CRITICAL LENS THE THIRD: DECONSTRUCTION

Adapted from work by Warren Hedges, Southern Oregon University

Step 1: Identify a Binary Opposition
- Notice what a particular text or school of thought takes to be *natural, normal, self-evident, originary, immediately apparent, or worthy of pursuit or emulation*:
    - group *x* is naturally, inherently *something*. group y is naturally, inherently the opposite.
    - "everybody knows that" *x* is true
    - everybody wants *x*, it is natural to want *x*, *x* is an inherent trait of human nature
- Notice those places where a text is most *insistent that there is a firm and fast distinction between two things*:
    - men and women, black and white, good and evil, subject and object
    - *x* precedes *y* (look for strict cause and effect relationships which are unquestioned by the text)
    - *x* is more natural than *y*
    - *y* is derivative of *x* or an inversion of *x*
    - *y* has a parasitic relation to *x*
    - *x* is original and *y* is imitative
    - *y* is a manifestation or effect of *x*
    - *y* is an exception or special case and *x* is the rule

Step 2: Deconstruct The Opposition
- Show how something represented as primary, complete & originary is derived, composite, and/or an effect of something else.
    - Our sense of Winnie the Pooh when we read books about him is shaped by our memories of the movies. The voices we hear when we read are the movie voices, and the "original" text is partially an effect of the movie.
    - Because consciousness is actually "self-consciousness," (i.e. a self and a consciousness) consciousness is always already divided, never simply present to itself.
- *AND/OR* Show how something represented as completely different from something else only exists by virtue of defining itself against that something else. In other words, show how it depends on that thing. For example:
    - There's no way to define happiness if we don't understand that sadness exists.
    - Nothing can only be defined as the absence of something. It depends on "something" to exist, just as "something" depends on "nothing" in order to be defined.
    - Truth depends on error. Without the concept of error, truth does not exist.
- *AND/OR* Show how something represented as normal is a special case.
    - Truth" is a story that people find especially convincing.
    - Whiteness is an ethnicity that disguises the fact it's an ethnicity.

The General Way It Works
In general, as Jonathan Culler puts it, deconstruction disrupts not only the hierarchy, but the opposition itself. Note how this is different than simply *reversing* an opposition. For example consider these reversals of a culturally prevalent opposition:
- The Pooh movies are better than the books (reverses the usual assumption that the book is better & more original than the movie).
- the Joker is cooler than Batman (reverses notion of the hero).
- women are smarter than men (reverses chauvinistic "common knowledge").
- Native Americans are more heroic than cowboys (reverses the Western).

Reversal is a valuable move, but deconstruction is after bigger game, because it "deconstructs" the underlying hierarchy. For example:
- Our sense of Pooh books *is derived* from the movies.
- Batman *is a special kind of villain* called a vigilante.
- Men's sense of their identity *is dependent upon* particular beliefs about female identity.
- "Cowboy heroism" *cannot exist* without "bad Indians."

Notice how these statements cripple the underlying hierarchy by "deconstructing" the opposition that it depends on. Deconstruction doesn't simply *reverse* the opposition, nor does it *destroy* it. Instead it demonstrates its inherent instability.

A Note on Practicalities
In Stanley's Fish's words, we can deconstruct anything in theory, but not in everyday practice. The fact that in principle we can deconstruct anything doesn't mean that we can deconstruct everything, all the time, and still communicate. We can, however, deconstruct things that annoy us, point out where a text already deconstructs an opposition, focus on oppositions authors and poets try (often with difficulty) to keep intact, and gain insight into how our own sense of ourselves (as well as the way the culture tries to interpret *us*) depends on oppositions that can be deconstructed.