



A CRITICAL READER OF “NEW” MEDIA

1. The Real Introduction



IN THIS CLASS

- The Actual Introduction™ to the class
- The meaning of the meaning of meaning
- The boring era of media analysis
- Two key concepts for today: *meaning* and *media*

WHAT IS THIS CLASS ABOUT?

- What do we mean by “new” media again?
- What is the reason for studying said “new” media?
- What does it mean to be critical?

STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

Session 1. The meaning of meaning and how to deal with it.

Session 2. Signs, what they do, what they are.

Session 3. The semiotics of culture.

Session 4. Narrative and possible worlds.

Session 5. The problem of interaction.

Session 6. The semiotics of art.

Session 7. Gamer Wittgenstein.

Session 8. Political power in the funnies.

Session 9. Traditionalizing the weird.

Session 10. Texts beyond their container.

Session 11. How to do things with images.

Session 12. Rinse and repeat in the normalization of new media.

- The structure is tentative! We'll talk about these topics more or less in this order, but we'll shake things up every so often!

EVALUATION

- Two written assignments
- The first one will be a short writing assignment at around the 6th session dealing with a number of fixed topics you can write about
- The second one will be a slightly longer assignment at the end of the semester with a partially free topic selection
- Assistance is expected, as is participation to the extent of your possibilities

READINGS

- The class will deal with multiple readings, from philosophical texts to comic books that will be assigned throughout the semester. All the readings will be available to you online either through Moodle or email
- We will do quite a bit of reading here, as it will be one of our main commitments. Many of them will be, I hope, fun texts though, not only from what is considered 'entertainment,' but also from our philosophical, semiotic and artistic choices

KEY INTERESTS

- Much of what we want to deal with is the analysis of non-traditional media that has emerged either side by side or as a consequence of more canonical forms of expression
- We want to take a critical, but serious look at non-traditional media and its dialogue with the history of traditional media
- We also want to develop a semiotic theory of analysis that can be robust enough to talk about these platforms without trivializing them
- Our interest is twofold then: Philosophical in that we want to have a philosophically informed theory; and artistic in that we want to approach new media critically in dialogue to other art forms as pertaining to the same domain
- The guiding word for us will be *meaning*

MEANING

- How do we define *meaning*?
- We usually tie the concept of meaning to different situations: meaning as correspondence, meaning as intention, meaning as *intension*, meaning as *ostension*, etc.
- Let's go through each of those

CONCEPTS OF MEANING

- **Correspondence**
- The idea that there is a 1:1 correspondence between a concept and an object
- **Intention**
- The aboutness of a mental state
- **Intension**
- The properties adduced by a concept
- **Ostension**
- Signification by enumeration or indices

THE MEANING OF MEANING

- Before we tackle how meaning is produced, we need to ascertain the most effective way for us to understand what *meaning* defines exactly
- Remember the Fregean notion of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*?
- But when we deal with *meaning*, we mean more than a **theory of reference**
- We don't want to stick to meaning as reference or meaning as psychological state
- The “meaning of meaning” is generally either linguistic or psychological, but we want to argue for a different approach related to our future objects of study

THE MEANING OF THE MEANING OF MEANING

- So when we try to define the meaning of meaning, what do we mean exactly?
- If the definition of what we mean when we use the word *meaning* depends on our theory of how we make sense of things, then meaning will depend on whether we think it is sufficient to think of reference or equivalence
- This view is however insufficient when we use the same concept of *meaning* to complex cultural objects! **(Or is it?)**

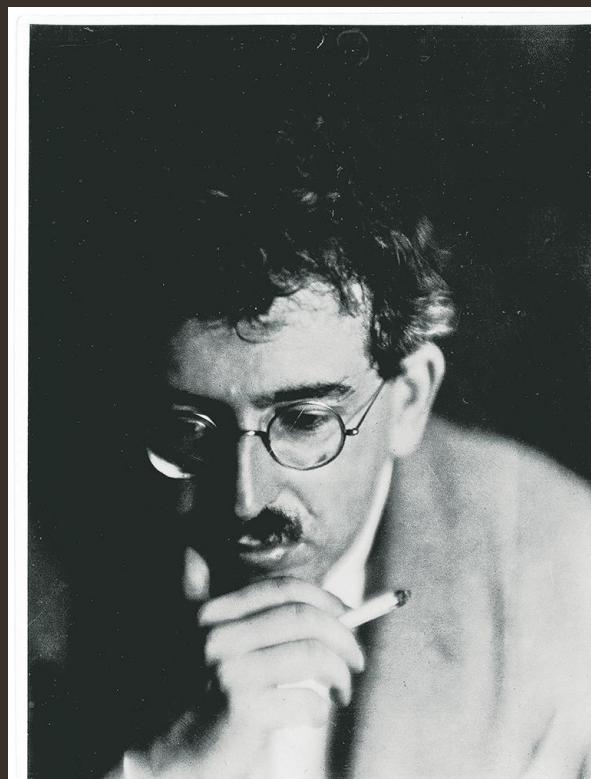
THE BORING YEARS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

- When did talking about art theory split into talking about media and about art as separate categories?
- Actually, what do we mean by *media*?
- In general, when we talk about *media* in the context of communication, we may refer to:
 - The press
 - The support of works of art
 - Works of art
- What sort of distinction is useful for us here?

DEFINING MEDIA

- In our context, we care about *meaningful texts* in a *cultural* setting that fulfils an *artistic function* of some sort
- DANGER DANGER DANGER
- Lots of keywords here!
- So we need to thread carefully here. We need to define *meaning*, *text*, *culture*, *art* and *function*! Ugh!
- Let's start with claims about art, meaning and text

WHAT'S UP WITH THIS GUY?



ART AND REPRODUCIBILITY

- What makes art *art*?
 - If we want to answer this question, we need to develop a *theory of art*
 - Why does this matter to us exactly?
 - Our working thesis for this course is semiotic-historical, so we want to understand meaning in context, meaning as context and meaning to create context, so to speak

DEALING WITH THEORIES OF ART

- In the case of Benjamin, it's a good initial approach for us because it's set as a theory of art against the background of mass reproducibility and capitalism—we find ourselves in an era way past this elucidation and yet its problems seem current enough
- The main things to take away at this point are:
- For Benjamin, art objects have an *aura* derived from their uniqueness, their genuineness
- Historical materialism is a key concept to keep in mind to explain this!

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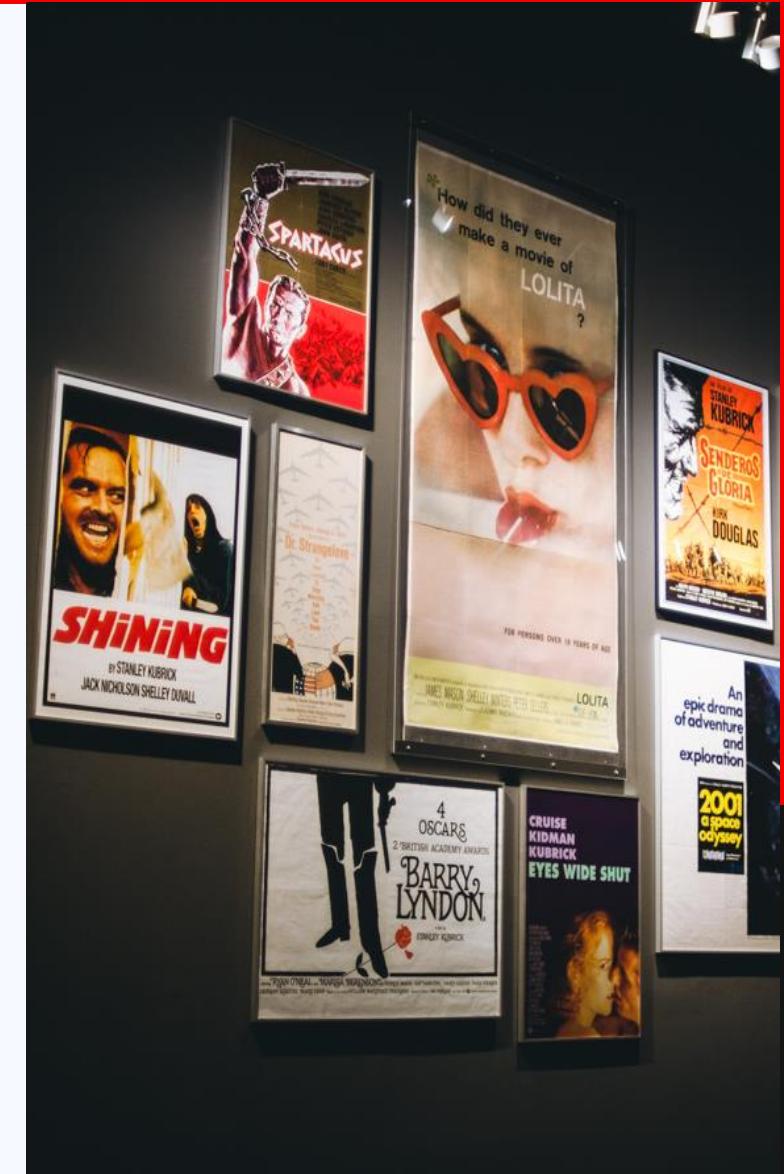


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ACRITICAL READER OF NEW MEDIA

02. MEDIA, MEANING, SIGNS



IN THIS CLASS

- ❑ HOW DO WE DEFINE A MEDIUM?
- ❑ THE MEDIUM IS THE... ~YAWN~
- ❑ SIGNS AND CULTURE

THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

So what is TWOITAOMR about?

1. Aura
2. Capitalism
3. The place of art in society





Cult and exhibition

- ❖ Art (at least classic art!) is embedded in tradition and the craft of making it as well as the ritual of presentation and admiration of art—art as cult
- ❖ Photography signals the detachment of art as a cult object, turning into an exhibition object. Authenticity becomes eroded.

LET'S TAKE A LOOK

Nadín Ospina, Colombia, 2001



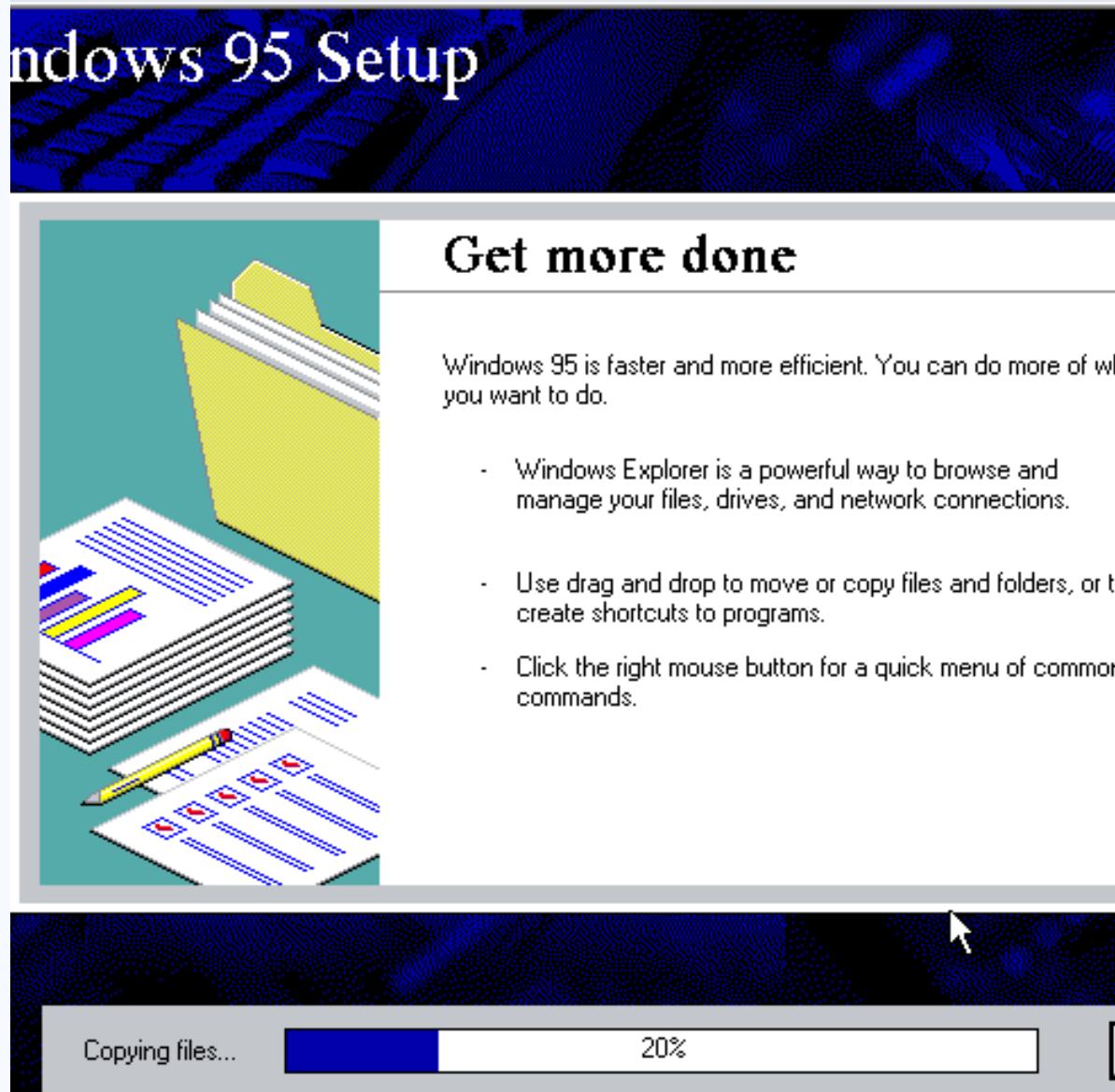
WHAT IS A MEDIUM

- A means of something
- A channeler of the spirit world
- A physical support of content
- How would you define it?



MEDIUM, A WORKING DEFINITION

We will treat the concept of medium as an encompassing container that defines the boundaries of representations expressed through it



THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

OR IS IT?
DOES IT MATTER
DO WE CARE?



Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980)

Canadian?!

Understanding Media

Culture, advertisement, media ecology

TV personality of sorts

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE



Woody Allen married his own daughter

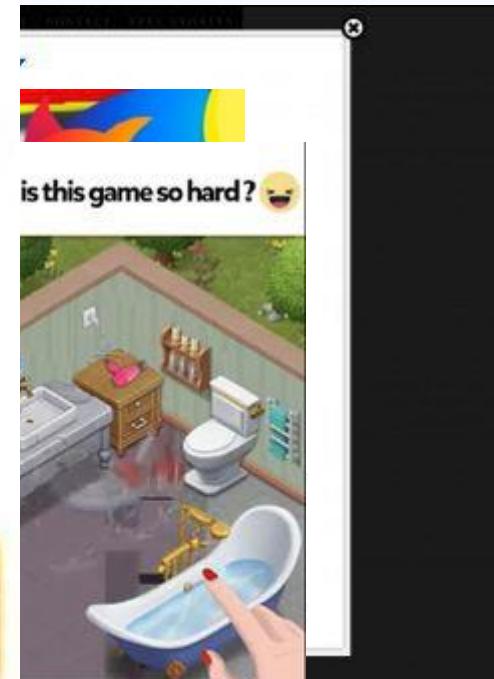


HOW CAN I
REGISTER
IN MC-L

Meet
Christian
singles
now!

JOIN NOW!

JG TO MC-L



MCLUHAN'S MEDIUM

McLuhan has a “technological” view of media in that he considers a medium to be a “new” technology that *mediates* human communication

So what constitutes a technology? Lightbulbs, clocks, money, words, etc.

THE FOUR EFFECTS OF MEDIA

(FROM LAWS OF MEDIA)



WHAT DOES THE
MEDIUM ENHANCE

WHAT DOES THE MEDIUM
MAKE OBSOLETE

WHAT DOES THE MEDIUM
RETRIEVE FROM OBSOLETE
MEDIA

WHAT DOES THE MEDIUM
REVERSE INTO WHEN TAKEN TO
THE EXTREME

LET'S APPLY THAT AGAIN



Let's grab the following element as a medium:

What does it enhance?

What does it make obsolete?

What does it bring back?

What does it reverse into when taken to the extreme?

BUT CAN WE SAY
SOMETHING FOR
CERTAIN HERE?

UHM IDK

WHAT IS THE POINT OF TALKING ABOUT SIGNS

Signs are more discrete units of analysis

However, they are multifarious

Do they give us more certainty when dealing with meaningful objects?

WHAT IS THIS A SIGN OF?



Let's focus not on the mask as a medium, but on its features: If we treat it as a sign, do we make a novel contribution in understanding anything at all?

