

Michael Lubin (CUNY Graduate Center)

In Defense of Meaninglessness

Traditional theories of reading hold that writing communicates something, that the arbitrary signs can transport meaning between the writer's consciousness and the readers (See I.A. Richards). Deconstruction, particularly Roland Barthes' work in *The Rustle of Language* and Jacques Derrida's work in *Limited, Inc.*, radically challenged this notion, and located the site of meaning within the reader, rather than in the writer. As a result, theorists like Hayden White and Roger Kimball have accused deconstruction of "meaninglessness," proposing that postmodern theory is "nihilistic" and "unintelligible." (White, Kimball). What happens if we grant these charges, and agree that deconstruction allows us to render language unintelligible, if we choose?

This paper defends meaninglessness as a necessary position from which to read. I argue that meaninglessness provides a way forward, a way to encourage polyvocality and multiplicity in modern literary theory. Furthermore, I argue that theoretical consistency is less important than the ludic value of criticism, and that this game-like inconsistency represents the core values of the postmodern academy in that it embraces diversity and individuality, affirming human autonomy and our capacity for sense-making. In this new theoretical framework, value is not derived from reading, but from readings; it is the production of readings, the intellectual work involved in sense-making that subjectivizes us, that has value, more than the readings themselves.

Bibliography

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