Society, Language, Difference

6. Derrida
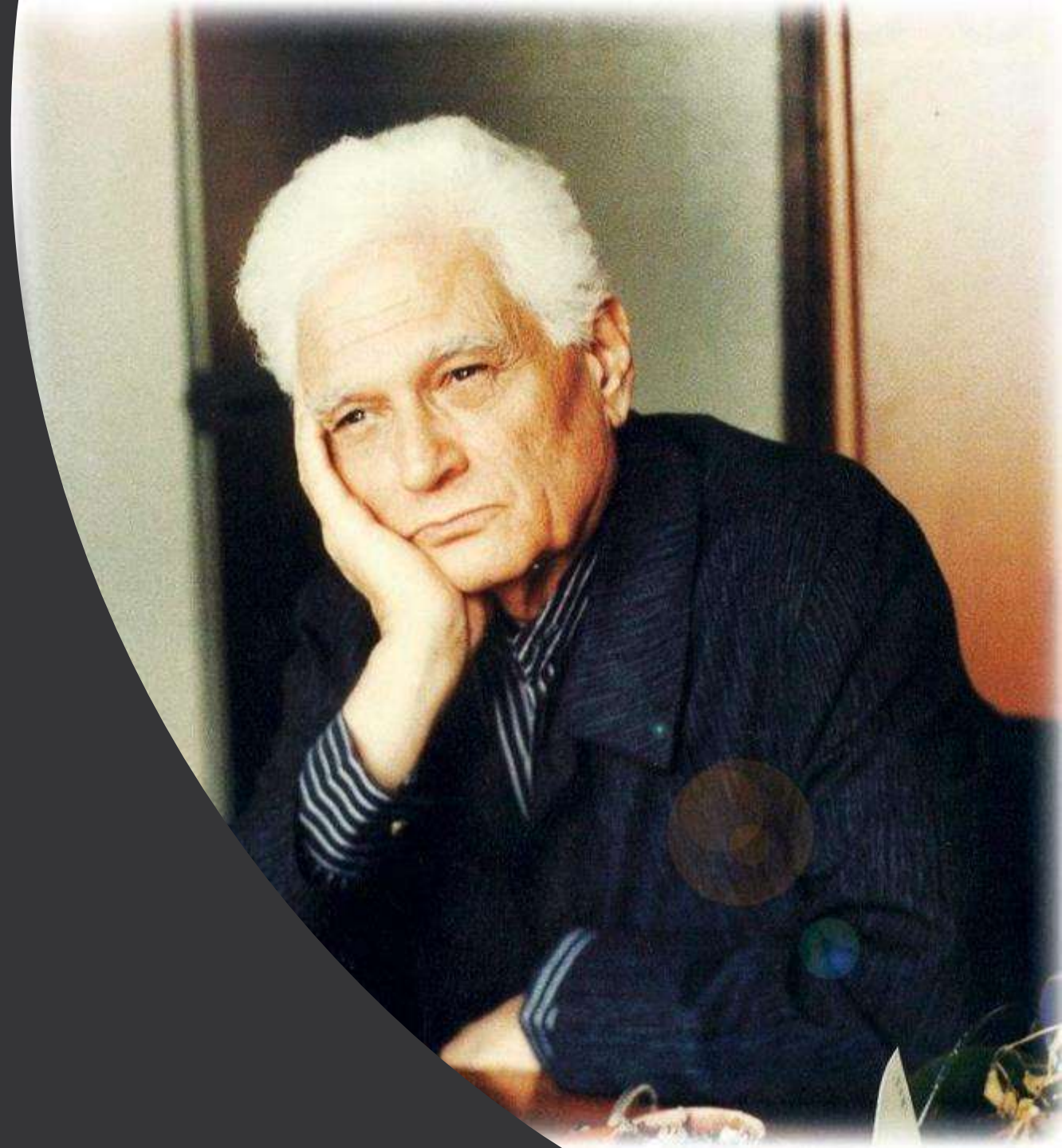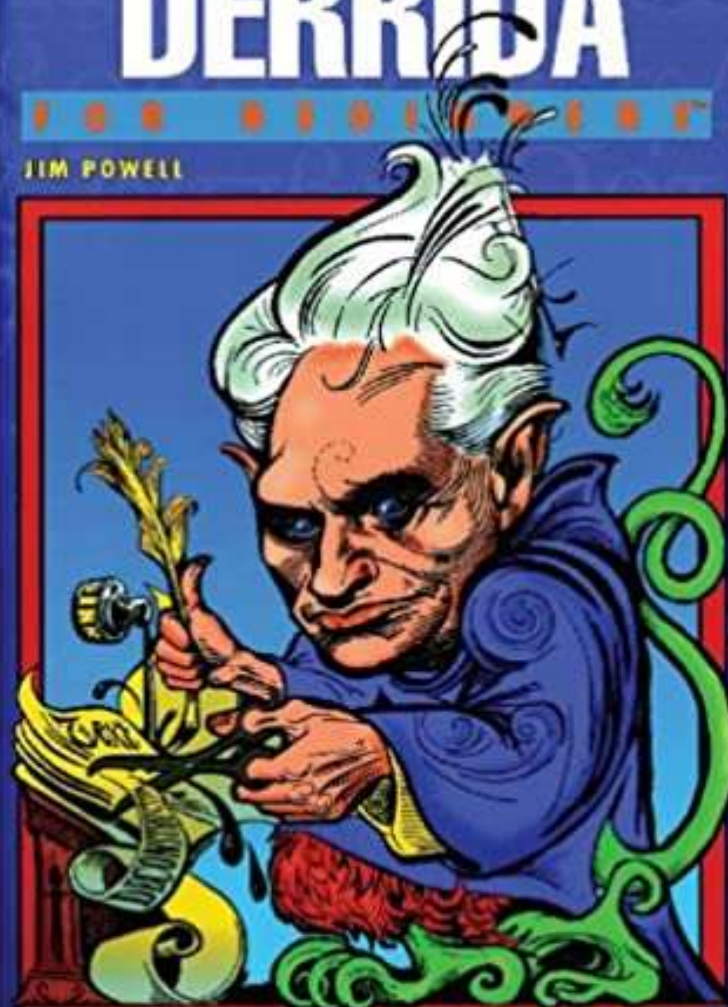
'A text remains […] forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harboured in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the *present*, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception.'
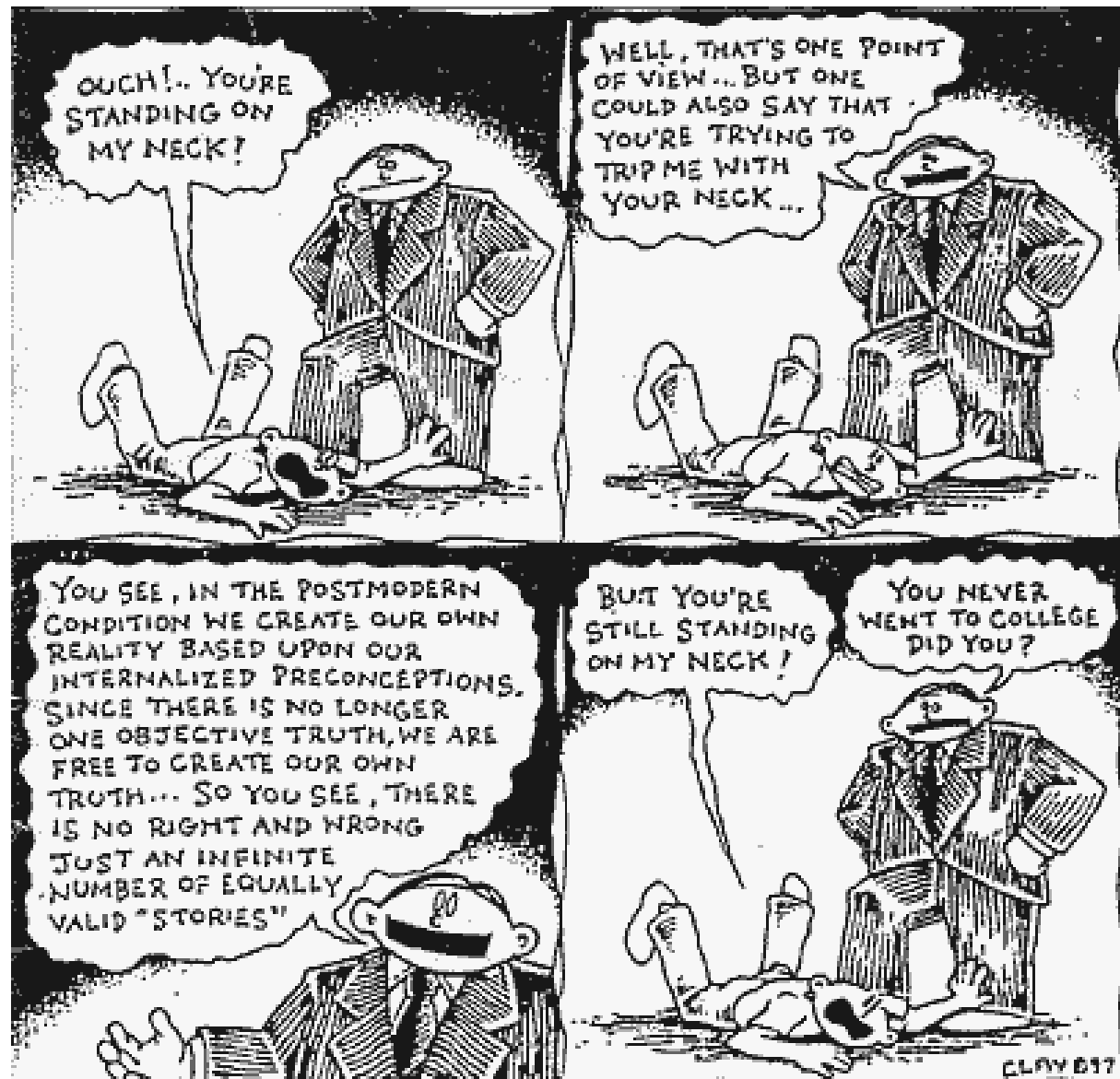– *Plato's Pharmacy*

