

Interpretive Theory New Criticism to the Present

Dr. Alex E. Blazer

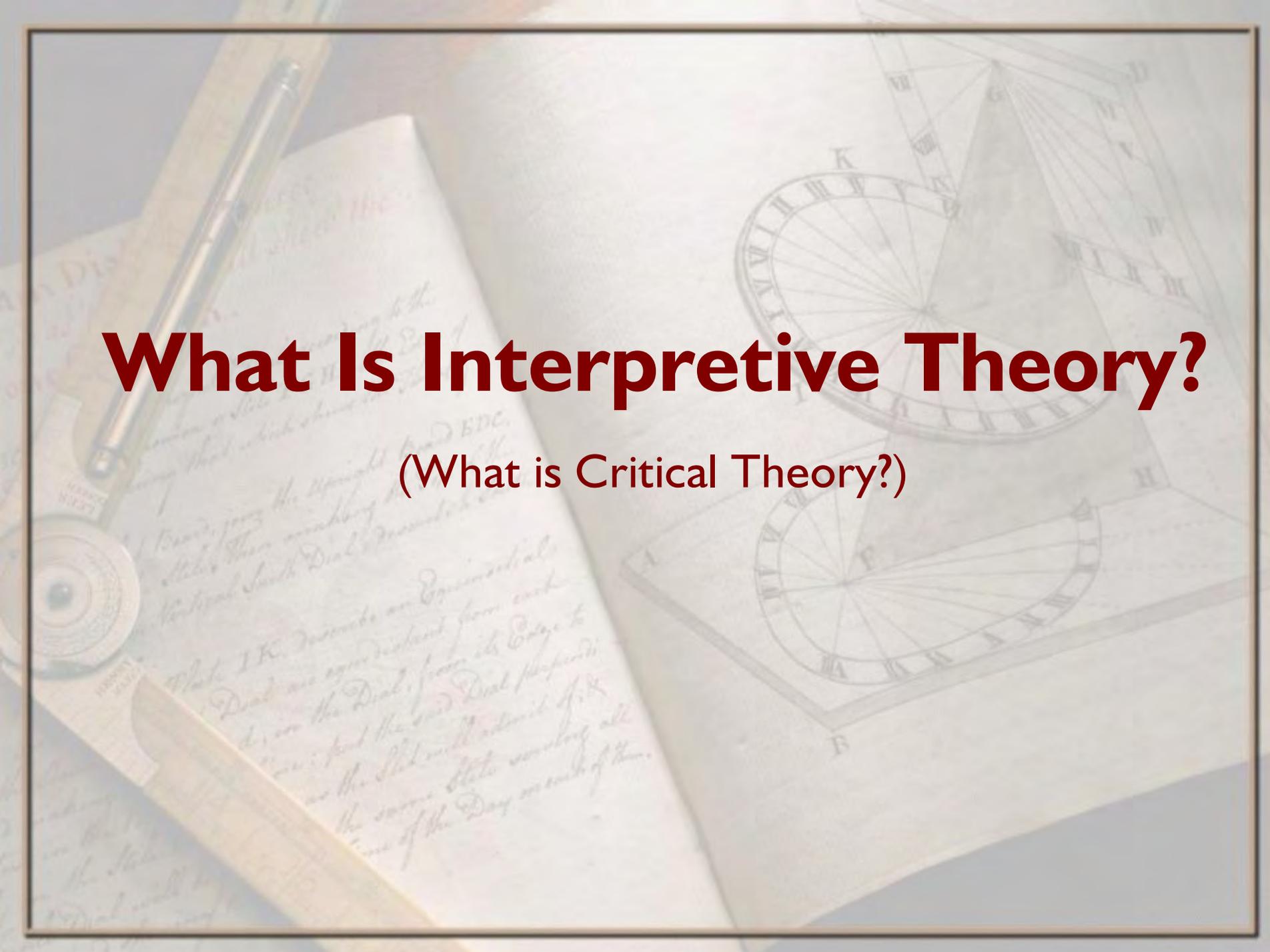
English 491

Spring 2004

<http://www.louisville.edu/~a0blaz01>

What Is Interpretive Theory?

