Animating Poststructuralism

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For a video animated by
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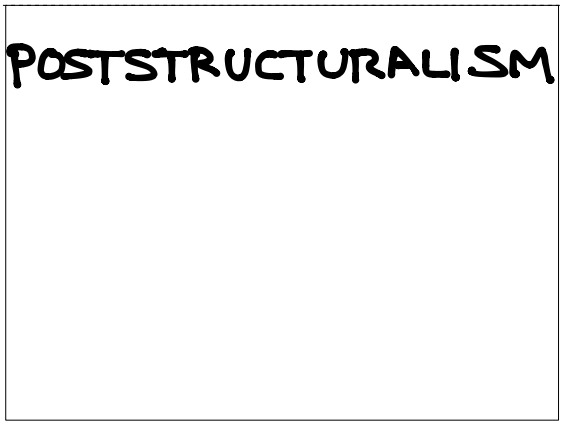
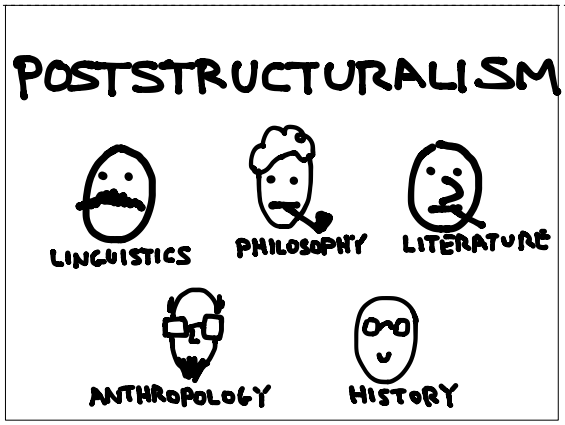
http://multimedia.redcocoon.org

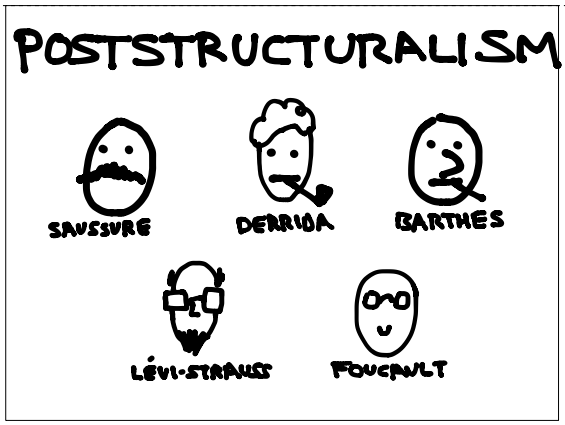
Black lines are drawn. Red lines are colored red. Green lines indicate movement. Blue highlighting indicates lines that are not drawn gradually but appear fully drawn or that are revealed fully drawn by a zoom or pan.



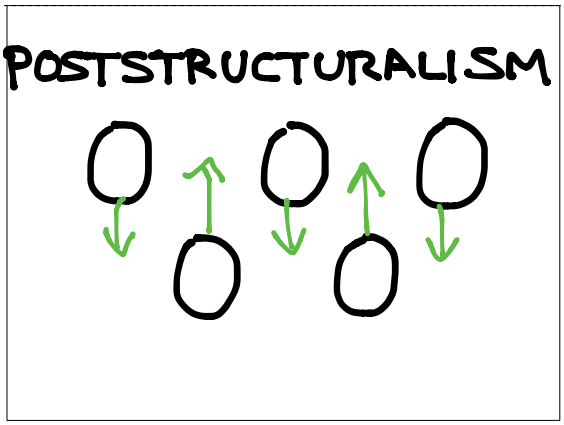
What is poststructuralism?



Poststructuralism is a set of 20th-century ideas about language and representation that have been very influential in the humanities--

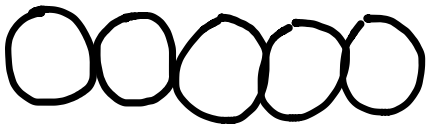


especially in literary criticism.



We'll look at these ideas by focusing on one key concept in poststructuralism--

POSTSTRUCTURALISM



The Chain of Signification

the chain of signification.

STRUCTURALISM

Poststructuralism is an extension or evolution of an earlier movement called structuralism.

STRUCTURALIST LINGUISTICS

Literary critics often trace structuralism's beginnings to the work of the Swiss linguist...

STRUCTURALIST LINGUISTICS

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE
1856-1913

Ferdinand de Saussure.

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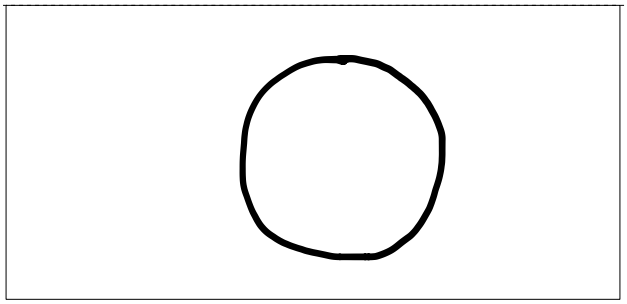
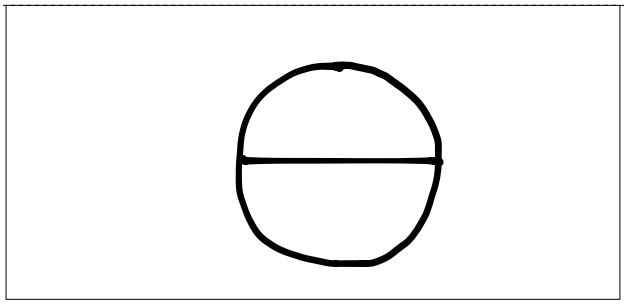
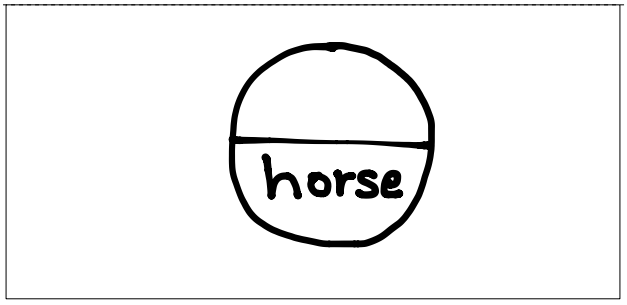


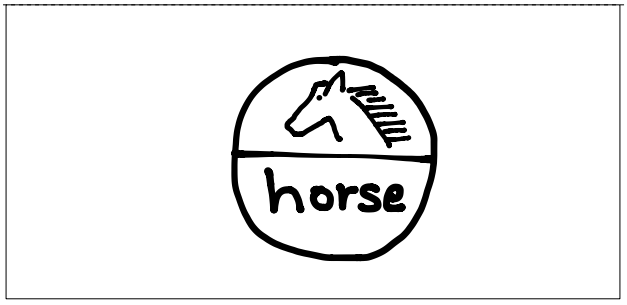
Saussure looked at an element of language--let's say a word--



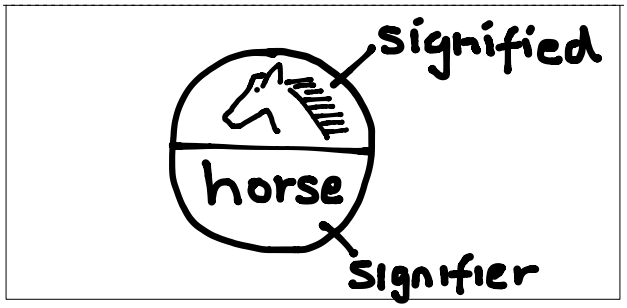
and divided it into two parts:



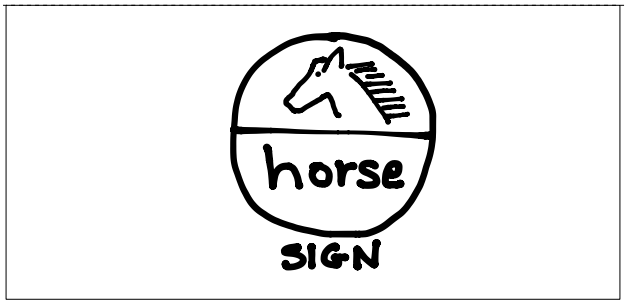
the sound of the word,



and the concept it represents.



He called the sound of the word the signifier, and he called the concept the signified.



The union of these two, he called the sign. This diagram appears in Saussure's book, The Course in General Linguistics.

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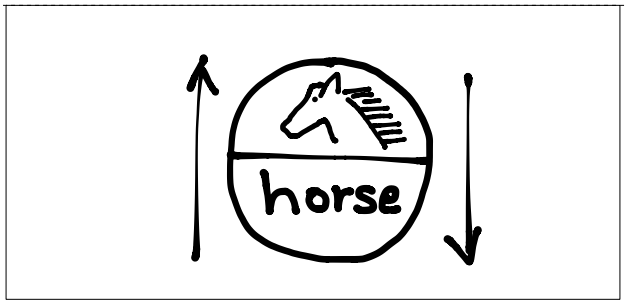
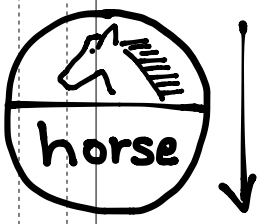
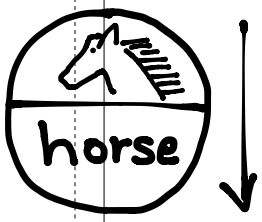




arbitrary

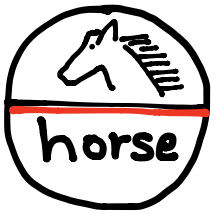
Saussure pointed out that the association of a given sound or signifier with a given concept or signified is arbitrary. There is nothing natural, simple, or permanent about it.



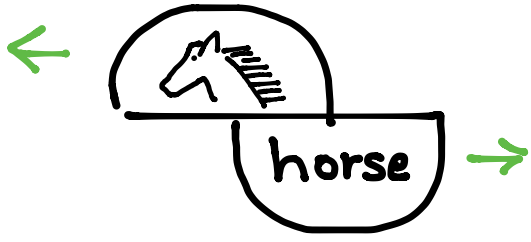
"The **arbitrary** nature of the sign...dominates all the linguistics of language; its consequences are numberless."

--Saussure,
Course in General Linguistics

"The arbitrary nature of the sign," he wrote, "dominates all the linguistics of language; its consequences are numberless."

