

Semiotics Workshop, Princeton, May 16-17, 2025

Is There a Semiotics of Theory?

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0. Abstract & Intro

From the 1960s to the 2000s, “theory” in the humanities and social sciences was largely used synonymously with critical theory, literary theory, and cultural theory, as well as their respective subfields. By default, these theories came as text, i.e. they always already included a linguistic formalization of their subject matter, before any theoretical modelling could begin. In one of my current projects, I am proposing that this textual tradition of theoretical writing from Benjamin to Butler should be seen as paralleled by a filmic tradition of theorizing in images, which originated before the 1960s and by the 2010s had begun to replace textual theories in certain fields and subdisciplines. –

In our workshop, I would like to discuss one fundamental question at the core of my project: Is there such a thing as a semiotics of theory? And how would a semiotics of theory as text differ from a semiotics of theory as film? In other words: What is the medium specificity of theoretical discourse, and how has the grammar of theory moved between media?

What follows are not at all finished thoughts (and partly unpolished prose, I apologize!), but truly questions in progress that I’d like to discuss with you – thanks for reading.

1. Beyond the Medium-Specificity of Theory

I am asking my guiding question – Is there a semiotics of theory? – before the horizon of a deep historical shift in what we could call the media of theory: Up to the 1980s and 1990s, theory, both as a mode of thought and as genre, was by default composed in the form of text. Other media such as art, photography, or film, were merely considered to be secondary, illustrative, or derivative to theories composed as text and debated in language. You might disagree with this historicization and respond, for example, that art had very well staged theoretical interventions, perhaps already since Dürer or Turner, but definitely since Impressionism, Cubism, and the other avantgarde - isms. While I would agree that artworks have always posed aesthetic problems, I would object to the idea that artworks themselves are automatically discursivizing their interventions. Rather, and I think art critics would agree, it takes the discursivization by viewers, critics, scholars for these works to become theoretical interventions or works embodying a theoretical take. The works as such, that is, viewed silently in solitude and without interlocutors or art historical contexts do not actively develop a theory, it requires their discursivization to achieve that.

Since ca. the 1990s, however, this landscape has changed: Visual theories have become an equally discursive sister medium to textual theories. Non-cinematic, non-fictional films are perhaps even more prone to be the timely medium of theory. As the media artist Hito Steyerl remarked when looking back to that era in 2015: Since the second half of the 20th century, it became clear that ‘our lives are lived more and ever more in images, through images, and as images.’¹ This development thus corresponds to a shift in the discursivization of theory: Film such as those by Hito Steyerl herself, or works by Harun Farocki, Trinh Minh-ha, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, Jean Painlevé and many others have experimented with and succeeded in offering

¹ Laura Poitras, “Interview with Hito Steyerl.” *Artforum* 53.9 (May 2015), 306–17.

theoretical reflection that usually would have been available only as text. While these works primarily work through images and include reflections on images, visibility, and media technology, their goal is generally a discursivization of a set of theoretical problems that goes beyond the very image and film at hand. Harun Farocki's works on early AI-supported prison surveillance systems and the disciplination they create – especially his film *Gefängnisbilder / Prison Images* (2001) – directly continues Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and Deleuze's *Postscript on Societies of Control*. But Farocki's two prison films do not just illustrate the earlier theories, they continue their theoretical intervention by adding new notions and concepts – such as the “control-image” – into the circulation of theories.

(Watch the final 1:20 minute sequence from the end of Farocki's *Prison Images*: https://youtu.be/WM110bafpWQ?si=8nIIm_PAOpS5Eoi3&t=3499 [the voice-over is important: turn on auto-generated English subtitles if needed]).

In going back to my initial question: What I sketched is a shifting landscape of the media of theory. I am understanding theory here in its most basic notion: Theory is the discursive conception of that which is inaccessible to sense perception alone. The history of modern theory, however, is one of linguistic conceptions, and this new shift therefore warrants the question whether theory can be taken beyond this linguistic media-specificity. Out of this problem arises my initial question: Is there a semiotics of theory? And if so, what would it look like and how could it help to understand the media of theory beyond theoretical logocentrism.

2. Theory as System vs. Theory as Tool

Before we can reach the point of discussing a semiotics of theory, a non-media-specific differentiation relevant for the history of theory might be helpful. This differentiation was recently

introduced by the German cultural sociologist Andreas Reckwitz. In a text that reflects on the use of theories by the humanities and social sciences, Reckwitz makes the decision between theory as system and theory as tool. Whereas theories-as-system build up complete axiomatic constructs, which are derived from thetical foundational hypotheses, Reckwitz describes theory-as-a-tool to be constantly evolving and applicable in an experimental setup without the necessary prior acceptance of a whole set of axiomatic assumptions. Reckwitz writes: “the theoretical system forms a unified whole and is self-contained. Once it has been developed, it can be applied indefinitely. Although it might be possible to supplement it and refine it here and there, its fundamental elements cannot be changed without causing it to collapse as a whole. The idea of theory as a system also suggests that a given theory must be accepted *in toto*: One either accepts the theory completely and learns to think and speak in it, or one leaves it behind entirely – a partial reception was not intended by its founder”². Reckwitz mentions Marx’s and Engel’s theory of capitalism and Parson’s and Luhmann’s theories of differentiation as examples of such theoretical systems.

