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Abject

The term derives from the Latin *abjectus*, meaning thrown away, and signifies something extremely unpleasant and degrading. In contemporary critical theory, it is most commonly used to refer to the condition of marginalized social groups. In the works of Julia Kristeva, the concept is applied to the ambiguous process of subject formation, which involves a rejection of something that exists within the self and attracts us and repels us at the same time. Abjection is something that undermines identity and social order. In Kristeva's words, the 'abject threatens the unity/identity of both society and the subject', by calling into question the 'boundaries upon which they are constructed' (1982: 54). In this view, it is only by confronting our abjections and recognizing the otherness in ourselves that we can become more tolerant toward others, and 'welcome them to that uncanny strangeness, which is as much theirs as it is ours' (p. 71). Kristeva calls a person who constantly engages with her or his own abjections a deject, who 'strays instead of getting his bearings' and whose space 'is never one . . . but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic' (p. 8).

See also: **Alterity; Identity, identification, identity politics; Subject, subjectivity; Uncanny**

Further reading: Kristeva (1982).

Actor-network theory

Actor-network theory (ANT) is a material-semiotic methodological framework, which emerged in the sociology of science in the 1980s and was popularized, most notably, by French sociologists Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, and the British sociologist John Law. Actor-network theory challenges the technological determinism prevalent in earlier accounts of the role of technology in social change.

Rather than regard technological change as an outside factor that has the power to influence society, actor-network theory postulates that technology itself cannot be extricated from the social fabric. It defies the

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notion of a clear-cut distinction between social actors and the networks within which they operate, arguing that actors have agency only in so far as they are elements of relational networks. Actor-network theory attributes agency to precarious assemblages of materially and discursively heterogeneous elements, which include humans, machines, nature, ideas, organizations and social arrangements.

To account for the perpetual fluidity of identities and relations within these networks, actor-network theory borrows the concept of translation originally developed by French philosopher Michel Serres. In actor-network theory, translation is defined as ‘all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force’ (Callon and Latour 1981: 279).

Actor-network theory is poststructuralist in inspiration, as it is closely related to the work of Foucault and Deleuze, and of the feminist scholar Donna Haraway. In particular, actor-networks could be interpreted as smaller-scale instances of Foucault’s discourses or epistemes.

See also: **Agency; Base and superstructure; Cyborg; Determinism; Discourse; Episteme**

Further reading: Callon and Latour (1981), Latour (1987 and 2005), Law and Hassard (1999).

Aesthetics

The word ‘aesthetics’ (also spelled ‘esthetics’) denotes a ‘set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, especially in art’; or the ‘branch of philosophy which deals with questions of beauty and artistic taste’ (*COED*). In the simplest terms, there are two basic approaches to the nature of beauty: the subjective approach, which posits that the sense of what is beautiful depends on the observer; and the objective view, according to which beauty resides in the observed object.

The foundations of modern philosophical aesthetics were laid by the eighteenth-century German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–62). Baumgarten used the term *Aesthetica* to describe the whole sphere of sensuous perception, which lies outside of the domain of the rational.

Drawing on Baumgarten’s work, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) considered aesthetics to be one of the three main types of cognitive functioning, along with moral and scientific reasoning. For Kant, aesthetics is a type of judgement that mediates between ‘pure reason’ or understanding, and ‘practical reason’ or ethics. It is both subjective (or grounded in the personal experience of pleasure) and objective, in that claims for beauty always depend on universal agreement.

Affect, emotion, feeling 3

Nineteenth-century aesthetic philosophy posited that experiences of beauty and the sublime generated a response of ‘disinterested pleasure’, which was considered to be highly moral. Consequently, arts were extolled as transcendental pursuits that were practised and appreciated for their own sake. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the most notable philosophers interested in aesthetics were the Italian Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), American John Dewey (1859–1952), German Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) and the British Robin George Collingwood (1889–1943).