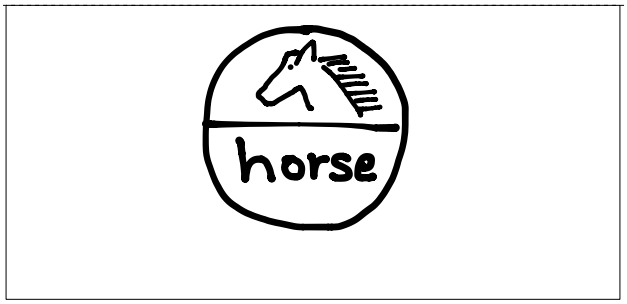


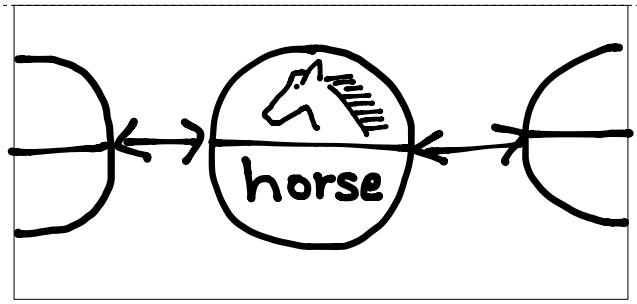
This line--and its emphasis on the arbitrary association between these two halves--suggested an uncertainty or...



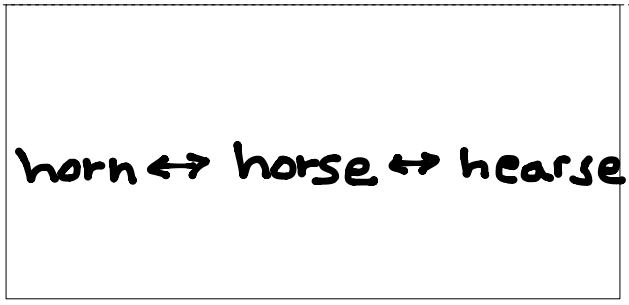
slippage in language that would become a key tenant of poststructuralism.

How does that slippage arise? Well, in place of this idea that signified and signifier were closely tied to one another,

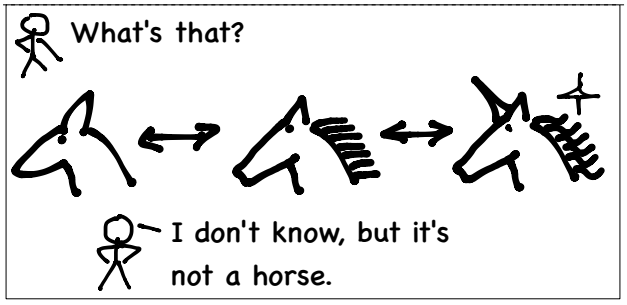




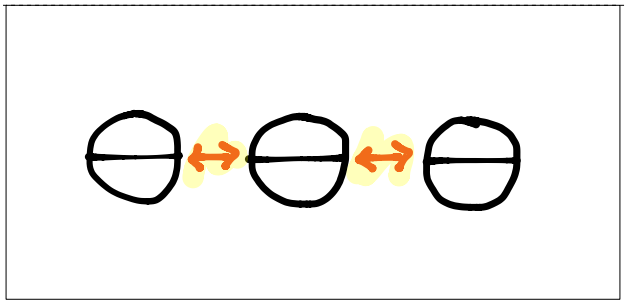
Saussure observed that each term is defined in relation to other similar terms nearby.



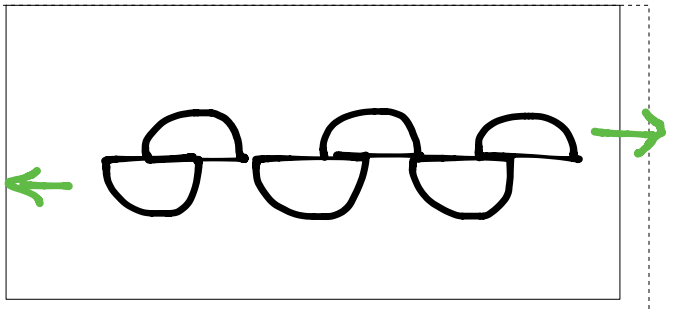
For example, the sound of the word "horse" differs only slightly from "horn" and "hearse."



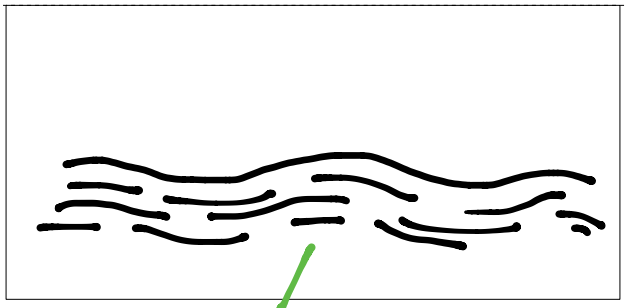
Saussure pointed out that the concept--the signified--was also defined differentially in the same way. Defining meaning not positively, but negatively...



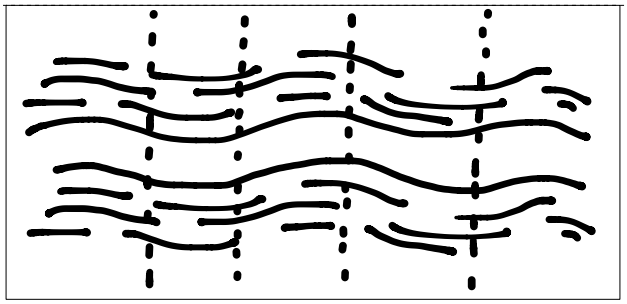
as a kind of gap between adjacent terms--



this also contributed to this sense of slippage, and it would also have far-reaching implications for later critics.

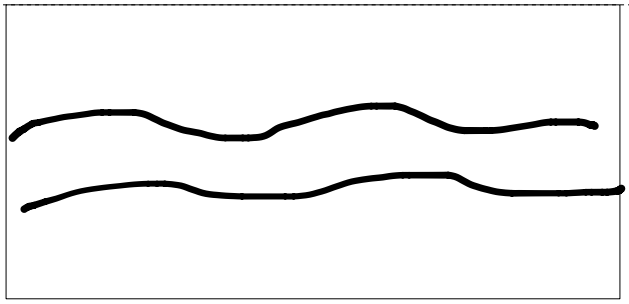


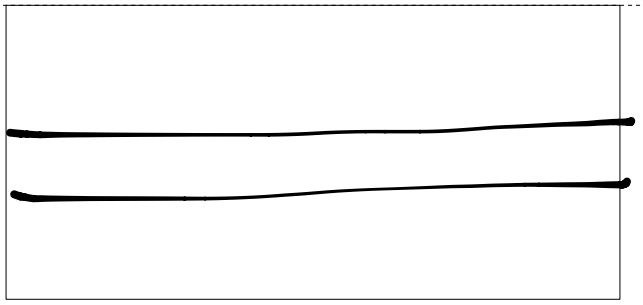
In fact, Saussure had another diagram to express the blurry boundaries between terms.

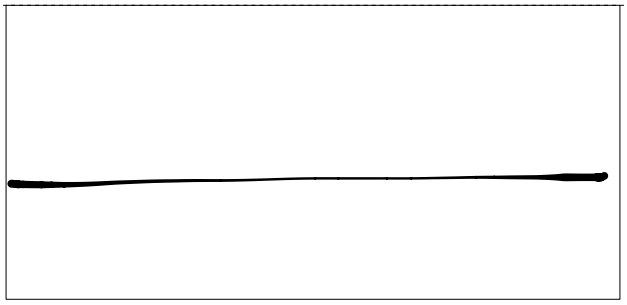


And up here is another stream that corresponds to the continuum of concepts, or signifieds. It is language's role to delineate units of meaning and map between these two streams.

It is "mysterious," Saussure wrote, "that language works out its units while taking shape between two shapeless masses."

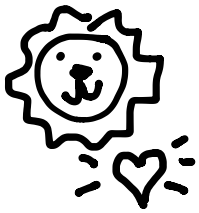






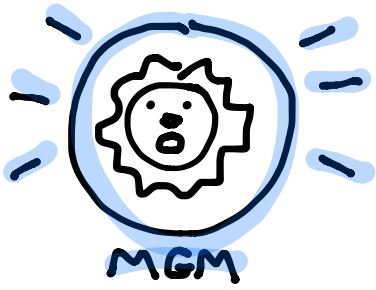
But Saussure's model remained simple in the sense that it was essentially one-dimensional.

What happens when we introduce additional layers of signification?

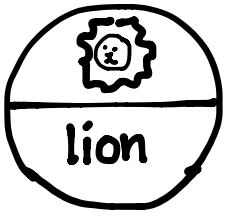


For example, the word "lion" signifies a particular animal, but on another level the sign lion can signify another meaning, like courage,...

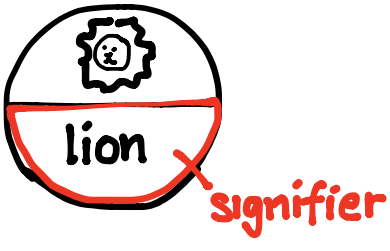
nobility,...



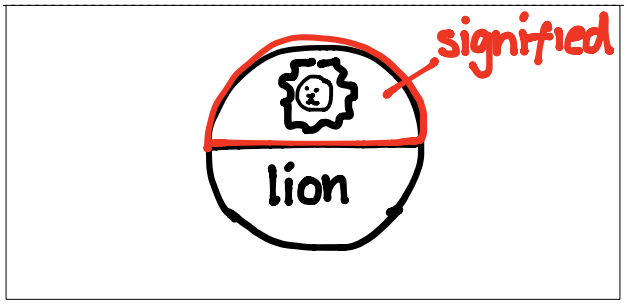
or MGM studios.