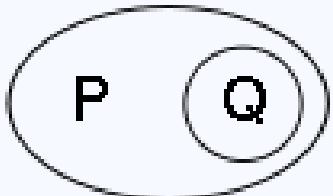
Signs need some context, so signs and the analysis of media are compatible

And signs are multifarious, so they don't give us enough certainty about their existence as signs

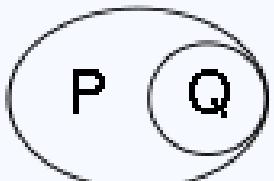
So what is the point of using signs as part of our analysis?

PQ

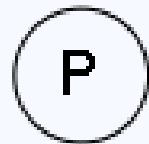
a) Conjunction $P \wedge Q$



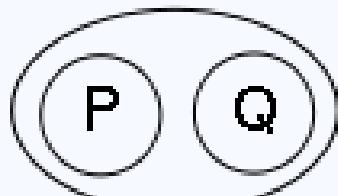
c1) Conditional $P \rightarrow Q$



c2) Conditional $P \rightarrow Q$,
alternative notation



b) Negation $\neg P$



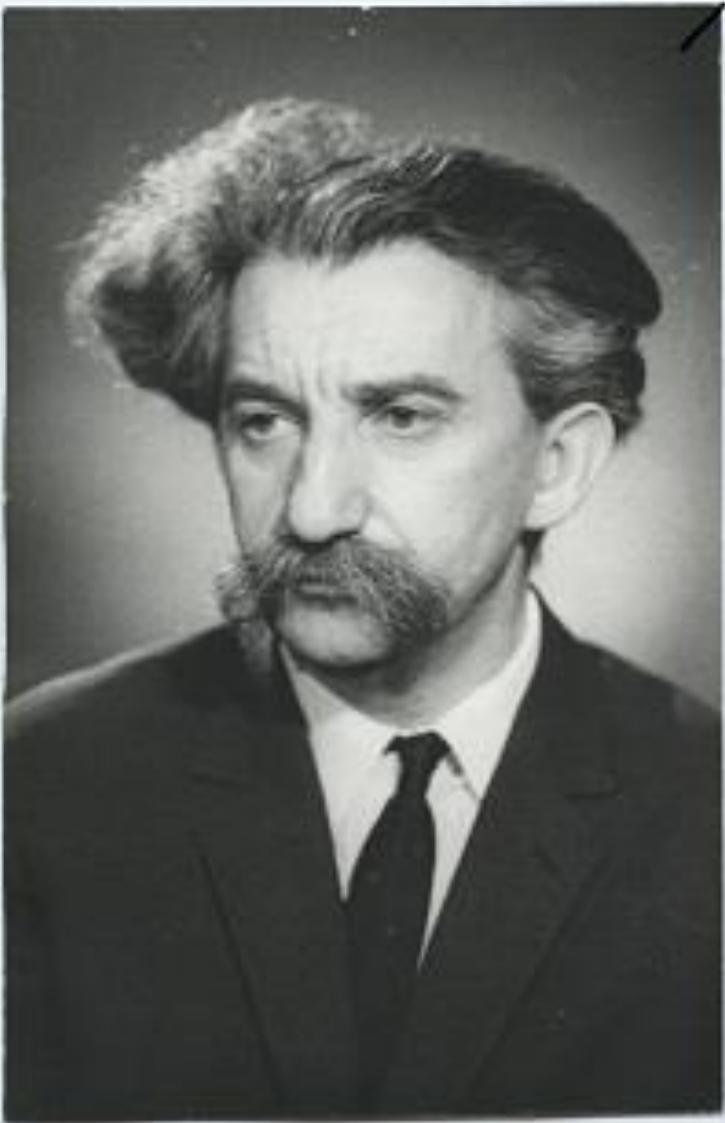
d) Disjunction $P \vee Q$

SIGNS

The point of focusing on signs is to have a wider arsenal of theoretical tools

The analysis of context and sign will still leave a bunch of questions open

Being strict about how we use signs enables a tighter position though!



WHAT ARE THE SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE

- Let's remember a bit of what the semiotics of culture looks like
- *Semiosphere*
- *Explosion*
- *Text*
- *Cultural objects as indicators of cultural meaning*

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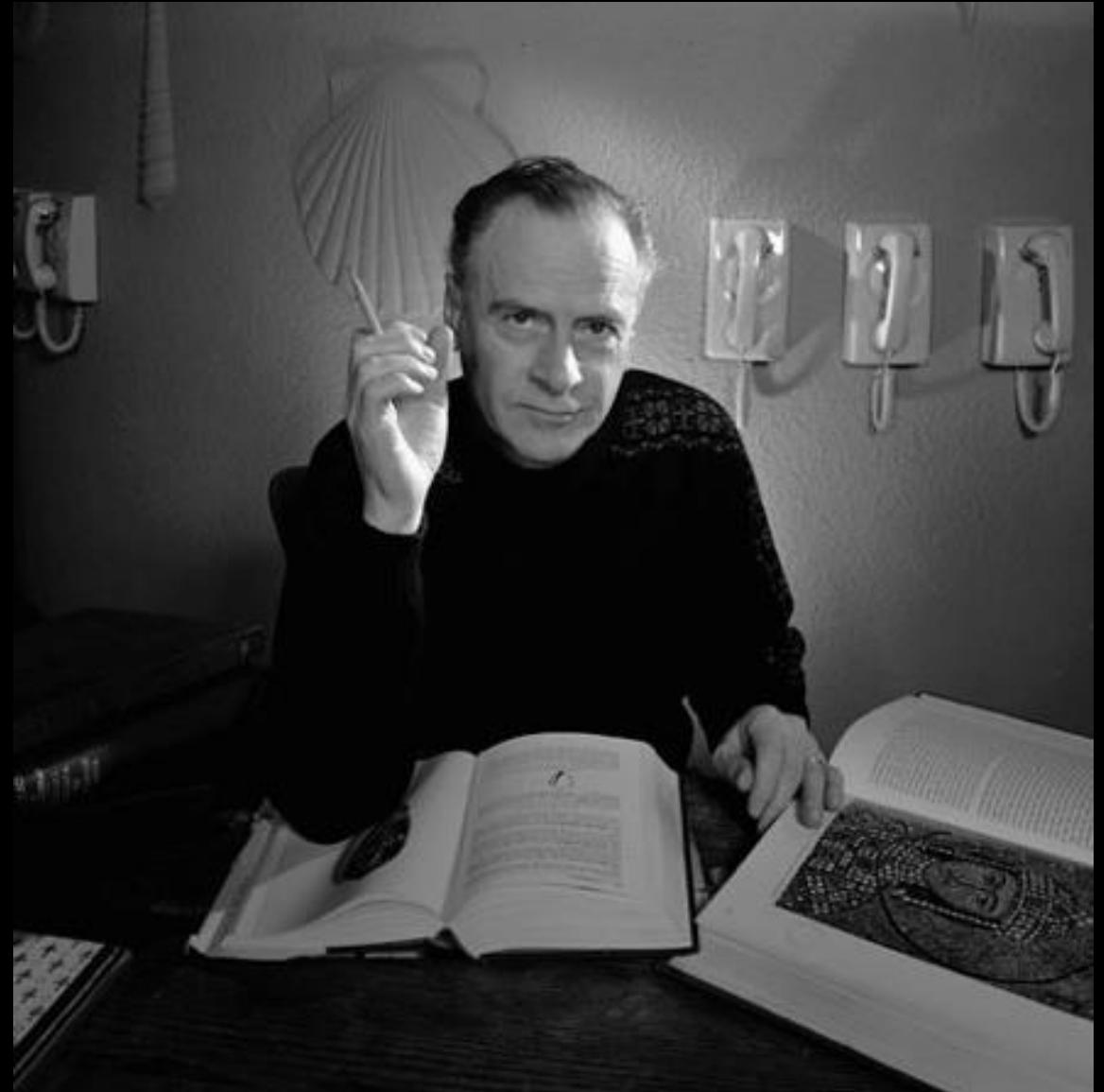


*more on the
effects of media*

brief interlude

The laws of media

- Every medium, every technology, every human artifact
 - 1. enhances some human function,
 - 2. obsolesces a previous way of achieving that function,
 - 3. retrieves something from the past that was obsolesced earlier and
 - 4. when pushed to the limits of its potential reverses or flips into an opposite or complementary form (McLuhan 1975 &1977, McLuhan M. & E. 1988)
- Marshall McLuhan's General Theory of Media (GToM), His Laws of Media; Comparing Three Kinds of Law
- Robert K. Logan



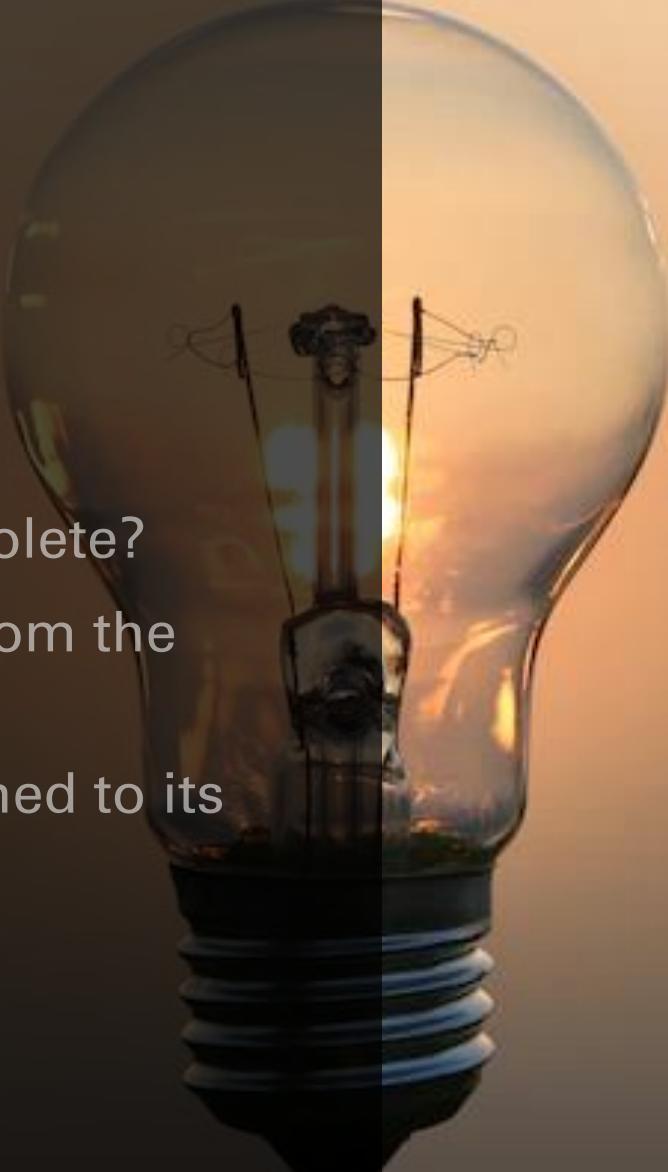
An example

The smartphone enhances the accessibility and convenience of the medium internet, which also accelerates the speed of real-time communication. Concerning obsolescence, the smartphone pushes feature mobile phones aside as well as decreasing the use of personal computers and home printers. The smartphone retrieves the use of cameras and (e-)books, reviving the linear focus on the medium. When pushed to its extremes, the smartphone transforms into a new form reversing its original characteristics, with imaginable evolvements being devices of Augmented Reality, (e.g. GoogleGlass), that might render its users oblivious to their surrounding environment and thus actually restricting human interaction instead of facilitating communication.

**What Would
McLuhan Say
about the
Smartphone?
Applying
McLuhan's
Tetrad to the
Smartphone**

<https://glocality.eu/articles/10.5334/glo.9>

- what does this enhance?
- what does this make obsolete?
- what does this retrieve from the past?
- what happens when pushed to its limits?

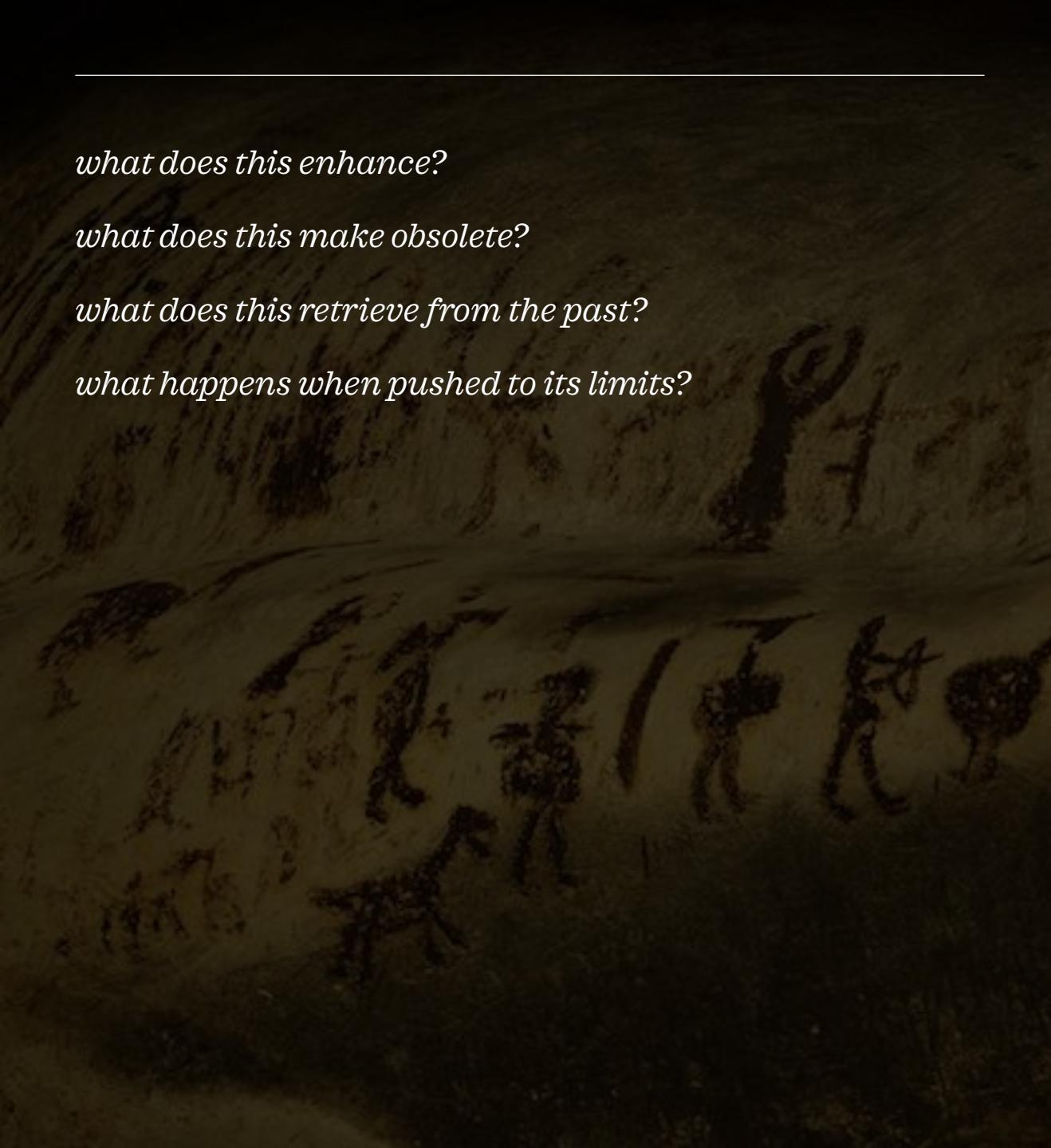


what does this enhance?

what does this make obsolete?

what does this retrieve from the past?

what happens when pushed to its limits?



what does this enhance?

what does this make obsolete?

what does this retrieve from the past?

what happens when pushed to its limits?



SHORTLY, INSIDE THE CLUBHOUSE, THE NEWEST MEMBER DEMONSTRATES HIS SUPER-POWER...

YUM, YUM! THIS OLD RAY-GUN) GASP!... HOW IS IT
SURE TASTES GOOD!) POSSIBLE FOR A HUMAN
YESSIREE! BEING TO EAT METAL...
AND LIVE?!



YOU SEE, I COME FROM THE PLANET
BISMOLL! GRADUALLY, OVER A PERIOD OF
EONS, MICROBES MADE ALL FOOD THERE
POISONOUS... JUST AS GRADUALLY,
EVOLUTION TRANSFORMED MY RACE SO
WE COULD EAT ANYTHING WITHOUT
BEING HARMED!



