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# Cultural Unconscious: A Theory of Cultural Criticism

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‘Cultural unconscious’ is a vague term in literary and cultural studies. It has not yet been systematically examined from the conceptual standpoint. As a concept, it is not a simple idea that combines ‘culture’ and ‘unconscious’, but refers to the mechanism of cultural psychology and epistemology structured on the interaction of history, psychology, discourse, ideology and other factors. By investigating how culture and the unconscious work together to form a concept from the integrated approach of psychoanalysis and semiotics, this article aims to turn a vague idea into a clearly defined theory of criticism with practical applicability for cultural studies. After a conception of its logic and mechanism in terms of Freud’s unconscious, Lacan’s renovation, Peirce’s semiosis, and Barthes’s semiology, the article applies the new theory to the analysis of a literary text to see how it may not only help reveal deep dimensions and mechanism of cultural consciousness but also has the potential of becoming a theory of cultural criticism.

## Introduction

‘Cultural unconscious’ is not a new idea in humanities and social sciences. Since psychoanalysis was applied to the studies of culture, it has become a term sporadically used by some psychoanalysts, anthropologists, sociologists, literary critics and cultural studies scholars, including Jacques Lacan, Pierre Bourdieu, Fredric Jameson, Juliet F. MacCannell and others, just to name a few prominent ones. The term, however, is generally understood to mean the unconscious in culture, and has seldom been conceptually examined. In the few cases in which the term gets defined, it is more a psychological term than a critical term in cultural studies. Joseph L. Henderson, a Jungian analytic psychologist, may be the first to define the term

in clear language (Henderson 1990), yet it remains a psychological concept. In Henderson's conception, the term is defined as a dimension between the Freudian personal unconscious and Jungian collective unconscious (Henderson 1990: 103–113). Michael Vannoy Adams, another Jungian psychologist, found Henderson's definition unsatisfactory and redefined it on his own terms. In his definition, the cultural unconscious is realigned with Jungian analytic psychology and described as 'a dimension of the collective unconscious' (Adams 1996: 46–47; 2001: 106–107). In a paper presented at an international conference on analytic psychology in 2005, he points out:

By that redefinition, the collective unconscious includes two dimensions. In addition to a dimension that comprises archetypes and archetypal images, the collective unconscious includes a dimension that comprises stereotypes and stereotypical images—and this is what I mean by the cultural unconscious. (Adams 2005)

This statement practically equates stereotypes and stereotypical images in the cultural unconscious with what Samuel L. Kimbles and Thomas Singer call 'cultural complexes' (Singer and Kimbles 2004: 4–6). As an example of cultural complexes, Adams cites the 'Middle Eastern cultural complex' of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. What is common to these traditions is a set of values centred on the belief in one God, to which these people feel emotionally sensitive.

My brief survey of the field shows that the concept of cultural unconscious is studied more as a psychological term than a cultural concept and the available scholarship certainly has not yet evolved into a critical theory for literary and cultural studies. Thinkers such as Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze, Althusser, Jameson and others adopt an approach to the unconscious from an orientation which is more directly related to literary and cultural studies. For various reasons, however, they also seldom use 'cultural unconscious', showing little interest in defining it in conceptual terms. As a consequence, 'cultural unconscious' exists as a familiar term in human and social sciences, but remains murky and undefined, and has not yet gone through the transformation from a psychological term to a concept of cultural studies. There are a few exceptions. The 'Introduction' to the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* briefly cites the concept as an idea of critical studies: 'The knowledge it [literature] conveys is of the "cultural unconscious" – that is, of the archive of historical words, symbols, codes, instincts, wishes and conflicts characteristic of a people and its era' (Leitch *et al.* 2010: 6). Regrettably and understandably, it is mentioned only in passing with no further elucidation. Recently, an exceptional case appeared in a volume entitled, *Analyzing the Cultural Unconscious: Science of the Signifier* (Rösing *et al.* 2022). Adopting Lacan's linguistic approach to the unconscious, it 'understands the unconscious as the echo of the signifier in the body', and applies the understanding to the analysis of social and cultural structures and practices as well as literary and artistic works (Rösing *et al.*, 2022: 1–14). Although the volume adopts the term 'cultural unconscious', its aim is to propose psychoanalysis as an 'applied science' so as to make a shift from the couch to culture. As a result, conceptual inquiry into cultural unconscious as a theory of cultural criticism is practically left untouched.

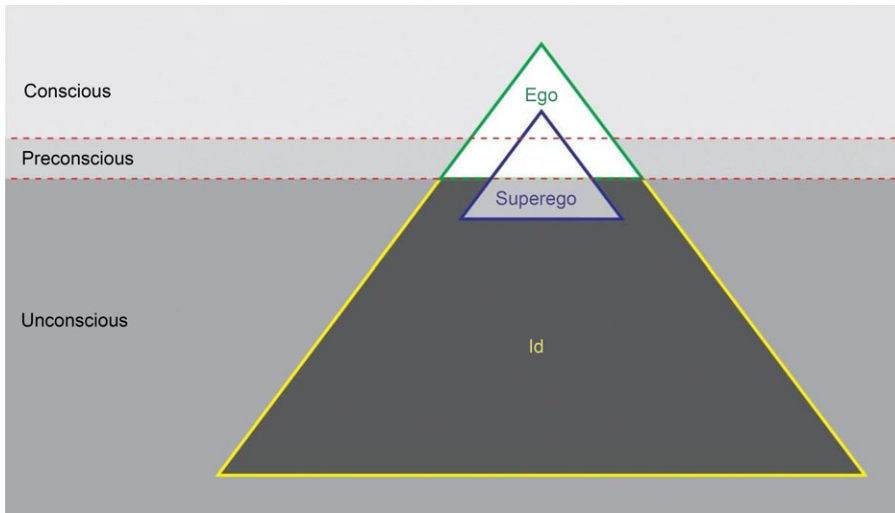
After much reflection on the concept in the past score of years, I have realized that in the postmodern and postcolonial era, 'cultural unconscious' is an idea that needs to be clearly defined and conceptually re-formulated so as to become a theory for cultural studies. I argue that, as a concept, it is not a simple juxtaposition of 'culture' and 'unconscious', but a dynamic formation of social psychology, epistemology, and methodology based on the interplay between 'culture' and 'unconscious' through interactions among history, psychology, ethics, language, discourse, etc. It is also a crystallization of diverse unconscious ways of perceiving, conceiving, interpreting, and doing things. This article attempts to analyse how 'unconscious' and 'culture' work together to form 'cultural unconscious' on the conceptual dimension from the combined approach of psychoanalysis, semiotics, and textual analysis with the aim of understanding its nature, psychic mechanisms, and operating logic, and to turn this vague concept into a clearly defined theory of literary, artistic and cultural criticism with practice values. In the field of literature and art, 'cultural unconscious' will help us discover deep meanings and implicit themes in literary and artistic creations and expose the invisible motivation and objectives that exert an impact upon the theses, methodology and conclusion of literary criticism and cultural studies. This article first probes into the nature and function of cultural unconscious, then examines its inner mechanism and constructs a conceptual framework with a clear definition, and finally conducts an analysis of a literary work to test the value of the formulated theory. The overall aim is to see whether a theory of cultural unconscious may help us understand better the inner logic of individual and social consciousness and possess the potential of becoming a theory of cultural criticism.