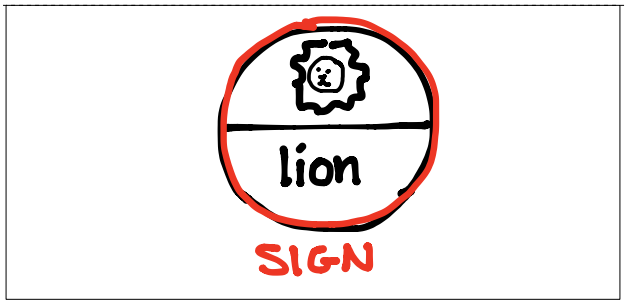
Here's is Saussure's sign:



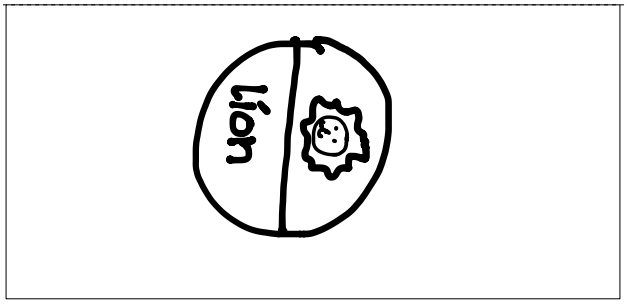
the sound of the word lion is the signifier,



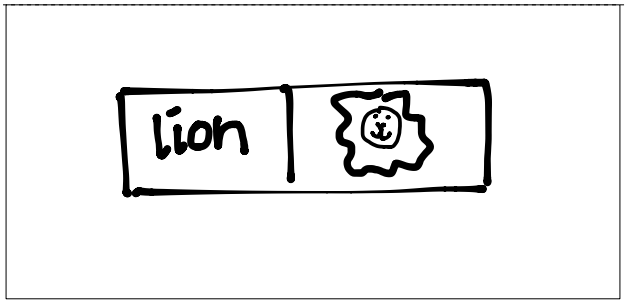
and the concept of the animal lion is the signified.



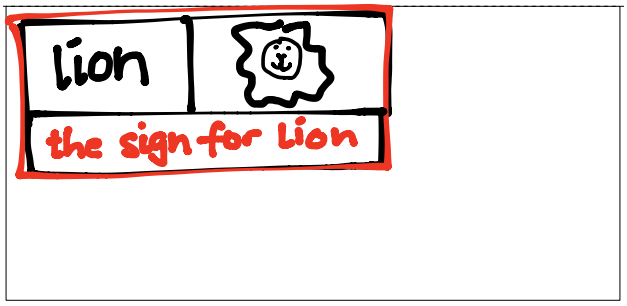
The two together form the sign "lion."



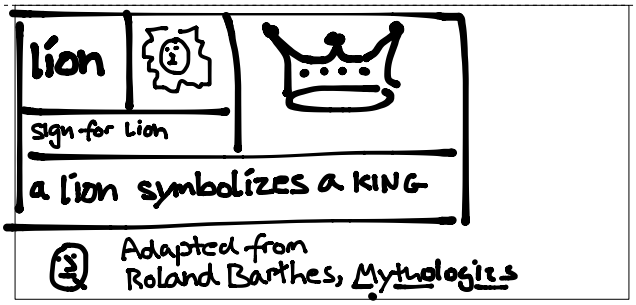
Let's turn this on its side...



and redraw it slightly.



And here we'll put a label for the whole box or the whole sign.



On another level, this whole sign lion is a signifier for something else, say a king. We now have two nested signs, with one taking the role of signifier in the other. This diagram is adapted from one drawn by the literary critic Roland Barthes.

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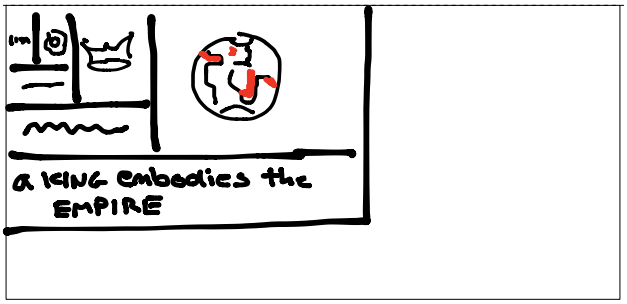
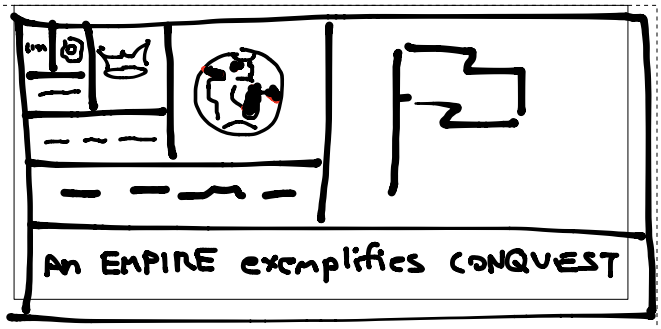
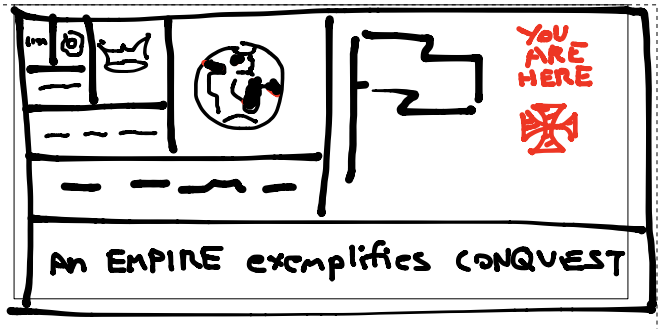


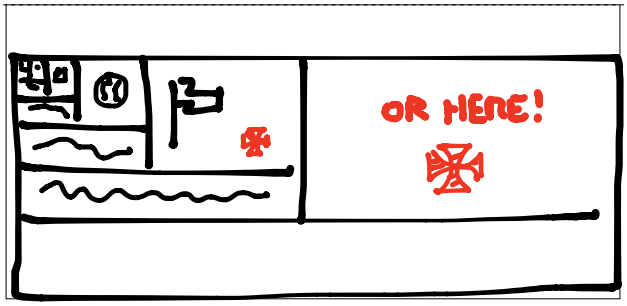
And while Barthes focused on this 2-term system, later critics extended it further, noting that these boxes could be nested infinitely.



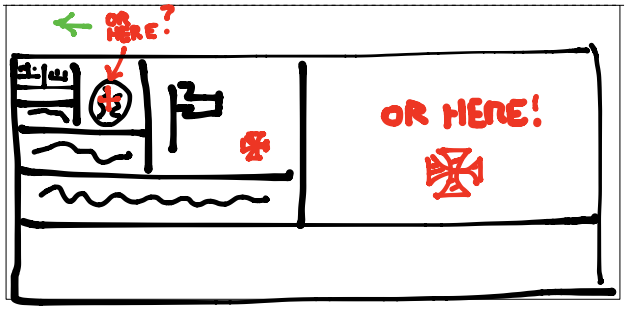
Radical poststructuralism suggests that the chain of signification has no end.



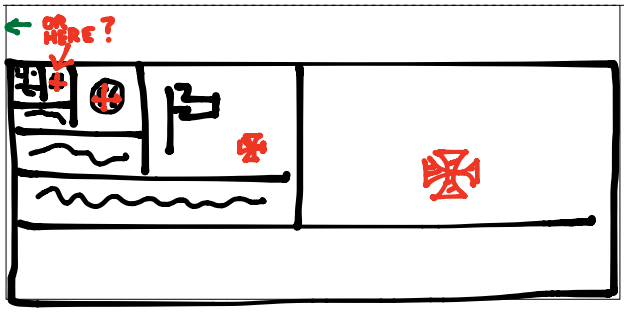
Language never points to a concrete signified outside the chain that would anchor it in an external reality;



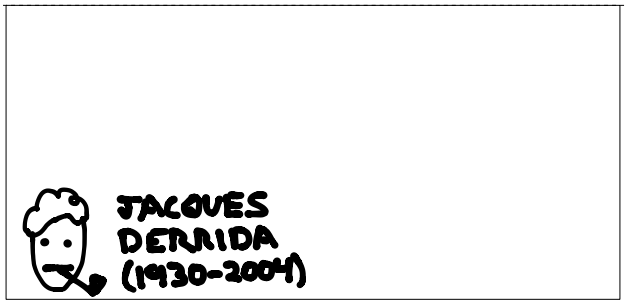
instead, language only ever points at additional layers of language...



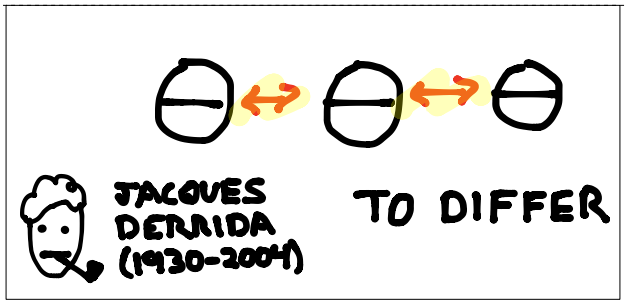
further down...



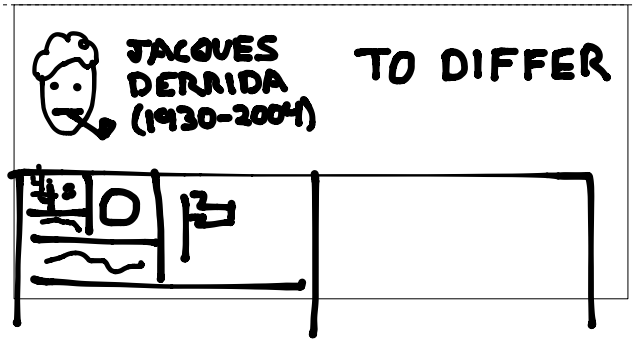
the chain.



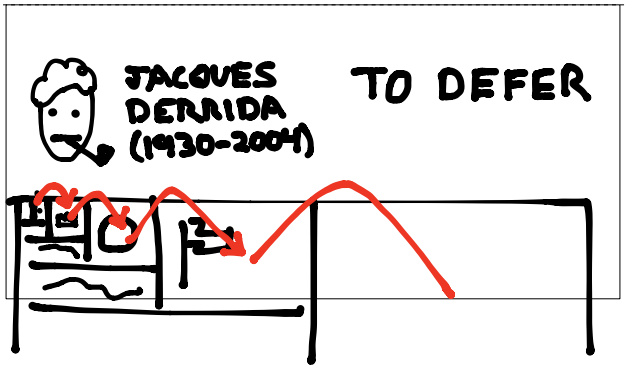
The French philosopher Jacques Derrida played on...



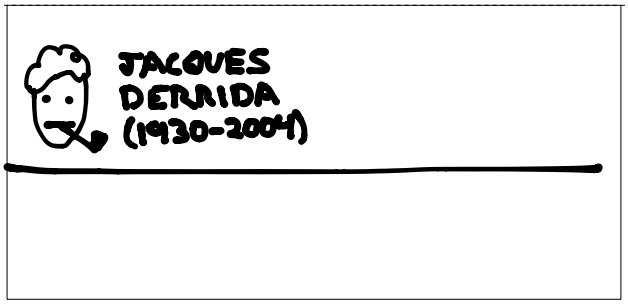
Saussure's idea that meaning lies in difference...

