

Theory: How Can Media Studies Make 'The T Word' More User-Friendly?

Theory as Killer App

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The premise of the call for this roundtable is that capital-T Theory, within the broad and amorphous field called “media studies,” functions as a “bad object” in desperate need of rebranding. As the call points out, all media scholars “do” theory in some way, but our reliance on theory as an explanatory model is frequently not broadcast, either out of fear of alienating readers, listeners, hiring committees, and students, or through the processes of publication, which tend to dull the edges of theoretical inquiry. As academics, we all have a tendency, at times, to become overly invested in our navels, and practitioners of Theory are perhaps more guilty than others. While this critique of theory as insular and impenetrable is certainly valid, accurately diagnosing a particular strand of theoretical writing, I’d like to advocate for a mode of theory that looks outward rather than inward. As someone whose work engages with visual culture broadly, ranging from video games to TV shows to films to imaging technologies to art objects, theory is vital for providing the connective tissue between my objects of analysis. As a disciplinary nomad, I have a personal stake in making my theoretical approaches as accessible as possible, as theory is what unifies my objects and serves as an entry point into my inquiries. This also applies to my pedagogy.

In my class on “Posthumanism and Media,” for example, I use theories of post/nonhumanism as an organizing principle to explore and understand a diversity of media, from the films of David Cronenberg, to the *Planet Earth* TV series, to the *Assassin’s Creed* game series. While the many historical, cultural, ideological, economic, and industrial differences between these objects are profound and of vital importance to study, it is also important to examine the places where they overlap and express similar cultural anxieties. In this class, I frame theory as revealing different ways to understand a visual object. Theory is one tool in our critical toolbox, and different tools allow us to ask different questions of our objects. Theory exists alongside and relies on our other critical approaches; it doesn’t replace them. To this end, I introduce my students to a long history of ideas and a series of writers who all address the “human problem,” including Descartes, Foucault, Hayles, Haraway, Marx, Benjamin, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, Levi Bryant, and Ian Bogost. The goal here isn’t to get lost in the labyrinth of theory but rather to engage with different perspectives on the question of what it means to be “human.” If undergrads are interested in anything, it’s Big Questions and Big Ideas, and I maintain a sense of play in our discussions, presenting theory not as an end in itself but as a powerful—and fun—way to maintain an openness toward the world and critical inquiry.

I’ve taught this “Posthumanism and Media” course at two different universities, and each time I’ve been surprised at the willingness of my students to engage with the challenging material. One strategy I use is to focus our inquiries on a visual object, which keeps our discussions grounded. Teaching theory to students also gives them the ability to speak in multiple registers, both popular and academic. Theory is our killer

app; it provides the foundation for critical inquiry, and it encourages our students to see continuities between past and present image cultures, technologies, and mediums.

More specifically, theories of space, embodiment, and digital ontology can help us to make sense of things like HDTV, virtual backlots in TV shows, and digital technologies like performance capture. When paired with a robust industrial, aesthetic, and cultural foundation, these theoretical approaches can enrich how both we and our students understand and engage with media. Theory, presented this way, is not something exclusionary. It is rather a fork in the road, an alternate path to understanding our objects of analysis. Applying theoretical frameworks to these topics can help us understand from where these hybrid televisual images gain their cultural power and how they become sensible. Theory provides the tools to address questions of authorship in performance—Is it the actor's or animator's or software designer's performance?—as well as questions of televisual space—How can viewers orient themselves in the any-spaces-whatever of digitally rendered sets? Thus, what I am proposing is not “theory for theory's sake.” Rather, I'm proposing that theory, approached with a sense of adventure and inclusion, can be deployed both as a gateway into the richness of our field and as ligament that can link the diverse modes of our scholarship.