### **The Nature and Function of Cultural Unconscious**

What is the nature of cultural unconscious? How is it formulated? What is its inner logic? How does it operate? In a previous study of the term, I have conceived of cultural unconscious as an unconsciously formed ideology for perceiving, conceiving, interpreting, and doing things:

In nature, it is a cultivated unconscious or cultured unconsciousness acquired through education, lived experience, and ideological indoctrination. In function, it serves the demands of both conscious and unconscious ideas, thoughts, strivings, and motivations. In content, it is a reservoir of both conscious and unconscious desires and fears, predilections and preferences, biases and prejudices. In form, it generates conscious and unconscious formulas, schemata, models, and frameworks, and approaches, and seeks to process the conscious and unconscious contents in both conscious and unconscious ways. (Gu 2013: 41)

I have also demonstrated that in specific circumstances, cultural unconscious is an unconscious culture, an unconscious style of life, and an unconscious motivating force that exerts its impact on ways of expressing opinions and doing scholarship. In



**Figure 1.** Freud's structural topography of the mind.

my previous study, I have mainly focused on the general relationship between culture and unconscious and the ways culture operates under the influence of the unconscious, and I have yet to demonstrate how 'culture' and 'unconscious' interact to form the ontology and operating principle of the cultural unconscious, paying little attention to the technical aspects of the operation. It is therefore necessary to re-examine its nature and explore its inner logic, signifying mechanism, and its impact on the representations of people's consciousness from a combined perspective of conceptual inquiry and practical criticism.

Needless to say, 'cultural unconscious' is a cultural theory based on Freud's theory of the unconscious. According to Freud, the unconscious is a dynamic psychological function, a reservoir of desires, emotions, thoughts, and memories. It exists outside of our conscious awareness, but it exerts a powerful impact on our conscious life. Freud's theory of the unconscious is based on two models of the mind: the topographical model of his early career and the structural model in his later life. The former consists of three basic concepts: (1) consciousness; (2) pre-conscious and (3) unconscious (Freud 1989: 577–581). The latter is also composed of three concepts: (1) id; (2) ego; and (3) superego. Although Freud liked the latter model more, he did not jettison his early model and instead integrated both models into a theory of the mind (Freud 1960: 18). The integrated model can be illustrated with Figure 1, based on the metaphor of an iceberg, which Freud employs to describe the psychic structure of the mind.

We may as well call this integrated diagram a structural topography of the mind. In Freud's integrated model, the conscious is located on top, and the unconscious is at the bottom, while the preconscious occupies the interfaced middle, connecting both the conscious and unconscious. The main content of the unconscious is the id, which contains the pre-natal psychic energy and the post-natal experiences acquired

after birth. The external materials acquired through post-natal experiences are stored in the unconscious via the route of the preconscious and can also exert an impact upon the ego through the preconscious. One of the major functions of the preconscious is that of memory. The information received by the self is classified by ego and superego. Materials such as defeat, frustration, pains and trauma, as well as socially and aesthetically unacceptable materials that the subject does not wish to memorize are repressed into the area of the unconscious, but these repressed materials do not disappear, or fail to play a role in the mind, but manage to pass through the preconscious and appear in the consciousness via memory. As a result, the cultural unconscious in the structural topography of the mind is not static and unchanging but dynamic and mutating. The information received by the subject may be repressed into the unconscious, while the content of the unconscious can also enter the consciousness in particular conditions and the materials in the preconscious move between the conscious and unconscious (Freud 1960: 18–21).

Freud's theory of the unconscious has been widely accepted as one of his great achievements, but the academic world has yet to form a consensus with regard to its nature, contents, and ways of operation. It used to arouse much controversy and has not yet found a satisfactory consensus. There are three main opinions. The first view is, of course, Freud's theory of the unconscious based on libido, conceived as a cauldron of instincts, fed by repressed personal experiences in the form of physical and spiritual defeats, traumas and socially unacceptable instinctual desires or sexual energy (Freud 1966: 413). Carl Jung, however, vehemently opposes the view of libido as sexual energy in his studies of the unconscious and instead argues for treating libido as psychic energy ('The Genetic Conception of Libido' Jung 1983a: 57). Moreover, he insists that libido is a universal life energy, not sexual instinct: 'From a broader standpoint libido can be understood as vital energy in general, or as Bergson's *élan vital*' ('Psychoanalysis and Neurosis', Jung 1983b: 51). He divides the unconscious into individual unconscious and collective unconscious. The former forms the second dimension of personality, including all that has been forgotten by memory, perceptions, and repressed life experience as well as a person's dreams. It is an equivalent to Freud's preconscious and can enter into the consciousness. The latter is the deepest dimension of the unconscious in personality or soul, including traces in the mind left behind by generations of human activities and life experiences. It is different from personal unconscious, because it is not acquired after birth, but inherited before birth. It is not what is forgotten by consciousness but what the individual is unaware of ('The Structure of the Psyche', Jung 1983c: 67).