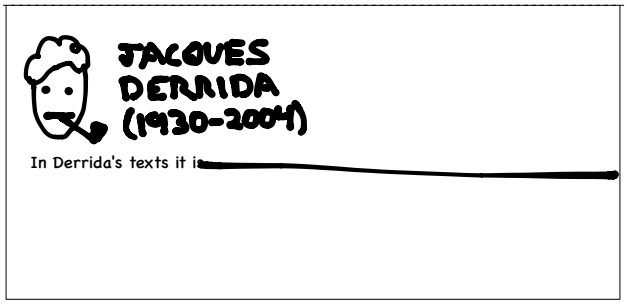


by adding the idea that meaning is also "deferred"...



endlessly down this chain. It is worth noting that while Saussure and Barthes actually used the diagrams we looked at earlier, Derrida's writing never includes this image.





In Derrida's texts it is prose, not diagrams, that has the upper hand, and perhaps this is because the idea of reducing meaning to something simple, like a line drawing, is exactly what radical poststructuralism rejects.

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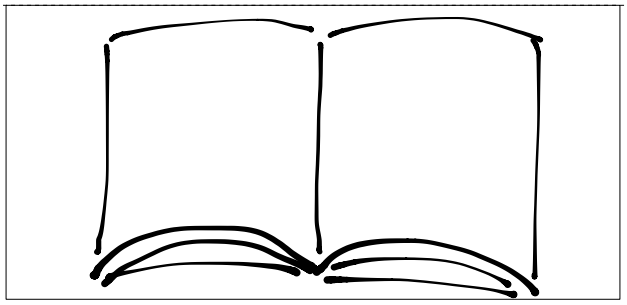
Paul de Man (1919-1983): "From the experience of reading abstract philosophical texts, we all know the relief one feels when the argument is interrupted by what we all a 'concrete' example. Yet at that very moment, when we think at last that we understand, we are further from comprehension than ever."
--The Rhetoric of Romanticism

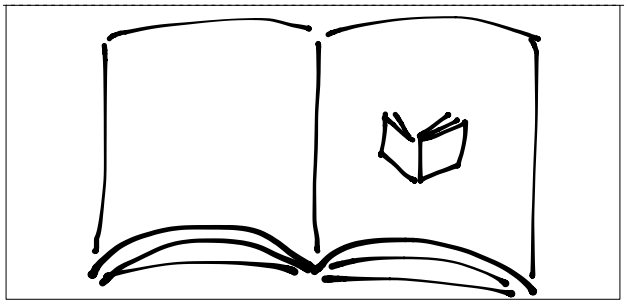
Paul de Man wrote about the dangers of using a simple illustration to represent the complexity of representation itself. "From the experience of reading abstract philosophical texts, we all know the relief one feels when the argument is interrupted by what we call a 'concrete' example. Yet at that very moment, when we think at last that we understand, we are further from comprehension than ever." De Man was talking about examples used to illustrate an argument; but what he says could apply equally to visual diagrams.

Paul de Man (1919-1983): "From the experience of reading abstract philosophical texts, we all know the relief one feels when the argument is interrupted by what we all a 'concrete' example. Yet at that very moment, when we think at last that we understand, we are further from comprehension than ever."
--The Rhetoric of Romanticism

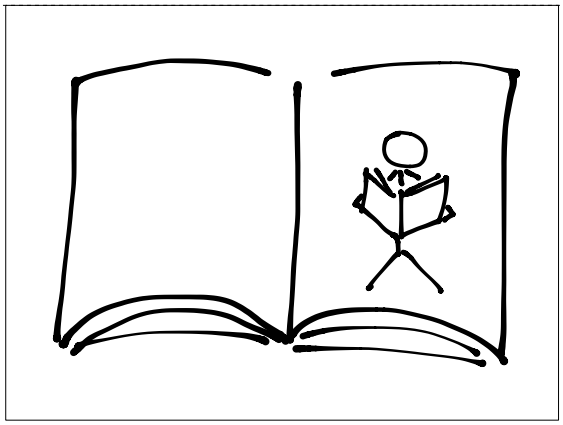
I have read and understood The limitations of this video.

Fair warning.

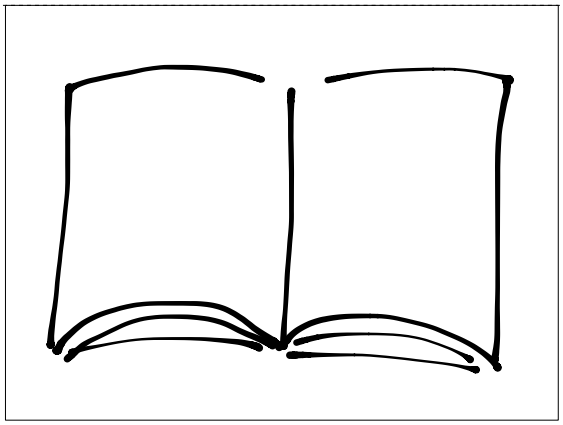




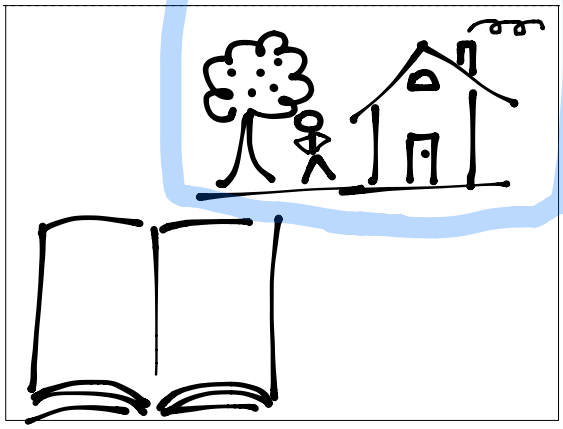
Literature influenced by poststructuralism may reproduce these recursive structures in itself, through devices like metafiction, in which the narrative contains other narratives...



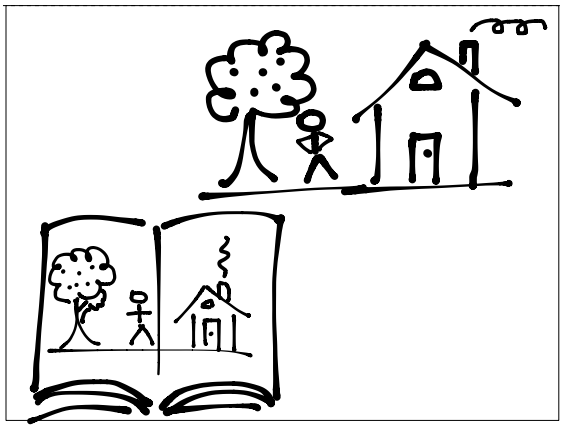
nested within it.

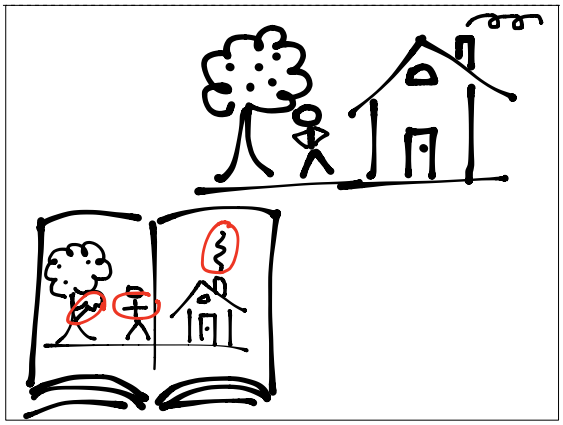


The opposite of this might be

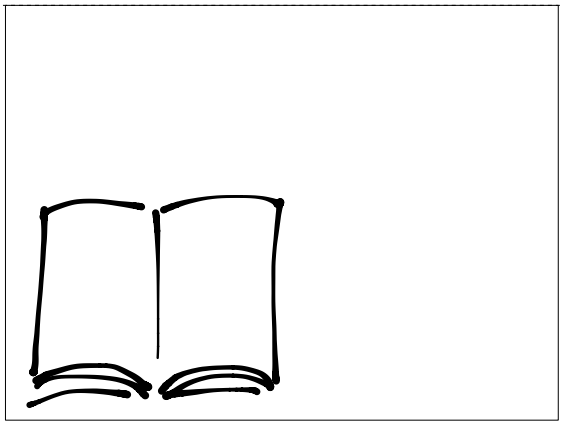


something like literary realism--literature that believes it can clearly and faithfully represent a reality that lies outside language.

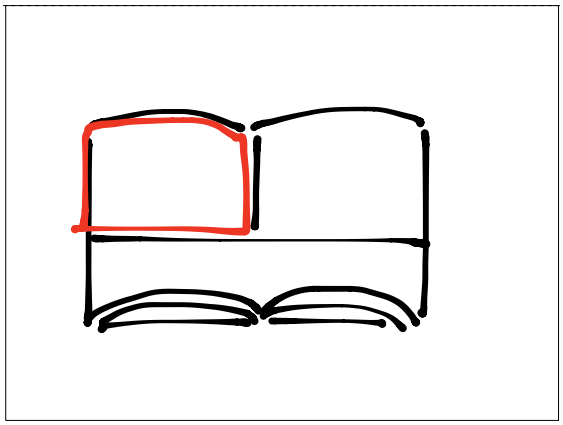


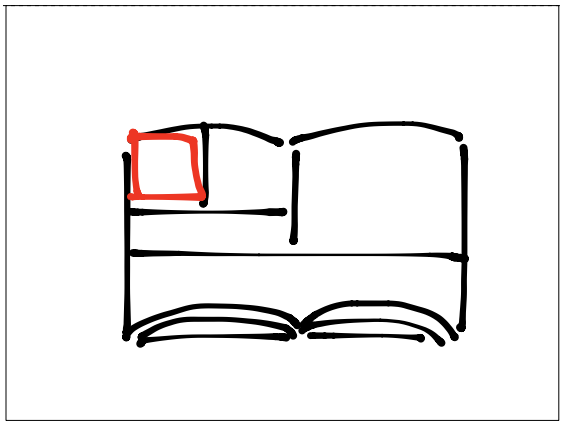


Poststructuralist critics tend to be skeptical of that belief

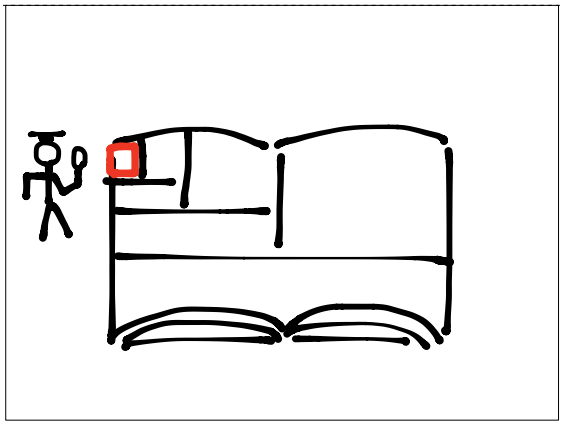


and even wary of it.