Contrary to the idealist tradition, Marxist aesthetics regarded ‘both aesthetic objects and the subjects of aesthetic judgment as being marked by the processes of their historical formation’ (Bennett 1990: 123). Endeavouring to circumvent the determinism of traditional Marxism, the writers of the Frankfurt School posited that true art was characterized precisely by its ability to transcend the circumstances of its social production. More recently, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argued that aesthetics was closely related to lifestyle and social status.

Cultural studies have been criticized as placing too much emphasis on politics and agency, and patently neglecting aesthetics. In response to this criticism, the Australian literary critic and cultural theorist Rita Felski has emphasized that cultural studies have never sought to ‘destroy aesthetics, but to broaden the definition of what counted as art by taking popular culture seriously. It was always as much about form as about content, as much about pleasure as about ideology’ (2004: 32).

See also: **Senses; Taste, taste culture; Value, value system**

Further reading: Bennett (1990), Bérubé (ed.) (2004), Hunter (1992), Korsmeyer (2004).

Affect, emotion, feeling

Affects, emotions and feelings are prominent topics in recent cultural theory in general and feminist epistemology and aesthetics in particular. They are considered to be central to embodiment, subject formation, politics and community building.

Although closely related, the three terms are not synonymous. In his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987 [1980]), Brian Massumi distinguishes between feelings, which are said to be personal or biographical, in that they depend on a person’s previous experiences; emotions, which are social, since they represent the outward display of a feeling; and affect, understood as a pre-personal and pre-linguistic experience of intensity, through which a body

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becomes ready to act in specific circumstances. Affects are not conscious, and can be triggered by factors that are beyond our control. Because they are abstract and unstructured, affects are more easily transmitted from one body to another than feelings or emotions.

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), a seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher of Jewish–Portuguese origin, understood ‘affect’ as a power to act. He distinguished between two types of affects: actions, which are brought about by events that are rooted in our own nature; and passions, which are occasioned by outside causes. Spinoza argued that passions could be restrained through virtue, which he understood as the pursuit of knowledge and ideas.

The US philosopher and personality theorist Silvan Tomkins (1911–91) identified nine distinct affects, all of which are biologically conditioned. These were interest–excitement; enjoyment–joy; surprise–startle; distress–anguish; anger–rage; fear–terror; shame–humiliation; ‘dis smell’ (a bad smell); and disgust (a bad taste).

The notion of affect problematizes our understanding of how we consume cultural and media texts. Indeed, the consciously received message may, and often does, leave less impression on the consumer than her or his affective resonance with the source of the message. The power of many media texts is thus believed to lie in their capacity to generate affective resonance, independently of their ideological content. In *Empire*, political philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe the production and manipulation of affect as one of the three main types of immaterial labour, along with the industrial production, which incorporates information and communication technologies, and the immaterial labour of analytical and symbolic tasks (2000: 293).

See also: **Agency; Ideology; Phenomenology; Senses**

Further reading: Brennan (2004), Deleuze and Guattari (1987 [1980]); Hardt and Negri (2000); Tomkins (1995).

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Agency

Agency is the capacity to originate social acts in ways that produce impact, independently of the constraints imposed by social structure. In mainstream sociology, there are three main orientations in the agency–structure debate, depending on the relative emphasis placed on agency or structure: (a) theories based on methodological individualism, which emphasize the centrality of human agency (e.g. Weber 1992 [1905]); (b) Marxist, structuralist and functionalist theories (e.g. Durkheim 1997 [1893]), which privilege structure over agency; and (c) theories that move beyond the strict dualism of the two factors, such as Giddens’s

structuration theory (1984) or Bourdieu's theory of practice and the habitus (1977 [1972]).

Inextricably linked with the notions of power, free will, subjectivity, identity and autonomy, agency in the cultural sphere is a central concept in the culturalist strand of cultural studies, concerned with theorizing the possibilities of radical social action.