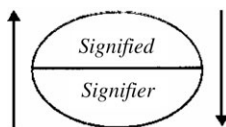
The English writer D.H. Lawrence expresses a similar view of the unconscious to that of Jung. Although he was not a psychologist, he nevertheless showed a good deal of interest in psychoanalysis and wrote two long treatises: 'Psychoanalysis and the unconscious' and 'Fantasia of the unconscious'. He argues that 'psychoanalysis all along the line fails to determine . . . the nature of the pristine unconscious in man' and disagrees with Freud's conception of the unconscious, dismissing it as a view that 'amounts practically to no more than our repressed incest' (Lawrence 1988: 16). With the figurative language of a creative writer, he attacks the Freudian unconscious as

‘the cellar in which the mind keeps its own bastard spawn’ (Lawrence 1988: 17). Where he differs from Freud fundamentally is that he views the unconscious not as the seat of morally and socially unacceptable instincts but as the primordial source of the individual consciousness and the authentic driving force of life: ‘The true unconscious is the well-head, the fountain of real motivity’ (Lawrence 1988: 18). Like Jung, he regards the unconscious as the fountain of life energy and artistic creativity.

We must admit that Jung’s and Lawrence’s criticism of the Freudian unconscious is not without reasonable grounds. In my opinion, there are several reasons why Freud, Jung and Lawrence cannot come to an agreement on the nature of the unconscious. First, the complexity of the unconscious has not been defined in more exact terms. Second, their focal points are quite different. While Freud shows more interest in the personal unconscious, which contains more post-natal materials, Jung is more concerned with the collective unconscious, which contains more materials inherited through generations. Third, and the most critical point, their understandings of the unconscious are based on different theoretical models. Freud’s theory of the unconscious is based on a model of natural sciences. Although he frequently employed literary and artistic materials to support his psychoanalytic research, he insisted on considering himself a scientist and was reluctant to employ philosophical speculations to lay the foundation for psychoanalysis. Moreover, he conceives libido as a physical and chemical energy and views the operation of the unconscious on a special model of biochemistry. By contrast, Jung’s and Lawrence’s research approach does not shun philosophical speculations. Their theory of the unconscious is based on the analyses of history, language, mythology, literature, and cultural memories. In a way, we may say that this kind of theory of the unconscious follows a model of aesthetics centring on the study of perception, intuition, imagination and symbolizations.

After Freud and Jung, the French school of psychoanalysis arose as a new force, which initiated creative interpretations of Freudian psychoanalysis. Among the French Freudians, Jacques Lacan made the most innovative contributions to psychoanalysis. Due to the fact that Lacan once advocated a return to the early Freud, abandoned the structural model of the mind consisting of the triad of the id, ego and superego, and emphasized the early topographical model, scholars tend to believe that he is a faithful Freudian psychoanalyst. However, in my opinion, Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory differs from that of Freud in some fundamental ways and to a large extent may be viewed as an effort to reconcile the differences between Freud and Jung and to answer the questions raised by Lawrence. Freudian psychoanalysis is predicated on the biochemical model, as Freud insisted on employing natural science theories of physics and chemistry to explain the mind at work. Pioneering a new way that differs from the Freudian approach, Lacan integrates Freud’s theory of the unconscious with Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiology and reconstructs an account of the unconscious on the basis of Saussure’s linguistic theory of the sign. Proposing to rethink the view of the unconscious as a reservoir of instincts, he argues that ‘what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language’ (Lacan 1977: 147), and his findings

were succinctly summarized in one famous saying: ‘the unconscious is structured like a language’. What he means is that the unconscious is not the seat of instincts and drives and does not work like a dynamic biophysical energy but is a signifying process involving encoding and decoding like a language. With this new conception, he reinterprets the unconscious in terms of signification and representation of language (Lacan 1977: 149–159). Accepting Freud’s early theory of a topographical model, Lacan integrates it with Saussure’s linguistic theory of the sign. In Saussure’s original model of the sign, a sign is composed of a signified and a signifier, with the latter on top of the former. They are correlated by the totality of the sign. Saussure draws a circle that embraces the two components of the sign to indicate such a correlation, which is visually represented below (Saussure 1966: 114):



Based on Freud’s topographical model of the mind, Lacan reverses Saussure’s conceived correlation between the signifier and signified to conform to the topographical relationship between the conscious and unconscious. His theoretical re-conception makes a meaningful connection between psychoanalytic theory of the mind and the linguistic theory of the sign. The outcome of his re-conception can be succinctly illustrated with the following diagram of algorithms:

S	Signifier	<b>conscious</b>
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s	signified	<b>unconscious</b>

When we stand back to inspect the various theories of the unconscious, it is not hard to see that whether it is Jung, Lawrence or Lacan, they all have their own purposes and agendas, but on the core issues, none of them can reject Freud’s theory of the unconscious. Their theories have their own rationale and contain great power to account for human psychology and social activities, but I am disposed to think that all their theories contain a problem, which is their insufficient attention paid to the power of culture that exerts a structuring impact on the unconscious. One indisputable fact is that neither Freud nor Jung has used the concept of ‘cultural unconscious’. In fact, neither Freudian psychoanalysis nor Jungian analytic psychology has conducted any studies of cultural unconscious. Up to the present day, although some thinkers have mentioned ‘cultural unconscious’, few have conducted an extended study of it, fewer still have engaged in conceptual inquiry into its logic and mechanism. Some Jungian psychologists have employed this concept and conducted some studies, but as I have pointed out earlier, their conception of ‘cultural unconscious’ is in fact another way of expressing the notion of ‘cultural complex’. Moreover, their conceptual inquiry is too brief to form a theory of

‘cultural unconscious’. In academic areas outside psychology, cultural unconscious is mentioned as an epithet, but never explored systematically and in depth. For example, in the areas of literary and cultural studies, there have appeared some concepts related to the cultural unconscious, and an incomplete list would include political unconscious, social unconscious, racial unconscious, ethnic unconscious, material unconscious as well as poetic unconscious, intellectual unconscious, linguistic unconscious, cosmic unconscious, colonial unconscious, etc. I believe, despite their variations and differences in nature and expressions, all these ideas of the unconscious can be subsumed under the umbrella term, ‘cultural unconscious’, which is predicated on Freud’s theory of the unconscious.