I KNOW WHAT'S ON
YOUR MIND! YOU'RE
THINKING!... "SO
HE'S AN UNUSUAL
FREAK! SO WHAT?
THAT DOESN'T
QUALIFY HIM FOR
LEGION MEMBERSHIP!"
BUT YOU'RE WRONG--
NO MATTER WHERE
OR HOW A FOE EVER
IMPRISONS US, I
COULD ALWAYS EAT
OUR WAY TO FREEDOM!



AFTER MATTER-EATER LAD IS SWORN IN...

THE SCIENCE POLICE COMMISSION HAS
ASKED US TO GUARD A SHIPMENT OF
ENERGITE, THE UNIVERSE'S MOST
VALUABLE MINERAL! IT'LL BE
SHIPPED FROM VENUS IN A CRAFT
DISGUISED AS AN OLD, DAMAGED
SPUTNIK! THEY WANT TWO
VOLUNTEERS!

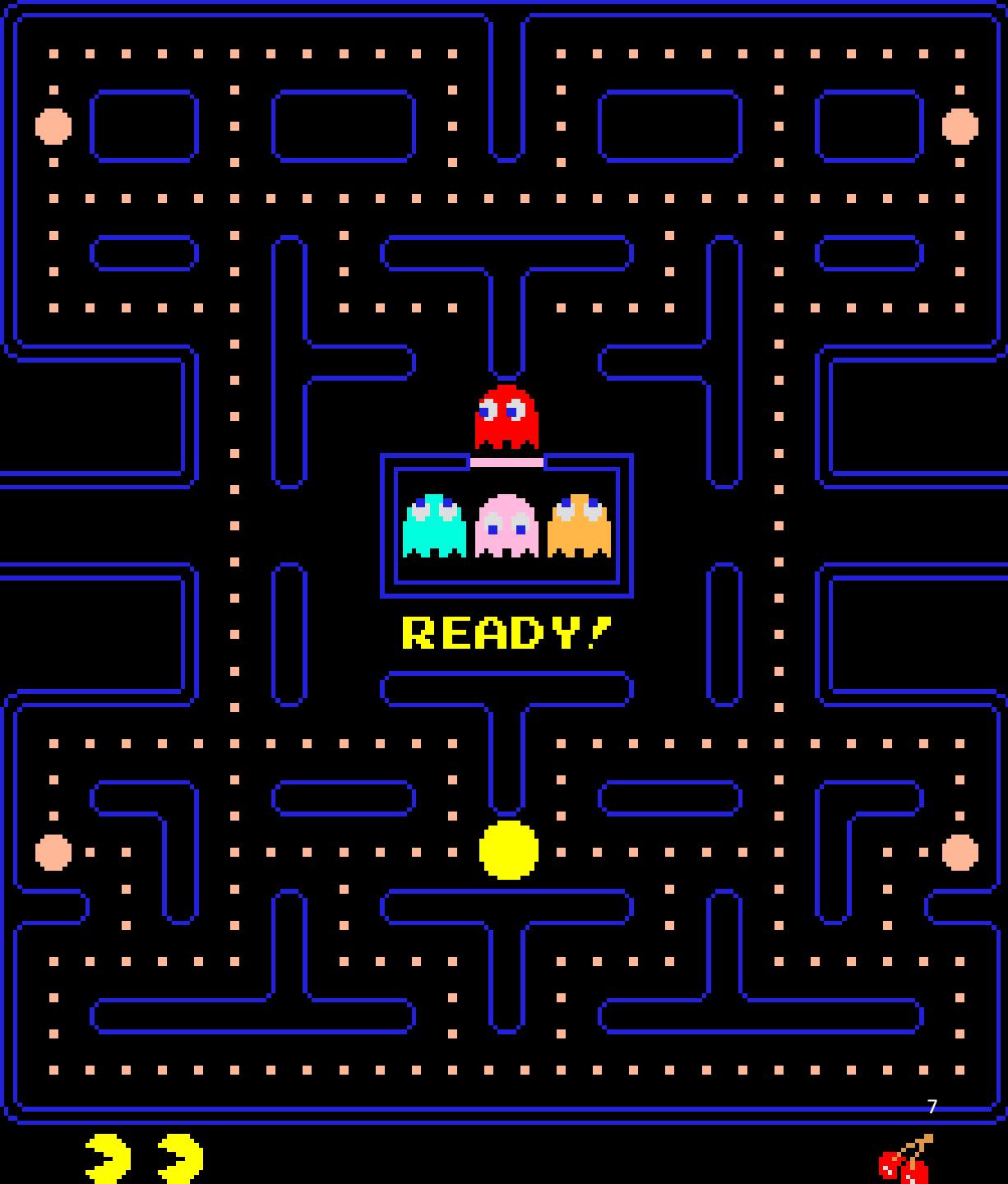


what does this enhance?

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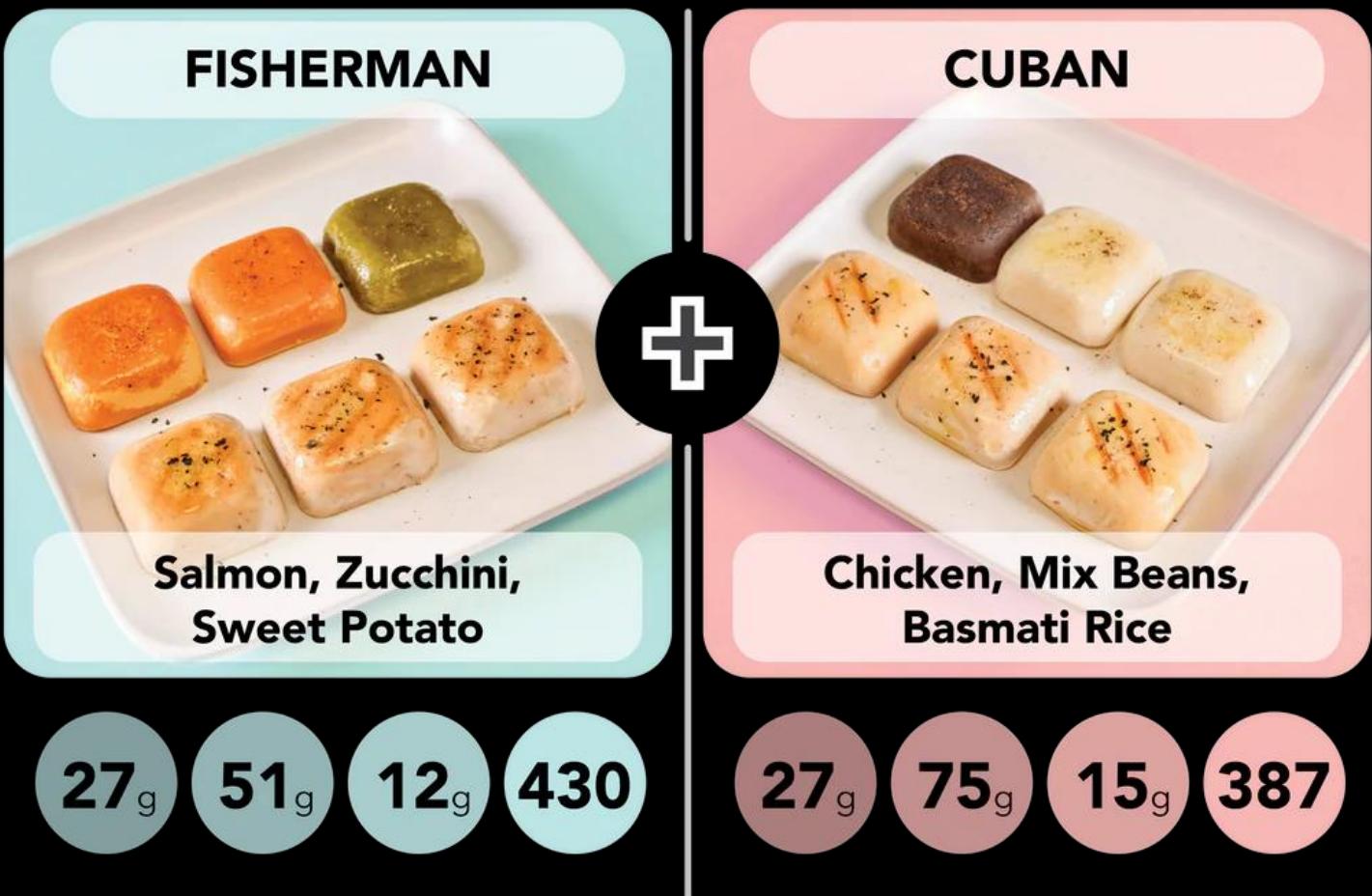


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interlude: the semiotics
of culture



IN THIS CLASS

- ▶ Yuri Lotman and cultural semiotics
- ▶ The concept of text
- ▶ Literature as a sample of cultural discourse
- ▶ Media and its analysis



YURI M. LOTMAN

- ▶ The semiotics of culture have an important landmark in the works of Yuri Lotman
- ▶ Petrograd 1922-1993 Tartu
- ▶ Notable works include:
Semiotics of Cinema
The Structure of the Artistic Text
Universe of the Mind
Culture and Explosion



WHAT IS THE SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE?

- ▶ The semiotics of culture, from Lotman's scientific standpoint, is a research program based on structural linguistics
- ▶ It studies the meaning-making and significative processes that take place in a given cultural system
- ▶ It creates a series of concepts to understand culture and non-culture as a dynamic system



THESES ON THE SEMIOTIC STUDY OF CULTURES

- ▶ As a manifesto and theoretical framework for a research program, Lotman et al. (1973) make the assumption that “all human activity concerned with the processing, exchange, and storage of information possesses a certain unity” (53)
- ▶ This means that one basic principle for understanding culture in this sense is that *sign systems* do not work individually: Human activity requires a plurality of signification systems to work
- ▶ In an abstract manner of speaking, no human activity is ever solely carried in one mode of signification: Nothing is *purely* linguistic—no linguistic description is self-sufficient because it depends on non-linguistic factors to be actualized

DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

- ▶ In the Theses from 1973, there is a distinction between culture as self-described and culture as meta-systematically (scientifically) described
- ▶ The self-description of culture operates on the dichotomy of culture and non-culture, but it is dependent on specific values of a culture (think of the Greco-Roman concept of *barbarian*)
- ▶ What would count as non-culture within your own cultural sphere nowadays?





CULTURE, WITHIN AND WITHOUT

- ▶ From within, culture is the “sphere of organization (information) in human society and the opposition to it [is] disorganization (entropy)” (54)
- ▶ From outside though, culture and non-culture “appear as spheres which are mutually conditioned and which need each other” (54)
- ▶ Let’s try to explain this further:
- ▶ The cultural description of culture sees it as an organized scheme in which its elements have specific meanings (and usages). Outside of culture there is chaos, non-values
- ▶ The scientific description of culture sees culture as a system of interconnected signification(s), but it also sees non-culture as a system that depends and defines culture



THE MECHANISM OF CULTURE

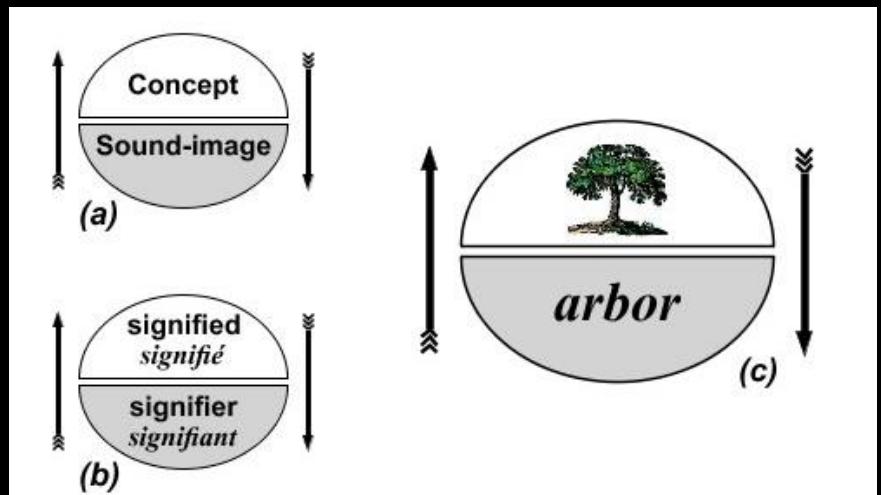
- ▶ When we describe culture ‘from outside’, we do not give primacy to culture as a system. Instead, we put both culture and non-culture as systems with specific features
- ▶ As we have defined both systems in opposition, we describe them as ‘mutually conditioned’ and ‘mutually necessary’
- ▶ Under this description, the *mechanism* of culture transforms the outside into a part of the inside, it turns *entropy* into *information*
- ▶ Think of it this way: If there is no non-culture, there is no culture either
- ▶ In Lotman’s view, this opposition is the *minimal unit* in the mechanism of culture



FIRST CONSIDERATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

- ▶ Culture is *dynamic*
- ▶ Culture is expansive
- ▶ Extracultural space is in an active position to change cultural space
- ▶ Culture is *hierarchical* and *multilayered* in terms of the semiotic systems that populate it

THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL SEMIOTICS



- Semiotics usually deals with signs
- However, Lotmanian cultural semiotics deals with groups of signs
- These groups of signs are termed *texts*
- The reason to avoid singular signs as the unit of analysis lies in the idea that a singular sign is uninformative and that meaning requires a non-singular set of signs



THE CONCEPT OF TEXT

- ▶ Lotman (1977) does not give us a straight definition of the concept of text, but instead states that there are three axes that lay its conceptual foundations:
- ▶ *Expression*: A text belongs to the realization of a communicative system. For instance, in literature, the text is expressed through the signs of a natural language
- ▶ *Demarcation*: A text has boundaries, opposing materially embodied signs that are not part of its composition
- ▶ *Structure*: A text has an internal organization. “In order [...] to recognize a certain aggregate of phrases in a natural language as a text, we need to be convinced that they form a secondary structure on the level of artistic organization” (53)



SO WHAT IS A TEXT THEN?

- ▶ Any “carrier of integral [...] meaning – to a ceremony, a work of the fine arts, or a piece of music” (1973: 58)
- ▶ Not every message in a natural language is a text though, at least from a cultural point of view: Only messages belonging to a speech “genre” would possess textuality
- ▶ Texts can be *discrete* and *indiscrete*: Discrete texts are clearly composed of specific signs, whereas indiscrete texts have no discernible specific, individualized signs



THE ARTISTIC TEXT

- ▶ Take the following example:
- ▶ *Portrait of Innocent X, by Diego Velázquez, c. 1650*
- ▶ What are the features of this work of art that make it a *text* in Lotman's view?
- ▶ What is its expression?
- ▶ What is its demarcation?
- ▶ What is its structure?



WHAT ABOUT THIS ARTISTIC TEXT?

► And is this a text too?