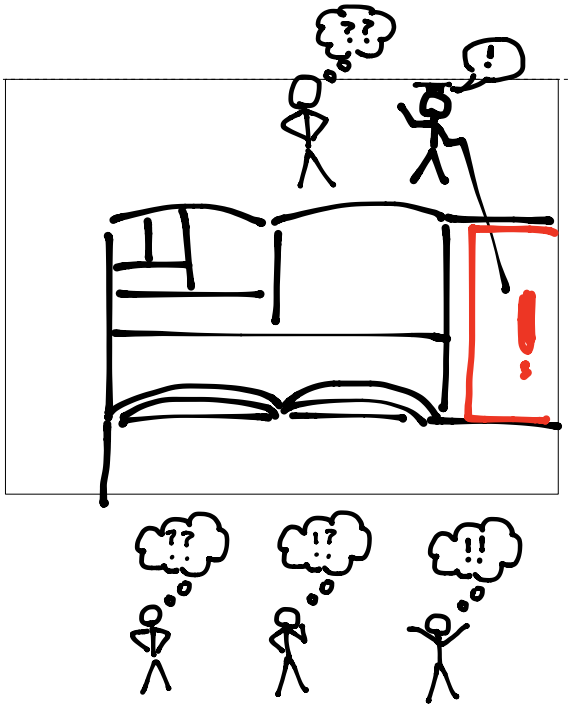




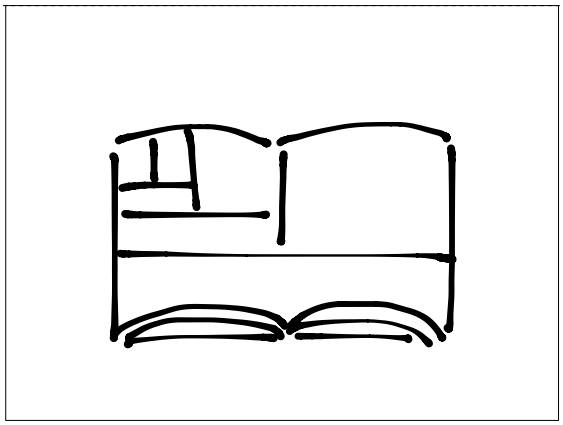
Whatever literature they look at, critics working in the wake of poststructuralism have embraced the ambiguity of language by searching for ways that the smallest details of a text...

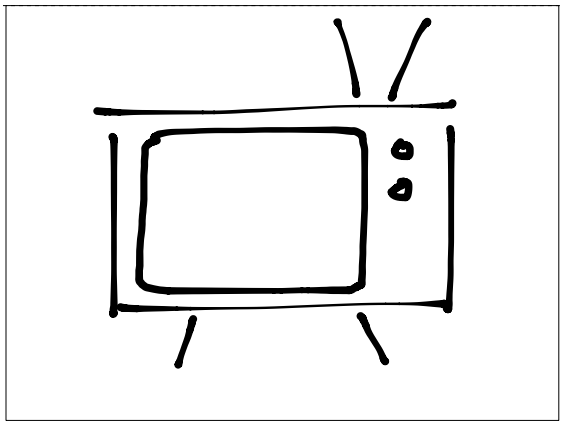


can be read to generate new meanings--

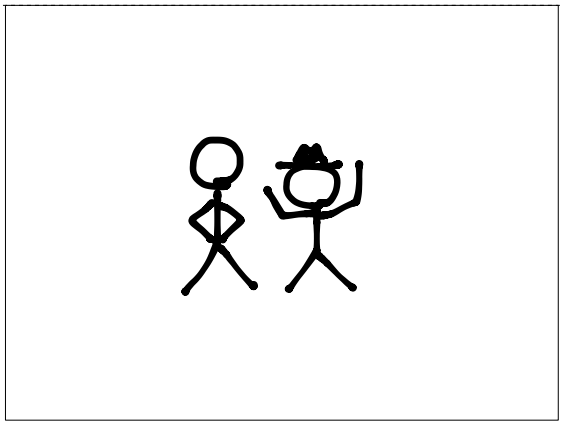


particularly surprising, even playful meanings that are at odds with more obvious interpretations of a text.

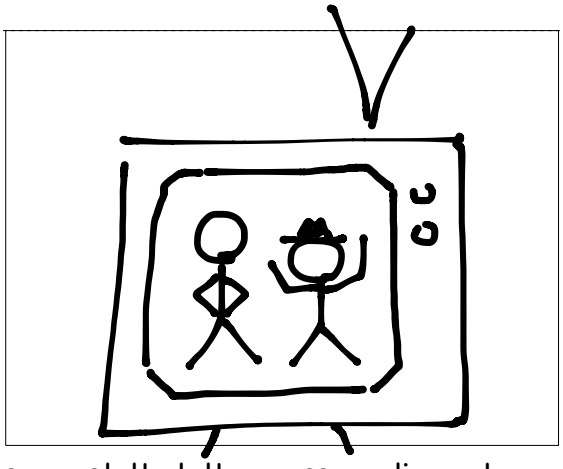


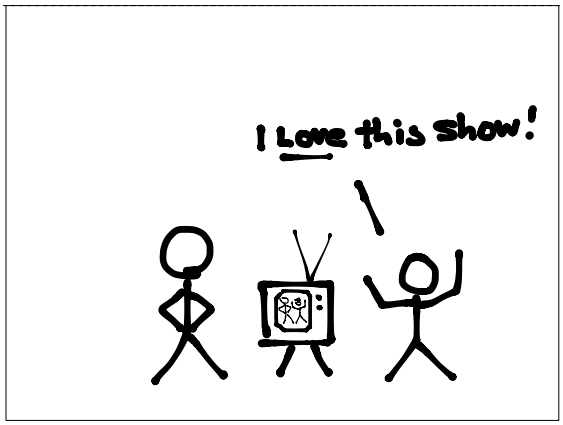


These conclusions about the slipperiness of meaning can be applied to non-literary language as well.

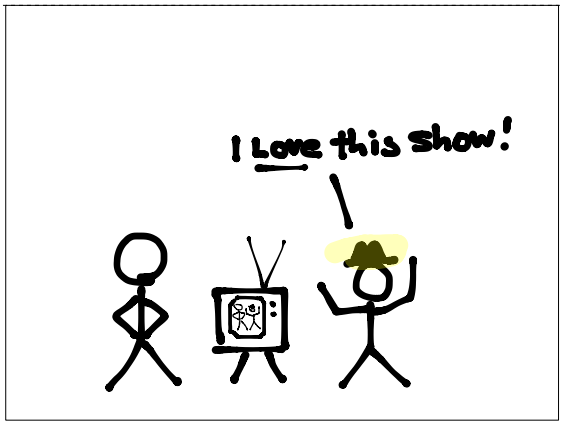


Media theories influenced by poststructuralism

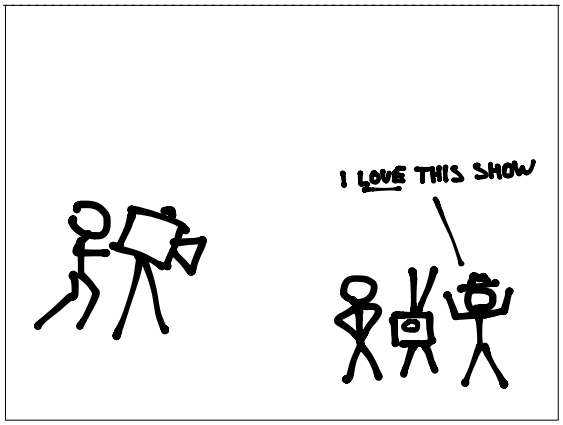




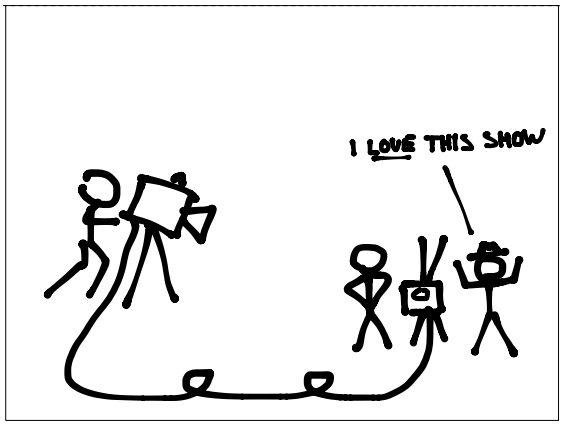
suggest that the mass media no longer portrays real external events, but that events now mimic the media



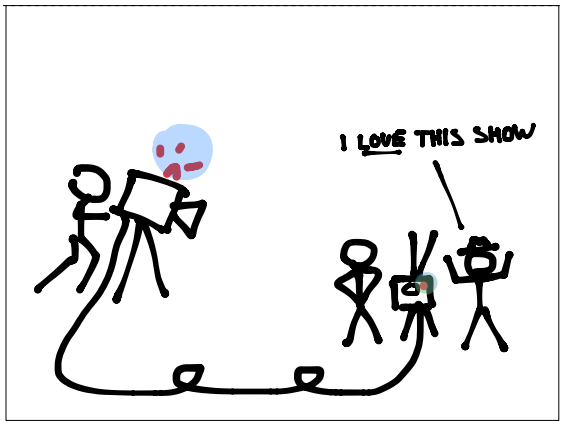
or are staged for it.