In examining cultural unconscious, we certainly cannot do without Freud’s early and later models of the mind and Lacan’s linguistic model of the mind, but Freud’s classical theory is not adequate because, although Freud’s theory of the unconscious has been reductively understood by many, we must admit that it is conceived as a conglomerate of mostly negative and undesirable materials with qualities that are hard to describe by language and unacceptable by society, morality, ethics and aesthetics. Lacan’s linguistic model can certainly furnish us with precious insights for our re-conception, but cultural unconscious does not fall within his purview of inquiry. Therefore, we need to re-examine the logic of social and cultural signification and representation in our conception and construction of cultural unconscious. I argue that the cultural unconscious derives its working logic from the classical Freudian unconscious, but departs from it in substantial ways, because a substantial part of it is derived from respectable ideas and values informed by the so-called social common sense and universality, and is almost equivalent to an unwritten and undeclared ideology in the Marxist sense of ‘false consciousness’. The basic difference between the unconscious and cultural unconscious can be seen by comparing Freud’s and Lacan’s models of the mind. The integration of Freud’s topographical and structural models is endowed with great explanatory power, but if we examine ‘cultural unconscious’ with in-depth analysis and refined classification, we will realize that ‘cultural unconscious’ differs from the general unconscious in substantial ways. Freud tells us that in the psychic structure of the mind composed of the id, ego and superego, only the id exists at the time of birth while the ego and superego arise as the individual grows into maturity and develops in life. An individual’s experiences not only give rise to the ego and superego, but also gradually change their contents and penetrate into the unconscious to merge with the id. In my view, this condition is the ontology of the cultural unconscious.

How does the unconscious generate cultural unconscious in contact with culture? I suggest that cultural unconscious arises only after an individual enters what Lacan’s calls the symbolic order at the time of birth and comes under its power. To clearly explain what cultural unconscious is and how it works, I, basing myself on the theories of the unconscious advanced by Freud, Jung, Lawrence and Lacan, propose a more practical theory of the unconscious predicated on personal unconscious and collective unconscious. My new view re-classifies the unconscious into two major components:

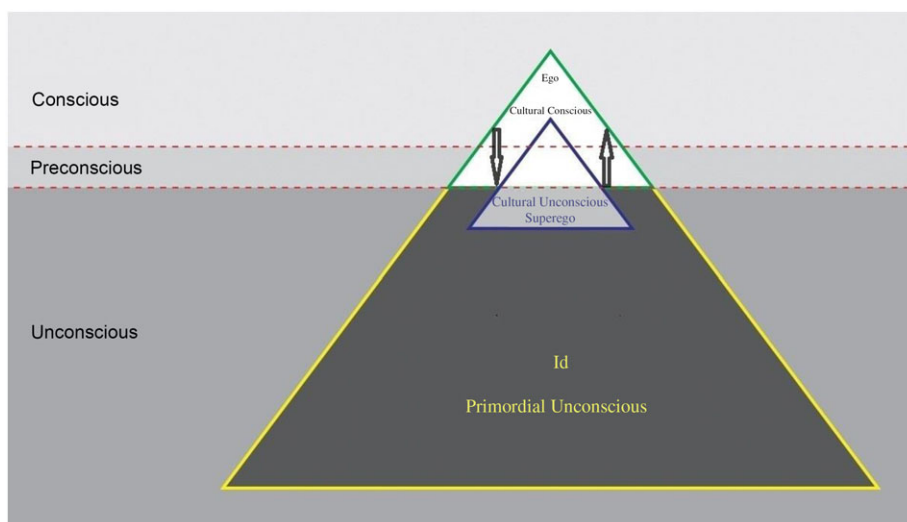


- (1) Primordial Unconscious
- (2) Cultural Unconscious

The former refers to an entity of pre-natal psychic energy with the id as its main contents, while the latter is a category of cultural energy acquired after birth and constantly replenished by life experiences mediated by the ego in the tripartite relationship among the id, ego and superego and preserved in the unconscious through memory. Both categories are located in the unconscious. Although both are under the control of the id, ego and superego, their contents are different. The former is pre-natal in nature and follows the pleasure principle, and it is relatively stable, almost unchanging, and practically beyond the sway of time, space, race and cultural tradition. The latter is post-natal in nature and follows the reality principle. It is unstable, culture-specific, and changes in accordance with time, space and tradition. In specific circumstances, the cultural unconscious can transform into cultural consciousness through the mediation of the preconscious. In the opposite direction, cultural consciousness can also transform into cultural unconscious through the mechanism of repression. What makes the transformations possible is the dynamic negotiation among the id, ego and superego under the impact of cultural circumstances. Due to the power of the id, cultural unconscious always attempts to overcome the repression by the superego to become cultural consciousness, but the superego always resorts to the power of moral codes to neutralize and repress the id's attempt to turn cultural unconscious into cultural consciousness, and even forces the materials of cultural consciousness into the domain of the unconscious so as to become part of the primordial unconscious. The final outcome of the contention and negotiation is determined by the controlling power of the ego. According to ego psychology, the ego always seeks to negotiate between the id and superego with the aim of arriving at a dynamic balance. Whether cultural unconscious can change to cultural consciousness or cultural consciousness can mutate into cultural unconscious is decided by the intensity of the external stimuli and the power of the ego. In terms of the above re-conception, we may describe the dynamic relationship among the id, ego and superego with Figure 2.

In Figure 2, the id is the original source of the primordial unconscious; the ego is the key to the rise of cultural consciousness, the superego is the force that controls cultural consciousness and cultural unconscious. The two arrows indicate the potential transformation of cultural consciousness and cultural unconscious into each other.

The cultural unconscious growing out of the integration of the topographical model and structural mode does not simply affirm the modification of the unconscious by 'culture', but indicates that the intervention of 'culture' causes the unconscious to go through a fundamental change, which makes it different from the primordial unconscious. Due to the intervention of 'culture', cultural unconscious is not entirely free from conscious awareness, especially in the condition of instinctual desires in the primordial unconscious. Culture as a social form is thus both conscious and unconscious with its bulk part being conscious and a substantial part being unconscious. Raymond Williams in his study of 'culture' points out: 'No community,



**Figure 2.** Modified model of the mind.

no culture, can ever be fully conscious of itself, ever fully know itself . . . A culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealized' (Williams 1963: 320). In Figure 2, the small triangle covers consciousness, preconscious and unconscious. Cultural unconscious overlaps with the superego, which is partly conscious and partly unconscious. Thus, the superego is almost equivalent to cultural unconscious and the contents of cultural unconscious are largely those of the superego.