WHAT TEXTS DO IN CULTURE

- ▶ In the organization of cultural space, texts move through culture as well as in and out
- ▶ Texts have three functions:
- ▶ Transmission of available information
- ▶ Creation of new information—information that is not easily deduced from available information or unpredictable information
- ▶ Memory—the capacity to preserve and reproduce information



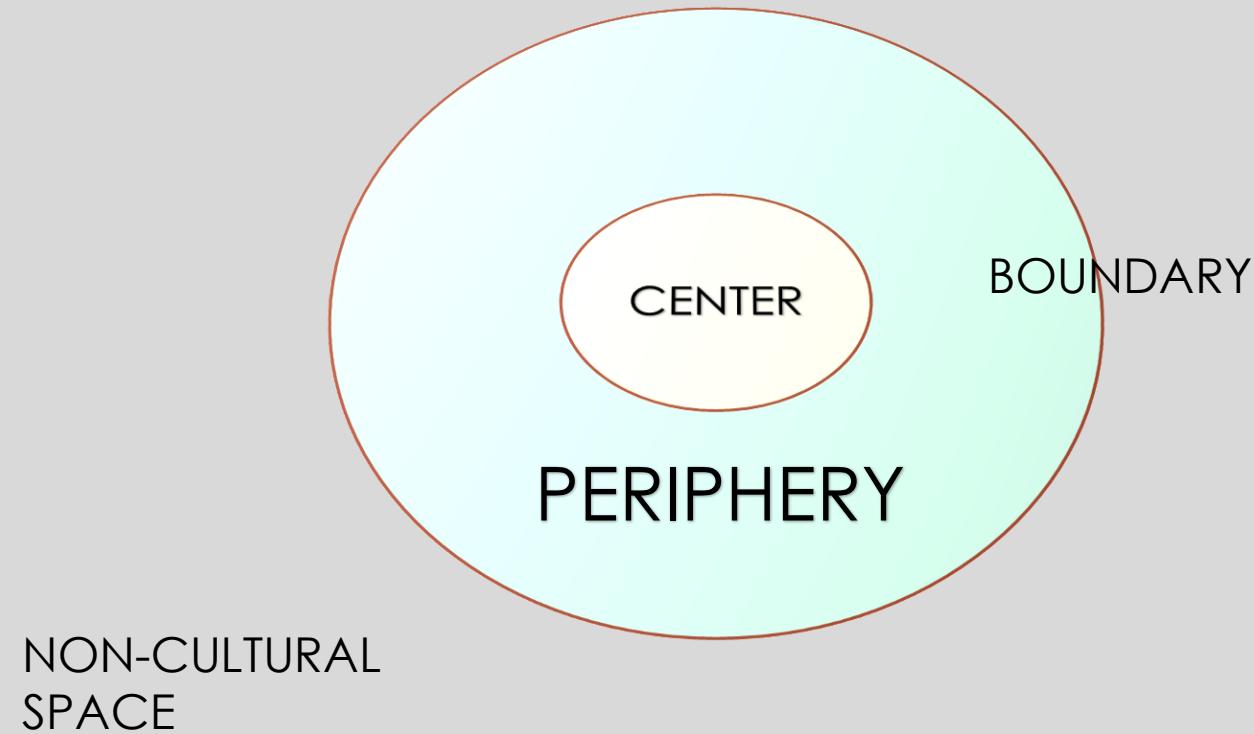
THE ORGANIZATION OF CULTURAL SPACE

The space where culture exists is semiotic space by virtue of its communicative properties

This semiotic space is defined as a *semiosphere* by Lotman (1990)

The semiosphere is defined as “the totality of individual texts and isolated languages as they relate to each other”

STRUCTURE OF THE SEMIOSPHERE





REFERENCES

- ▶ Lotman, Juri M. 1977. *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan
- ▶ —— 1990. *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. London: Tauris.
- ▶ Lotman, Juri M., Ivanov, Vjacheslav V., Pjatigorskij, Aleksandr M., Toporov, Vladimir N., Uspenskij, Boris A. 2013 (1973). Theses on the semiotic study of cultures (as applied to Slavic texts). In: Silvi Salupere, Peeter Torop and Kalevi Kull (eds.), *Beginnings of the Semiotics of Culture*. Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 53-77.

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a critical reader of “new” media

03. THE SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE (or a series of questions that we may not end up solving at all)



IN THIS CLASS

- What is the semiotics of culture?
- What do we analyze with it?
- Actually, what is culture?

SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE – an overview

- What do we call ‘semiotics of culture’? First, let’s try to reanswer this:
- What do we call ‘semiotics’?
- How can there be a *semiotics of something*?

SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE

Semiology and structuralism

- A Saussurean approach to understanding systems of signification
- Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Greimas, etc.

Semiotics of culture

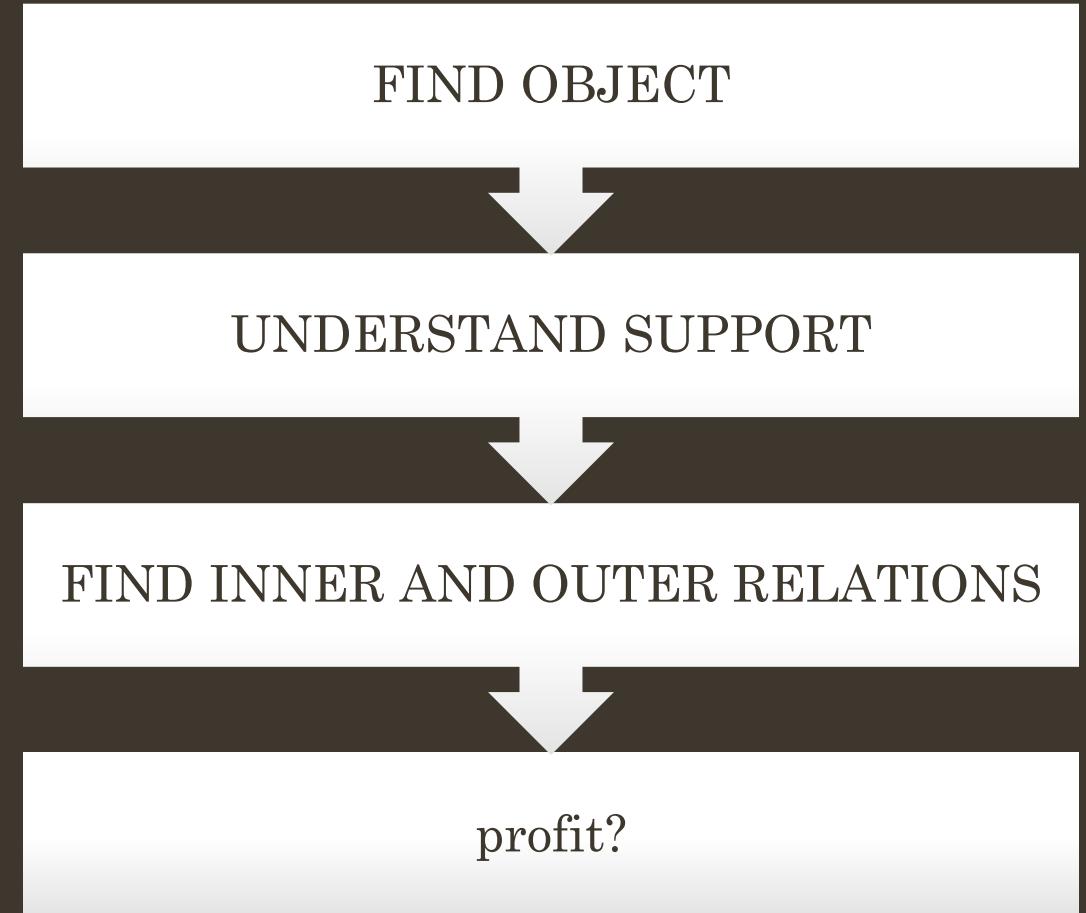
- An analytical approach to understand systems of culture and elements within
- Lotman, Piatigorsky, Uspensky, etc.

SIDENOTE: WHAT COUNTS AS ANALYSIS?

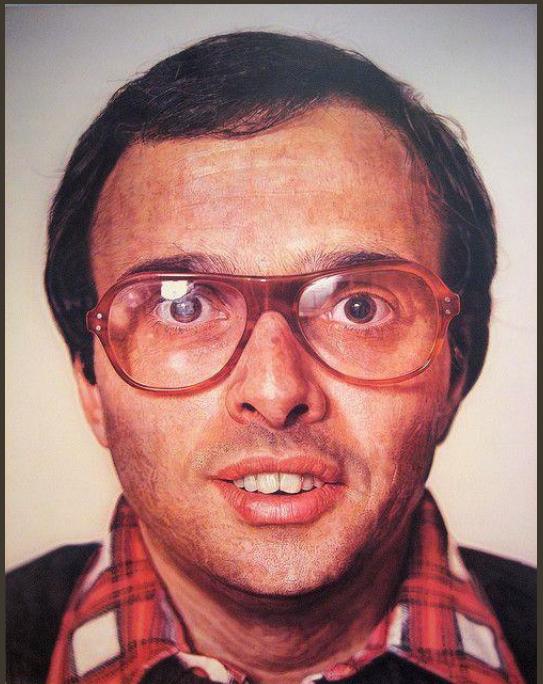
- Both areas of cultural analysis are fairly compatible, though have significant differences
- Structuralism, semiotics and criticism all create means of analyzing meaningful cultural objects
- What do we mean by analysis though? This may sound like a ridiculous question, but it actually grants some thinking!

THINGS THAT COUNT AS ANALYSIS

- Understanding motivation of cultural object
- Understanding underlying meaning of cultural object
- Understanding underlying structure of cultural object
- Understanding overlying structure of cultural relations



- Summarization of contents of cultural object?
- Description of appearance of cultural object?
- Psychoanalysis of authorial intent?
- Psychoanalysis of reader reaction?
- Craft quality *qua* content analysis?



things that
maybe do not
count as analysis

but can we be sure about this?

IS THE MEDIUM THE MESSAGE?

- Instead of making a point about what a work *means* or what an artist *means* (etc., etc., etc.), our analysis and sense of *meaning* has to correspond to more areas of cultural objects—the medium is essential, the relations of the work are essential, the relations within a semiosphere (and towards other semiospheres) are essential
- Let's give this idea a spin



- The question is then, *what do we do with this?*



SEMIOTICS, AGAIN

- So what do we call semiotics?
- In general, we will think of semiotics as both a set of methodologies and a point of view
- It's not properly a methodology because semiotics implies a commitment to the usage of *signs* and the relevance of *meaning-making*
- But from this commitment we derive a number of potential analytical tools that can be extended towards full methodologies (such as structuralism and the semiotics of culture!)

HOW CAN THERE BE A SEMIOTICS OF SOMETHING?

- If semiotics deals with the general phenomenon of meaning-making, signification and all that, then it means it can be applied to specific areas where meaning-making is important
- If perception and meaning-making are fundamentally semiotic, and cultural signification is a subsystem of a more general signification, then semiotics can cover these areas with some success in order to analyze the mechanisms of meaning generation!
- So you can have, say, a semiotics of toilets that could successfully analyze how meaning is generated in the context of toilets!



WHAT IS CULTURE

- Now this is a tricky one: We previously talked about the concept of *semiosphere* and its constituents
- Lotman defined culture at some point as ‘the whole of uninherited information and the ways of its organization and storage,’ pointing out the cybernetic nature of his theory
- Culture, in general, is the whole of meaning-making practices historically and locally situated, ever-changing and interacting by way of human action through modeling
- Let’s remember the Sebeokian revision of what modeling systems are:
- Primary modeling systems
- Secondary modeling systems
- Tertiary modeling systems

WHAT IS A CULTURAL OBJECT

- Is an *axe* the same as a *movie*? How do we assign value to different objects?
- If we go by the McLuhanian understanding of medium, both correspond to different media
- If we try, however, to model their meaning-making, we end up with a different picture
- Moreover, if, after modelling, we try to account for the usage of signs in regards to both objects, we can get a picture of what *kinds* of signs we are witnessing

SO WHAT IS THE SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE, AFTER ALL?

- Maybe it's an ad-hoc systems theory that takes into account historical relations to make sense of how cultural objects create meaning
- Maybe it's a way to treat culture as a sort of language, with specific expressions within it as specific aspects or instances of language usage
- Maybe it's a theory of how cultural systems work by observing both the micro and macro levels

- Question: What distinguishes how we treat different but related cultural objects? For instance, why do we treat news articles differently than fiction novels?
- In other words, why are there discourses/genres?

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CRoNM

SEEING AND UNDERSTANDING



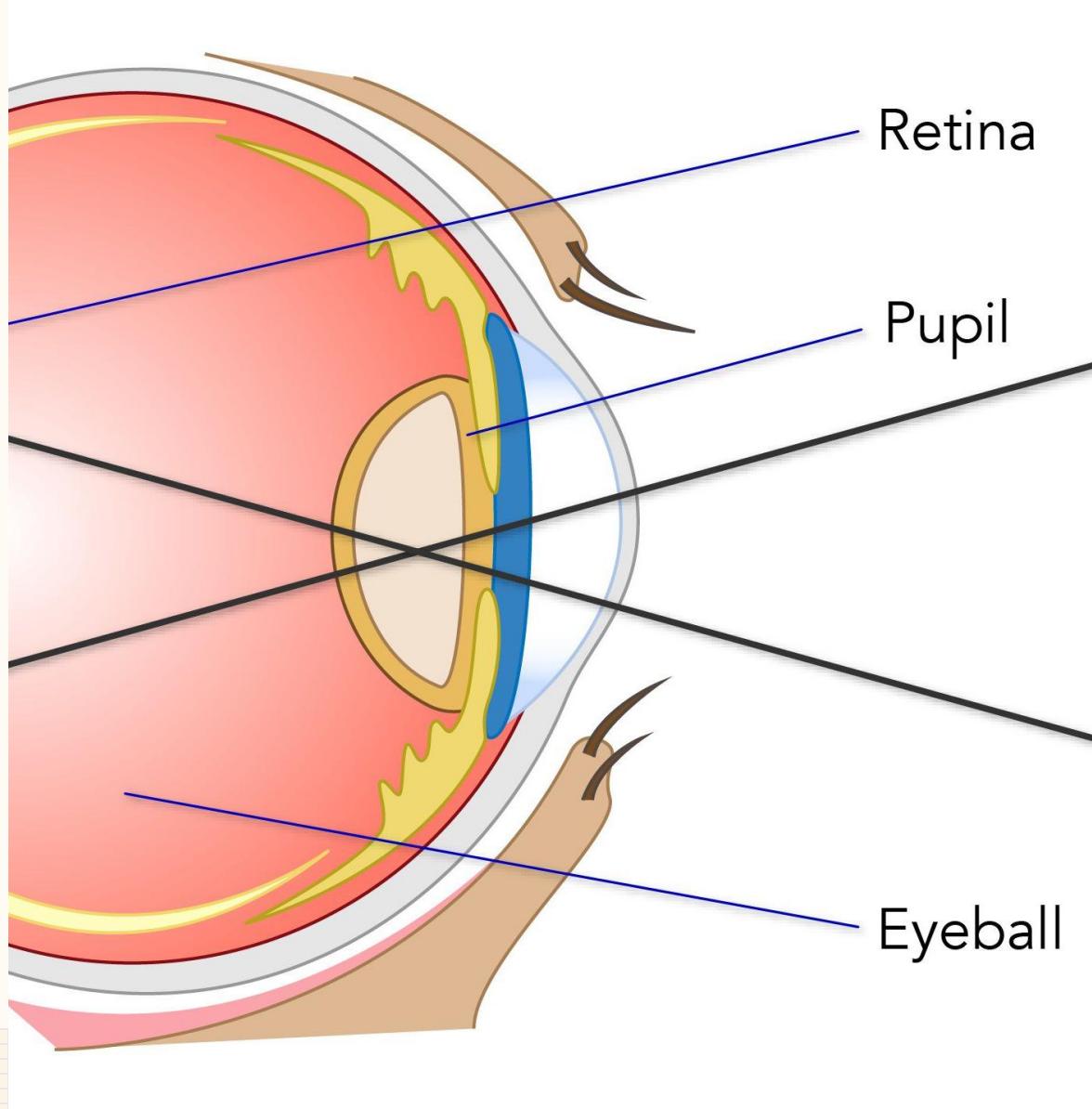
In this class



A brief historical overview of how we *look* at things



Understanding cultural objects as an observer



Looking at things

- What is *seeing*?
- And is it different from *perceiving*?
- Direct/Indirect perception

Modeling Systems Theory

PRIMARY

- The infrastructure of cognition

Primary
Secondary
Tertiary

SECONDARY

- Cognition built upon non-necessary connections between elements at the infrastructural level

Cognition and the arts

- We usually separate artistic practices from the way we understand how we think
- But does art tell us something about how we think?
- For instance, take the following:



- Think about the music here. What role does the music play in such a sequence?
- And what role does *framing* have in this sequence?



From a vantage point

- More generally, what do we do when we *consume art*?
- How different is this from consuming *experiences*?

What do we do with this?



By examining how our perception *is* meaningful, we can also try to access how meaning is generated in our experiences



This process can then feed our understanding of the cultural objects we have access to, allowing us to see how we see

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A CRITICAL READER OF “NEW” MEDIA

04. narrativity, possibility, existence

IN THIS CLASS

- Narrativity an cultural texts
- Narration and mental models
- Words and objects
- Worldbuilding
- Logical modality



POLL TIME!

- We asked the two following questions:
- Is narrativity ever avoidable in media?
- Is a cultural object defined by a narrative axis?