'What is going to come, *perhaps*, is not only this or that; it is at last the thought of the *perhaps*, the *perhaps* itself.'
– *The Politics of Friendship*
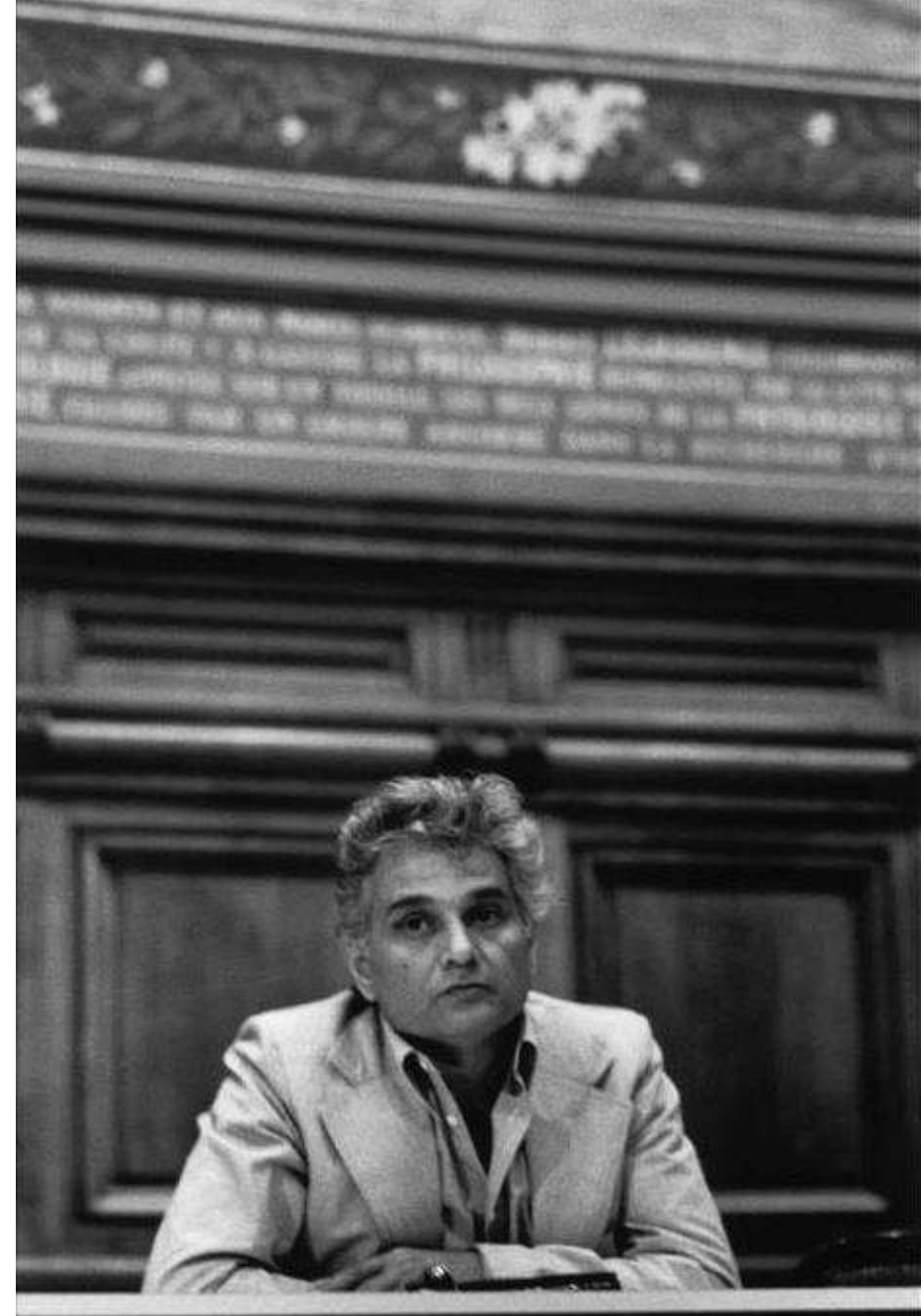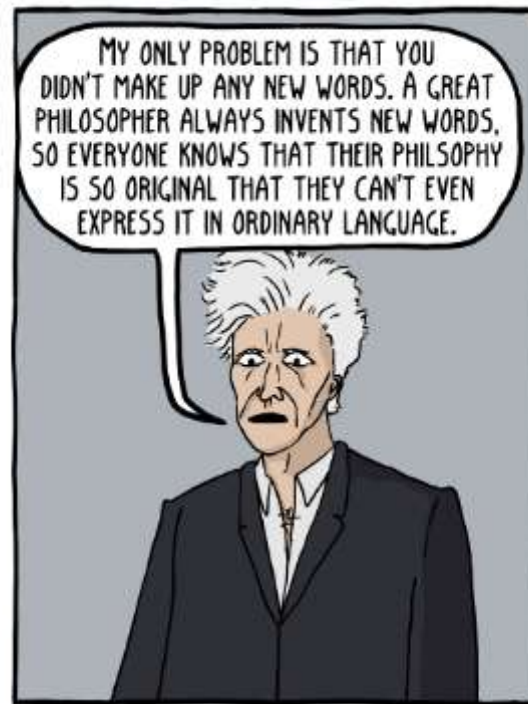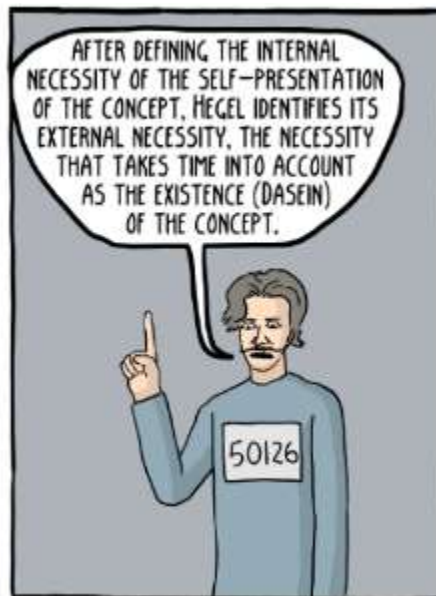
'Derrida's special significance lies not in the fact that he was subversive, but in the fact that he was an outright intellectual fraud

… whatever Derrida is affirming he is also simultaneously denying. From a logical perspective, the only way to read Derrida on his own terms is mentally to insert the phrase "or not" after every one of his statements.'

- Mark Goldblatt, "The Derrida Achievement"

'[John Searle is] right in saying that a lot of Derrida's arguments … are just awful.'