(What is Critical Theory?)



Criticism and Interpretation

- ★ Criticism is the act analyzing, evaluating, and judging the quality of a literary or artistic work.
- ★ Interpretation is explanation, explication, elucidation.
 - ★ Interpretation is the act of finding meaning in a work of art or literature.
- ★ Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation, originally the Bible, but now broadly defined to art and literature.
 - ★ Hermeneutics is interpretive theory.

Theory

- ★ “A coherent group of general propositions used as principles of explanation for a class of phenomena” (*Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*)
- ★ A proposed explanation
- ★ A system of rules, principles, and methods of art, as distinguished from practice
- ★ Theory is the act of contemplating disciplinary systems methodologically.

Literary Criticism vs Literary Theory

- ★ Literary criticism is a particular act of interpretation of a text.
 - ★ Literary criticism explains the text.
- ★ Literary theory is a hermeneutical method that proposes principles of textual analysis.
 - ★ Literary theory is *the* system which underpins a particular practice of criticism; literary theory systematizes literary criticism.

Critical Theory

- ★ Critical theory, as opposed to specifically literary theory, embodies the methodological analysis of culture in general. Literary analysis is one component of a larger analysis of media, politics and ideology, socio-economic positions, and other subjectifying apparatuses.
- ★ Because the theories we're learning about can be applied across disciplines (not just interpreting literature), I will refer to them as types of critical theory.

What We Won't Cover

(At least not explicitly)

- ★ Marxist Criticism, socio-economic historical analyses
- ★ Reader-Response Criticism, the relationships between readers and texts
- ★ Queer Theory, the analyses of ideological codes and sexual problematics

What We Won't Cover

Continued

- ★ New Historicism and Cultural Studies, the interplay between literature and history writing and/or cultural analyses
- ★ Postcolonialism and African American Criticism, analyses of cultural othering and diasporas
- ★ Phenomenology and Existentialism, the analysis of the ontological status and effects of literature

