

Signs of Violence: *Three Structuralist Extrapolations of Saussure's Sign*

The history of postwar theory could scarcely be told without reference to the Genevan linguist and semiotician, Ferdinand de Saussure, whose work became the cornerstone of the modern science of linguistics while igniting a series of methodological revolutions that spread far beyond the precincts of his fledgling discipline. Saussure's radical insistence on the arbitrary character of the sign exposed uncritical nomenclaturist assumptions in the comparative philology of the 19th century, breaking its fixation on the historical continuity of linguistic forms. In so doing, Saussure altered the very basis of linguistic representation, resituating it in an abstract and purely diacritical system he called *la langue*. There can be little overstating the impact of this shift in perspective on the decades that follow the appearance of the *Cours de linguistique général*, a book gleaned from lecture notes taken by Saussure's students and published after his death. If the *Cours* went on to become one of the pivotal works of theory in the 20th century, its conception of the sign was frequently adapted for uses that exceeded any the Swiss linguist could have imagined. This presentation briefly summarizes a few attempts made by non-linguists to conscript Saussure's sign during the midcentury, attempts that split its parts to open annihilating new inroads of criticism and extend the range of academic speculation into the recesses of human prehistory. In the succession of moves we will be following, three French titans of theory—Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, and René Girard—play their hands in a high stakes match on the frontier of disciplines as divergent as anthropology, metaphysics, literary theory, religion, and history, a place where traditional academic criteria break down, and seemingly discrete fields of endeavor merge past distinction. Exposed in their various adaptations of the sign is the secret violence of discourse and evidence of a bloody exchange at the foundation of human culture.

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BIOGRAPHY

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