- Richard Rorty
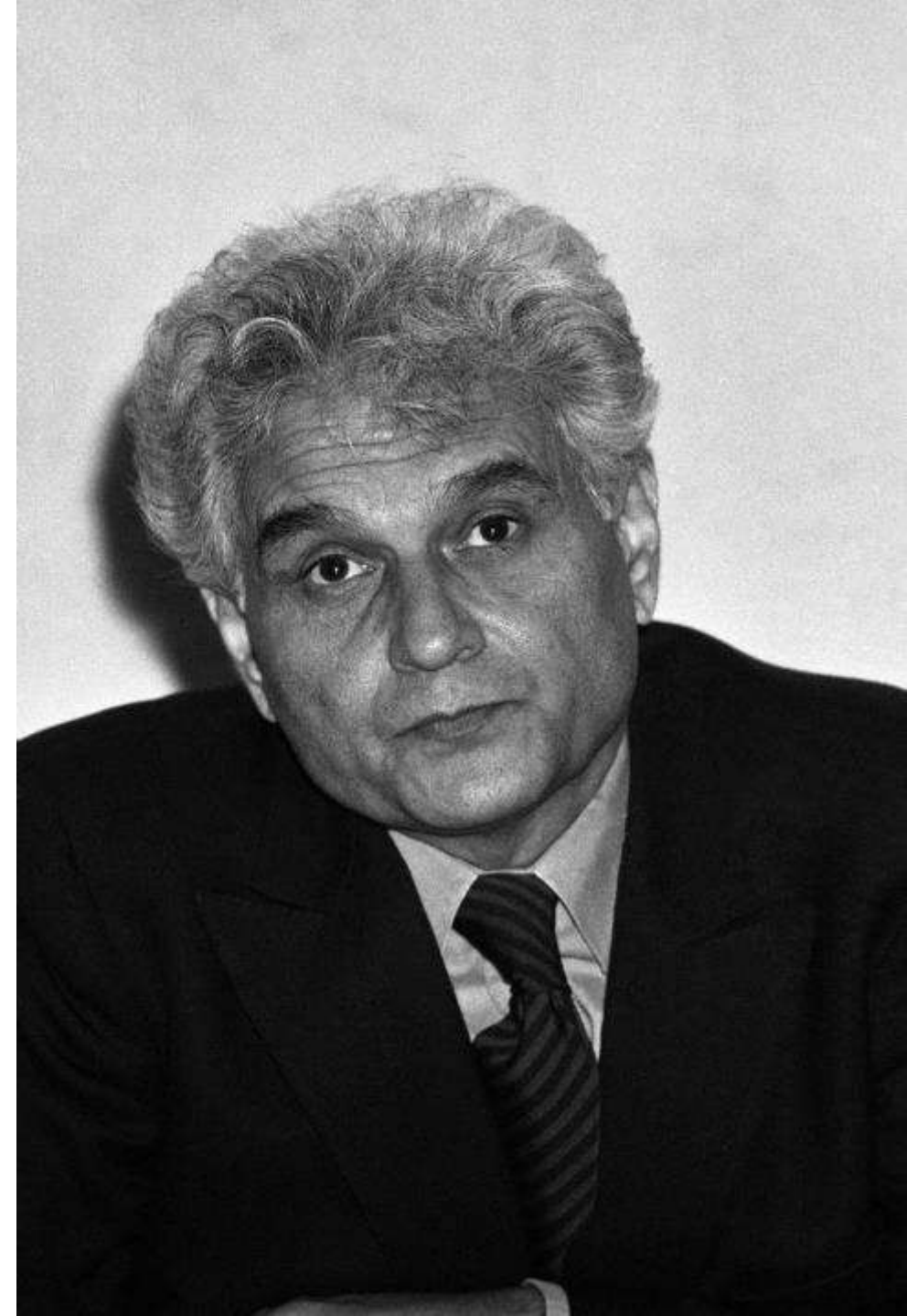
Agenda
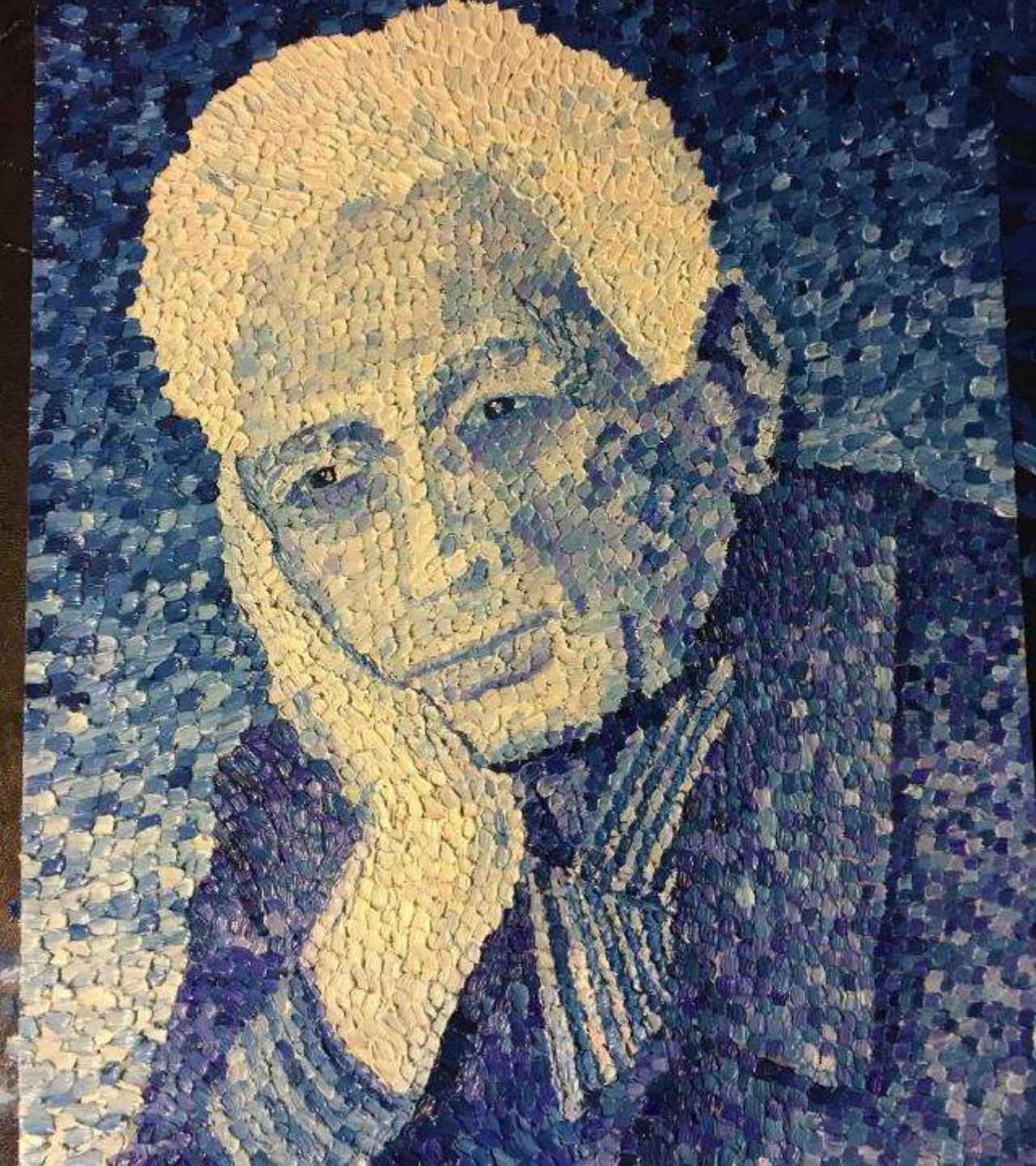
'As you know, the traditional philosophy excludes biography, considers biography as something external to philosophy.

You remember Heidegger's statement about Aristotle? Heidegger once was asked 'what was the life of Aristotle?'

... The one thing that could be answered is very simple. Aristotle was a philosopher. ... He was born, he thought, and he died. And all the rest is pure anecdote.'

Introducing Derrida

- Born in El Biar, Algiers, to a Sephardic Jewish Family in 1930

- Expelled from school in 1942 after Vichy enforced anti-Semitic quotas

- Studies in France from the 1940s, with two years military service back in Algeria from 1957-59, teaching soldiers' children

- Decisive influences include Husserl, James Joyce and Heidegger

- Comes to prominence from 1967, very much shaped by earlier traditions of Phenomenology and Structuralism

- Very prolific, writing over 40 books over 5 decades, with subjects covering philosophy, literature, law, linguistics, friendship, politics

חברת גומל חסדים
חברים
1951

JACQUES DERRIDA

DE LA GRAMMATOLOGIE

Jacques Derrida

English Translation
by John P. Leavey, Jr.
and Richard Rand

GLAS

Timeline

1952: Enters ENS, meets Althusser & Foucault

1962: first key work, Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry*

1966: *Structure, Sign and Play* at Johns Hopkins University

1967: *Of Grammatology*; *Speech and Phenomena*; and *Writing and Difference*

1974: *Glas*

1986: becomes Professor at the University of California, where he remains until his death in 2004

