

Things that look like regular words but are really technical terms

As you read literary criticism, you are likely to encounter some words that seem like they have a fairly obvious meaning, but which in reality are terms of art that always carry with them philosophical connotations of which you should be aware. Below is a short list of some of those words, as well as the meanings you might be likely to confuse them for.

deconstruction A form of analysis that destabilizes a conceptual binary (which is always covertly hierarchical) by inverting and then displacing it, or by revealing the privileged term's dependency on the deprecated term. There are a few canonical binaries that are particularly likely candidates for deconstruction: subject/object, speech,/writing, masculine/feminine, original/copy.

source: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology (De la grammatologie)*, 1967

associated with: well...deconstruction

does not mean: take apart, destroy

Symbolic order One of the three registers of the psyche (the other two are the Imaginary and the Real, which are also potential sources of confusion). The Symbolic is a social and linguistic structure generated by the collective, which confers meaning on that which the subject encounters in advance of any particular experience. The symbolic is the psychic dimension through which language and sociality are made possible; it also structures the unconscious.

source: Jacques Lacan, various writings

associated with: psychoanalysis, structuralism

does not mean: a system or logical grouping of symbols

male gaze A visual orientation structured by gender that treats the female body as spectacle. Women can occupy the male gaze; in fact, that is what classic narrative cinema requires female viewers to do, since the *camera* is structured by the male gaze.

source: Laura Mulvey, "Visual Cinema and Narrative Pleasure," 1975

associated with: psychoanalytic film theory

does not mean: a male point of view, any particular man's perspective

commodity fetishism The practice of understanding relationships between human beings on the terms of relationships between commodities, i.e. in terms of objects whose value is determined by the market rather than by anything intrinsic to the objects.

source: Karl Marx, *Capital*, 1867

associated with: Marxism, historical materialism

does not mean: an obsession with commodities

signifier and signified The two components of a linguistic sign. The signifier (*signifiant*) is a “sound-concept,” the concept one has of the sound associated with a word. The signified (*signifié*) is a semantic concept. Signifiers are defined “diferentially,” i.e. not intrinsically but by their difference from other signifiers. For example, “hat” and “had” are different signifiers in English because in English phonetics, we hear a difference between voiced and unvoiced plosives (d and t, in this case). We know what “hat” signifies in part because it isn’t “had” (and in part because it isn’t “bat” or “cat”). This leaves a wide but limited range of actual pronunciations that can sound to us like “hat.” Similarly, there are a wide range of actual objects that could fit the semantic category of “hat.”

source: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in Structural Linguistics*, 1916

associated with: structuralism originally, later also taken up by poststructuralism and deconstruction

does not mean: word and referent, phenomenon and meaning, manifest and latent

Bonus: Some essay formatting FAQ!

Question: Should I capitalize “modernism”/ “postmodernism”/ “naturalism”/ “avant-garde”/ “realism”/ basically anything?

Answer: Is it either (a) Romanticism or (b) something involving a proper name, like Victorian (referring to Queen Victoria)? Then yes. If not, then no.

Question: What titles should I italicize?

Answer: Those of “full-length works”: books, whole journals (like *Shakespeare Quarterly* or *PMLA*), feature films, epic poems.

Question: What titles should I put in quotation marks?

Answer: Those of “shorter works”: book chapters, journal articles, lyric poems.

Question: What titles should I both italicize *and* put in quotation marks?

Answer: None of them.

Question: What titles should I neither italicize *nor* put in quotation marks?

Answer: None of them.

Question: What do you do when you have a quotation inside a quotation?

Answer: Nest the quotation marks, alternating single and double quotation marks. Example:

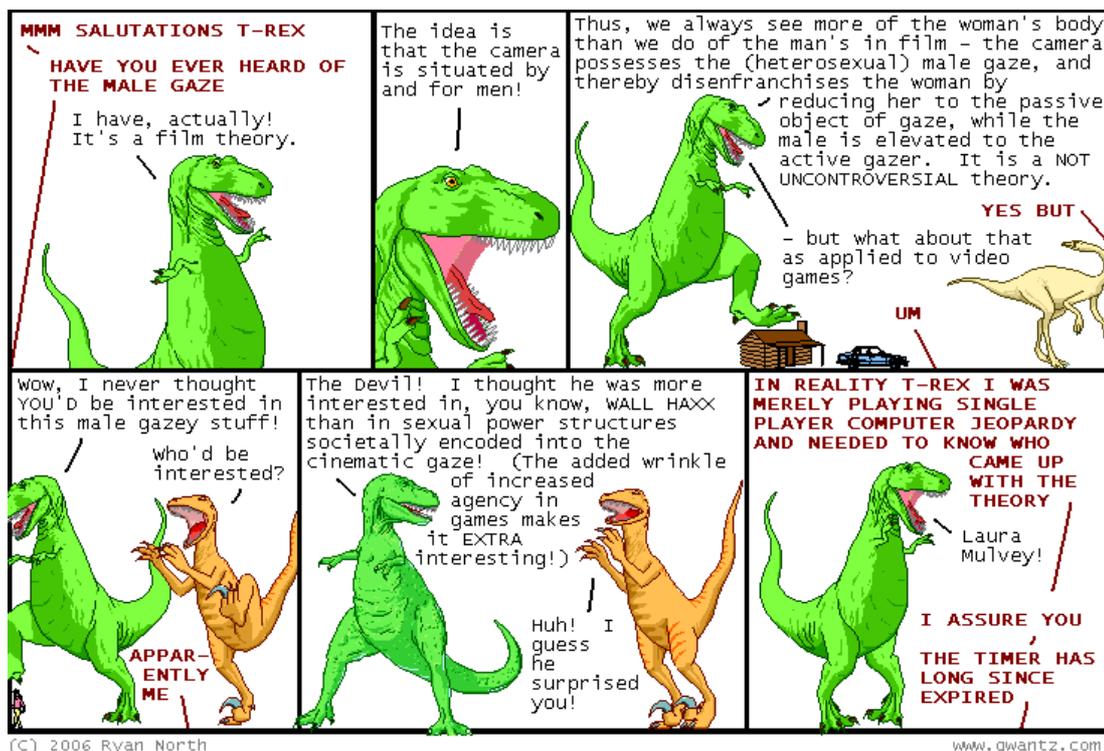
Hayot writes that “the core of [Bertrand] Russell’s ‘here’ and ‘now’ become, for instance, Woolf’s well-known ‘moment,’ a local time ‘not simply equivalent to the present’” (*The Hypothetical Mandarin* 179).

Question: Shouldn’t punctuation go outside quotation marks?

Answer: In British usage, yes. In American usage, no. Take your pick.

Question: If you wrote “wc” on my paper, does it mean “water closet”?

Answer: No, it means “word choice,” as in “this was a really weird word to put here.”



Dinosaur Comics by Ryan Q. North. <http://www.qwantz.com/index.php?comic=859>