Since their inception, cultural studies have taken a position against elitist approaches to culture by Leavisite critics and the Frankfurt School, which interpreted cultural consumption as passive and dictated by production. In the 1960s, Althusser's influential conception of interpellation tended to rule out the possibility of agency outside of dominant discursive systems. Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), which emphasized the difference between a culture made for the working class and one made by it, was an important contribution to agency–structure considerations within cultural studies. Subsequently, the turn to Gramsci offered a subtler mediation between agency and structure through the concept of hegemony. More recently, feminist, postcolonial and postmodern theories have emphasized the varied and often contradictory positions occupied by the subject and the contingency of agency on specific circumstances.

See also: **Consumption; Critical theory; Culturalism; Feminism; Habitus and field; Hegemony; Identity, identification, identity politics; Interpellation; Leavisism; Postcolonialism, neo-colonialism; Postmodern, postmodernity, postmodernism; Power; Subject, subjectivity**

Further reading: Archer (1996 [1988]), Holland et al. (1998), Thompson (1966 [1963]).

Alienation

The term denotes a social or psychological estrangement of individuals from their environment and ultimately from themselves. This estrangement can manifest itself in a variety of ways: as a feeling of powerlessness or lack of agency due to external, often institutional constraints; as a lack of purpose in life caused by the instability of meaning in the social domain; as social exclusion or rebellion against established social norms; and finally, as a decentring and fragmentation of the self, characteristic of late capitalist society.

In classical Marxist theory, 'alienation' refers to workers' loss of control over the act of production and over the product of their labour. According to Karl Marx, capitalism deprives work of its intrinsic value and turns it into a commodity, thus alienating workers both from each other and from human nature itself.

In contemporary cultural studies, alienation is an important concept

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in analysing subcultures and minority groups. In addition to classical Marxism, several other theoretical strands are of relevance to the understanding of alienation in cultural studies research:

- Critical theory, which focuses on the alienating influences of consumerism, technology and the culture generated by the mass media.
- Existentialism, which understands alienation as a defining element of the human condition.
- Lacanian psychoanalysis, which sees alienation as constitutive of subjectivity, in both the imaginary and the symbolic domains.
- Postcolonialism, which postulates the alienation of the colonial subject from her or his pre-colonial identity.
- Postmodernism, which theorizes a fragmentation of the self in an increasingly 'depthless' world.

See also: **Agency; Capitalism; Consumption; Critical theory; Identity, identification, identity politics; Imaginary, symbolic, real; Marxism, Leninism, Western Marxism; Mass communication and mass media; Postcolonialism, neo-colonialism; Postmodern, postmodernity, postmodernism; Psychoanalysis; Subculture; Subject, subjectivity**

Further reading: Geyer and Heinz (eds) (1992).

Alterity

The complex dynamic between identity and alterity, the self and the other, is embedded in the very etymology of the word 'alterity', from Latin *alter*, *altera*, *alterum*, which means both 'one' (of two) and the 'other'. The notion of alterity, crucial to any understanding of our formation as individuals and as social beings, holds a prominent place in a wide range of approaches to epistemology, social and cultural theory and psychoanalysis. It has attained increased prominence in contemporary society, where everyday encounters with the 'other' have intensified both in physical spaces, through globalization and people mobility and in virtual environments, due to the pervasive presence of the mass media and new media technologies.

Twentieth-century theories of alterity have moved away from Hegel's dialectics of the self and the other through negation and synthesis in several different directions. On the one hand, the 'other' has been interpreted as existing in its own right, rather than being defined by its relation to the self. This view permeates Emmanuel Lévinas's philosophy of ethics and is prominent in French feminist thought. Another strand, central in poststructuralism, deconstruction and psychoanalysis, interprets otherness as a lack or absence, simultaneously integral to and

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different from the identity of the same. In Foucault's theory, otherness signifies exclusion from structures of power and potentially a privileged site of intellectual inquiry and political resistance. Alterity is also central to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which criticizes the representations of the Oriental other in Western discourse as cultural projections in the service of self-identity affirmation. A number of postcolonial critics influenced by Said's work have focused on the self-other relationship in colonial settings, as well as on Western and colonial strategies of dealing with otherness through exoticization, reification and domestication.