1992: Cambridge honorary doctorate controversy

1994: *Spectres of Marx*; *The Politics of Friendship*

2. Structuralism

Ceci n'est pas une pipe.
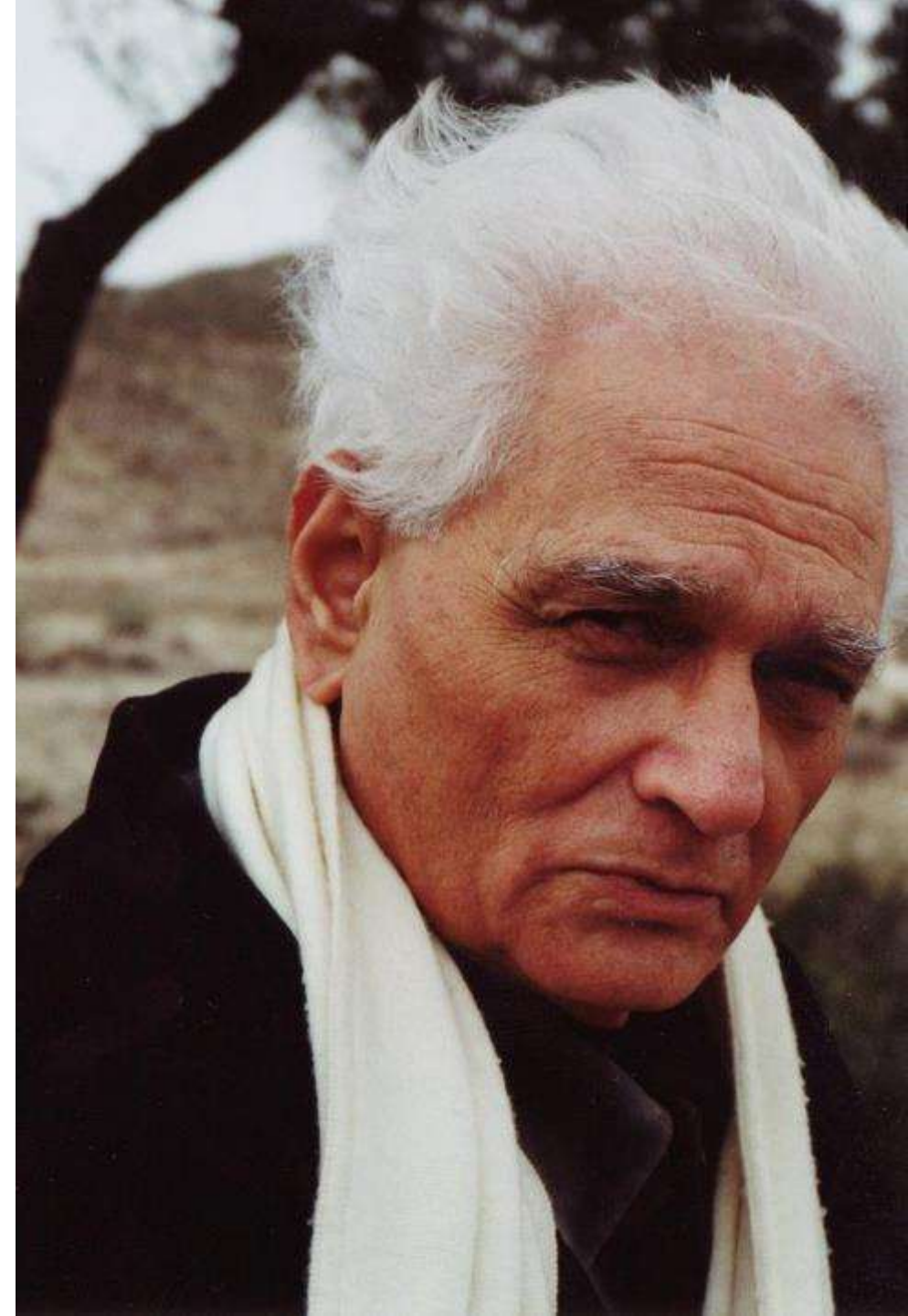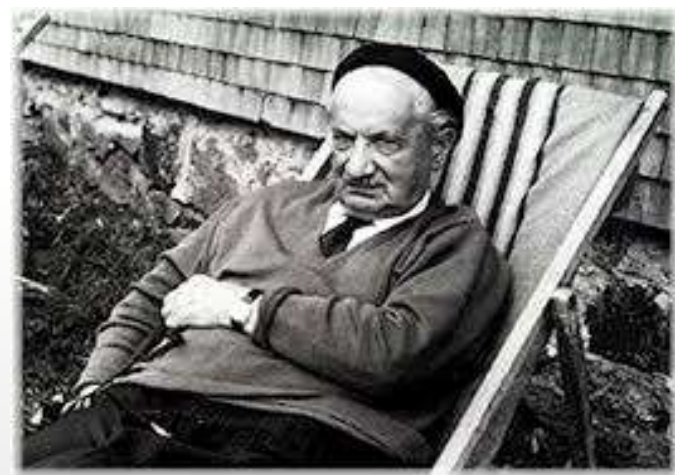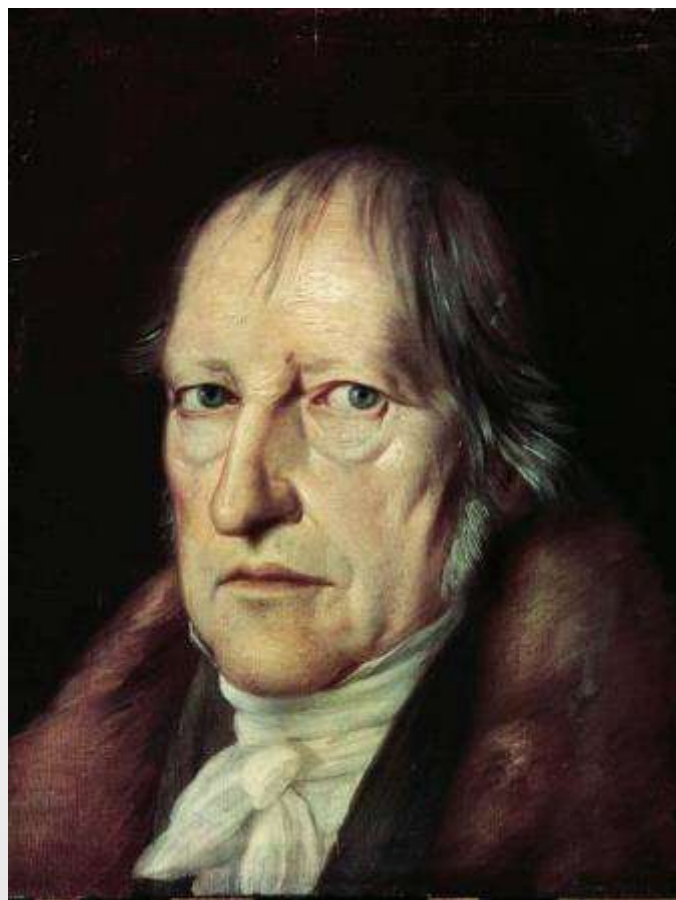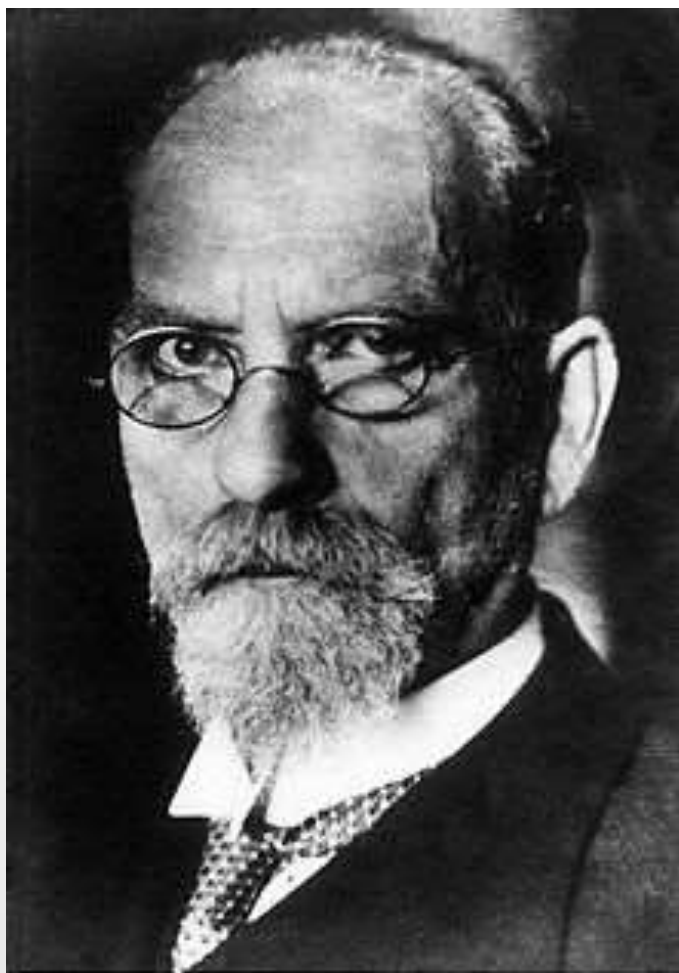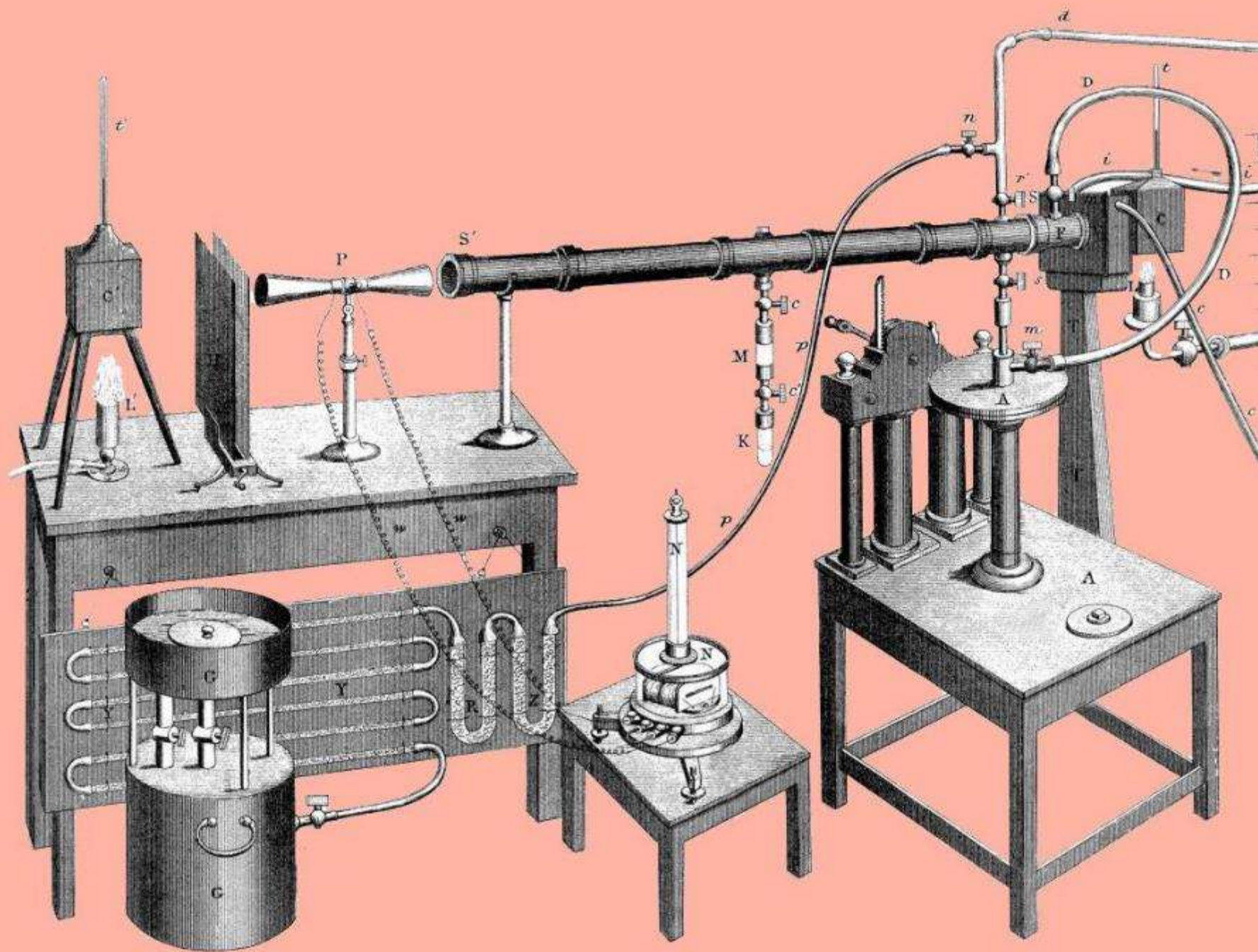
Ferdinand de Saussure