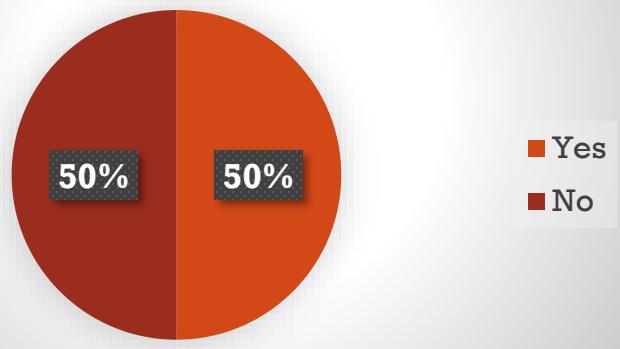
QUESTION TIME

**1. Can we avoid
narrativity in media?**

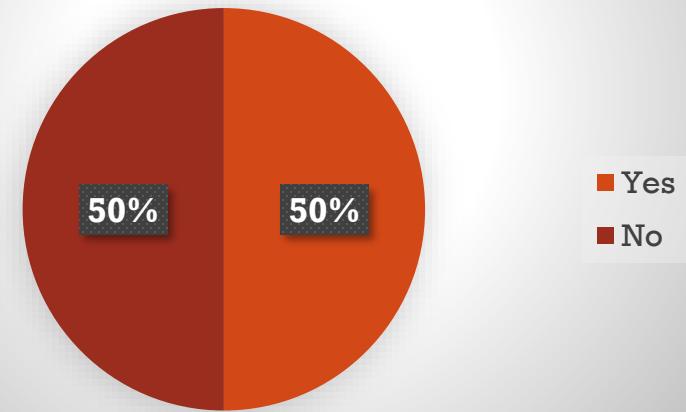
**2. Are all cultural objects
narrative to some degree?**



**Is narrativity ever
avoidable in media?**

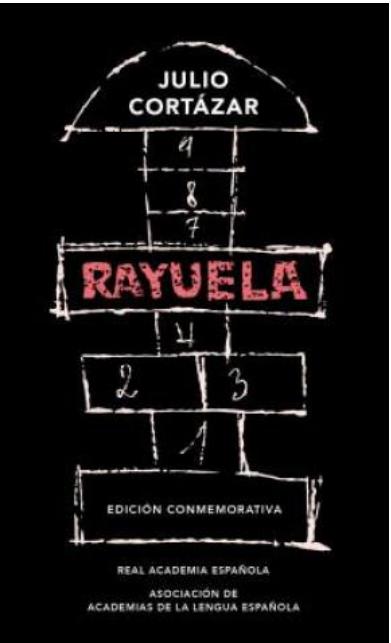


**Is a cultural object
defined by a narrative
axis?**



RESULTS





SEINFELD, TANIGUCHI, CORTÁZAR

- What was the point of the different pieces we checked?
- Seinfeld
- The Walking Man
- Hopscotch (Nebe, peklo, ráj)



WHAT DO WE NARRATE

- How do we define narration?
- Do we identify narration with *plot*? This seems to reduce presentation to story
- Intuitively, narration is simply the expression or description of events in a certain manner
- More formally, we could talk of the terms that work within narration such as *action*, *character* and *recognition* per Todorov (1969: 73). We could go with Uspensky and qualify it as *description* on the *semantic* level (1976)



HOW DO WE NARRATE

- Todorov puts it this way:

The minimal complete plot can be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to another. This term "equilibrium," which I am borrowing from genetic psychology, means the existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society; it is a social law, a rule of the game, a particular system of exchange. The two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement

- This equilibrium theory is essential to his brand of *narratology*, which studies the structure and inner workings of narration and plot
- But *plot* is not exactly what we're after



CULTURAL OBJECTS

- We seem to be limited in scope to a bidimensional sign construction. The *plot* and its *expression*
- Are cultural objects all *plots* formed in one way or another?
- We have to avoid confusion here! What do we actually mean by *cultural object*?
- This is where Lotman's concept of *text* becomes useful again!



THE CONCEPT OF TEXT

- Remember the idea of a *cultural text*?
- A text is *not* the integrality of a work of art
- A text is defined in three different planes:
- *Expression*: It is set down through the usage of signs
- *Demarcation*: There are tangible boundaries to the expression of signs
- *Structure*: There is a certain organization in the signs used



- What we have here is a *crowbar*
- How do we characterize the *narration* of this crowbar?
- Does this crowbar have a *plot*?
- Can this *crowbar* be construed as a *text*?

THE NARRATIVE MIND

- Thought is very often given to us in the form of narration. Who has never been caught in a train of thought that “sounds” exactly like whatever book you’re reading?
- It would seem that at the surface level, narration is natural to the way we think. There may be some rudimentary neurological reasons to think that thoughts are formed narratively
- Narration could explicate outcome inference and memory retrieval—it’s both past-accessible and future oriented
- But is all thought narrative or is it *temporal*?





- Take the following object
- When you approach it, do you *narrate* it?
- Can you identify a narrative structure in it?
- On the other hand, can you identify your *thoughts* as you approach the object?
- Can this be a *text*, beyond our cognitive intuition of narration?



Mark Rothko (1944), *Hierarchical Birds*





A SHOW ABOUT NOTHING

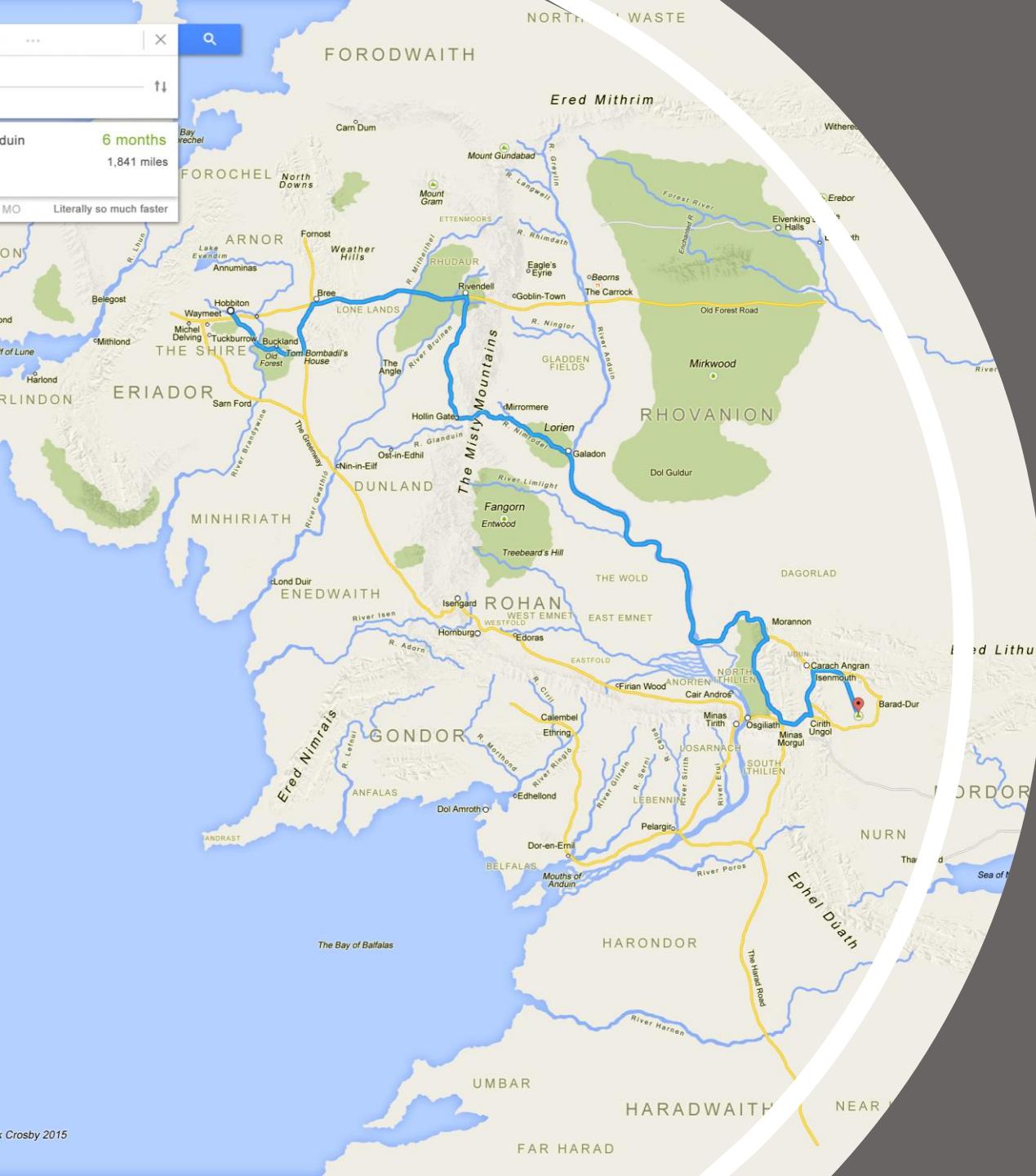
- Is narration conducive to understanding cultural objects as their content?
- Why do we ask what *something is about*?
- Can anything be *about nothing*?



WHEN WE CAN'T NARRATE

- Let's go back to the crowbar: Do non-artistic texts narrate?
Under what conditions?
- A medium does not entail narration
- *Unless* we assume that all thought is inherently narrative
- But that would mean that all objects subjected to psychology
would narrate, not necessarily that *objects* narrate by
themselves
- In how we understand a medium or an object, we perhaps
deal with something different, namely, the logic of the object





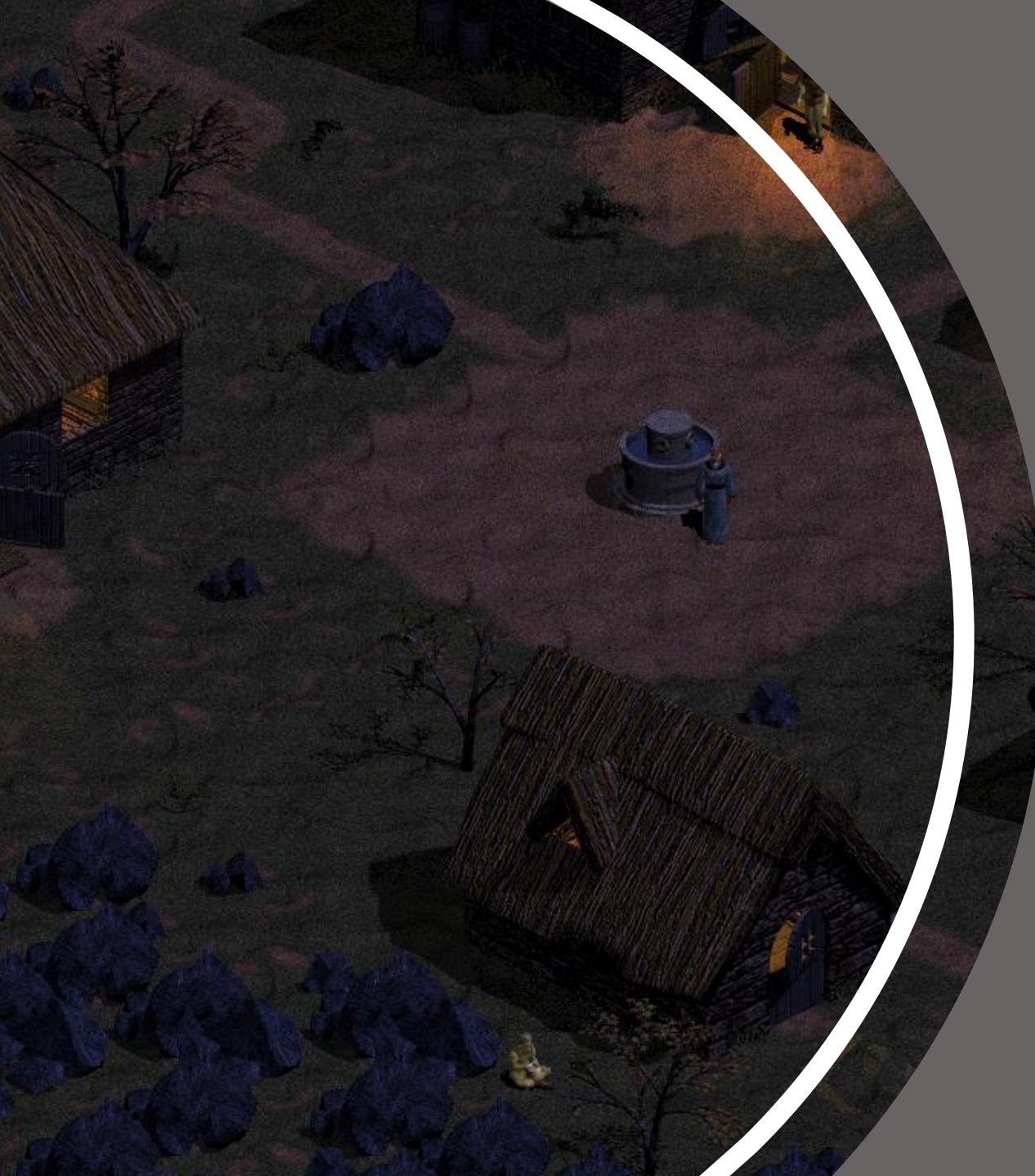
CONSTRUCTING THE WORLD

- Let's focus on fiction for a moment
- Normally we talk about fiction in terms of plot and its presentation
- But we also talk about the worlds of fiction
- We fly concepts like *worldbuilding*, *atmosphere*, *lore* or *background* to talk about the idea that certain cultural objects present us with enough information to reconstruct a sense of a world half-represented in fiction
- We can both ask questions and formalize the idea in a couple of steps

WHAT IS A WORLD

- Does all fiction worldbuild?
- Take, for example, *The Lord of the Rings*: One of its apparent features is that it builds and presents elements that can be identified as a *world*
- But at the same time think of *The Old Man and the Sea*: Does it *necessarily* build something that can be characterized as a *world*?
- What is the feature in culture that presents a built world?
- In fact, what is a *world*?
- If we rely on intuitions, we think of a *world* as a set of historical, physical, biological, social, etc. facts. Is something lacking in this definition? (not a trick question!)





WORLDS WITHOUT HISTORY

- Cultural objects undeniably pertain to the world they are a part of, not the world they are presented in
- But narrative cultural objects often rely on worldbuilding and even make it happen without much of an intention to do so
- Moreover, the effect of the *atmosphere* is tied to this worldbuilding without actually providing a specific indication of references to a world



POSSIBLE WORLDS

- We can assume a psychological mechanism interpreting objects represented as part of the world constructed, but that doesn't hold water when thinking about presentation vs. plot or fact-based world construction
- A way to limit and formalize our pondering on these elements has to do with setting the fact-based world construction as the main relevant point of *fictionality* mechanisms that *develop a specific world*
- **Hold up, how do we characterize *fictionality* vs. *narration*?** Do we have to assume intention?



