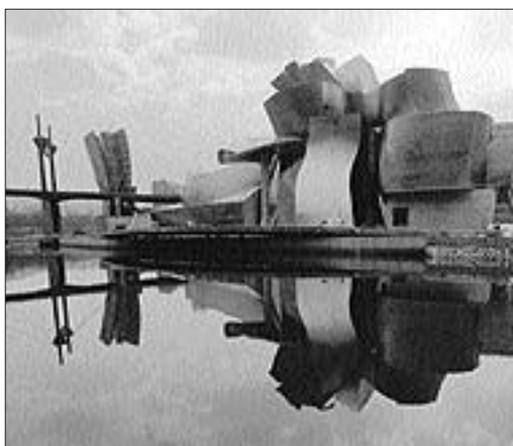


## Go Fish

Architect Frank Gehry's new Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, has been hailed as a work of genius. According to Myra Jehlen, an English professor at Rutgers University, writing in *Raritan* (Spring 1999), Gehry's success owes much to his grandmother's cooking, which provided the fish shape that has long been his aesthetic standard, and to the computer, which has allowed him to pursue it.

*It was almost two centuries ago that Emerson thought one should pattern one's creations on nature, and with the accelerating rate of technological evolution, it might as well be four. An architect making a building he himself cannot see whole without the aid of a computer while imagining that he was copying nature seems unlikely. But of course Gehry does not think that when, as he puts it, he does fish, he is following nature directly; he is being an artist. . . .*



*The fish-shape is more than an aesthetic opportunity but less than a cosmic scheme. It embodies a conception of self-sufficient and at the same time globally effective creativity; the connection between fish and both the beginning of time and the origin of life (in his own biography and in the history of the race) attests to this conception without extending it into a philosophical program. Similarly Gehry's relation to technology, in contrast, say, to the relation of the Bauhaus to the machine, is personally empowering but does not engage him in a world view. The computer that is enabling him to replace geometric abstraction with zoomorphism has simply made Gehry, in his words, "once more the master builder." "Once more" because the technology had developed beyond the control of an individual builder and now he has regained mastery. The technology remains as powerful or more, but he has become still more so.*

## In Defense of Cultural Studies

"Those Who Disdain Cultural Studies Don't Know What They're Talking About" by Rita Felski, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 23, 1999), 1255 23rd St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037.

Ever since physicist Alan Sokal smuggled his deliberately nonsensical essay (in which he solemnly maintained, among other things, that physical reality is "a social and linguistic construct") into the cultural studies movement's premier journal, *Social Text*, a few years ago, cultural studies has come to seem, well, a bit passé. Felski, an English professor at the University of Virginia, rises in defense of the relatively new (but now apparently "old") interdisciplinary field.

*Cultural studies*, she complains, has come to be simply a term of abuse—shorthand for taking a political approach to literature. And as such, it is rejected by critics who want "a return to aesthetics in literature. . . . They want to talk about language, style, and sensibility, about why they love poetry and what makes Shakespeare a great writer."

But cultural studies "has always been concerned with language and form," Felski contends. "It is just as much about the aesthetic

dimension of the social world as it is about the social dimension of a work of art." The discipline, which originated in England in the 1960s, treated culture anthropologically, "seeking to make sense of the entire range of symbolic practices, texts, and belief systems in society rather than equating culture exclusively with high art." Cultural studies scholars showed "how the most ordinary behavior—eating, wearing clothes, shopping, going to the beach—involves complex rituals, symbolic expression, and multilayered levels of meaning."

In short, Felski says, cultural studies "enlarged rather than erased our aesthetic sensibility," expanding it to encompass such forms of popular culture as "rap music, sitcoms, science-fiction novels, [and] slasher movies." In the influential *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), for instance, Dick Hebdige "explored the aesthetics of British

youth culture," showing that "punks" employ "avant-garde techniques of collage, bricolage, and surreal juxtaposition, combining random, mass-produced objects—dog collars, safety pins, school uniforms—in a perverse parody of consumer culture." Similarly, Kobena Mercer, in a much-cited essay in his *Welcome to the Jungle* (1994), "unraveled the multileveled meanings of black hairstyles."

Cultural studies seems fated, Felski observes, "to be faulted by historians for not being historical enough, by sociologists for not being sociological enough, and by literary critics for not being sufficiently interested in literature. There is also a rich vein of self-criticism within [the field] itself." Nevertheless, she concludes, since "cultural studies" has been pressed into use as "a much-abused term [of abuse] in America's culture wars," it is time "to insist on its distinctive identity and its integrity as a scholarly field."

## OTHER NATIONS

### *The German Left's Ordeal of Power*

*A Survey of Recent Articles*

The postwar era in German history came to an end last fall when chancellor-for-life Helmut Kohl was turned out of office. During his 16-year rule, the Christian Democrat had helped to gain the West's victory in the Cold War and the reunification of his nation. When the 68-year-old, pro-American chancellor became "history," many observers worried about what would happen under his younger successor, Social Democrat Gerhard Schröder.

In the early 1970s, Schröder was head of the Hanover branch of the Jungsozialisten, radical youth organization of the Social Democratic Party, notes Josef Joffe, editorial page editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in Munich, writing in *National Interest* (Summer 1999). German defense minister Rudolf Scharping also had been a leader of the radical youth group, while foreign minister Josef Fischer, the leader of the Green Party (which is the junior partner in the ruling "Red-Green" coalition), had run with street-fighting anarcho-socialists in Frankfurt.

All three men, Joffe writes, "came of political age in the heady '60s when they imbibed pretty much the same ideological brew in the 'anti-imperialist struggle' against the Vietnam War: anti-capitalism, anti-Americanism, and 'anti-anti-communism,' plus what the French call *tiers-mondisme* [Third World-ism] (especially of the 'anti-Zionist' variety) and contempt for 'bourgeois' political virtues such as moderation, compromise, and pluralism."

Today, Joffe says, "the only thing remotely 'red' about [Schröder] is his pricey Cuban Cohiba cigars," while erstwhile rock thrower Fischer, since moving to the head of the Foreign Office, wears only gray three-piece suits. When NATO's U.S.-led air war against Serbia began last March, the former antiwar activists, whose parties had long opposed America and NATO, sent German strike aircraft into combat for the first time since World War II.

Like Bill Clinton when he first assumed the U.S. presidency, however, Schröder on taking