- *Course in General Linguistics* (1916)
- Language is an objective system of signs, whose meaning is understood through their structure of relations
- Meaning is determined through difference between these units
- Key distinction between the signifier and the signified
- Ideas of difference are underscored by opposites: Night/day; black/white; animal/human.

3. *Grammatology*

'But the one who reads a text by a philosopher, say a tiny paragraph, and interprets it in a rigorous, inventive and powerfully deciphering fashion is more of a real biographer than the one who knows the whole story.'
- Derrida

JACQUES DERRIDA
Of Grammatology

Translated by
GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

Introduction by **JUDITH BUTLER**

Of Grammatology

- An investigation into a 'critical science of writing', grammatology

- Argument: western metaphysics has been guilty of prioritising speech over writing

- Identifies the inherent difficulties within language

1. The one who will shine in the science of writing will shine like the sun.
A scribe (*EP*, p. 87)
O Samas (sun-god), by your light you scan the totality of lands as if they were cuneiform signs (ibid.).

2. These three ways of writing correspond almost exactly to three different stages according to which one can consider men gathered into a nation. The depicting of objects is appropriate to a savage people; signs of words and of propositions, to a barb~~aric people and the alphabet to civilized~~ people. J.-J. Rousseau, *Essai sur l*

3. Alphabetic script is in itself ~~most intelligent and~~ *Enzyklopädie.*

This triple exergue is intende ~~to focus attention upon the~~ *centrism* which, everywhere and ~~the limitless object of investigat~~ ing. Nor merely to focus attent ~~upon that which I shall call the~~ metaphysics of phonetic writing ~~(for example, of the alphabet)~~ fundamentally—for enigmatic y ~~and essential reasons that are~~ a simple historical relativism—n ~~what I shall call the most original and powerful~~ ethnocentrism, in the process of ~~imposing itself upon the world controlling~~ in one and the same *order*:

1. *the concept of writing* in a ~~world where the phoneticization of writing~~ must dissimulate its own histor~~y as it is produced.~~
2. *the history of* (the only) ~~metaphysics, which has, in spite of dif-~~ ferences, not only from Plato t~~o Hegel (even including Leibniz) but also,~~ beyond these apparent limits, f~~rom the pre-Socratics to Heidegger, always~~ assigned the origin of truth in ~~general to the logos: the history~~ of the truth of truth, has alway~~s been—except for a metaphysical diversion~~ that we shall have to explain—t~~he debasement of writing, and its repression~~ outside "full" speech.
3. *the concept of science or t*~~hat of the scientificity of science—what has~~ been determined as *logic*—a co~~ncept that has always been a philosophical~~ concept, even if the practice o~~f science has constantly challenged its im-~~ perialism of the logos, by invol~~ving itself in, for example, a nonphonetic,~~ ever increasingly, nonphonetic ~~script.~~

describe the limits of its field. For essential reasons: the unity of all that allows itself to be attempted today through the most diverse concepts of science and of writing, is, in principle, more or less covertly yet always, determined by an historico-metaphysical epoch of which we merely glimpse the *closure*. I do not say the *end*. The idea of science and the idea of writing—therefore also of the science of writing—is meaningful for us only in terms of an origin and within a world to which a certain concept of the sign (later I shall call it *the* concept of sign) and a certain concept of the relationships between speech and writing, have *already* been assigned. A most determined relationship, in spite of its privilege, its necessity, and the field of vision that it has controlled for a few millennia, especially in the West, to the point of being now able to produce its own dislocation and itself proclaim its limits.

Perhaps patient meditation and painstaking investigation on and around what is still provisionally called writing, far from falling short of a science of writing or of hastily dismissing it by some obscurantist reaction, letting it rather develop its positivity as far as possible, are the wanderings of a way of thinking that is faithful and attentive to the ineluctable world of the future which proclaims itself at present, beyond the closure of knowledge.

The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity. For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue.

- An ethnocentrism at the heart of writing…

- *Logocentrism ?*

- A critical survey of the possibility of writing itself…

- How might this be of service for 'the ineluctable world of the future which proclaims itself at present, beyond the closure of knowledge'?

4. Logocentrism

Logocentrism

- There is a 'logocentrism' throughout western thought that prioritises speech over writing

- *Logos* (speech, thought, law or reason)

- Speech is the original signifier of meaning, and writing its derivative representation

- Grammatology sets out to investigate how our concepts of writing can be liberated from, and become as comprehensive as our concepts of speech