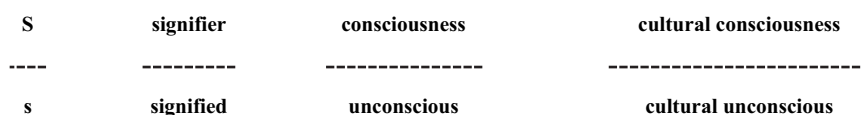
### A Definition of Cultural Unconscious

I mentioned in the previous section that the unconscious arises only when an individual enters the symbolic system of society at birth. The most essential thing in the symbolic system is language, which is the most essential factor for the appearance of consciousness and personality. Cultural unconscious is closely related to language and its working rationale models after that of semiotics. The id and primordial unconscious are a-language, equivalent to the signified of the sign. The ego and cultural unconscious are language-centred, equivalent to the signifier of the sign. As the superego touches consciousness, preconscious and unconscious, it is both language-centred and a-language, equivalent to the totality of the sign. A sign consists of a signifier and a signified. In terms of Lacan's model of the sign, the signifier is conscious while the signified unconscious. But when a signifier correlates with a signified which is unconscious, it is both conscious and unconscious. According to Lacan's notion of the sliding of the signifier on the signifying chain, the signified can become another signifier and therefore is potentially conscious.

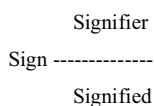
In the binary opposition between cultural consciousness and cultural unconscious, the former is conscious while the latter unconscious. In terms of the dual nature of the sign, cultural unconscious consists of both signifiers and signifieds. It is therefore both conscious and unconscious. As a result of the intervention of culture and language, it can refer to both a signifier and a signified in a specific cultural situation. To describe its largely unconscious and partly conscious nature, I propose to define ‘cultural unconscious’ as *an unconscious structure of feelings whose content is concealed in unconscious signifiers and conscious signifieds of a culture and only perceivable through words, actions and multi-form texts*. On the deep dimensions, however, unconscious signifiers are the perceivable link between culture and the unconscious. I therefore argue that the core of cultural unconscious is a series of dynamic unconscious signifiers, an analysis of which through signification and representation of language constitutes a royal road to an understanding of the cultural unconscious in a cultural situation or a cultural text, verbal, visual or aural. I will further analyse this paradoxical nature of cultural unconscious in the following section.

### **A Psycholinguistic Model of Cultural Unconscious**

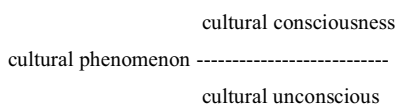
In the previous section, I examined the psycholinguistic nature of the dynamic relationship between cultural consciousness and cultural unconscious and offered a definition, but I have not yet investigated its mechanism of signification and representation, still less constructed a model of the unconscious structure of feelings. Since culture invariably involves language, the transformative mechanism for cultural consciousness is both psychological and semiotic. Thus, the logic of cultural unconscious is directly related to the semiotic rationale of the linguistic function. In his integration of Saussure’s linguistic theory of the sign with Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, Lacan redefines signification as a dynamic process of the transformation of signifier and signified. This process is characterized by a sliding through which the meaning of a signifier constantly shifts from signifier to signified and, as a result, the signified becomes another signifier, which entails still another signified (Lacan 1977: 153–154). With my definition of cultural unconsciousness as ‘an unconscious structure of feelings’, I view the signification of cultural unconscious as a dynamic transformation between signifier and signified. In my re-conception, the signifier is ‘culture-centred’. It is always visible and most of the time perceivable and most of it is conscious. By contrast, the signified points to ‘the unconscious’, which is always invisible and most of the time unrecognizable and always stays out of conscious awareness. Just as the signified can mutate into a signifier, so cultural consciousness can change into cultural unconscious and vice versa. In light of this transformation, I conceive of the interaction between cultural consciousness and cultural unconscious as a semiotic correlation and provide a visual representation of their relationship in terms of the linguistic model of the sign:



If, however, we want to further inquire into the transformative rationale of cultural consciousness and unconsciousness, we may gain some insights from Roland Barthes’s semiological model of the modern myth. Saussure’s linguistic theory of the sign informs us that in the process of signification, there is no motivated relationship between the signifier and signified, only a humanly contrived correlation. This correlation is the third term that connects the signifier and signified. It is the totality of the sign that correlates the signifier and signified in Saussure’s theory of the sign. In my re-conception, the totality of the sign is located in cultural phenomena. Following Saussure’s theory of the sign and Lacan’s topographical re-mapping of the relationship between the signifier and signified, Barthes adds a third term, which is ‘the associative total of the first two terms’ (Barthes 1972: 113). The further reconceived model of the sign becomes an algorithm:



In my re-conception, all cultural phenomena are signs whose meanings are determined by the interplay of three factors: cultural consciousness, cultural unconscious, and cultural phenomenon, whose relationship can be shown as follows:



In modern society, all cultural phenomena are what Barthes calls ‘modern myths’. Barthes’s myth is not the myth in the traditional sense of the word. What he means by modern myth is a semiological system. It is called ‘myth’ because it contains a logic imperceptible by human beings if one does look into its deep structure. Its logic works according to the rationale of semiology:

[M]yth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain in which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. (Barthes 1972: 114)

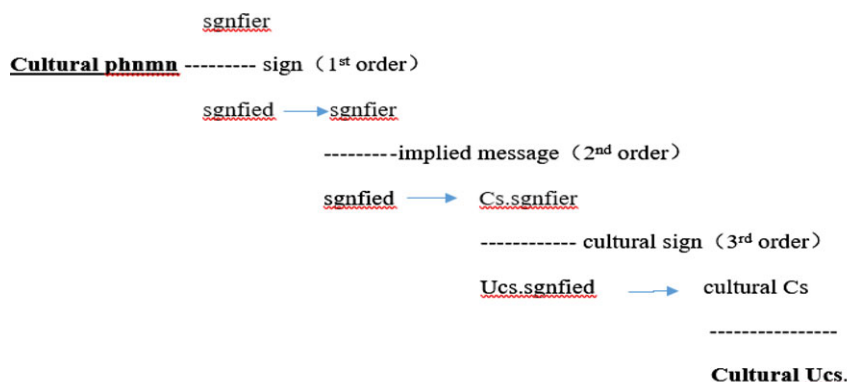
As a result, the first order of the system is shrouded and becomes imperceptible. Barthes goes further to explain the operating mechanism of the signifying process:

Myth sees in them only the same raw material; their unity is that they all come down to the status of a mere language. Whether it deals with alphabetical or pictorial writing, myth wants to see in them only a sum of signs, a global sign, the final term of a first semiological chain and it is precisely this final term which will become the first term of the greater system which it builds and of which it is only a part. (Barthes 1972: 114–115)

A modern myth is therefore constructed on a second-order system of signification and is a new system on the existing system. In the mechanism of modern myth, the first-order system (e.g. language) is denotative, while the second-order system is connotative.