See also: **Deconstruction; Globalization; Identity, identification, identity politics; Mass communication and mass media; Orientalism; Poststructuralism; Power; Psychoanalysis; Tropicalization/s, tropicopolitan**

Further reading: Bhabha (1994), Hegel (1977 [1807]).

Archaeology

As a critical and methodological concept in the humanities and social sciences, archaeology is associated with the early writings of Michel Foucault. Foucault branded his own mode of historical inquiry as archaeology, to differentiate it from both social history and philosophical hermeneutics. His primary aim was to investigate the discourses of the human sciences as systems of knowledge. Rather than asking whether these discourses were 'true' or not, he was concerned with mapping all their claims, objects and strategies in order to reveal how they operate within a specific episteme. Archaeological inquiry, in other words, begins from the ground up, at the level of seemingly insignificant local events. It is neutral, in the sense that it does not pass judgement on the truth and meaning of the discursive systems under its scrutiny.

As an epistemological tool, archaeology is complementary to the concept of genealogy, which was advanced in Foucault's later work. Archaeology is commonly taken to denote a synchronic analysis of discourses within a specific episteme, while genealogy implies their diachronic reconstruction from the perspective of present experience. Foucault himself thought of archaeology as the material and methodological framework for his analysis, and of genealogy as the ultimate goal of this type of historical inquiry. This goal, he emphasized, was to show 'how those discursive events have determined in a certain way what constitutes our present and what constitutes ourselves – either our knowledge, our practices, our type of rationality, our relationship to ourselves or to others' (Mahon 1992: 105).

In his own work, Foucault sought to reveal how certain discourses that lie at the heart of contemporary Western subjectivity, including

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those of deviance, illness, madness and sexuality, have emerged from disconnected practices and ostensibly ordinary events.

See also: **Discourse; Episteme; Genealogy; Knowledge; Subject, subjectivity**

Further reading: Foucault (1972 [1969]).

Articulation

Two connotations of the word 'articulation' – expression and the joining together of different elements – inhere in the nature and application of the homonymous theoretical concept in cultural studies, which was elaborated by Stuart Hall in the 1970s. This duality of signification echoes the structuralist assumption that meaning does not simply reside in any particular discourse or practice, but is always contested and contingent on a specific set of circumstances.

Hall's theory of articulation is closely related to Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which interprets cultural forms and practices as relatively autonomous, related to but not entirely determined by socio-economic power configurations. Accordingly, meaning is not inscribed in individual texts and practices, but arises as a result of the active process of articulation, or production in use.

The significance of articulation theory for cultural studies is manifold. First, it denies the possibility of interpreting cultural texts as if they possessed discrete meanings. Secondly, it focuses on the conjunctures between texts, their audiences and their consuming practices as principal sites of the formation of meanings.

This anti-essentialist logic also applies to collective identities, ideology and political formations. Hall's 'politics of articulation' thus shifts the focus of analysis from the traditional notions of fixed identity towards multiple shifting articulations, which operate within and according to the logic of hegemony.

Althusser's more restricted application of the term, as a conjuncture between different modes of production in historically specific social formations, is helpful in analysing the processes of globalization.

See also: **Audience; Consumption; Hegemony; Structuralism; Text**

Further reading: Althusser and Balibar (1970), Hall (1996a), Laclau (1993).

Audience

The word derives from Latin *audientia*, which means 'hearing', the 'act of listening', or a 'body of listeners'. In media and cultural studies, the term conventionally refers to a group of people consuming – watching,

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listening to or reading – a media or cultural text. Clearly, technological development has a significant impact on media consumption. Most recently, the rapid development of new media technologies has allowed high levels of user control and interactivity, thus blurring the traditional distinction between media producers and media consumers (Lievrouw and Livingstone 2002; Turkle 1995).