- Giving up the illusion that language might provide access to a reality beyond language, an unmediated experience of 'truth'
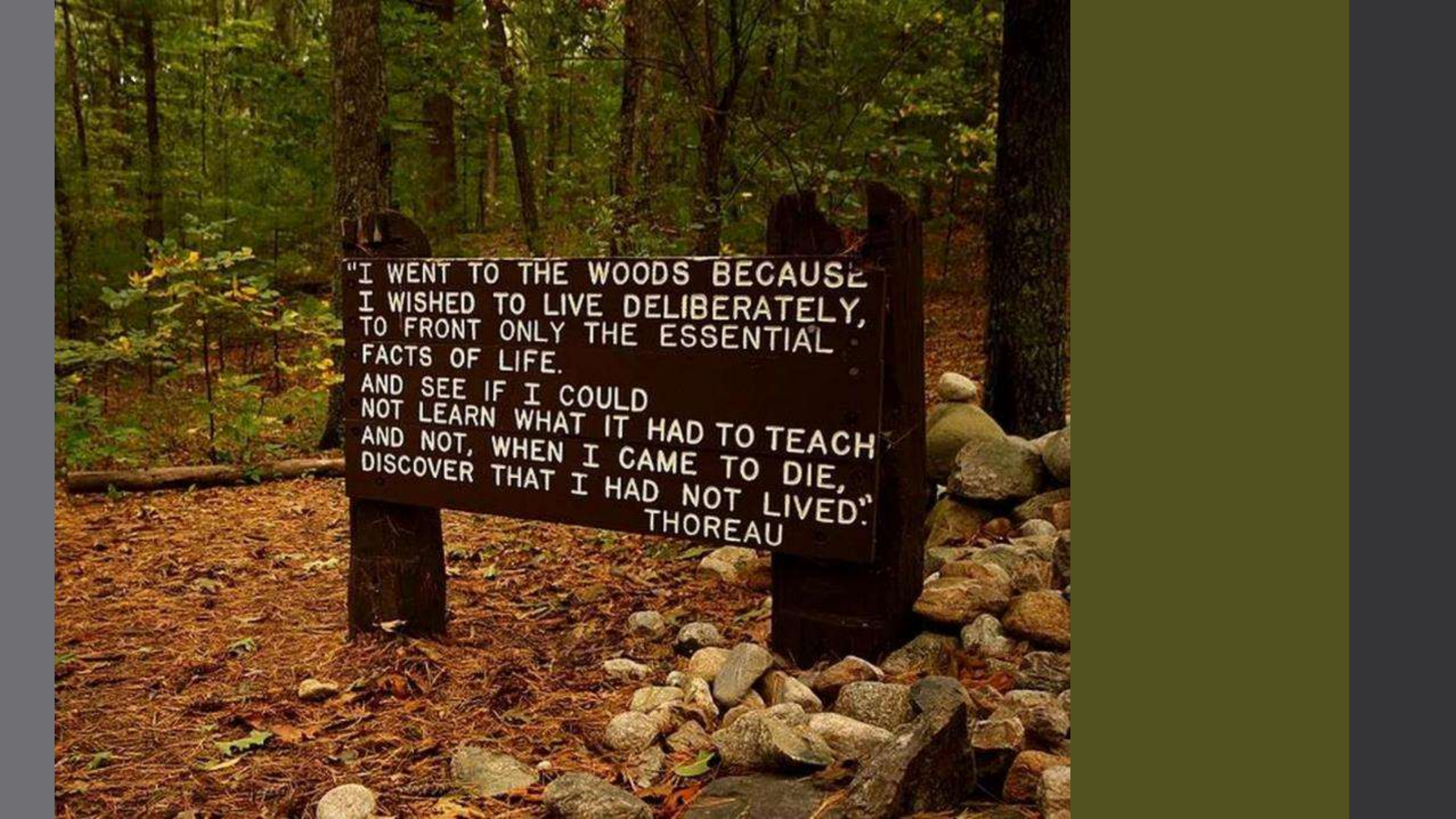
STRUCTURALISM

DECONSTRUCTION

Signified

Signifier

Signified

Signifier ⟷ Signifier ⟷ Signifier

Man can find ~~truth~~ in ~~nature.~~

5. Deconstruction

—no longer indicating a particular, derivative, auxiliary form of language in general (whether understood as communication, relation, expression, signification, constitution of meaning or thought, etc.), no longer designating the exterior surface, the insubstantial double of a major signifier, *the signifier of the signifier*—is beginning to go beyond the extension of language. In all senses of the word, writing thus *comprehends* language. Not that the word "writing" has ceased to designate the signifier of the signifier, but it appears, strange as it may seem, that "signifier of the signifier" no longer defines accidental doubling and fallen secondarity. "Signifier of the signifier" describes on the contrary the movement of language: in its origin, to be sure, but one can already suspect that an origin whose structure can be expressed as "signifier of the signifier" conceals and erases itself in its own production. There the signified always already functions as a signifier. The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general, affects them always already, the moment they *enter the game*. There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language. The advent of writing is the advent of this play; today such a play is coming into its own, effacing the limit starting from which one had thought to regulate the circulation of signs, drawing along with it all the reassuring signifieds, reducing all the strongholds, all the out-of-bounds shelters that watched over the field of language. This, strictly speaking, amounts to destroying the concept of "sign" and its entire logic. Undoubtedly it is not by chance that this *overwhelming* supervenes at the moment when the extension of the concept of language effaces all its limits. We shall see that this overwhelming and this effacement have the same meaning, are one and the same phenomenon. It is as if the Western concept of language (in terms of what, beyond its plurivocity and beyond the strict and problematic opposition of speech [*parole*] and language [*langue*], attaches it *in general* to phonematic or glossematic production, to language, to voice, to hearing, to sound and breadth, to speech) were revealed today as the guise or disguise of a primary writing:[1] more fundamental than that which, before this conversion, passed for the simple "supplement to the spoken word" (Rousseau). Either writing was never a simple "supplement," or it is urgently necessary to construct a new logic of the "supplement." It is this urgency which will guide us further in reading Rousseau.

These disguises are not historical contingencies that one might admire or regret. Their movement was absolutely necessary, with a necessity which

- A crisis for language, 'menaced in its very life', the 'signifier of the signifier'…

- Language in terms of a 'game' and a 'play of signifying references'…

- 'the history of the world' has arisen out of several key binaries – what does he mean?

'The privilege of the *phone* does not depend upon a choice that could have been avoided.

It responds to a moment of *economy* (let us say of the "life" of "history" or of "being as self-relationship").

The system of "hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak" through the phonic substance – which *presents itself* as the nonexterior, nonmundane, therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier – has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch,

and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin, that arises from the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and nonideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc.'

"What, therefore, is truth?

A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms;

truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions…"

– Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (1873)
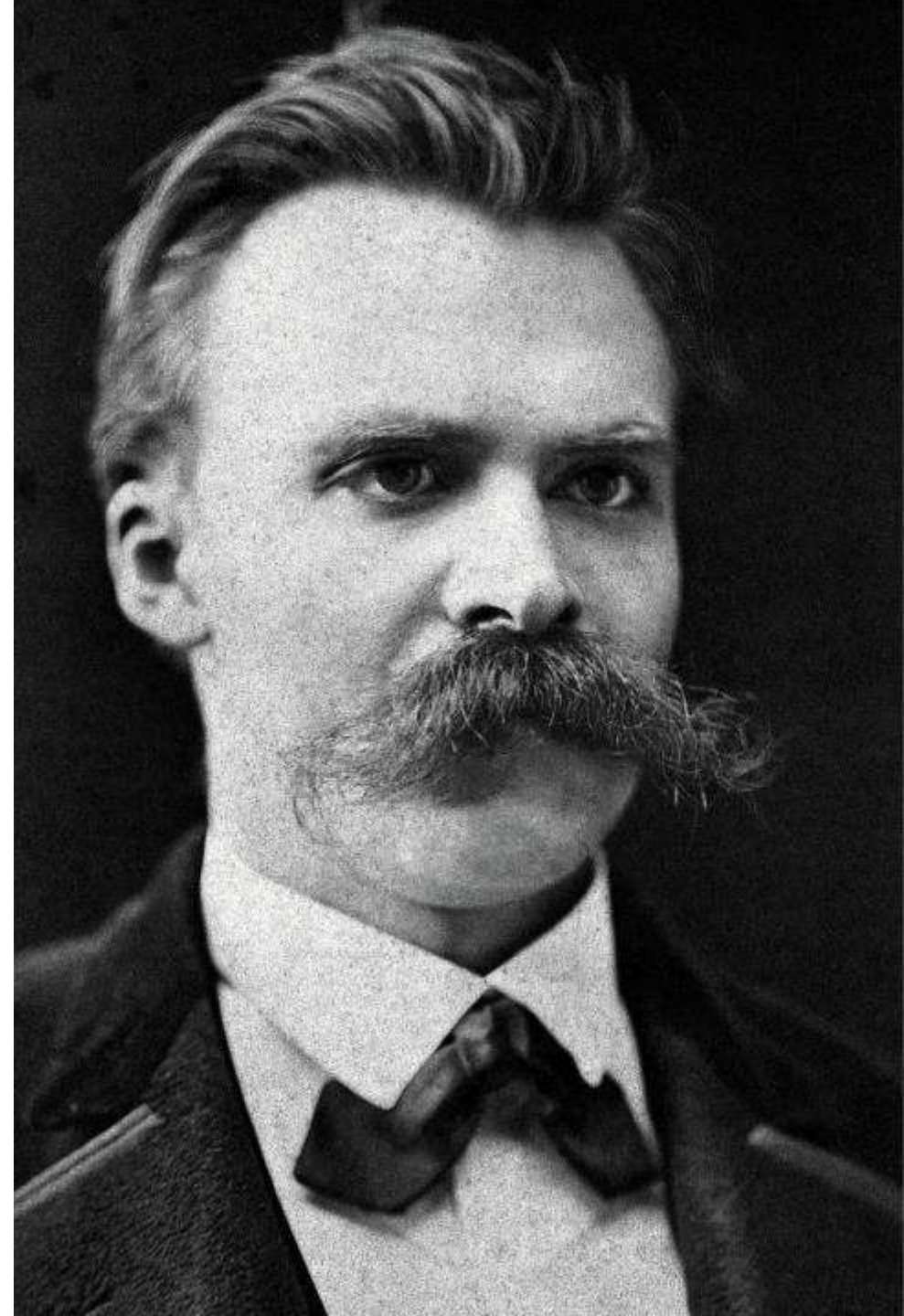
Différance

- Difference is at the heart of existence, not essence

- *Différance*, meaning to differ and *defer*

- *Différance* is the possibility of things being different, a condition prior to their binary opposites

- Not just words, but any kinds of signs involve a trace or mark, a point of difference, the absent part of the sign's presence

- Thus if anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another.

