Kate Rasmussen
Dr. Jamie Horrocks
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Explication of Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"

"The other choice…consists in conserving all these old concepts within the domain of empirical discovery while here and there denouncing their limits, treating them as tools which can still be used. No longer is any truth value attributed to them: there is a readiness to abandon them, if necessary, should other instruments appear more useful. In the meantime, their relative efficacy is exploited, and they are employed to destroy the old machinery to which they belong and of which they themselves are pieces" (Derrida 262).

In his essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", Derrida entirely reexamines the nature of literary structures and points out their dependency upon other structures and inherent flaws within them. The above passage points out the necessity of continuing to rely on these flawed systems. Within this dependency, however, it is necessary to recognize the limitations of these structures to convey truth.

Derrida speaks of "old concepts" (262) which can be used, with the right understanding, as tools. These concepts of which he speaks refer to the entire format of academic exploration and explanation. Essentially, he is talking about the way in which our world is constructed; with a center, and related entities strung along that center. This structured format allows for play between elements, and further exploration of ideas. These structures can be highly effective in allowing for accurate and legitimate communication; without a point of reference or some form of order, our established ways of conveying truth fall apart very quickly.

These structures, though effective to a degree, are also inherently flawed. This defectiveness comes from many sources. A core component of every structure is a center which, though indispensable to the structure, supersedes structure itself in that it itself is unconnected to a former precedent. Every structure will inevitably collapse when one attempts to question the center, or the very foundation upon which it lies. We are unable to define anything without somehow connecting it to something else, or placing it within a structure. Additionally, structures exist in a kind of infinite loop, because more and more language can constantly be plugged into the system. Because of this dysfunction, we as a society need to be prepared to discontinue our use of them when more effective methods reveal themselves. Derrida states that "No longer is any truth value attributed to them" (262), pointing out that the structures themselves fail to edify and teach us; on the contrary, they themselves are destined to self-destruct.

Finally, Derrida proposes a solution. Concerning the old structures: "their relative efficacy is exploited, and they are employed to destroy the old machinery to which they belong and of which they themselves are pieces" (262). We begin to cobble together and select from these systems, always keeping in mind that they are limited in function and destined, at some point, to fail. The structures themselves are all we have for the present moment—there's no way to proceed without somehow utilizing what we already have. Though this functionality is limited, we accept what we have, all the while searching for more truth and clarity. Derrida reflects this methodology in his work: the very phrasing used in the essay comes off as cryptic,

confusing, and nontraditional. In this sense, he is using parts of the whole to begin the destruction of the machine of structure itself.

Through his essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", Derrida shows our reliance on structure to convey truth, and our need to eventually set aside these outdated systems. He reveals some inherent irony in the structures around us—though they allow for some degree of play within, the structure itself is fixed and immobile. He presents a jumping off point: we recognize the flawed nature of our systems, while using them to serve our necessary purposes.

Work Cited

Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, edited by Charles E. Bressler, Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, English, 2003, pp. 256-271.