Ways of conceptualizing the audience are of vital interest to broadcast media producers, since audiences have a direct impact on their financial success. Audiences are also a concern of government regulatory bodies, which have a stake in controlling media consumption. In both cases, the control of the audience has been undermined by emerging media technologies.

Audience theories have differed in the degree of agency they attribute to the consumers of media texts. At one end of the spectrum, we find models that postulate a passive audience uncritically absorbing media messages. Within this strand, the Frankfurt School emphasized the role of the mass media and popular culture in generating and perpetuating capitalist ideology and thus contributing to the subordination of the working class. The second strand, which posits an active role of the audience in selecting media texts and using them to satisfy personal needs, takes impetus from what is known as the ‘uses and gratifications’ theory (Blumler and Katz 1974).

Stuart Hall’s influential encoding/decoding paradigm (1980c), which perceives media consumption as an active process, has been widely accepted in cultural studies. Through ethnographic research of specific audience groups, it has been possible to explain how social determinants such as class (Morley 1980), gender (Ang 1985; Modleski 1984; Radway 1987), age (Buckingham 1993), family circumstance (Morley 1986) and ethnicity (Gillespie 1995) affect the decoding process. More recently, extreme versions of audience-centred research have been criticized for neglecting the power relations embedded in media production and consumption.

See also: **Agency; Bardic function; Consumption; Critical theory; Encoding/decoding, ethnography; Mass communication and mass media**

Further reading: Ang (1985), Hall (1980c), Morley (1980 and 1986), Radway (1987).

Authentic culture

Something is considered ‘authentic’ if its provenance cannot be disputed, and if it is demonstrably an original, and not a copy. Authentic culture, then, is a culture that can purportedly be traced back to an original past of an ethnic group, or a group defined in relation to a partic-

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ular locality. The notion of authenticity is associated with mass culture theory's idealization of the past, threatened by the emergence of mass-produced culture. Authenticity can also be interpreted as a function of identity, conceived in a popular essentialist way as a stable category. Within various identitarian discourses, authenticity becomes a measure that serves for excluding others who 'don't belong' and are considered fake or inauthentic. Many critics have acknowledged that, in a technologically advanced and globalized world, a definable authenticity may not be more than a nostalgic fantasy. Walter Benjamin was the first to describe how the emergence of technologies of mechanical reproduction tarnished the aura of art, which had previously depended precisely on its authenticity and inaccessibility. Theories of the postmodern postulate that, in late modernity, authenticity has been transformed into a hyperreality of depthless culture, deprived of referentiality and meaning (Jameson 1991 [1984]). Globalization has challenged the notion of authenticity based on fixed identity categories. It can be argued that, paradoxically, in contemporary global society, authenticity pertains precisely to the hybridized transnational and cosmopolitan cultures. Authenticity is also increasingly becoming commodified: once a cultural resource – a travel package, a performance, an artefact – becomes identified as authentic, its market value rises, and so does the demand for it.

See also: **Commodity; Critical theory; Globalization; Hyperreality; Identity, identification, identity politics; Mass culture, culture industry; Postmodern, postmodernity, postmodernism; Simulacrum**

Further reading: Cheng (2004), Jameson (1991 [1984]).

Author, authorship

Deriving from Latin *auctor*, which means 'promoter' or 'creator', the word refers to the creative originator and the main legitimizing principle of a text. Authors are not always easily identifiable in contemporary cultural and media texts, many of which are products of collective enterprise, intercultural borrowing and intertextuality. Most recently, the development of collaborative software and the widespread use of electronic reproduction have contributed to a rapid proliferation of textual agency.