Barthes draws a diagram to show how ‘Signifier’ and ‘Signified’ in the second order system constitute the connotative sign, which conveys an occulted message, but the two-order system of signification is limited because it overlooks the potentially incessant sliding of the signifier on the signifying chain in the process of signification. We therefore need to formulate a new model of cultural signification with multiple orders so that we can adequately explain the complicated relationship between cultural consciousness and cultural unconscious contained in cultural phenomena in society and reveal their shrouded messages. For this purpose, I will assimilate Charles Sanders Peirce’s triangular theory of incessant semiosis. In Peirce’s theory of semiosis, any instance of signification involves three signifying elements: a sign (the signifying vehicle such as a word created by a person), an object (the physical object to be represented) and interpretant (the meaning understood by someone who observes a relationship between a sign and an object). Peirce’s infinite semiosis is predicated on the idea that the meaning understood by an observer of the signifying relationship between the sign and object is an interpretant which is to be interpreted as a further sign by another interpreter. As the number of interpreters is unlimited, the production of interpretants is theoretically infinite and an infinite chain of signs is theoretically possible with multiple orders of signification (Peirce 1931–58: vol 2, 228). Peirce’s infinite semiosis shares with Lacan’s notion of the sliding signifier the incessant production of signs, and his triangular theory of semiosis shares with Barthes’ semiological theory of modern myth a triadic algorithm consisting of sign, signifier, signified with more than one layer of signification. With a synthesis of Peirce’s infinite triangular semiosis, Lacan’s theory of sliding signifier, and Barthes’ algorithmic structure of the myth, I have formulated a multi-layered model of cultural signification and representation which is illustrated in Figure 3.

In Figure 3, from ‘cultural phenomenon’ to ‘cultural unconscious’, there exists a more complicated process of signification than that conceived by Barthes. ‘Cultural phenomenon’ on the left becomes a sign composed of the signifier and signified. This sign itself becomes another signifier. Since a signifier must entail a signified, the two combine to convey an implied message. This message is both a conscious signifier and unconscious signified. The conscious signifier conveys the cultural consciousness of the cultural sign and at the same time implicitly refers to the signified of the cultural unconscious. The unconscious signified imparts the cultural consciousness of



Note on Abbreviations: phnmn=phenomenon; sgnfier=signifier; sgnfied=signified; Cs=consciousness; Ucs=unconscious.

**Figure 3.** A model of cultural signification and representation.

the cultural phenomenon, which at the same time hides the cultural unconscious of the cultural phenomenon. From a cultural phenomenon to cultural unconscious, the operation of the significations involving a series of signifiers and signifieds serves to occult the messages hidden by the cultural phenomenon.

Compared with Barthes' model of modern 'myth', the semiological model of cultural unconscious constructed in this essay has the following differences:

- (1) This model directly integrates the signifying process of the sign with the operating logic of the unconscious, a factor not covered in Barthes' model.
- (2) Barthes' myth of signification is a two-order system. By contrast, my formulated model of cultural unconscious is a multiple-order system. Depending upon specific circumstances, it may involve a triple-order, quadruple-order or multiple-order signifying system.
- (3) While Barthes's model is that of social linguistics, my model is one of cultural psychology, covering a dimension outside Barthes' consideration, which emphasizes the dimension of ideology.

### **Practical Value of Cultural Unconscious Theory**

In the second section, I suggest that the analysis of the unconscious signifier through signification and representation of language constitutes a royal road to an understanding of the cultural unconscious in a particular cultural situation or a cultural text. In this section, I want to put the formulated theory of cultural unconscious to a test so as to see whether it can serve as a critical tool for cultural studies capable of penetrating the surface structure of cultural phenomenon and analysing the deep motives that control the logic and mechanism of cultural texts, both verbal and visual. Here, I will analyse an American poem to illustrate how the conceived theory of cultural consciousness can reveal its hidden dimension and

produce an interpretation that contradicts the accepted reading. This poem was composed by the American writer Bret Harte, who worked with Mark Twain in writing plays and used to be as famous as Twain. It was originally entitled 'Plain Language from Truthful James' (1870) and later changed to 'The Heathen Chinese'. The poem was very popular, printed numerous times and sold by the millions. Harte composed the poem in the late nineteenth century when the large-scale anti-Chinese immigration campaign eventually led to the passing of 'the China Exclusion Act'. On both public and private occasions, Harte expressed his criticism of the rampant anti-Chinese immigrant sentiments at that time. Ironically, his poem was used as a propaganda tool for the anti-Chinese campaign. A Californian senator who actively pushed for the passing of 'the China Exclusion Act' expressed his sincere gratitude to Hart for his poem's enormous service to his campaign. The existing opinion on the poem holds that Harte's poem was originally intended to describe the sentiments of Americans who confront the alien and enigmatic Chinese immigrant labourers and was also intended to satirize the rampant anti-Chinese immigrant sentiments in the US. Critics believe that the poem has no anti-Chinese immigrant theme and was hijacked by those anti-Chinese immigrant politicians for their racist agendas. To confirm this accepted opinion, critics cite Hart's own words that he treated this poem as 'trash' and regarded it as 'the worst poem I ever wrote, possibly the worst poem anyone ever wrote'.<sup>a</sup>

A thoughtful reader would invariably ask: How could a poem intended to oppose the anti-Chinese campaign serve an opposite purpose? In my opinion, it is not because the satirical message was too subtle to cause misreading and misuse, as some critics claim, but because it triggered the anti-Chinese sentiments in the unconscious structure of feelings in American society, of which the author himself was not entirely free. I will put the newly conceived psycholinguistic theory of cultural unconscious to practice and reveal the unconscious anti-Chinese sentiment of which the author himself was not consciously aware. To facilitate analysis, I will quote the poem in full:

**[The Heathen Chinese]**  
Originally published as  
**'Plain Language from Truthful James'**  
**By Bret Harte**  
**in *The Overland Monthly Magazine***  
**(September 1870)**

Which I wish to remark,  
And my language is plain,  
That for ways that are dark  
And for tricks that are vain,  
The heathen Chinese is peculiar,  
Which the same I would rise to explain.

Ah Sin was his name;  
And I shall not deny,  
In regard to the same,  
What that name might imply;  
But his smile it was pensive and childlike,  
As I frequent remarked to Bill Nye.

It was August the third,  
And quite soft was the skies;  
Which it might be inferred  
That Ah Sin was likewise;  
Yet he played it that day upon William  
And me in a way I despise.

