Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction asks how representation inhabits reality. How does the external image of things get inside their internal essence? How does the surface get under the skin? Western culture since Plato has been governed by such oppositions as inside/outside and mind/body.

If writing is but a copy of spoken language, typography is even further removed from the primal source of meaning in the mind of the author. The alphabet aims to represent the sounds of speech with a finite set of marks. Derrida used the term grammatology to name the study of writing as a distinctive form of representation.

The intellectual achievements of the West—its science, art, philosophy, literature—have valued one side of these pairs over the other, allying one with truth and one with falsehood. Deconstruction attacks such oppositions by showing how the devalued, negative concept inhabits the valued, positive one.

Consider, for example, the Judeo-Christian concept of the body as an external shell for the inner soul, a construction that elevates the mind as the sacred source of thought and spirit, while denigrating the body as mere mechanics. The original work of art carries an authenticity that its copy lacks—the original is endowed with the spirit of its maker, while the copy is mere empty matter.