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The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History

By Walter Benn Michaels



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The Shape of the Signifier is a critique of recent theory--primarily literary but also cultural and political. Bringing together previously unconnected strands of Michaels's thought--from "Against Theory" to *Our America*--it anatomizes what's fundamentally at stake when we think of literature in terms of the experience of the reader rather than the intention of the author, and when we substitute the question of who people are for the question of what they believe.

With signature virtuosity, Michaels shows how the replacement of ideological difference (we believe different things) with identitarian difference (we speak different languages, we have different bodies and different histories) organizes the thinking of writers from Richard Rorty to Octavia Butler to Samuel Huntington to Kathy Acker. He then examines how this shift produces the narrative logic of texts ranging from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's *Empire*. As with everything Michaels writes, *The Shape of the Signifier* is sure to leave controversy and debate in its wake.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Revisiting a theme of his earlier writing, Michaels (*The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* and *Our America*) examines what most determines a literary work's meaning: the reader's experience (whether sensory, as in the room in which one is reading and the table on which the book is resting, or cerebral, as in identifying factors like nationality, race or religion) or the author's intent. From there, Michaels expands his query into the postmodernist and posthistoricist (à la Francis Fukuyama) concern with identity's supposition of ideology in the post-Cold War world. Rather than interpreting texts differently because of fundamental ideological conflicts, the author argues that readers experience them differently because of a post-modernist fixation on divergent, cultural identities. Likewise, Michaels explores how this notion of experience affects authors' choices. To make his case, he reviews a wide range of historical, artistic and literary theories through the works of Michael Fried, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Kim Stanley Robinson, Octavia Butler, Paul Celan, Toni Morrison, Bret Easton Ellis and Richard Rorty. Michaels's arguments are provocative, especially as he considers current affairs like the war on terror or the debate about granting reparations to descendants of slaves; however, he occasionally struggles to connect his ideas in a congruent middle ground. This is further entangled by his thoughtfully complex prose, which for many readers may obscure his meaning more than illuminate it. However, dedicated disciples of theory will appreciate Michaels's stimulating addition to contemporary debate.

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Review

"Michaels's absorbing new book swims against the critical stream with a brilliance and originality unmatched this side of Slavoj Žižek."--**Henry Staten**, *Modernism/modernity*

"[This] book is not scholarship, criticism, or theory. It is a brazen call for the return to ideology."--**Lindsay Waters**, *Chronicle of Higher Education*

"[W]hat makes this book compelling . . . is his central thesis: that the apparent diversity of the marketplace of ideas, as in the marketplace of commodities, conceals fundamental uniformity (so many choices in the cereal aisle, so few in the voting booth)."--**Robin J. Sowards**, *The Minnesota Review*

About the Author

Walter Benn Michaels is Professor of English at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He is the author of *"The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism"* and *"Our America"*

Users Review

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