6. Legacy
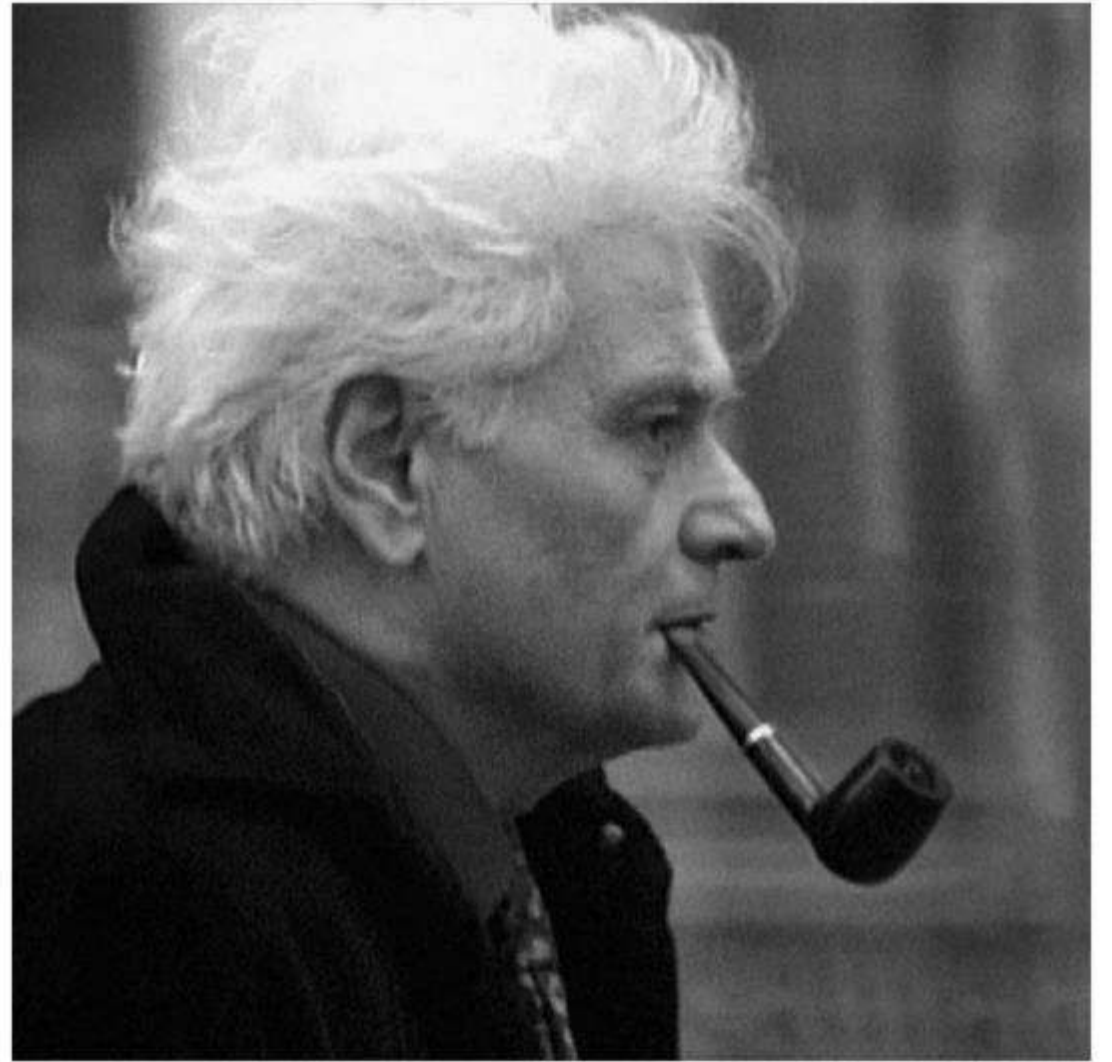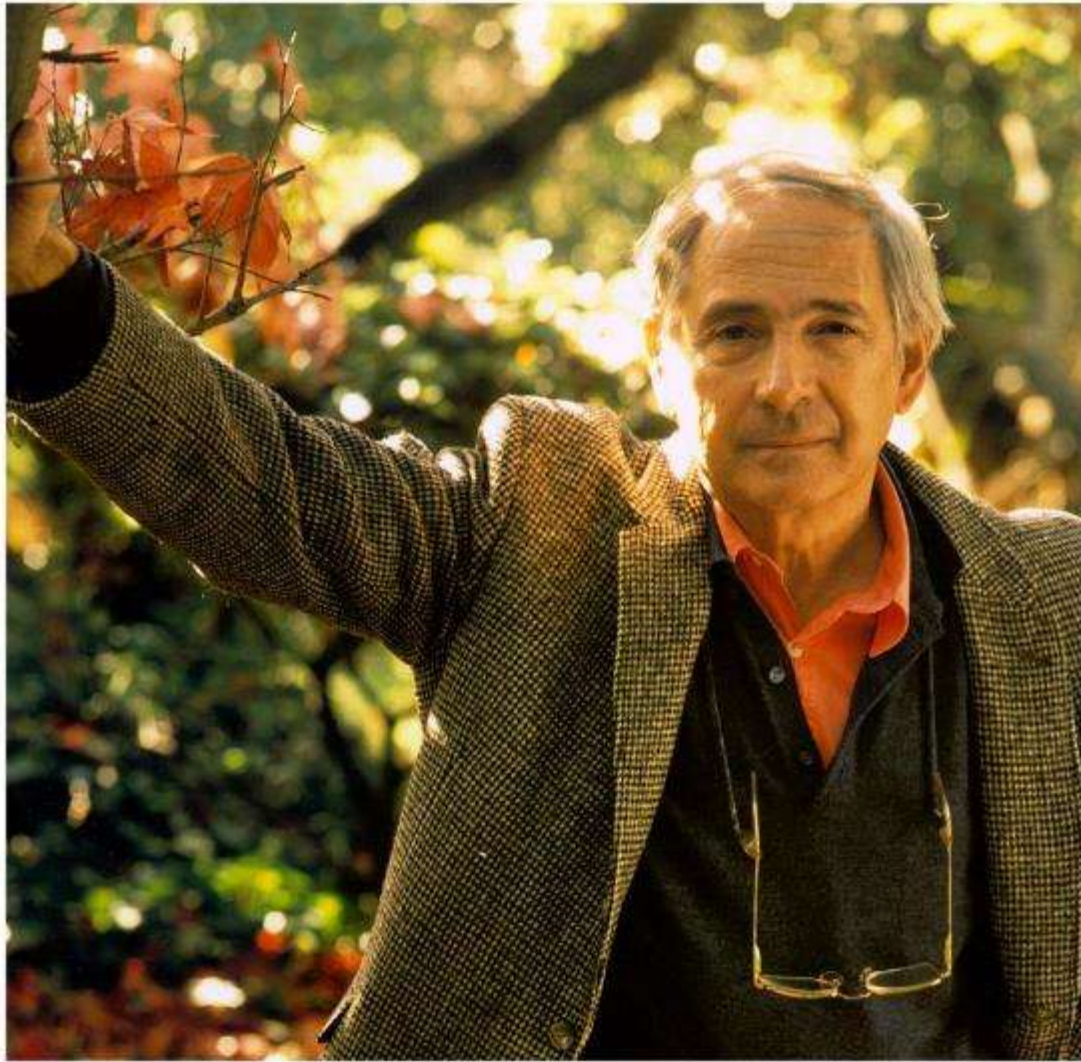
John Searle

'On the face of it, this claim [i.e., Derrida's thesis that speech is privileged over writing] is bizarre. The distinction between speech and writing is simply not very important to Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, etc. …

'On Derrida's account, however, it is essential not only to Husserl, but to philosophy, and indeed to "the history of the world during an entire epoch," including the present, that speech should be mistakenly privileged over writing.

