



[Interior of a house in Princelet Street](#): “View of bedroom of Grade II* listed terraced house at 19 Princelet Street, Spitalfields. Room in state of considerable disrepair, books, crockery, and furnishings are scattered throughout.”

When the portrait of the *autodidact* is appearing in two different stories—J.P. Sartre’s [Nausea](#) and R. Lichtenstein/I. Sinclair’s novel [Rodinsky’s room](#)—the reader is left to ponder on that dimension, of knowledge in modernity, which partakes of universal knowledge with a *fresh start*: be it the French *Enlightenment*, or the German *Wissenschaft* (featuring *hermeneutics*). While Sartre’s autodidact departs from the *alphabet* in acquiring universal knowledge, Rodinsky features an *enigma*.

The enigma: if the different facets of living and knowing were to be contained in a room, it would lead to madness and make the task of drawing the portrait of whoever is living there almost impossible: in Lichtenstein & Sinclair’s documentary fiction, the *multiple personage* of Rodinsky himself. In Sartre’s novel, the problem is transposed unto the bookshelves: starting his reading list on authors and topics with the letter A (...) the chances of developing *critical* knowledge are virtually nil.

The two faces of trauma—the stasis of a home as ground zero, and critical knowledge as an empty set—reveal two faces of an *illusion*: the domestic space as a universal *container*, and the library as the repository of universal *content*. A third pair of faces extends from this: the *fresh start* means leaving tradition as a source of knowledge, and setting the fresh start as a *universal standard*. In the two autodidacts feature two *character analyses* in an act of portraiture of European colonialism.



A portrait of Sartre framed by a brick wall. Dan Matthews in Cultural Daily: [are we in the age of the autodidact](#) (...)?

In the present European phase of global retreat and territoriality the provincial nature of the above enterprise is bound to appear. Since the only rationale for this reconfiguration of interests is for Europe to rest on a *heritage*. Which means that the modern modes of taking knowledge of the world—from Enlightenment, *Wissenschaft* through Modernism—will appear: it is simply an effect of changing the backdrop. The forays of liberalism in higher education will accordingly serve a different purpose: re/territorialising Europe.

If this theory sticks, it means that the price of *not* taking cultural history into account in politics, will become more a more evident (perhaps even glaring). Joining the Europe of higher education, through the introduction of tuition-fees for non-European students, is a case in point. And according to

the same logic Norway will be incorporated into the group of Western European industrial nations. That is, of being the home of high-tech *innovation* and one of the global centres of *consumption*.

The re/territorialisation of Europe will also be fuelled by the Russian war on Ukraine, which from the aggressor-side is likely motivated by economic interest—the control of oil and gas resources—and *not* ethnicity, as it is claimed (given the *mobility* of people over the areas in history, and most recently during the Soviet empire). The mobilisation of cultural value and meaning along the lines of ethnicity has been fuelling wars over interests of a more sober and stern kind, in many places.

The Middle East is, of course, a case in point now. As was the Algerian war (1954-62). The latter is of specific relevance here, on account of the intellectual disenchantment it produced among the French intellectuals, on the political left. It is the backdrop of post-structuralism, and can be trailed among such as Derrida, Lyotard, Badiou and of course Bourdieu. The latter is of specific interest here, since it was he who pointed out the unhinging of cultural value *and* meaning *from* economics.

The retreat unto language—with structural linguistics as the main driver—featured two major critiques in post-structuralism: Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism, and Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the volume and structure of capital (ranging from symbolic, intellectual, cultural, social and economic) with the *habitus* as a structuring structure, and the field in which it articulated, embodied and made to work along the *spectrum* of dis/advantage in class-society.

The scope of Bourdieu's analysis still captures the dialectics of class-relations, if pursued on a global scale. What it does *not* capture is **a)** the growing importance of the new petty bourgeoisie on the national/global stage; **b)** the scope of *third text* that impacts the European—and then American—cultural hegemony as *noise* [and *terror* when active]. The first he did recognise as problematic himself, the other was outside of his scope, and supremely under Derrida's keep.

However, the problem does *not* come from only from the linguistic turn, but also from the assumption that culture should *fuel* economic progress: in extension from President J.F. Kennedy's doctrine that development-aid to 3rd world countries should benefit the interests of the US. This functional perception of the *value* and *meaning* of the entertainment-business, as a *stowaway* in interests & operations of an enormous scale, has made cultural hegemony an economic success.

It is therefore with a sense of irony one may discover a project that has been interested specifically in the narrative of *fuels*: the treasure hunt, exploitation and life-shaping impact of the offshore oil-production is a case in point—analysing movies/series, books and cultural expression from the oil-venture. To the point of looking into the twists and turns—happy accidents and adversities—of the oil adventure, as a kind of religion. Moving people to extraordinary human-technological feats.



Photo: Sissel Furuseth, Professor of Literature, and head of the project Critical petro-aesthetics. It queries the affordances of oil aesthetics to hold back progress on a transition to alternative energy.

This project is called *Critical petro-aesthetics*, it was hosted by the Oslo School of Environmental Humanities (OSEH) and is currently in the phase of settling with a scope of evolving into a more durable network. It could be seen as a *multiple*: that is, on operating through multiple *analytical* nodes and acts of *portraiture*: as an *ensemble* of contributions, rather than as a morass of individual projects participating on each their own terms. The ensemble might have an *anthroponomic* cogency.

That is, the deconstructing cultural narratives as fuelling economics, by turning to narrating fuels, using literary *fiction* as a lens to explore pathways across the multiple that are implied and marked by subsequent discovery: a cultural query on *value*.