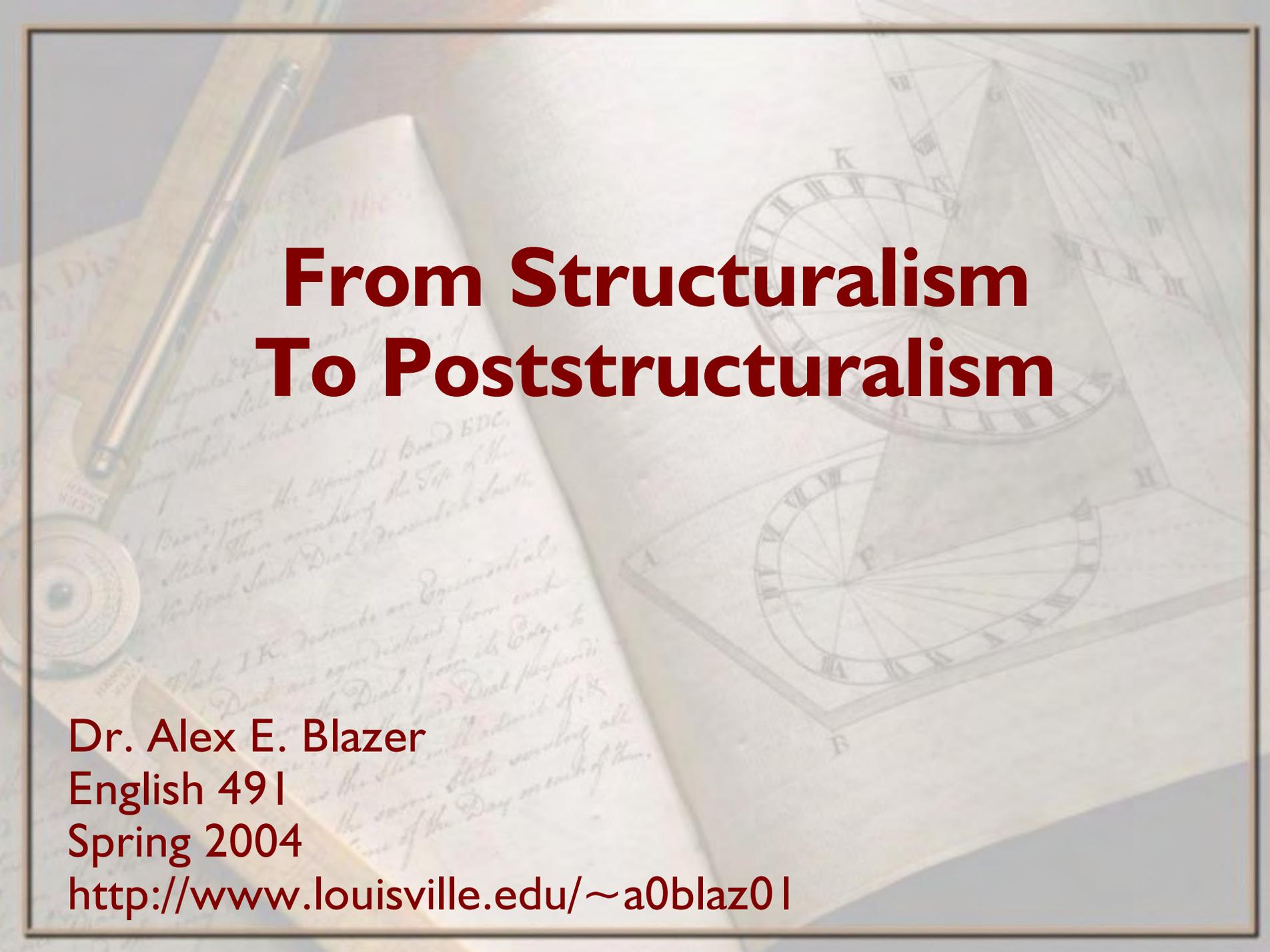
What We Will Cover

- ★ New Criticism, close reading of the text itself, paying particular heed to its unifying tensions
- ★ Structuralism and Semiotics, the analysis of signs and codes within linguistic systems
- ★ Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction, the analysis of a text's plays of meaning

What We Will Cover

Continued

- ★ Psychoanalysis, the analysis of the psyche of the text, author, and culture
- ★ Feminist Criticism, the analysis of the position of women within texts and women authors within the canon



From Structuralism To Poststructuralism

Dr. Alex E. Blazer

English 491

Spring 2004

<http://www.louisville.edu/~a0blaz01>

“From Work to Text”

Roland Barthes

- ★ Old disciplines, systems, structures of thought are collapsing
- ★ No longer looking at author's work as a product
- ★ No longer looking at the work of literature as a cold, lifeless, exhausted object derived from thousands of years of literary tradition
- ★ No longer looking at doxa
 - ★ Now is the time of paradox

From Work of Literature

- ★A "fragment of substance"
- ★Approximates signified concepts or reality
- ★Filial to the old patriarchal system
- ★A product to be consumed by reader

To Text in Process

- ★ A "methodological field"
- ★ Approximates signifiers
 - ★ The metonymic play of signifiers
- ★ Structure without closure or center
- ★ Pluralistic dissemination
- ★ Not originary, but intertextual
- ★ Not filial ("no-father"), but networked

To Text in Process

Continued

- ★ Writerly play of processes that are never closed or packaged
- ★ Against simple readerly consumption
- ★ Rather the reader participates in the process of meaning creation
- ★ The play of the text, the *jouissance* of the text, the pleasure of the text

De(con)struction

- ★ Whereas structuralism valorized only the underlying system and codes of literature while decidedly excommunicating the writer, the reader, and pleasure from the literary process,
- ★ Poststructuralism seeks the destruction of codes, systems, and structures in order to find a place for the writer, the reader, and the pleasure of the text.