Which we had a small game,  
And Ah Sin took a hand:  
It was Euchre. The same  
He did not understand;  
But he smiled as he sat by the table,  
With the smile that was childlike and bland.

Yet the cards they were stocked  
In a way that I grieve,  
And my feelings were shocked  
At the state of Nye's sleeve,  
Which was stuffed full of aces and bowers,  
And the same with intent to deceive.

But the hands that were played  
By that heathen Chinese,  
And the points that he made,  
Were quite frightful to see, –  
Till at last he put down a right bower,  
Which the same Nye had dealt unto me.

Then I looked up at Nye,  
And he gazed upon me;  
And he rose with a sigh,  
And said, 'Can this be?  
We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor,' –  
And he went for that heathen Chinese.

In the scene that ensued  
I did not take a hand,  
But the floor it was strewed  
Like the leaves on the strand  
With the cards that Ah Sin had been hiding,  
In the game 'he did not understand.'



In his sleeves, which were long,  
 He had twenty-four packs, –  
 Which was coming it strong,  
 Yet I state but the facts;  
 And we found on his nails, which were taper,  
 What is frequent in tapers, – that's wax.

Which is why I remark,  
 And my language is plain,  
 That for ways that are dark  
 And for tricks that are vain,  
 The heathen Chinese is peculiar, –  
 Which the same I am free to maintain.

The words in this poem are all conscious signifiers which both reveal and conceal unconscious signifieds. With close reading, we will be able to ferret out the hidden signifieds and unconscious structure of feelings. The poem tells the story of a Chinese labourer by the name 'Ah Sin' who is forced to play poker with two white men. William Nye, an Irishman, cheats in the game by concealing trump cards on his person. He does not expect that Ah Sin outwits him by hiding 24 trump cards in his sleeve and causes Nye to lose the game completely. With a fit of anger, he gives Ah Sin a severe beating and utters racist curses. A casual reading of the poem will not reveal the author's hidden prejudices, but when one reads the poem closely with my conceived notion of cultural unconscious, he or she will surely see the unconscious structure of feelings hidden beneath the textual surface. The poem does not contain any positive description of Ah Sin. It basically echoes the popular sentiments toward Chinese immigrants depicted as objectionable in appearance, devious in conduct, and docile in enduring abuses. The poem speaks from the perspective of the 'Truthful James' who proclaims that 'The heathen Chinese is peculiar' (Harte 1870: 131). The title alone reveals two biases: (1) the Chinese are infidels to Christians; (2) 'Chinese' is an imitation of Chinese immigrants' poor pronunciation and therefore equivalent to the racist epithet 'Chinaman'. Moreover, this detail confirms that the changed title 'the Heathen Chinese' was not imposed on the author. The narrator gives the Chinese labourer the name 'Ah Sin' and, as though he was afraid that the reader would not be able to get the implied message, he makes a special mention that 'I shall not deny,/ In regard to the same,/ What that name might imply'. In fact, his mention is redundant, for the Chinese labourer is already given the epithet 'heathen'. As a consequence, Ah Sin becomes an allegorical figure, representing the idea of 'sin'. Rudyard Kipling, the British Nobel Prize Winner of Literature who openly and staunchly defended British colonialism, once wrote a poem with a notorious title 'The White Man's Burden'. It calls on Americans to take responsibility for colonization. In his poem, he describes the colonized people as uncivilized human beings, half barbarians and half ignorant children. Harte's poem does not depict Ah Sin as an uncivilized barbarian, but it does not lack such implications. The poem states that 'his smile it was pensive

and childlike' in one sentence and that 'he smiled as he sat by the table,/ With the smile that was childlike and bland' in another. In the whole poem, there is only one ostensibly positive description of the Chinese labourer. Ah Sin is compared to the 'soft' August sky, but the positive tone is immediately undercut by the narrator's contempt for Ah Sin's despicable behaviour on that day, when he shows himself to be a 'frightful' player. As Ah Sin outsmarts his opponents in the game, the narrator speaks through the mouth of the Irishman: 'We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor'. This claim is precisely the key excuse for the anti-Chinese immigration campaign. In the end, the Irish Man beats Ah Sin severely while the narrator looks on taking no action to stop the beating. Instead, he makes some remarks implying the uncivilized features of Ah Sin: his long nail with dirty wax, a detail which repeats the stereotypical bias against the Chinese immigrants' filthy and barbaric lifestyle. With the major theme that 'The heathen Chinese is peculiar', the whole poem hardly contains any positive sentiments for the Chinese labourer, or any satirical criticism of the hostility towards the Chinese immigrants in American society at that time. My close analysis of the poem confirms that the positive evaluation of the poem is only a view growing out of the author's post-textual remarks and actions and finds no textual support in the poem itself. In terms of the theory of cultural unconscious, I may draw the conclusion: the poem is full of (un)conscious signifiers and signifieds that hide the unconscious intention of the author, and the whole poem is a large signifier which reflects the boiling unconscious anti-Chinese sentiments in American society then. Even if the author initially attempted to satirize the anti-Chinese immigrant sentiments, the poem ironically triggers the repressed anti-Chinese unconscious feelings in the mind of the American populace at that time and also incidentally reveals the similarly negative feelings from which the author was not at all free. On a global scale, the poem may be said to have touched the repressed prejudice and contempt hidden in the unconscious structure of feelings of the white colonists against coloured people of former colonies. One of the reasons why the author dismissed the poem as 'trash' may be because it incidentally exposes an ugly aspect of the cultural unconscious cultivated by the 500 years of western expansion and colonization. Having analysed the poem, I wish to represent the anti-Chinese consciousness and demonstrate how it works in the deep recesses of the popular mind using the constructed model of the cultural unconscious. All words in the poem are conscious signifiers, but they are not equal in value for representing the unconscious signifieds. I have chosen some key signifiers and match them with unconscious signifieds in terms of the formulated schema in Figure 4.