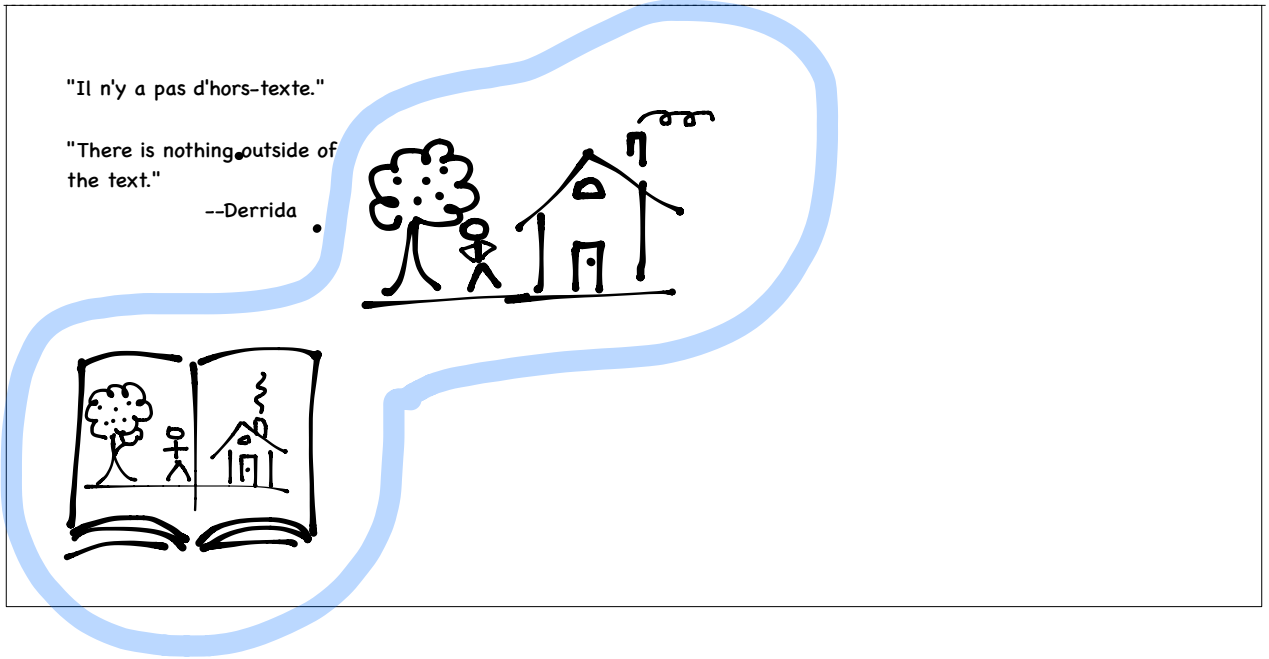


From the self-referentiality of popular culture to the way politics is staged for the television cameras-- these things are taken as evidence that electronic media have lost any referent or anchor in reality,

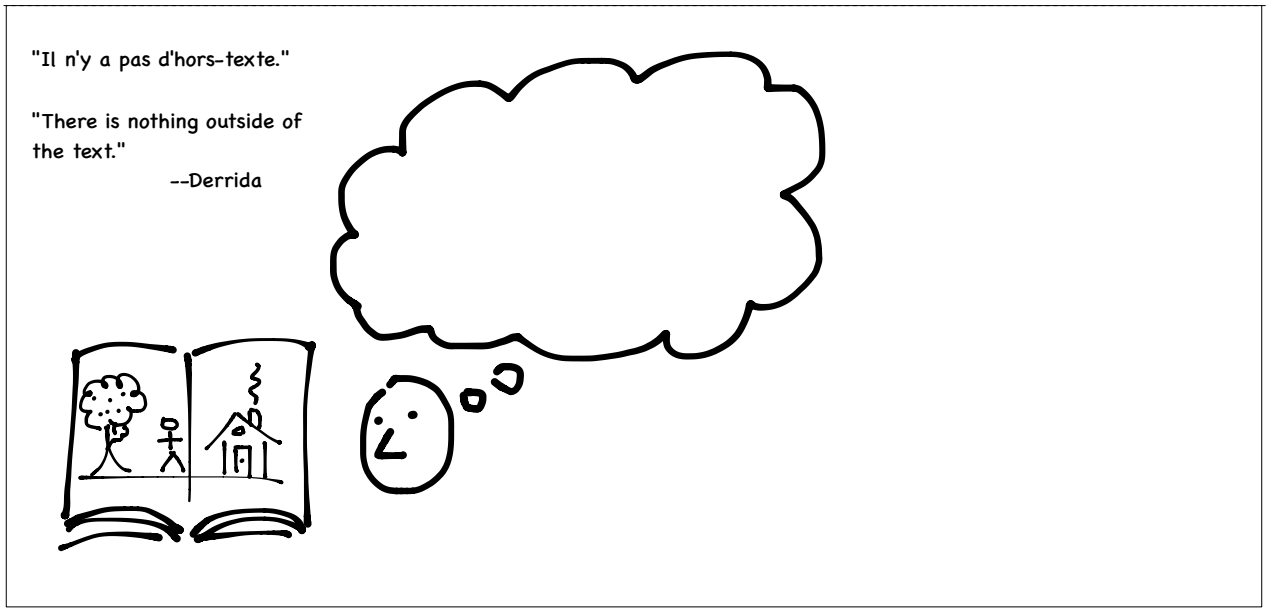


and only ever point at other layers of media.





Derrida famously declared that "There is nothing outside of the text." Naive critiques of this idea sometimes suggest that Derrida is denying the importance of a physical reality.

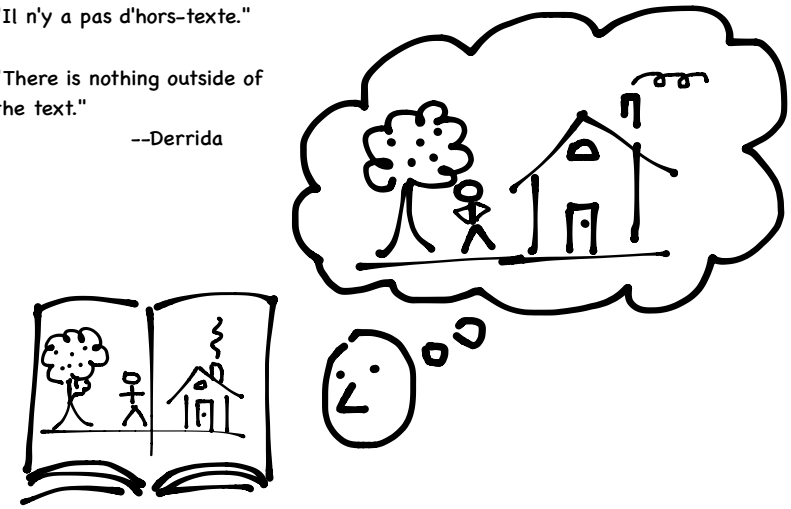


But it might be more accurate to say that poststructuralism is about recognizing the power of language to shape and reshape our own individual realities...

"Il n'y a pas d'hors-texte."

"There is nothing outside of the text."

--Derrida

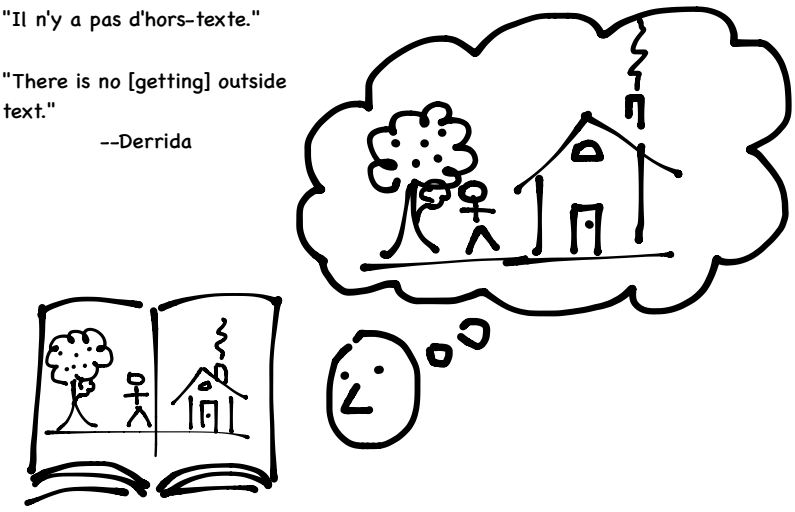


in important ways.

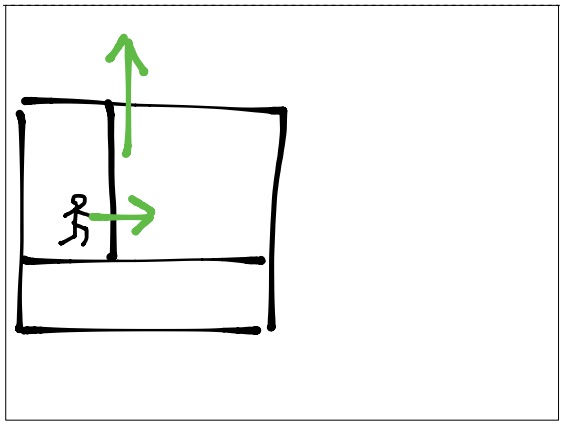
"Il n'y a pas d'hors-texte."

"There is no [getting] outside text."

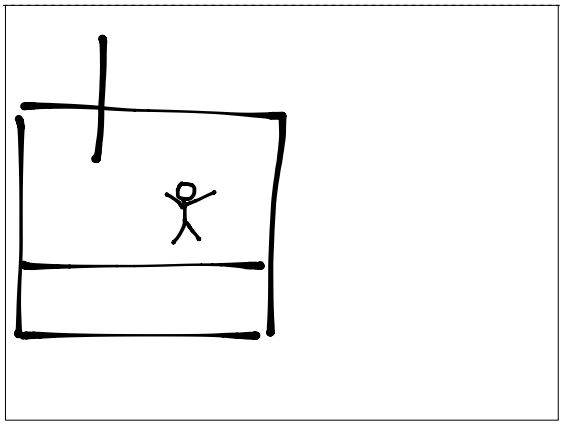
--Derrida



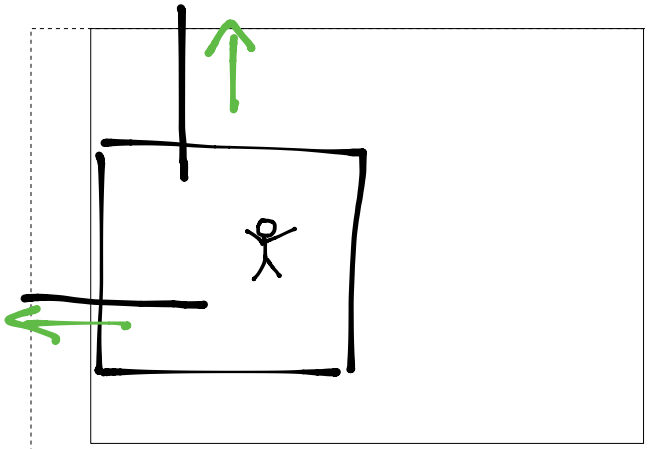
Realizing that "there is nothing outside of the text" means recognizing that we can never get outside these boxes--



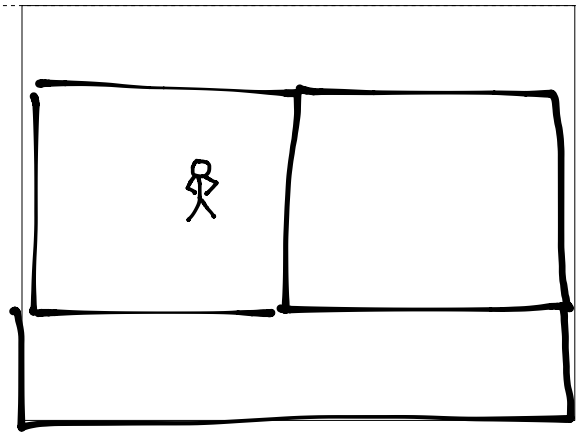
we can never...