- We can use the following example of a definition:
- the fictionality of literary worlds is a composite phenomenon assuming both inter-world relations (fiction cannot be defined outside a cultural system that defines also nonfictional modes of being) and intra-world organization. In the case of narrative worlds intra-world organization is determined by narrativity (Ronen 1994: 12)
- We can also assume fictional worlds to be definable as *possible* worlds in a logico-semantic way
- What is a *possible world* then? Simply speaking, the idea that the current state of affairs *could be different from what it is*, and that *were we to change some of its conditions, we could get some information about what that state of affairs would look like*



LOGIC GROUNDING CULTURE

- That gives us an idea that when we work with certain fictive accounts, we can categorize them *modally*
- If we want to understand some sense of worldbuilding and background, we can study the relations of what is *necessary* and what is *possible* in the context of that world
- Moreover, a fictional construction in the world of cultural objects does not need a specific narration to be effectively fictional and invoking a possible world
- Take for instance Sim City 2000



TERTIARY MODELING

- As tertiary modeling systems make more and more complex semiotic models, we see how these models may often have some significant construction grounded on levels of reference to primary and secondary modeling systems
- As we build on our semiotic understanding of cultural texts, we will discover how some problems that are not common in the more traditional media start cracking our understanding and descriptions of tertiary models



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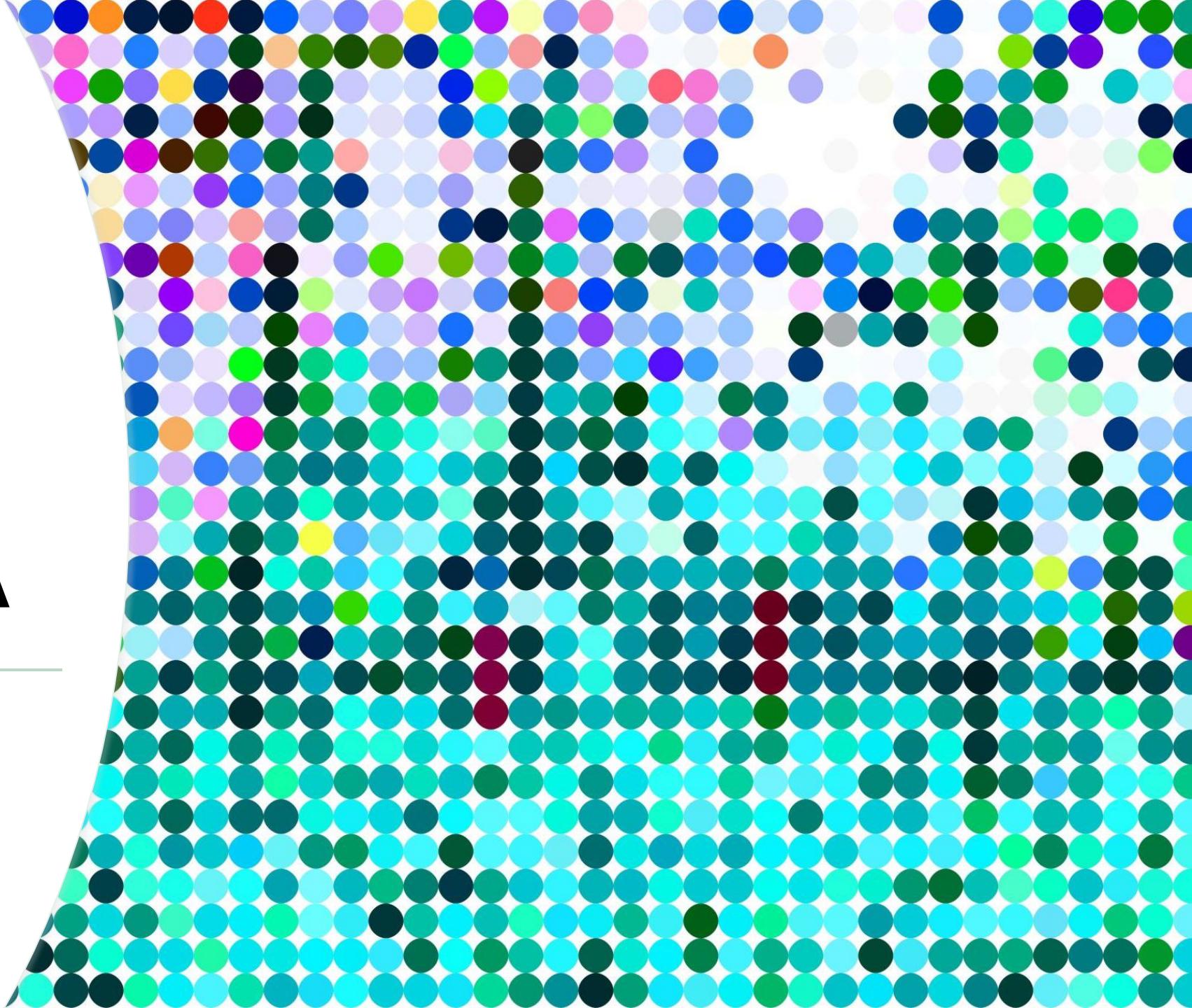


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A CRITICAL READER OF “NEW” MEDIA

06. where we currently stand/the
problem of interaction



In this class

- Reviewing concepts we are using
- What is interaction?
- Why is it a problem?

Where do we stand?

- As we move through multiple, sometimes very different concepts, we need to take stock of our theoretical ammo so far!

What is meaning?

- Meaning. A tricky word. What do we mean by meaning?
- When we talk semantics, we talk *some form* of meaning
- What is semantics? What is a theory of meaning?

Meaning, semantics, content

Theory of meaning

- What are the facts that make content possible at all?

Semantics and content

- How is content assigned in linguistic expressions?

But this distinction is not enough!



What is content?

Is there something *inside* our cultural objects?

What is a medium?

- A technology that opens up a new way of communication
- A technological support for some content
- A message
- An encompassing container that defines the boundaries of representations expressed through it





Why caring about art specifically?

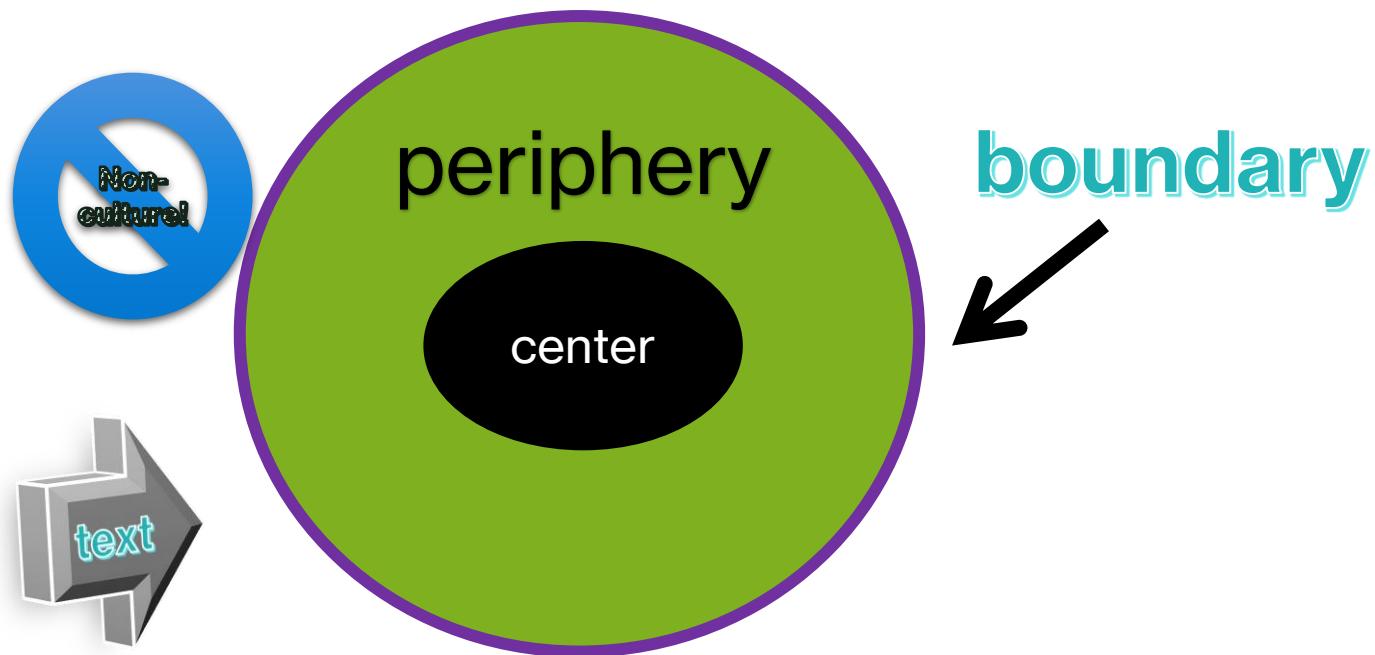
- When we consider the current place of our concept of art, it gives us a good example of communication where medium and content are both of high value
- It allows us to observe how we push the boundaries of notions such as medium and content!

What is culture?

- Culture, in general, is the whole of meaning-making practices historically and locally situated, ever-changing and interacting by way of human action through modeling
- We use a semiotic approach to culture in order to formalize our unit of analysis
- By using a Lotmanian approach, we can understand culture as a *dynamic system*

What is a semiosphere?

- A representation of a dynamic semiotic system where texts circulate across its different areas



What is a text?

- A unit of analysis of Lotmanian semiotics
 - Any “carrier of integral [...] meaning – to a ceremony, a work of the fine arts, or a piece of music” (Lotman 1973: 58)
 - Texts can be *discrete* and *indiscrete*: Discrete texts are clearly composed of specific signs, whereas indiscrete texts have no discernible specific, individualized signs
- In order to approach media that do not fit solely in conventional categories, we need to be mindful of their semiotic dimension: As cultural objects with multiple avenues to carry meaning

What is narrativity?

- Why do some cultural objects have a sense of narration?
- We have a temporal axis to our cultural objects, but their sign composition does not *require* narration
- But cognitively speaking, we put narration in cultural objects as a way to structure them
- And this leads us to a different question: How do we interact with different texts?



How do we interact with texts?

Place yourself here: It's the year 842 in Oviedo. The king of Asturias is dead.

Setting the scene

- You, a random peasant, head to the finally finished church at Mount Naranco, some 3 kms away from town
- You have seen churches before, of course. It's the year 842, after all!
- King Alfonso II, who led the war efforts and propaganda against the Emirate of Córdoba, is dead
- Ramiro I, had first ordered this construction earlier… setting himself up for a promotion!



Embodying the situation

- The façade stares at you, the lower floor moves you
- You are in awe not only of the moment, but of how a divine hand may have also guided the conception of this church
- Your knowledge of the world, its history, your religion, they all make you *feel* things and *understand* things





HOW DO WE INTERACT WITH TEXTS?

Do we embody them? Do we approach them?

What is interaction?

- One of the things we want to work with is the way we approach, use, understand and embody cultural texts
- As a text is, in a way, a message, it is usually framed in the sender-receiver dynamics
- If we're not crafting the text, then we're on the receiving side
- What does that mean?

Why is interaction a problem?

- There's basically two ways in which we interact with things: actively and passively
- The way we approach cultural texts, at least in the most relevant sense, seems to place us squarely on the passive side of things
- When it comes to artistic objects, interaction poses a problem in what the place of the so-called message is
- Moreover, how do we actually define what counts as "active" interaction? Think of social rituals and videogames

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A CRITICAL READER OF “NEW” MEDIA

interaction and art

In this class

- Our last activity
- How do we interact with texts?
- Why is interaction not always horizontal?
- Is interaction desirable?
- What is the problem of art in terms of interaction?

From our previous class

- We started talking about *interaction* in general terms
- If we go by text as communication, then we usually have a sender-receiver image
- In interaction, we situate ourselves in one of the roles
- The way we interact can be summed up as either *passive* or *active*
- This can be problematic in the case of how we frame some specific cultural objects

Defining interaction

- Interaction is simply how we *engage* with a cultural object
- But this engagement, as we've mentioned, is not equal across the board
- We can be passive agents or active agents
- A passive agent is, at its simplest, a receiver that interacts with the cultural object simply by appreciating it
- An active agent, however, will interact with the cultural object through something that affects the cultural object directly to some degree
- **Interaction is thus the property of a cultural object to influence and be influenced in its performance by an agent at the side of the receiver**

How do we interact with texts?

- First, one question: **Do texts hard-code interaction in themselves?**
- In other words, is a text capable of containing interaction in its definition?
- The answer is not straightforward and will still depend on how we parse our texts
- If the text includes a receiver, then it will include that interaction
- But when you are parsing the text from the point of view of an analyst, then you yourself are attempting to remove yourself from the object

For example

- Take this image
- As receivers, we are given a message
- We interact with it because of its mode
- Is that interaction coded in the text?



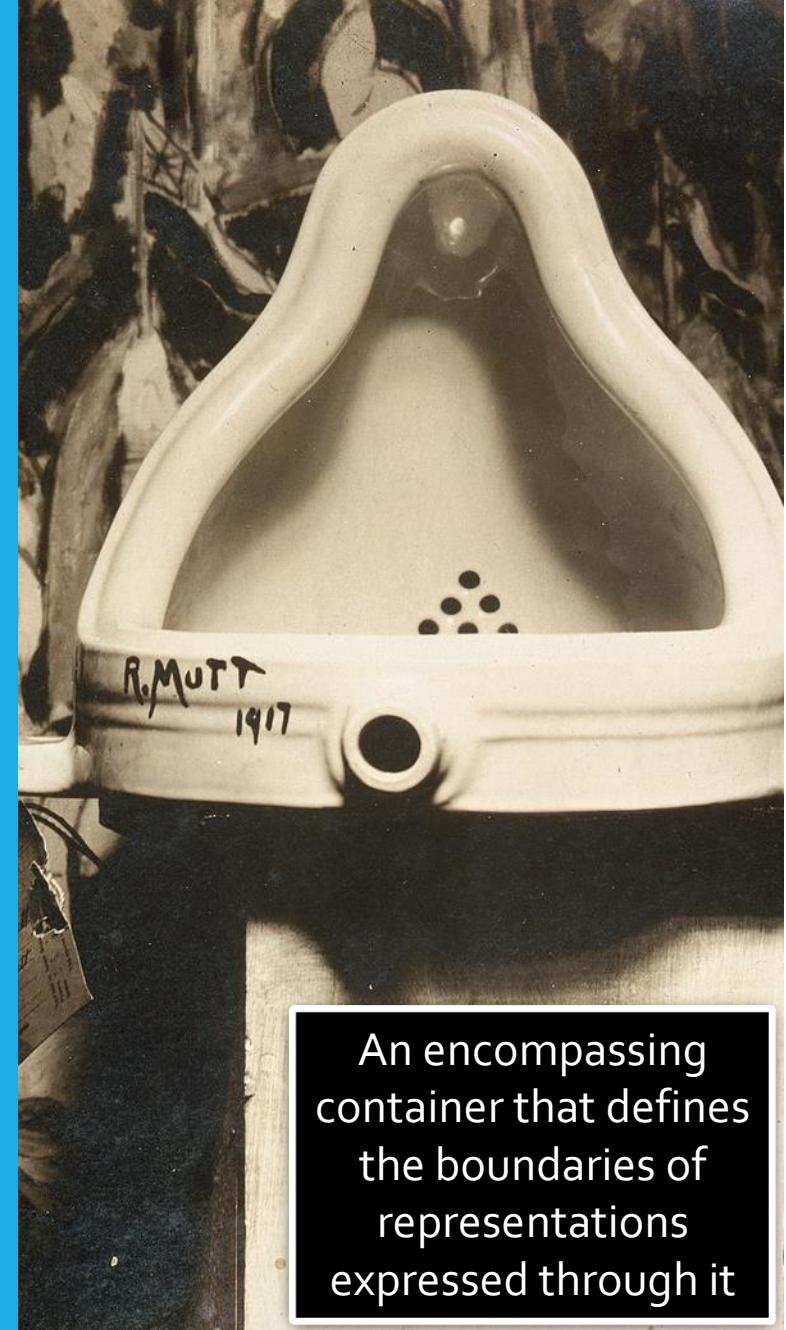
Types of interaction

- Interaction requires an **interface**
- An interface is a point of connection between an object and a subject
- Much like the software you use in your computer to get it to do the things you want it to do, cultural objects depend on an interface to be interactive
- That interface can be derived from context, and sometimes it can result in a false positive, as in the following video

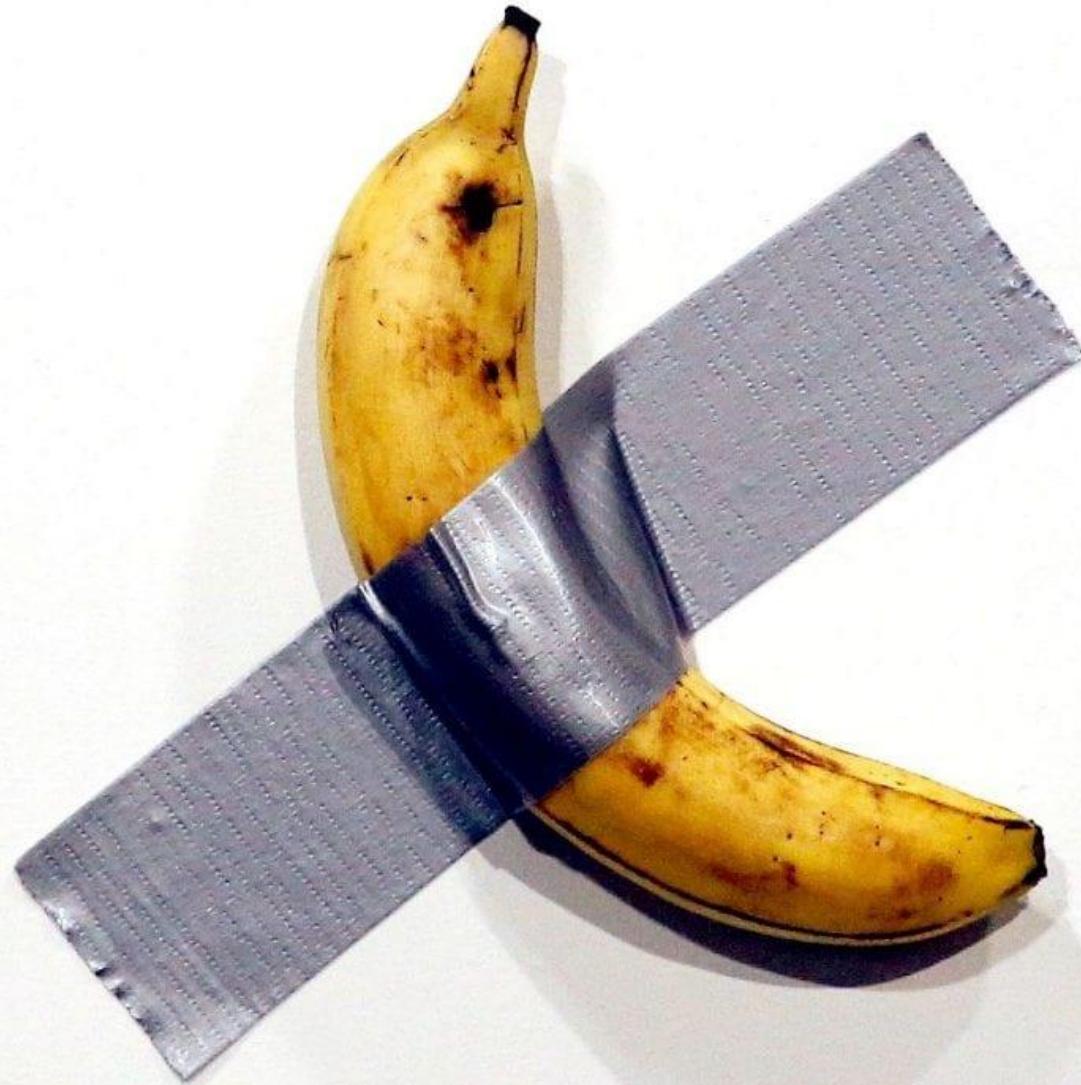


Not every interaction is the same

- Readymades still make the headlines!
- Cultural objects do seem to have some interface coded, either by context or by structure
- How you interact with a cultural object is partly dependent on the characteristics of the **medium**