### **Conclusion: A Meta-Theory of Criticism?**

Since time immemorial, thinkers in the East and West have cherished the ambition of finding a universal theory capable of explaining the myriad phenomenon and human activities in the natural and human world, but as Jameson points out in his 1971 article on 'Metacommentary', the more such efforts are made the more elusive the

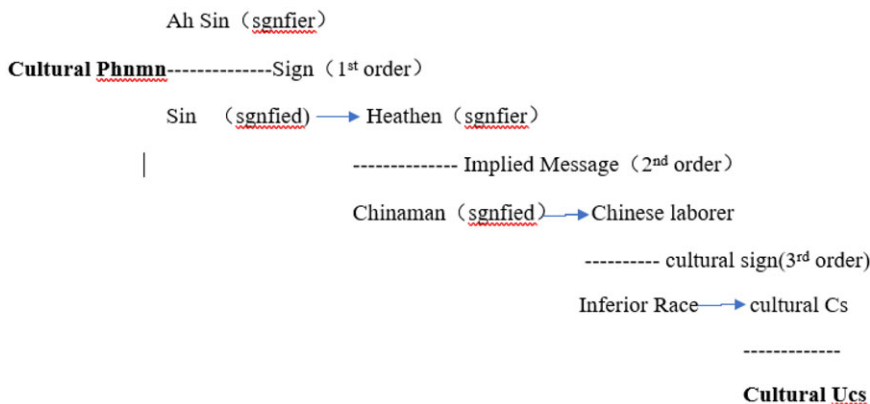


Figure 4. A schema for analysing Harte's poem.

sought object becomes (Jameson 1971). After critically examining various critical theories from historicism, formalism, and structuralism to Marxist hermeneutics, Kantian aesthetics, and other methods of interpretation, he acknowledges ‘the sterility of efforts to devise a coherent, positive, universally valid theory of literature, of attempts to work out some universal combination good for all times and places’ (Jameson 1971: 10) and shows how those theories fall short of being genuine metatheories. A metatheory is a theory about and above ordinary theory and capable of offering explanatory power for the deep logic of other theories. In the field of human and social sciences, it is hard to find a metatheory that can explain all cultural phenomena and literature and art, but it may be likely to find a theory of criticism with universal explanatory power. Jameson calls such a hermeneutic theory ‘metacommentary’, which he thus describes: ‘every individual interpretation must include an interpretation of its own existence, must show its own credentials and justify itself: every commentary must be at the same time a metacommentary as well’ (Jameson 1971: 10). What critical method can qualify as a metacommentary? Jameson suggests that the Freudian psychoanalysis can offer the necessary insights for building a metacommentary:

Metacommentary therefore implies a model not unlike the Freudian hermeneutic (divested, to the sure, of its own specific content, of the topology of the unconscious, the nature of libido, and so forth): one based on the distinction between symptom and repressed idea, between the disguise and the message disguised. (Jameson 1971: 15)

In principle, he thinks the Freudian unconscious renovated by Lacan can provide a paradigm for metatheory: ‘Here the most revealing paradigm, perhaps, is that of Freud in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, particularly as the unconscious mechanisms described in it have been reworked by Jacques Lacan into a series of rhetorical figures’ (Jameson 1971: 14). Jameson’s belief in the value of the Freudian unconscious for proposing a metacommentary is demonstrated in his characterization of the very nature of criticism itself in terms of dream interpretation:

Thus, the process of criticism is not so much an interpretation of content as it is a revealing of it, a laying bare, a restoration of the original message, the original experience, beneath the distortions of the censor: and this revelation takes the form of an explanation why the content was so distorted; it is inseparable from a description of the mechanism of censorship itself. (Jameson 1971: 16)

Taking his cue from Freud and Lacan, Jameson integrates ideological and psychoanalytic criticism to propose a form of metacommentary, which is his theory of 'political unconscious'. In his conception of 'political unconscious', Jameson argues that all cultural products, including literature and art, are in essence 'socially symbolic acts' with political contents and implications, and all the interpretations of literary and artistic texts are subject to the consciously selected political perspectives and the unconsciously taken political positions. In his opinion, the cultural consciousness of politics of which one is unconsciously aware is 'the political unconscious', the influence of which is omni-present in all social life including literature and art. Thus, his theory of 'political unconscious' sounds like a metatheory because Jameson treats interpretations from the political perspective 'not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods . . . but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation' (Jameson 1981: 17). The political unconscious proposed by Jameson has its limits as a metatheory, because it mainly refers to the ideas, views, values, and political stands that arise in the class struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed in economic production with its essentials determined by the resources of production and modes of production (Jameson 1981: 289). The human unconscious, however, is all-embracing and multifaceted in content and form, involving both political dimensions and various aspects including race, gender, sexuality, morality, ethics, language, aesthetics and culture. The political unconscious has enormous explanatory power but has its limitations and is incapable of covering areas beyond politics and economics. In addition to political unconscious, the human unconscious consists of class unconscious, racial unconscious, colonial unconscious, ethnic unconscious, gender unconscious, sexual orientation unconscious, linguistic unconscious, material unconscious, poetic unconscious, creativity unconscious and aesthetic unconscious, etc. All these kinds of the unconscious have their specific logic and mechanism which cannot be completely explained by the political unconscious. In my view, only cultural unconscious as an umbrella concept is endowed with the explanatory power of a metatheory for all the unconsciousnesses.

The cultural unconscious conceived in this article seems to meet the requirements of Jameson's proposed metacommentary:

Metacommentary . . . aims at tracing the logic of the censorship itself and of the situation from which it springs: a language that hides what it displays beneath its own reality as language, a glance that designates, through the very process of avoiding, the object forbidden. (Jameson 1981: 917)

It is able to reveal the hidden sources of miscellaneous cultural phenomenon in society. It is also capable of interpreting literary and artistic texts and even empowering some existing theories of literature and art. Take the current narrative theory for example. Narrative progression depends upon the narrative drive which comes from the author. The author's creative desire cannot be explained by pre-textual and post-textual intentions as both kinds of intentions have been proved to be unreliable and misleading. An adequate understanding of the narrative progression needs to analyse the author's cultural unconscious. Operating in the thinking space beyond the author's pre-textual and post-textual intentions, the cultural unconscious works with the cultural consciousness to generate the narrative thrust for the author and create the hermeneutic space for the reader and even reach into the unconscious area of which even the author is not consciously aware. If we combine the theory of cultural unconscious with literary theory, we would not only be able to provide narrative theory with a reliable basis but also correct the lopsided views in the debate over the death of the author. We would certainly be in a position to bring about the return of the 'dead author' in a meaningful way to literary criticism and significantly enrich narrative theory and theories of textual interpretation. Can the theory of cultural unconscious serve as a meta-theory of criticism? Only time and more studies will furnish a convincing answer.

### Note

- a. Regarding the controversy over the poem, the reader should see Scharnhorst (1996).

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