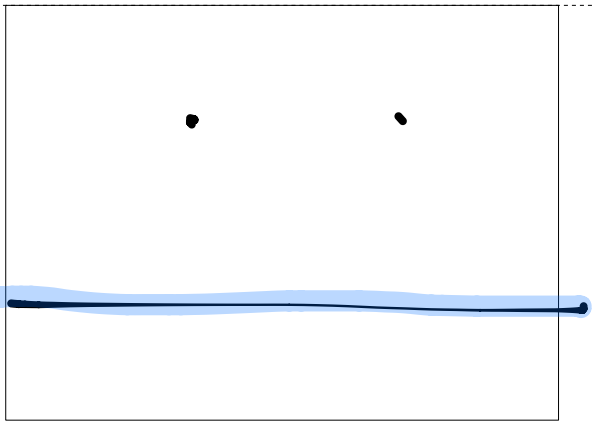
get to the end...



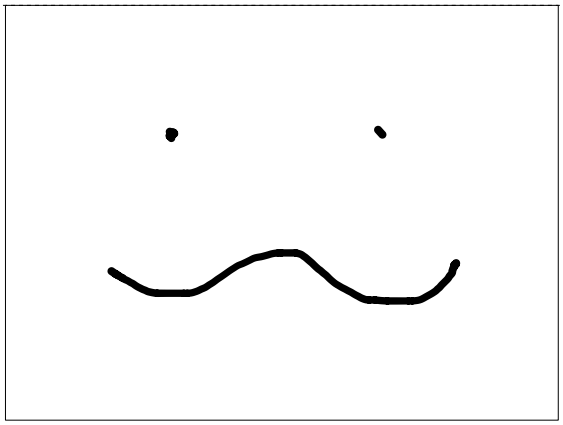
of this chain...



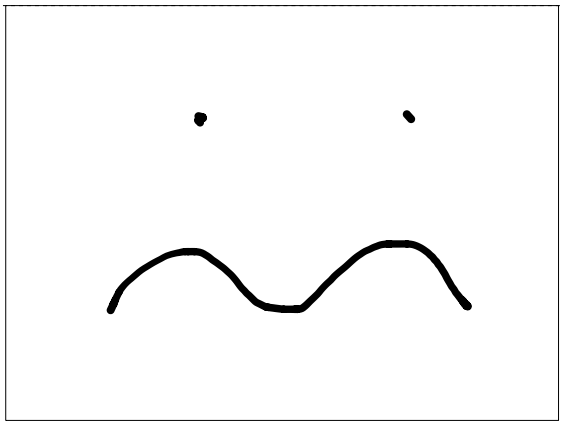
because there is no meaning or referent that cannot in turn be reinterpreted to mean something else.

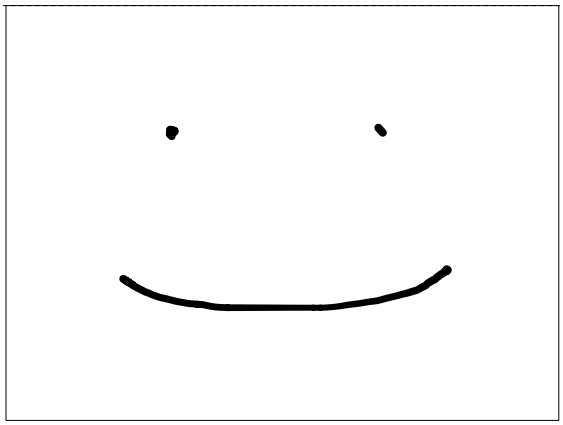


This idea that meaning is endlessly postponed may sound like a bleak conclusion. But many literary critics see it as an optimistic one:

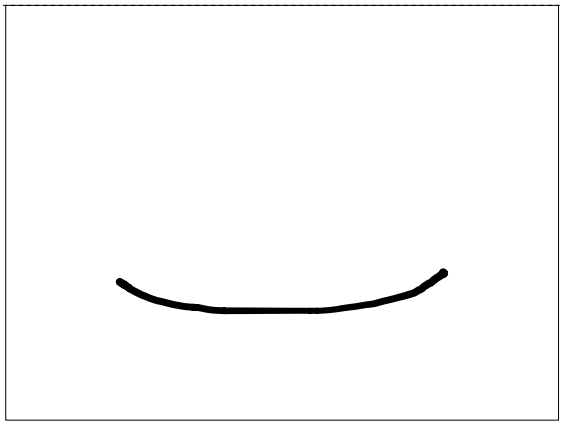


the more freedom or play in this chain...

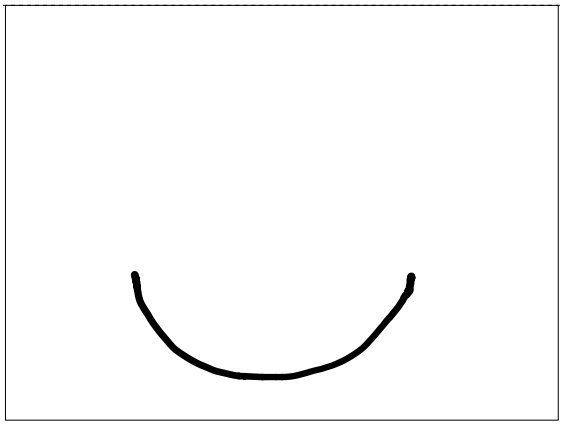




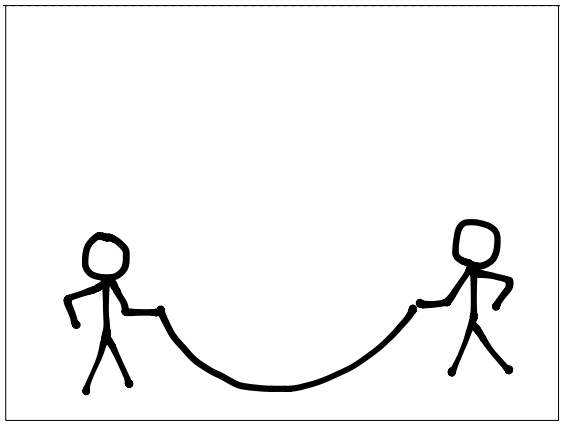
the more room for a reader to generate his or her own meanings from the text.

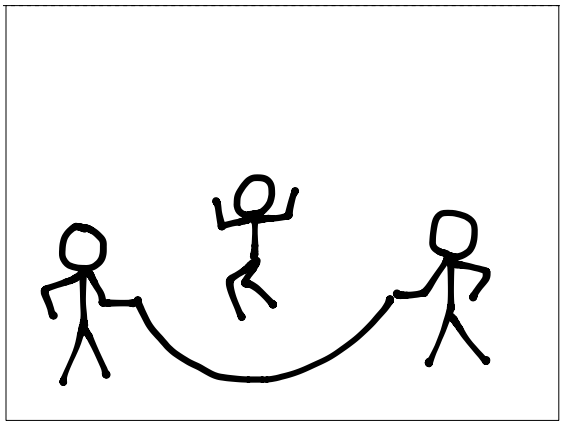


This term play was a key one for Barthes: he used it to refer to...

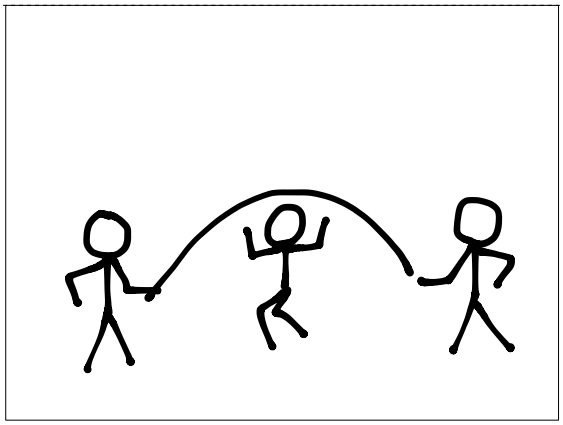


a flexibility or movement in the text that allowed it to be interpreted in different ways.

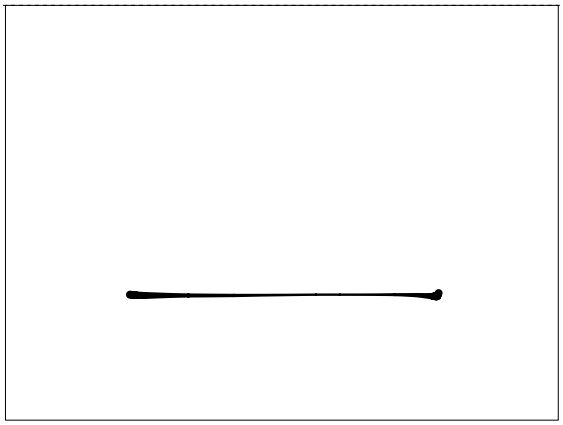




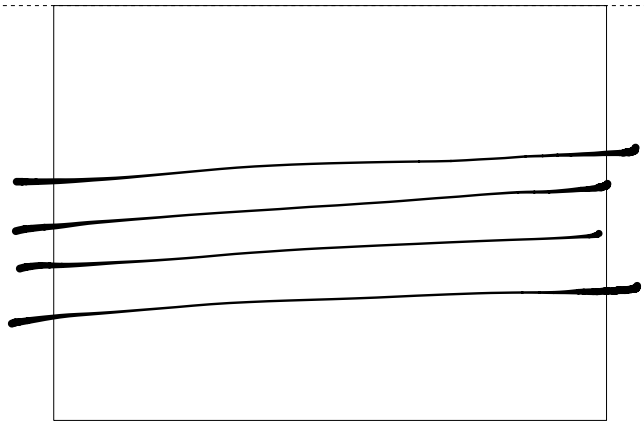
He also used it to refer to the act of reading and interpretation, which was playful,