An encompassing container that defines the boundaries of representations expressed through it





Base level interaction

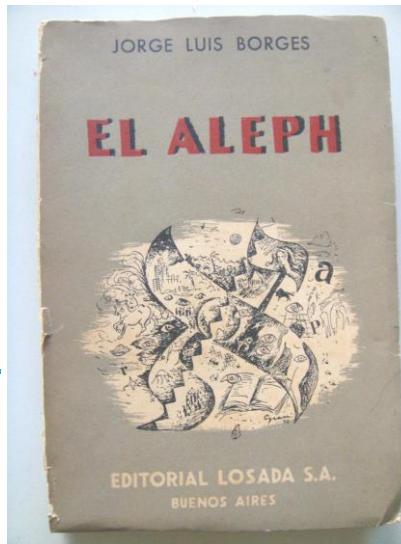
- The most basic, simplest interaction we seem to witness everyday in terms of cultural objects is that of *witnessing*, being the receiver of a message
- This, however, would seem to apply only to cultural objects that are intent on *communicating* to some degree
- But that's not necessarily so: The interface we have is *cognitive* and *semiotic*
- The base interface is cognitive because it depends on what we've called our primary modeling system
- The base interface is semiotic in the sense that perception of signs is sufficient in the primary modeling system to enable our interaction

Higher complexity in interaction

- Complexity of cultural objects goes hand in hand with the complexity of our own semiotic systems
- Our secondary modeling system would make more complex interactions possible
- Remember that tertiary modeling systems would in fact be equated with things like *art*

Do we actually *want* interaction?

- Interaction is quite a problem in how we frame our consensual understanding of some cultural objects as opposed to other cultural objects
- Take for instance these two:
- These are very much cultural objects, but they are worlds apart in how they are!
- Their engagement is qualitatively different at least in terms of main (apparent) functions



Types of interaction

- Passive
- Active
- Physical
- Psychological
- Biological
- Phenomenological
- The point of all of these is that interaction is a measure of intrinsic features of the relation between object and perceiver
- We could keep adding things to this list, such as *political, ideological, scientific, phenomenological*, but we either describe subsets of interactions or we use context-dependent features as intrinsic features

Is art interactive?

- Well, all cultural objects are, by default, interactive, as we have seen
- So the real question is: What sort of interactivity does art create?
- Now this question is much harder to answer because of the social and historical connotations of the concept of art





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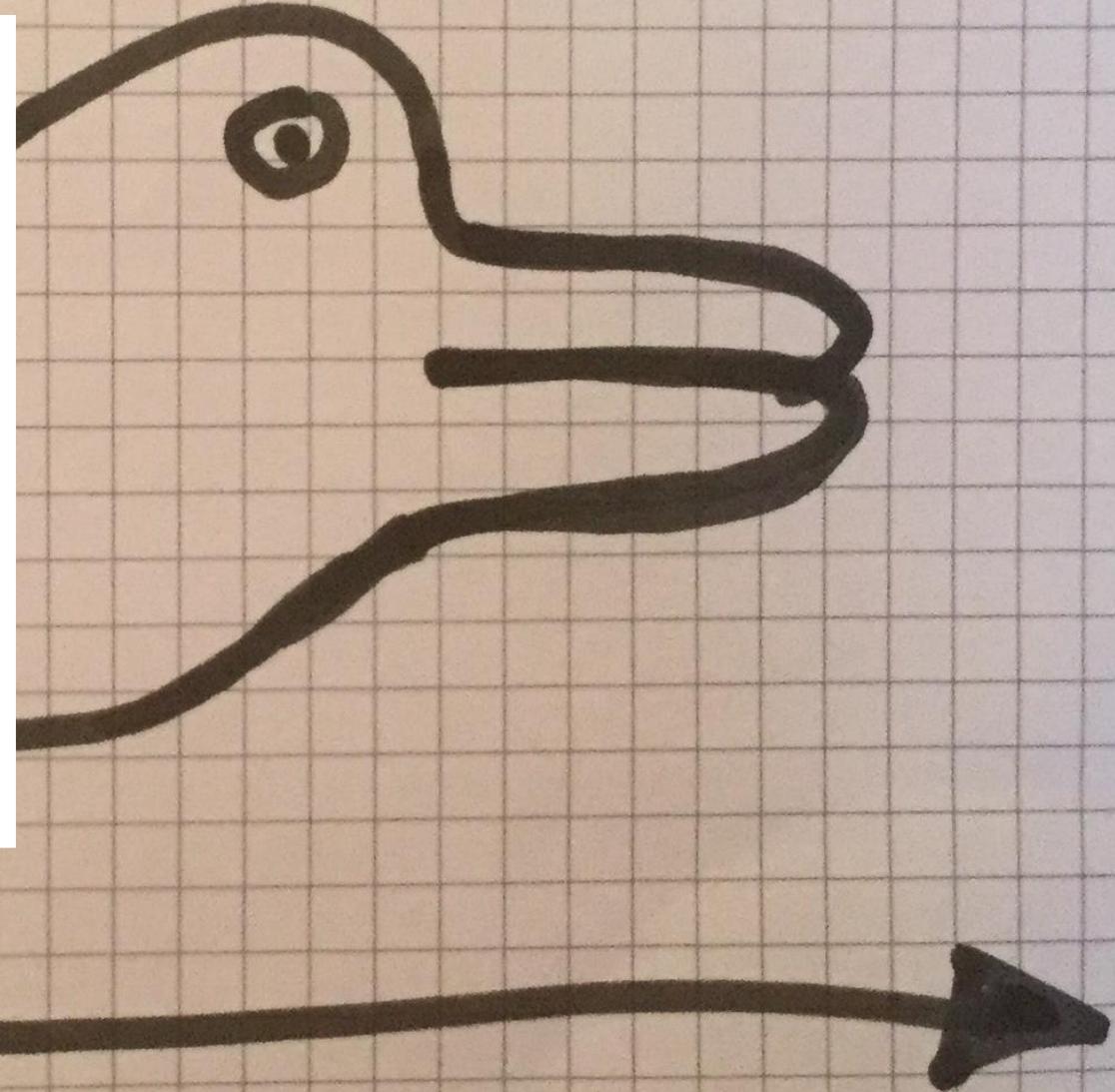
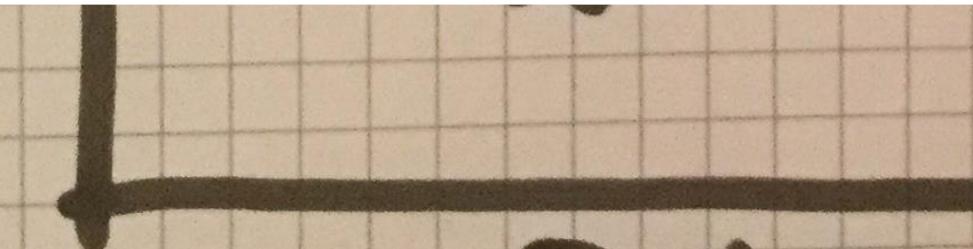
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A CRITICAL READER OF “NEW” MEDIA

07. gamer Wittgenstein

in this class

- Last week's activity
- Interaction and analysis
- Wittgenstein and the logic of an object



Ducky

last week's activity



We asked two (2) questions about a specific cultural object:

- How would you characterize this particular interaction following the concepts we used in our previous class?
- What is the interface you're actually using? Describe following modeling systems theory



interaction and reference

- One of the big things we want to explore is how we interact with cultural objects that we may not be used to—novel approaches, technologies or systems.
- When we interact with cultural objects, we do it within our *grasp*: That is, we use our own reach, bodily and intellectual, to interact with the objects we're presented with

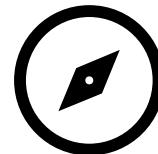


areas of analysis, revisited

We can now establish **boundaries** for how we analyze things:

- The graspable, interactive area of the object
- The intangible, logical core of the object
- The relative position of the object

These three boundaries mark a general theoretical perspective through which we can face new cultural objects, including new media



interaction through interfacing

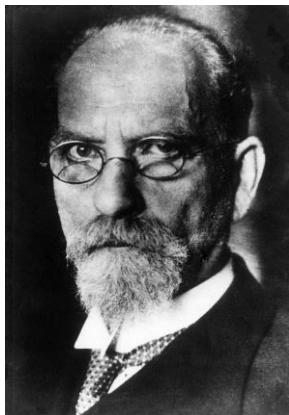
- When we interact with a cultural object, we **grasp** it
- But what does it mean to **grasp** something?
- Grasping something may be a physical or metaphorical act
- Remember the talk about interfaces and modeling systems?
- We made a distinction between a base-level interaction and higher complexity interaction
- Let's revisit those ideas and flesh them out more concretely



levels of interaction

- Base-level interaction depends on our cognitive interface (primary modeling system)
- This interface is situational: We make sense of things through our cognitive infrastructure
- But the way we comprehend and act upon cultural objects is usually far more complex
- What is **graspable** about different cultural objects is the way these objects lend themselves to being part of your **lifeworld**
 - This is a phenomenological point of view in that we assume that interaction is relevant to us because it is part of the context we experience
 - A more concrete technicality here would be that the coupling of our perceptual and action-oriented system acts in cycles (think Uexküll)

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high level interaction and graspability

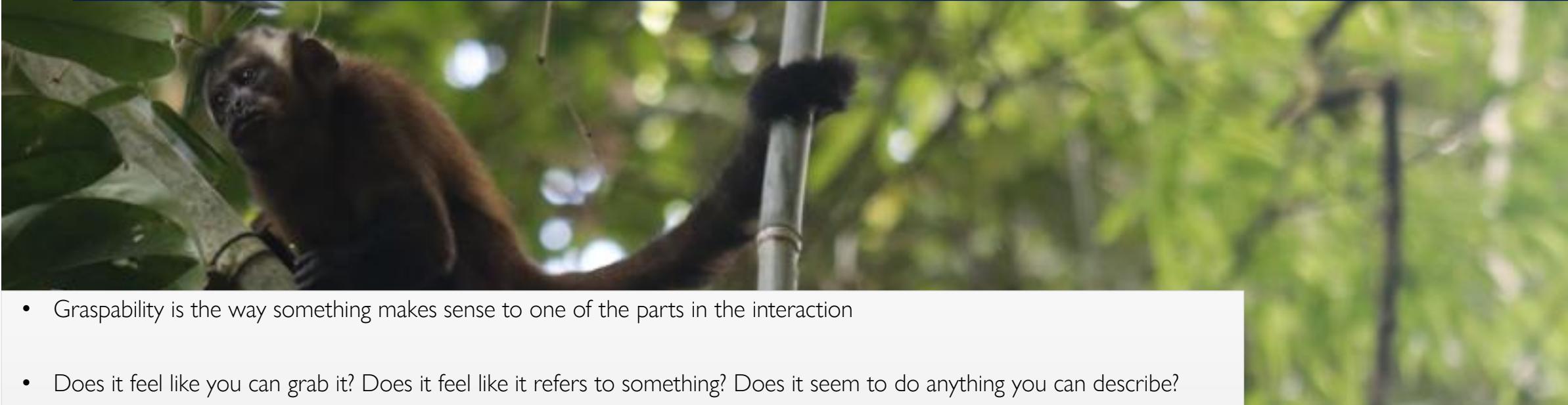
- The principle here is that the elements that populate your world of experience are significant
- This in turn translates to the principle that cultural elements play some role in the perception-action arc



cultural complexity in objects

- Our semiotic competence, whether we're aware of it or not, plays a fundamental role in our interaction with cultural objects
- The dynamics are related to the complexity of the object and the individual interacting with it
- The higher our degree of “semiotic freedom”, the more complex our capabilities of interacting with the object are
- If **graspability** is a property of a cultural object, how do we describe it properly?
- We mentioned earlier that it can come as a physical or metaphorical situation, but what does that mean?

graspability defined



- Graspability is the way something makes sense to one of the parts in the interaction
- Does it feel like you can grab it? Does it feel like it refers to something? Does it seem to do anything you can describe?
- Of course, these questions can become more abstract when the object seems more symbolically loaded
- What are the symbolic references that we can grasp? What are the elements of the object that elicit a specific emotional response?
- Basically then, by asking **how do we interact with the object**, we ask what the aspects of the object we can grasp, notwithstanding their intention

the logic of the object

what lies at the core of the cultural object?

- The second area we are exploring is related to how a cultural object is internally composed
- We make the claim that cultural objects have some inner logic, or at least a **perceived** inner logic
- Once again, we do not want to play on the field of authorial intentions, because the variety of cultural objects will not necessarily allow us to use an author theory to describe this logic

positivism as an experimental method



CRnM

1889-1951

- In order to describe the potential logic of a cultural object, we need to do a number of operations:
- We describe it as a text—this will be our unit of analysis
- As a text, we understand it as a system
- As a system, we posit it as a **world**



ザ・ワールド

the world



- The world is everything that is the case
- The world can be mapped to truth conditions
- Propositions are meaningful only by reference to said truth conditions
- How does this actually help us understand the logic of an object?



logic as an ad-hoc construct

- In a way, cultural objects can establish their own rules. The more complex the cultural object, the more nuanced and clear its rules will probably be
- We can axiomatize this in our approach by assigning perceived complexity, but it's tricky, as it depends on the positioning of the object and the graspability of its components (in other words, it's part of a holistic analysis)
- It's easy to see what the logic of a certain work of art is, but what is the logic of a **spork**?
- As we ask such questions then, the assigned complexity of the object will determine the complexity of its logic and how detached it is from its graspability



The logic of the object may be functionally related to its graspability, but the more symbolically involved the object is, the more detached its logic will be from the way we interact with it



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A CRITICAL READER OF “NEW” MEDIA

08. CONTEXT AND CONTENT

IN THIS CLASS

- Today we will finish talking about the logic of the object based on what we talked about during our last class
- We will move on to understanding the third area of analysis, how we situate the object spatially
- Final paper and activities

IN OUR PREVIOUS CLASS

- We tried to develop a frame for our way of doing analysis, dividing it in three areas
- The interactive area, where we *grasp* an object
- The logical area, where the object has *internal coherence*
- The spatial area, where the object is *located*
- We distinguished levels of interaction—depending on how we perceive, interface and utilize objects
- Here we defined the *graspability* of an object as the property of an object to be used in some particular way
- Then we talked about the logic of the object
- In order to posit a thesis on what the logic of an object is, we use a methodology to define the object as a *world*
- We finally saw the connection between the graspability and logic of an object defined as an inverse relation on their symbolicity and its constitution