Authorship is an ideological concept: a social, cultural and legal institution embedded in the relationships of power in a specific social context. The idea of the author as a creative genius, autonomously producing original meaning, is a construct the origins of which are usually associated with eighteenth-century Romanticism. This view of authorship persisted in literary theory well into the twentieth century. Between the 1920s and 1960s, the New Criticism, motivated by a

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humanist conception of subjectivity and creativity, ascribed the meaning of a text entirely to the author's genius and intentions. Even today, this approach dominates common perceptions of authorship and is reflected in intellectual property legislation. Attributions of authorship are hegemonic in nature. They serve to add value to certain texts on the basis of aesthetic ideas such as creativity and originality, and act as market regulators for cultural commodities.

The main shortcoming of the theories focusing on authorial intention is that they tend to limit the latent multiplicity of meaning within each text, which can be triggered by the discursive practices that regulate its production, transmission and consumption.

An influential critique of authorial intentionalism was produced in the 1960s by French semiotician Roland Barthes. In a famous essay entitled 'The Death of the Author' (1977 [1968]), Barthes criticized the author-centred criticism as an epitome of capitalist ideology. He shifted the focus of analysis from the author to literary form and intertextuality. According to him, intertextual meaning is mediated by the reader, who 'holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted' (p. 148). In Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, writing always contains potentially infinite meanings that were never intended by the original author, but can be activated by different readers in different contexts (1974 [1967]).

Rather than eradicating the authorial role from literary analysis, Michel Foucault saw authorship as a cultural formation closely related to the commodification of literature (1984 [1969]). He introduced the notion of 'author-function': not the real author, but a name 'attached' to a particular discourse or set of discourses, which serves to authorize their circulation within a society.

See also: Agency; Authentic culture; Deconstruction; Discourse; Intertextuality; New Criticism; Text

Further reading: Barthes (1977 [1968]), Burke (1993 and 1995), Foucault (1984 [1969]).

Authority

Authority is a type of power that is accepted as legitimate and authorized by a system of social norms. The sociologist Max Weber distinguished three main types of authority: legal-rational authority, based on codified norms, such as laws and procedural regulations; traditional authority, which rests on un-codified beliefs in the legitimacy of ancient customs and practices; and charismatic authority, attributed to the extraordinary capacities of a leader (1968 [1925]). A fourth type of authority, based on expertise, is known as 'professional authority' (Haskell 1984).

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Deriving part of its meaning from the word ‘author’, the term implies that creators have singular claims over the use and interpretation of their creation. In poststructuralism, the conception of the death of the author is related to an overall critique of authority. In postmodernism, authority is seen as challenged by a growing incredulity toward meta-narratives, resulting in what Habermas calls ‘legitimation crisis’ (1975 [1973]).

See also: **Author, authorship; Knowledge; Narrative; Poststructuralism; Postmodern, postmodernity, postmodernism**

Further reading: Habermas (1975 [1973]), Haskell (1984), Weber (1968 [1925]).

Avant-garde

‘Avant-garde’ is the French term for the vanguard of an army advancing into battle. From the late nineteenth century onwards, the term has been used to refer to the political, intellectual and artistic movements considered to be ‘ahead of the mainstream’ and thus in opposition to the dominant culture. Since the mid-twentieth century, a great deal of earlier avant-garde art and literature has been absorbed into the mainstream.

The emancipatory potential of avant-garde movements was emphasized by the Frankfurt School, as an antidote to the tyranny of contemporary popular culture, mass-produced by culture industries. Cultural studies, with their focus on popular and media culture, have largely overlooked the counter-hegemonic capacity of avant-garde movements.

Relying on a linear and irreversible conception of time, characteristic of modernist thought, avant-gardism has lost some of its appeal with the onset of the social and cultural changes associated with postmodernity. Yet, postmodern art often combines everyday objects and elements of mass-produced culture by employing such avant-garde techniques as *bricolage*, collage and juxtaposition.

See also: **Bricolage; Critical theory; Hegemony; Mass culture, culture industry; Parody, pastiche; Postmodern, postmodernity, postmodernism**

Further reading: Bürger (1984 [1974]), Murphy (1999).

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