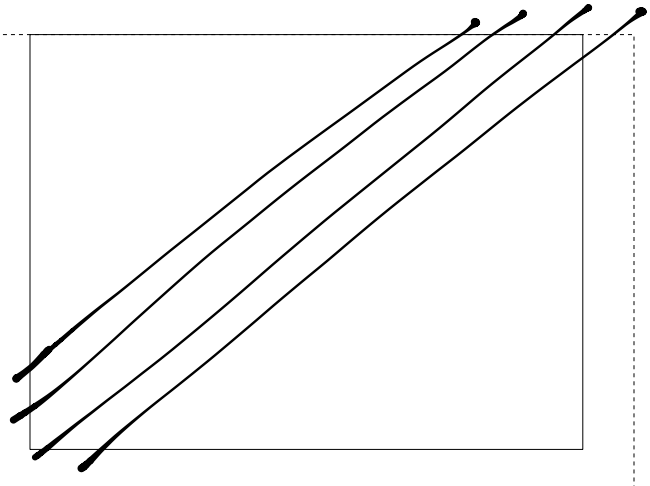
like a game,



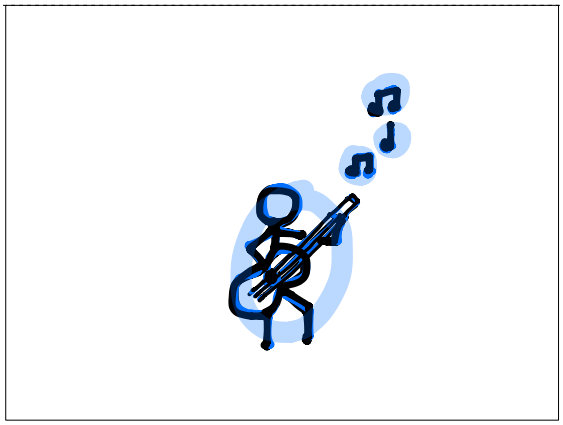
and also creative,



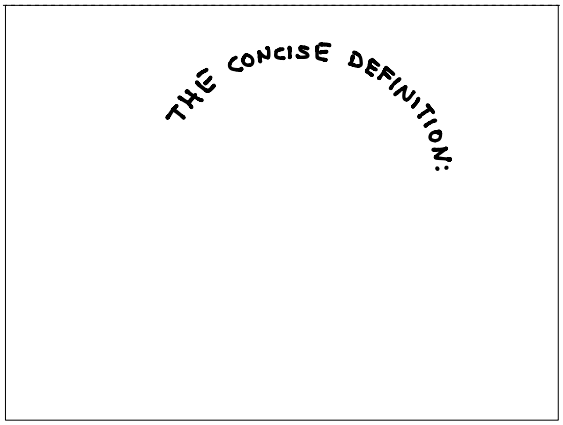
active,



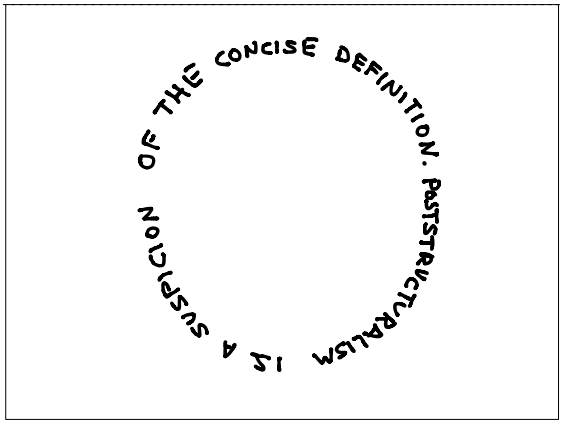
and virtuosic--



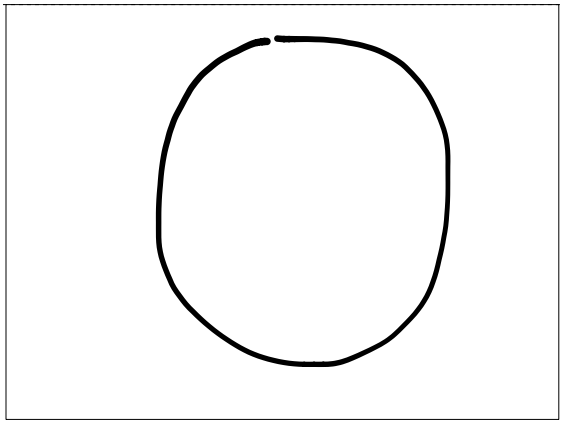
--like a musician playing a score.



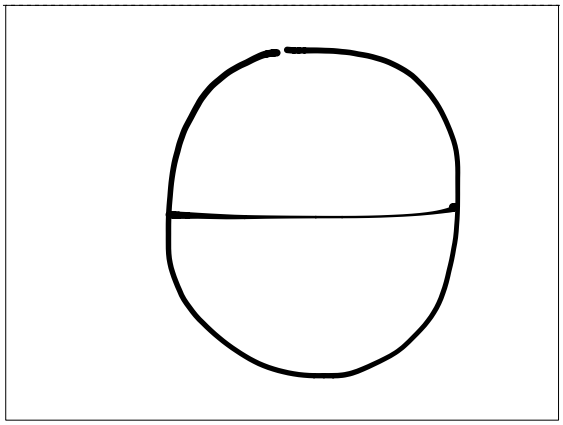
This is a short definition of poststructuralism. But as you may be able to see,



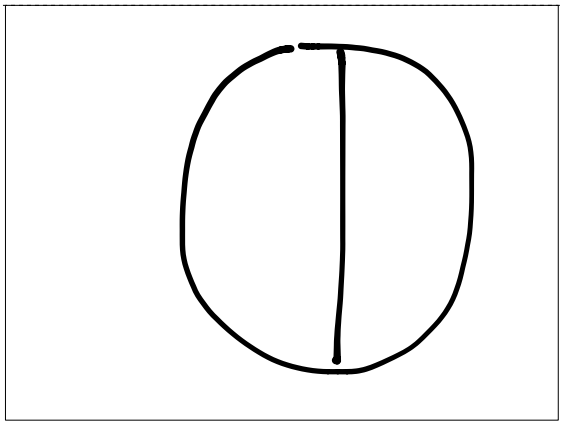
an even more concise definition could be that poststructuralism is a suspicion of concise definitions.



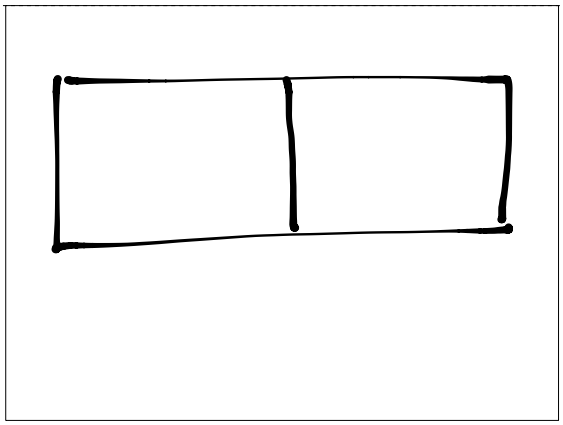
It's a consciousness



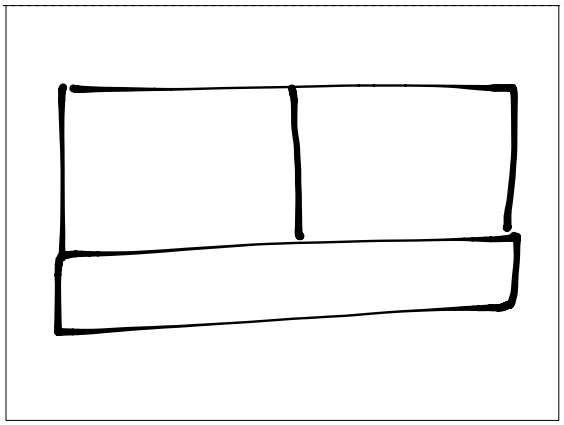
that literary language



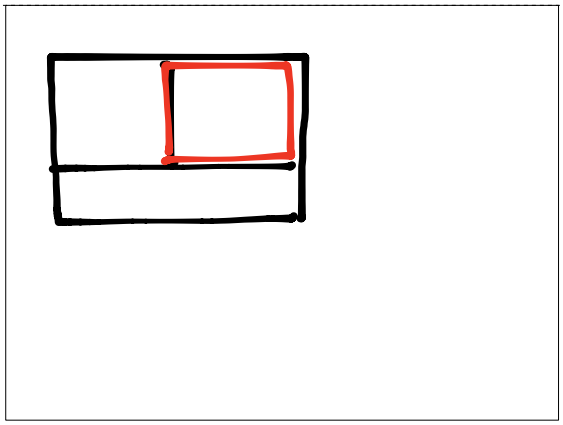
and maybe language more broadly



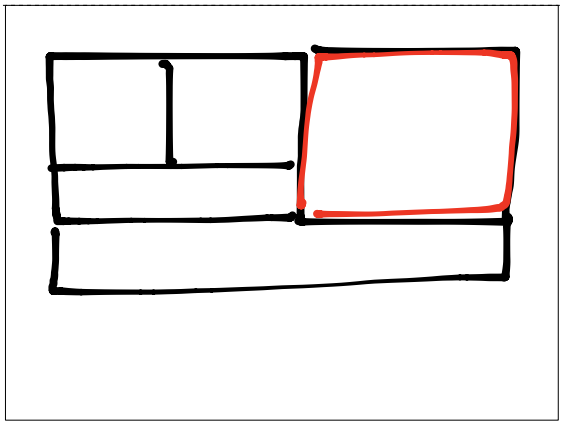
do not point simply



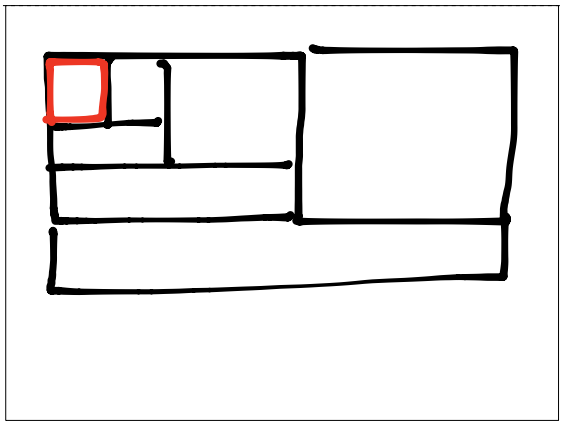
or reliably



to a stable meaning,



but only ever defer meaning,



by pointing to other language.

(Cross fade to live action footage of hand drawing on paper, then zoom out to reveal the makers of the film in the studio. This frame then retreats to the upper left in the next frame.)

Poststructuralism encourages a way of reading that is aware of the gaps in meaning that inevitably exist in language. It is a way of reading that does not try to get outside language to nail down meaning or to close those gaps.

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(Making of" footage continues in this box.)

(Citations for source texts are written in this box.)

(Production credits are written in this box.)

...Rather it revels in the play of language, and plays at constructing new meanings in the space these gaps open up.

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