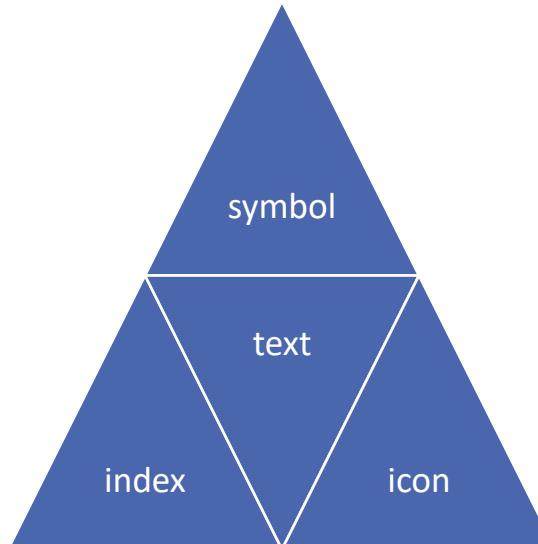
MAKING A THESIS ON LOGIC



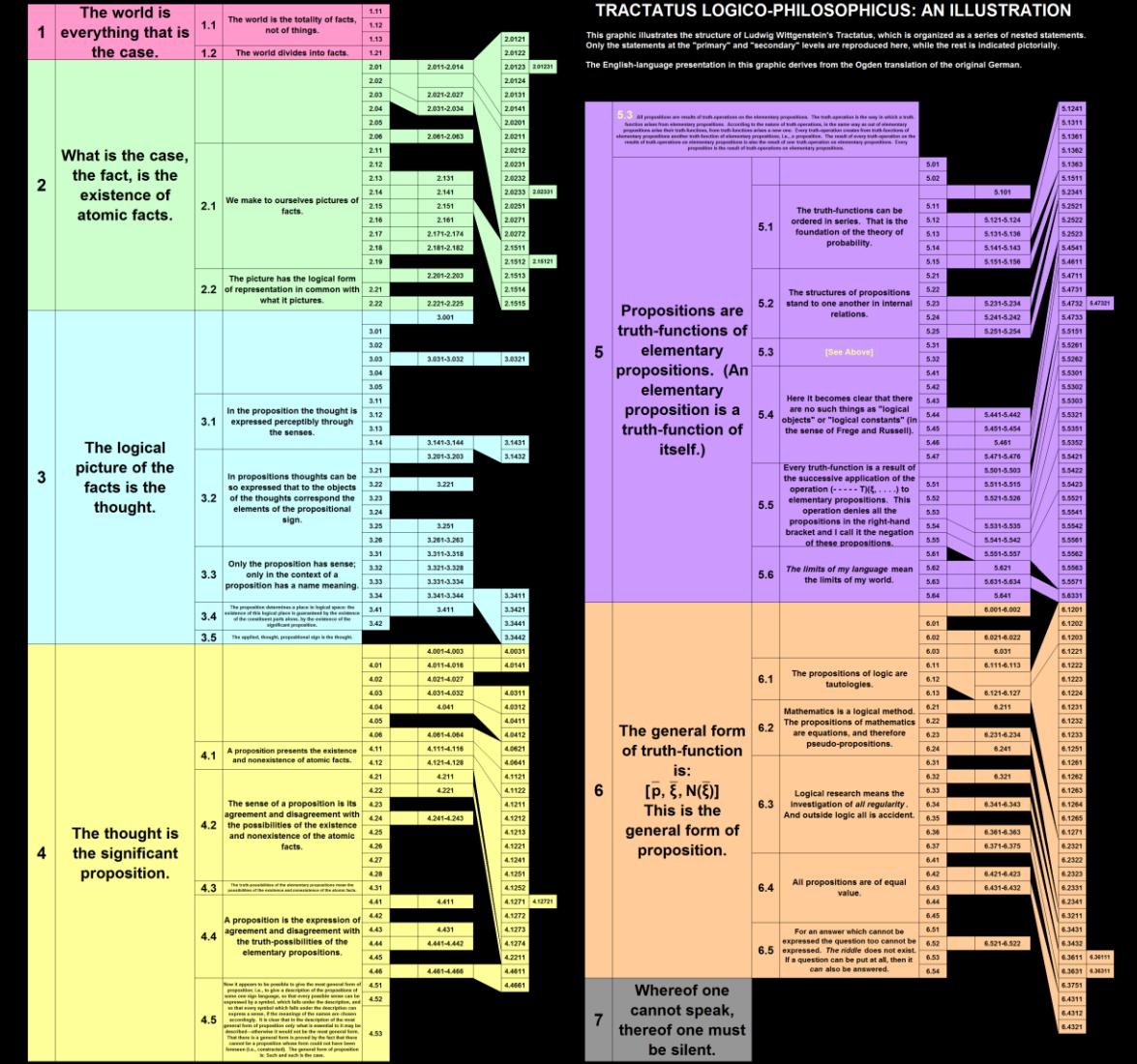
- One thing we need to try and understand is the symbolic involvement of an object
- Let's trace back to the Peircean origin of this line of thinking
- Remember the concept of symbol
- *A symbol is a representamen which fulfills its function regardless of any similarity or analogy with its object and equally regardless of any factual connection therewith, but solely and simply because it will be interpreted to be a representamen. Such for example is any general word, sentence, or book.*

SYMBOLIC COMPLEXITY

- Peircean signs are not unambiguous, and so interpretation of qualities is left as a task of intuition to some degree
- Symbolic qualities are highly contextual, and some objects make these easier to access
- The *symbolic threshold* is, however, the golden standard for complexity
- *Indexicals* and *icons* do not seem to hold the same currency. Why?



CONSTRUCTING LOGICAL RELATIONS





LOGICAL ATOMISM

- Logical atomism is both a metaphysical and a methodological view of philosophy
- The idea is that you can map truth conditions to radical (basic) facts in the world
- This way of analyzing lends itself well enough to narrativity
- But how do we frame this *logic*?



AN EASY EXAMPLE

Magic: The Gathering provides us with a fully fleshed out example of at least one logical dimension of an object

RULES AS A LOGICAL SYSTEM

- MtG is a collectible/trading card game where two players duel against each other
- The basics of the game are: You have a 60 (or 40, or 100) card deck made up of spells, creatures and lands, start with 20 life and to win the game you have to make your opponent reach 0 life
- As the game's complexity increases with every new card and with every set, its actual rules are intricate
- 250 pages with 9 sections dealing with all sorts of general rules and corner cases derived from the existence of the rules

613.3. Within layers 2–6, apply effects from characteristic-defining abilities first (see rule 604.3), then all other effects in timestamp order (see rule 613.7). Note that dependency may alter the order in which effects are applied within a layer. (See rule 613.8.)

613.4. Within layer 7, apply effects in a series of sublayers in the order described below. Within each sublayer, apply effects in timestamp order. (See rule 613.7.) Note that dependency may alter the order in which effects are applied within a sublayer. (See rule 613.8.)

613.4a *Layer 7a*: Effects from characteristic-defining abilities that define power and/or toughness are applied. See rule 604.3.

613.4b *Layer 7b*: Effects that set power and/or toughness to a specific number or value are applied. Effects that refer to the base power and/or toughness of a creature apply in this layer.

613.4c *Layer 7c*: Effects and counters that modify power and/or toughness (but don't set power and/or toughness to a specific number or value) are applied.

613.4d *Layer 7d*: Effects that switch a creature's power and toughness are applied. Such effects take the value of power and apply it to the creature's toughness, and take the value of toughness and apply it to the creature's power.

Example: A 1/3 creature is given +0/+1 by an effect. Then another effect switches the creature's power and toughness. Its new power and toughness is 4/1. A new effect gives the creature +5/+0. Its "unswitched" power and toughness would be 6/4, so its actual power and toughness is 4/6.

Example: A 1/3 creature is given +0/+1 by an effect. Then another effect switches the creature's power and toughness. Its new power and toughness is 4/1. If the +0/+1 effect ends before the switch effect ends, the creature becomes 3/1.

Example: A 1/3 creature is given +0/+1 by an effect. Then another effect switches the creature's power and toughness. Then another effect switches its power and toughness again. The two switches essentially cancel each other, and the creature becomes 1/4.

THE LOGIC OF A CLOSED SYSTEM



- Let's deal with a different example
- Take an online fps (CoD MW2 pictured)
- What we want to do is reduce the whole system into simpler chunks
- Movement, actions, reactions, limited placement, etc.
- All this things can be construed as both opening the logic of the object and limiting its reach

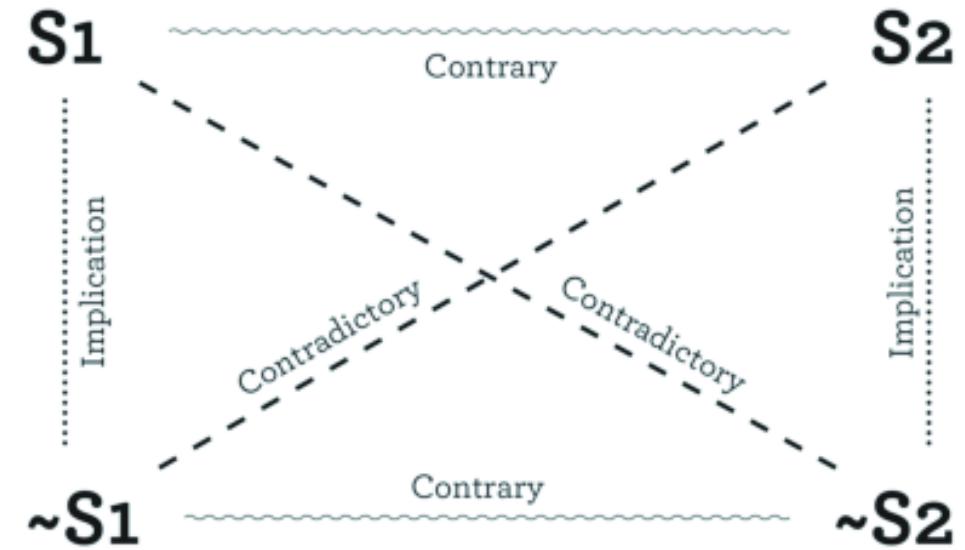
GREIMASIAN SEMIOTICS AS AN ALTERNATIVE

- Algirdas Greimas has a different take on how to understand a semiotic system
- Greimas, as a semiotician entrenched in the French tradition, tried to understand how there may be conceptual networks in a work of art
- These conceptual networks can be represented and give rise to understanding the semiotic logic of a certain work
- We chase the narrativity of a work by pushing the binary oppositions that emerge from understanding how the inner structure of the work actually looks like



GREIMAS SQUARE

- Greimas's square is a system for uncovering the relations between semiotic elements in a text
- We use evidenced concepts and derive implications and oppositions between them
- We apply these sets of relations to certain items within the object and extend it to multiple objects of one text, creating a layered, scaled analysis
- By doing this we uncovered conceptual relations that give us new syntactical and semantic info about the object



Blythe & Encinas
(2016)

EXAMPLE

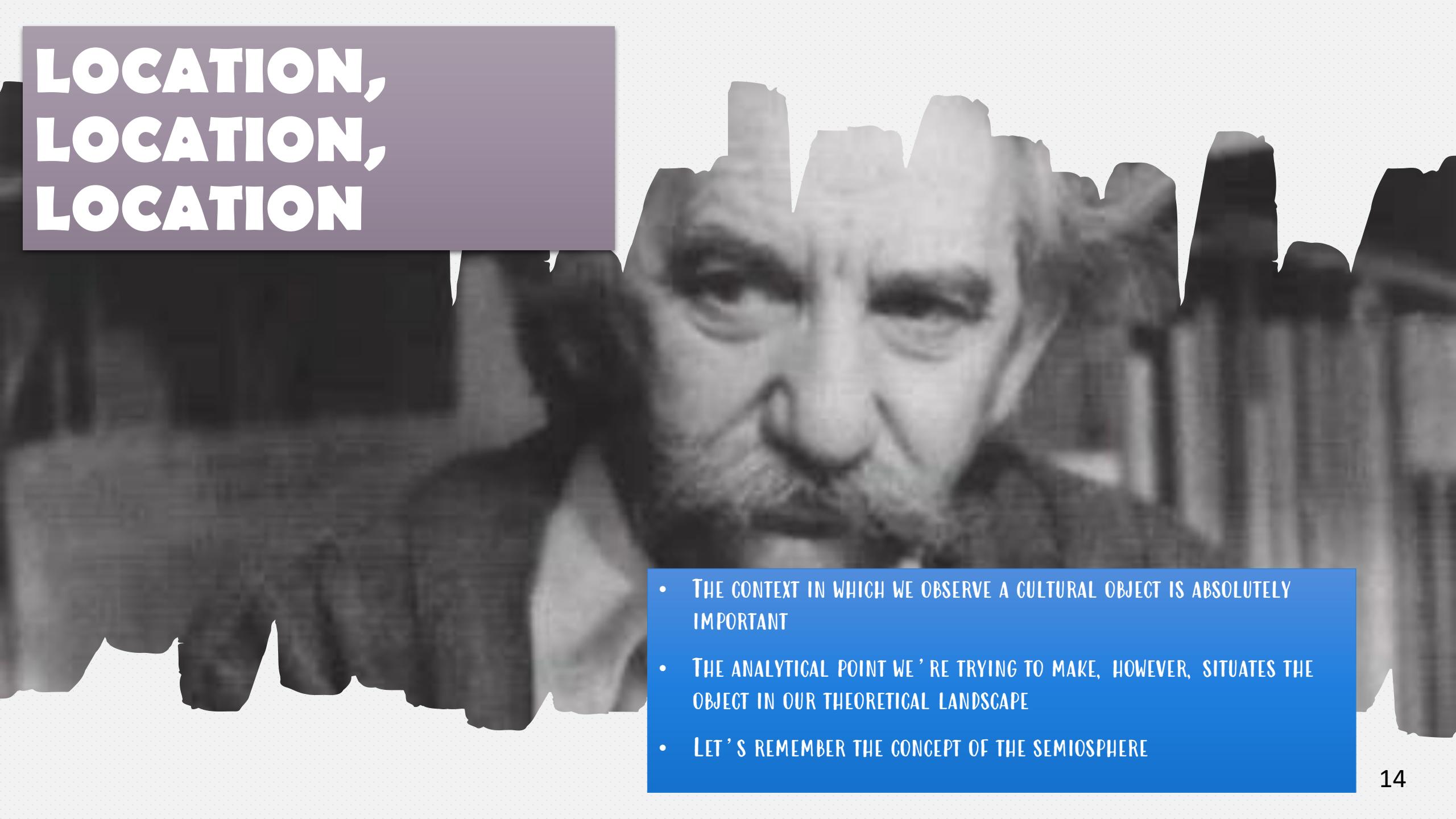
3. APPLICATION : THE PASSION OF CHRIST

We shall adapt an example from Courtés (1991, 152-154) using the *Bible*. With respect to the opposition life/death, Christ goes through the following stages:

1. Not-life + not-death: the divine existential state, beyond life and death.
2. Life: At the Nativity, Jesus becomes human.
3. Not-life: the agony of crucifixion.
4. Death: He is pierced by the lance, confirming his death, and placed in the tomb.
5. Not-death: the process of resurrection. (Is it instantaneous or does it occur over time? In the latter case, there would be an ellipsis: why, and with what effect on the story?)
6. Life: emerging from the tomb. Other interpretations are possible: The resurrection brings Jesus back to not-life + not-death, even here on Earth, or it grants him boundless life, freed from death (life + not-death). To simplify things, we shall say that Jesus is in life, and that the Ascension is what brings him back to not-life + not-death.
7. Not-life + not-death: beginning with the Ascension.

You will notice that this syntactic description has the advantage of eliciting some much-debated theological positions and pinpointing them within a framework. These debates are interpreted in terms of "conflicts" over different classifications on the same semiotic square. For instance, some people maintain that when Jesus was placed in the tomb, he was not actually dead, but in a state of not-life. Changes in beliefs may be represented as syntactic movement on the square, insofar as we consequently apply veridictory categories (true/false) to each position that is taken. Thus, for Thomas, Jesus is in death, not life, which he mistakenly believes until he touches Jesus' wounds.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

- 
- THE CONTEXT IN WHICH WE OBSERVE A CULTURAL OBJECT IS ABSOLUTELY IMPORTANT
 - THE ANALYTICAL POINT WE'RE TRYING TO MAKE, HOWEVER, SITUATES THE OBJECT IN OUR THEORETICAL LANDSCAPE
 - LET'S REMEMBER THE CONCEPT OF THE SEMIOSPHERE

MAKING YOUR SEMIOSPHERE

- It's said that an individual can theoretically be their own semiosphere
- How do we construct a theoretical semiosphere though?
- We set rules for it, paradigmatic and syntagmatic ones
- The properties of the semiosphere are still the same regarding how texts move and what its structure looks like

DISPARATE ELEMENTS, ONE SEMIOSPHERE?

Fight in the Ukrainian Parliament become Renaissance Art ^^



Under The Sign Of The Black Mark



PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

INTERACTION
LOGIC
LOCATION

FINAL PAPER/ACTIVITIES

- Thoughts about final paper?
- Activities for the remainder of the semester

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