If Derrida's claim were to be taken at its face value, I believe that a contrary argument could be given equal or even greater plausibility'.
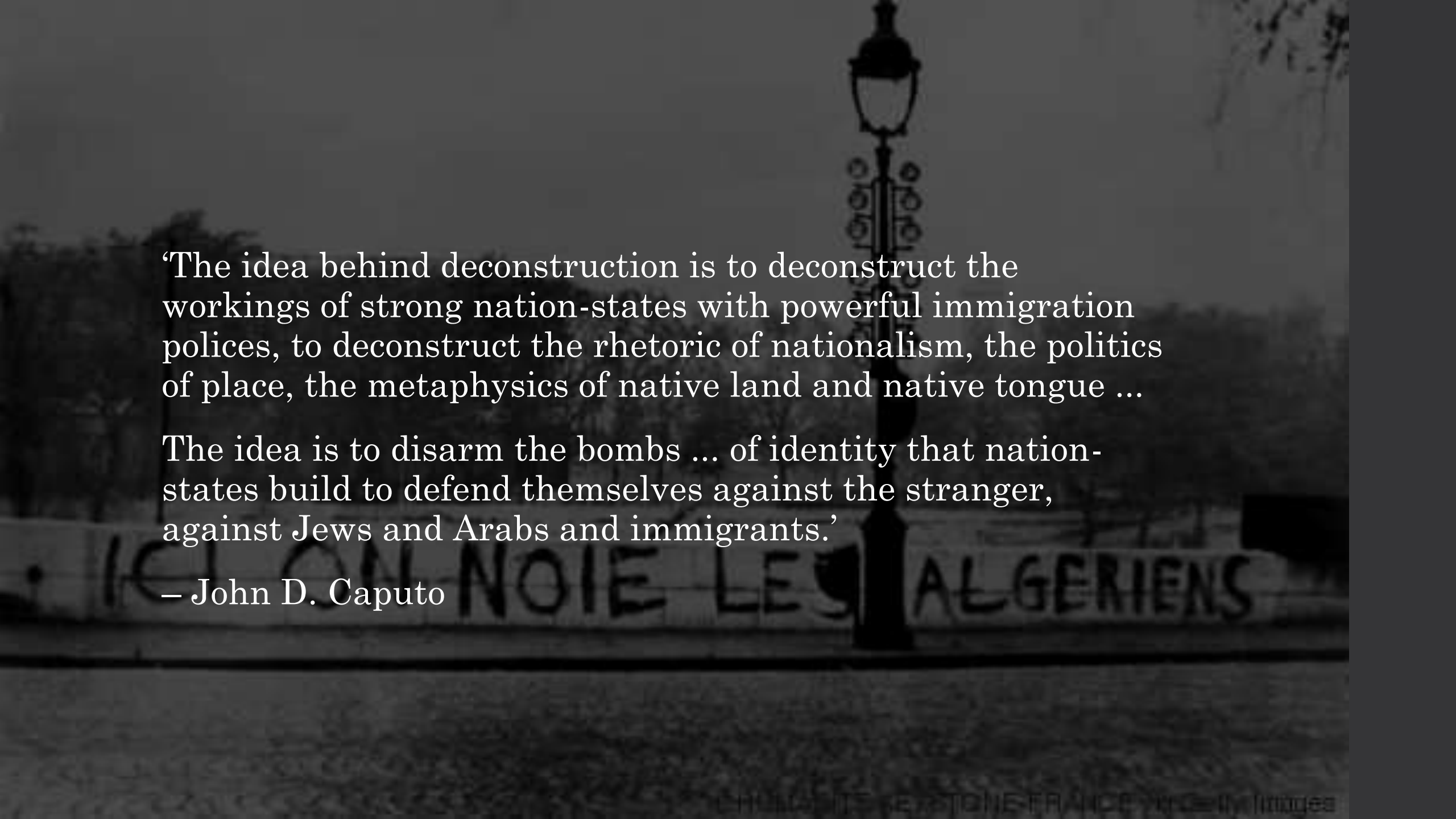
'To deconstruct" philosophy' … is in this sense to think the structured genealogy of its concepts in the most faithful, internal manner,

but at the same time, on the basis of a certain outside that cannot be qualified or named by philosophy, to determine what may have been concealed excluded by that history,

which became history by way of that repression, which, somewhere, was always a self-interested one.'

- Derrida, *Positions* 1972 (1967 interview)

'The idea behind deconstruction is to deconstruct the workings of strong nation-states with powerful immigration polices, to deconstruct the rhetoric of nationalism, the politics of place, the metaphysics of native land and native tongue ...

The idea is to disarm the bombs ... of identity that nation-states build to defend themselves against the stranger, against Jews and Arabs and immigrants.'
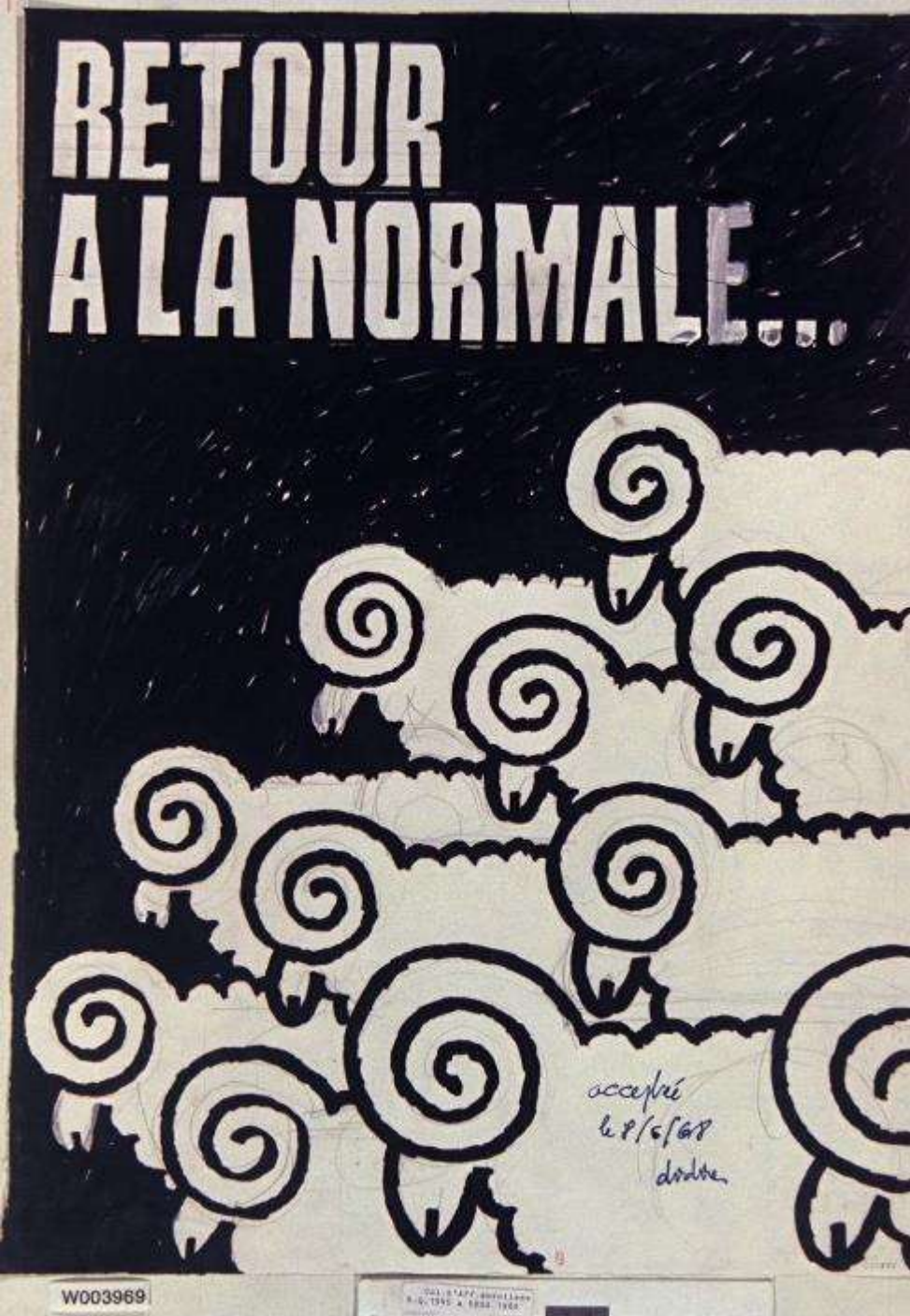
– John D. Caputo

Discussion points

1. What characterises Derrida's approach to philosophy?

2. How does it reflect the historical and philosophical threads of our course so far? (E.g. anti-Semitism, Husserl, Nietzsche, war)

3. What does Derrida mean by deconstruction?

4. How could this technique be put into practice?

Monday 22nd June – 6pm

RETOUR A LA NORMALE...

Next week: May 1968

- Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem

- Both were members of the Situationist International

- Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life* (also 1967) would influence the language and ideas of May 1968

- the *dérive, detournement,* psychogeography, the *spectacle*, attack mass conformity, and view authentic social life being debased by capitalism and the mass media

- Whimsical idealism or more relevant than ever?