Structuralism vs. Poststructuralism

- ★ The underlying system
 - ★ Structuralism analyzes the freeze-frame of the underlying system.
 - ★ Poststructuralism analyzes *langue* in motion, the social context of codes: unfrozen, in human history, and reintegrated into time.
 - ★ Lacan's metonymy of desire
 - ★ Derrida's *différance*
 - ★ Foucault's discontinuous history

Structuralism vs. Poststructuralism

★ Identity

- ★ Structuralism discusses the system only, not individual authors and not individual people.
 - ★ The author is dead, replaced by myths and archetypes and the structural analysis of narrative.
 - ★ The individual is nil, superceded by the discursive system.
- ★ Poststructuralism witnesses the reemergence of the author and individual, but subjected to language systems.
 - ★ Derrida's decentered subject of discourse
 - ★ Lacan's subject exists only in relation to the Big Other
 - ★ Foucault's subject-positions derived from discourse

Structuralism vs. Poststructuralism

★ Literary Criticism

- ★ Structuralism analyzes how a text means in terms of underlying systems and structure, such as archetypes, genres, and plot formulas.
- ★ Poststructuralism analyzes the shifting identities of the characters and the purposively playful meaning of the text.

Poststructuralist Literary Criticism

- ★ Analyze the fluctuating and shifting, non-essential and non-substantial, destabiliz-ed/-ing and performative subject-positions of the characters with respect to the various discursive networks to which they are subject(ed).
- ★ Analyze the paradoxes and the play, the contradictions and the shifts, the undecidability and the aporia of meaning within the text.
 - ★ Meaning and “Truth” are suspected, debunked, dispelled, questioned, destabilized, contingent and situated rather than transcendent and absolute.

Deconstruction

- ★ Deconstruction is one version of poststructuralism, most associated with Derrida and de Man, that shows the play of meanings within the world and the work.
- ★ Another version is the New Historical, most associated with Foucault and Butler, that shows the play of ideological power within individuals subjected to discourse; others version include Baudrillardian hyperreality (the deconstruction of the image vs reality hierarchy) and Cixous's bodily romantic ecstasy (the pleasure of the text become the pleasure of the body).
- ★ [Thanks to Lois Tyson for the following schema.]

Deconstructing Language

- ★ Due to the everyday, practical, and conventional use of language, we think language is a stable structure, but it is actually a slippery, endlessly deferring play of the chain of signifiers that never arrives at the signified, especially in literature.
- ★ Deconstruction thus attends to the ironies and ambiguities valorized by New Criticism, but it does not seek to resolve tensions into a harmonious, universal, meaningful theme.

Deconstructing the World

★ After showing language's instabilities, deconstruction turned to the foundations of being: by deconstructing language, deconstruction disrupts logocentrism, the ground of Western thought. Absolute and transcendental metaphysics give way to decentered and disseminated discourse.

Deconstructing Identity

- ★ Just as language and belief are destabilized, so too is identity. There are neither *a priori* nor innate organizing principles; rather identity is subject to (thus the term “subjectivity”) the decentered, unstable, shifting play of language and discourse systems.
- ★ Deconstruction does not discount structuralism's belief in an underlying system of human thought, but it shows how this system is as playful and prone to slippage as the language/discourse system, which it believes produces subjectivity.

Deconstructing Literature

- ★ Analyze either 1) how the meaning of the text is ultimately undecidable because the conflicts and contradictions within the text produces conflicting and contradictory interpretations (again, this method is the exact opposite of how New Critics seek to expose and then resolve the tensions of the text) or
- ★ 2) how the text paradoxically privileges both terms of the binary oppositions that structures it or, similarly, how the privileged position ceaselessly slips back and forth between terms, without being resolved.