In opposition to that, Reckwitz puts theories as a tool: “The quality of a theory as a tool manifests itself first and foremost in its ability to inspire both within and beyond academia. It is measured not simply by what it *knows* but also, and more importantly, by what it is *capable of*. In this respect, the practice of theory always has the character of an *experiment* in which concepts and theoretical connections are tested and refined in dialogue with the objects in question. To work in this way is to allow oneself to be surprised by the materials of the world – which have the character of ‘epistemic things’ (in Hans-Jörg Rheinberger’s terms) – and also by the consequences

² Andreas Reckwitz, “The Theory of Society as a Tool”, in: Reckwitz & Rosa, *Late Modernity in Crisis. Why We Need a Theory of Society*, Cambridge 2023, 9-94: 24.

of one's own conceptual design. In these experimental contexts, one can tinker around with different conceptual tools and draw upon various empirical materials, so that the theory, for its part, remains 'in flux.' This is not a matter of reaffirming the familiar system of thought, but rather about discovering the utility value of certain tools."³ As examples Reckwitz mentions late 20th century and more recent theories such as those by Foucault and Latour, but also Haraway and Boltanski.

As should have become clear from this differentiation, not only the historical situation of theory outlined earlier but also a semiotics of theory would have to deal with the second kind of theory described by Reckwitz: The valence of a theory as system is based on the totalism of its systematicity, not on its communicability and its semiotics. Theory as tool, however, gains the character of signs when it becomes an intellectual device that involves itself in practices to move phenomena into a new context, bringing to the fore new problems with respect to these phenomena. Reckwitz underlines this with his focus on knowledge vs. capability: Theory as tool does not present knowledge but is capable of pointing to or emphasizing aspects of phenomena in a new light.

3. Sign as Sign (Knowledge) vs. Sign as Tool (Practice)

In now looking back at the semiotic conditions of theory, especially with the theory film in mind, it is interesting to start from the fact that Volker Pantenburg, perhaps the foremost Farocki scholar, has used the concept of "metapicture" to discuss the theoretical quality of Farocki's works. With respect to the aforementioned works on prison surveillance, the images that Farocki contains in his films can be understood to be the focus of his films, if one leaves out the theoretical

³ Ibid., 24.

discursivity that the films develop. The image type of “metapictures” described by WJT Mitchell in 1994 includes not only obviously self-reflective images such as Velasquez’s “Las Meniñas” made famous by Foucault’s *Let mots et les choses*, but also cartoons or the well-known duck-rabbit image later discussed by Wittgenstein. Mitchell defines metapictures as “pictures that show themselves in order to *know* themselves: they stage the ‘self-knowledge’ of pictures.”⁴ With respect to Reckwitz’s distinction, however, such metapictures therefore stand in direct opposition to the idea of theory-as-a-tool, because instead of shedding new light on other phenomena, metapictures merely perform self-knowledge, and thus also point to the fact that the display of knowledge and of epistemological conditions and not practical capability is their specific quality. (Perhaps this is because Mitchell’s idea of metapictures rather belongs to theoretical systems such as Husserlian or Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology instead of the experimental tools that Reckwitz discusses.) Pantenburg, in discussing Farocki’s use of images, expands on the phenomenon of metapictures and then refers to Rorty’s definition of theory as a form of writing *about* writing that is at the same time aware of its linguistic constitution.⁵ For Pantenburg, the theoretical potential of Farocki’s works lies exactly in this fact: Farocki is making films whose images are aware of their imageness. This, however, only gets at their metapictorial quality.

4. Constituents of Theory – Signs of Theory?

In my own interest here, the mere explication of the reflexivity of a sign as sign does not suffice to turn this sign into a theoretical tool that invites experimentation. Theories as tools can by definition not be limited to isolated signs or images but must be marked by an open discursivity

⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Metapictures,” in Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, Chicago 1994, 48.

⁵ Volker Pantenburg, *Farocki/Godard. Film as Theory*, Amsterdam 2015, 33-72 (“Le Film qui Pense”).

that invites the expansion and modulation of their theoretical interests. A semiotics of theory is therefore different from the mere connotation that something is self-reflective, self-reflexivity alone does yet open up the discursivity required of a theory as tool. What the mentioned textual theories by Foucault or Haraway, and the filmic theories by Farocki or Mulvey/Wollen have in common is that they introduce new problems about existing phenomena: By introducing new aspects or concepts, they mark a difference to the old and thereby distinguish new knowledge from existing knowledge. I would argue that this constructivist principle is part of all theories and allows them to differentiate not by mere conceptuality but by the practice character described in Reckwitz's notion of theory-as-tool. From Pantenburg's use of Mitchell's concept of the "metapicture" or Rorty's notion of the language about language as language I would also retain the auto-reflexivity of theory as a theory: Theory use is aware of itself, or at least could potentially produce a metatheory about itself, if needed.

As a preliminary conclusion and first attempts at a "semiotics of theory," I propose the following abstract signs of non-media-specific theoretical discourse:

1. Differentiation: New aspects (problems) added to an existing phenomenon
2. Constructivism: Differentiations link and produce a set of another phenomenality
3. Practice Character: When the above signs of differentiation and constructivism are applied in to various context, the theory becomes a tool used in an experimental way
4. Autoreflexivity: Whether required or not, such theoretical discourse includes its own reflexivity, which allows to describe the practice application