

Handbook For a Theory Hobby

The Hobby-Horse is the Sawhorse of Theory

Gregory L. Ulmer

4008 Turlington Hall, University of Florida
Gainesville, FL
32611

"Handbook for a Theory Hobby" is a montage of borrowed images and quotations and it functions as an amateur's instruction manual for fun with theory. The manual plays through decaying models of thought beginning with a visual explanation of leaf rubbings. In this sense, it gives an impression of metaphors for thinking and memory. The manual is also a reading of Deleuze's and Guattari's chapter on rhizomatic thinking in *A Thousand Plateaus*. From that angle, the reader is asked to consider alternatives to alphabetic or book-centered thinking. The manual illustrates a potential botanical image which might replace the tree metaphor of dialectical thinking. By combining found fragments, this deceptively simple text explores how our culture represents thinking, memory, and learning.

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LESSON NUMBER FIVE: RUBBING READING

Theory Craft

I am developing a handbook for doing theory, of which the present text is a sample. This handbook is for everyone, especially for those who want to do theory as a hobby, or for those who want to engage in theory without becoming professional specialists (students, for example). There is every reason to expect that the day will come when theory will be practiced as a craft in the manner of woodworking, gourmet cooking, photography, or karate. People will be theorists the way they are sailors, dancers, skin divers, needleworkers, when these are performed as avocations. Amateur theory will arise in a society in which avocation is more important than vocation as a source of identity and satisfaction. There will be a theory journalism catering to this activity, including video and computer applications,

producing eventually a situation in which the entertainment industry will replace the universities as the principal source of cultural invention and innovation. The area of public life that will be most affected by this development is politics.

Reading

Before making a theory of your own you will want to read some examples of theories made by other people. The biggest obstacle to theorizing is learning how to read theory. Having taught theory for many years at the university level, I can tell you that many otherwise brilliant people have foundered on this task. The reason for their difficulty is that they forgot the fundamental nature of the technology they were attempting to use. They were so saturated with the ideology of logocentrism (in which the technology of writing is artificially limited to the capacities of the spoken word) that they insisted on treating the print medium as if it were

oral. They tried to read five-hundred page, densely argued books as if they were listening to a conversation, ignoring the fact that in conversation ideas are communicated in units of six to seven words per idea in a linear string, supported by the possibility of feedback from the source, while in writing the ratio of ideas to words is much higher, with the concentration of ideas increasing geometrically in a multilayered network of spreading resonances as the argument develops, without possibility of feedback. Logocentric reading is almost useless for theory reading. Students time and again testified to the experience of having passed their eyes over all the pages, saying the words to themselves silently, in their thoughts, listening to themselves as if to a speaker, only to find at the conclusion of the activity nothing remained in their minds of what had been said. What students said on such occasions was: "it doesn't make

any sense.” “It is boring.” “It is poorly written.” They blamed the technology for their own forgetfulness, having forgotten how to extract information that has been stored alphabetically. Their behavior could be compared to someone trying to extract information from a computer without using software. How can you avoid this problem? Keep in mind that writing originated separately from speaking, within the visual arts, and enjoyed its own evolution and development until it was finally put in the service of voice by the invention of the alphabet. Alphabetic writing, of course, is not limited to its role as prosthesis of the voice, but is capable of taking thought and communication beyond spoken culture, as theoretical writing itself illustrates (mathematics is another example of writing beyond the voice). Writing continues to evolve, just as does spoken language. Part of the fun of being a theorist is to participate

in this historical process of inventing new programs for writing in all the media available to you. To extract information from written storage, then, requires written strategies. Many of these strategies have more in common with the visual than with the verbal arts. One of the founders of theory craft, himself a promoter of amateur theory, Roland Barthes, suggested the possibility of written readings. What this means is that when you read you should not try to process the information you are receiving in your oral memory, but you should be writing yourself, transposing the information from print to your notebook. Taking notes is a familiar activity in school reading. In amateur theory note taking must be taken up as a craft. In craft theory it is not at all necessary to understand what you are reading, at least not at the level of specialized discourse, although, at the present stage of culture, it is still necessary to know at a

quotidian level the language in which the book is printed.

The following set of procedures constitute instructions for amateur reading of theoretical texts. If you follow these instructions you will be able to extract from the densest book all the information you will need as raw material for making your own theory.

REMINDER: The present exercise is only one part of a larger handbook, the whole of which must be used in order to actually produce a theory. You may wish to practice this exercise on your own, in order to gather a large amount of raw material in preparation for the next installment of the handbook. You should not hesitate to select your practice books from the most recalcitrant examples. Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan would be good choices, but almost anything French or German should give good results.

Rubbing (beginner)

(NOTE: The instructions are stated in figurative terms.)

STEP ONE

Make a leaf rubbing.



"Fun with Fall Leaves", from *Peanut Butter* magazine,
reprinted by permission of Scholastic publishers

STEP TWO

Write the word "leaf" over the rubbing. On the facing page opposite write the word "feal". On the front page of your booklet write "how to take notes (tones stones)". Use this booklet as a bookmark, and refer to it before you begin each session of reading.

STEP THREE

Look up the word “feal” in an unabridged dictionary. (A feudal tenant, vassal, liegeman; a servant “feed” or hired for a term. The condition of being held in fee. A payment due to the lord of the fee; also a periodical payment. Faithful, firm in allegiance, constant. To hide or conceal.) The rubbing as a process for creating an image and the definitions of “feal” give you the essentials necessary for reading theory. If you leaf through books of theory, rubbing their leaves in this way, you will soon have a splendid collection of notes.

Rubbing (advanced)

(Once you have started your collection, you may wish to introduce the added dimension of theoretical reflection on the relationship between books and trees.)

STEP FOUR

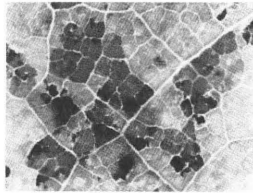
Consider the fact that paper is made from trees. Note the saying: "three books are as good as a fire."

STEP FIVE

Use the following images and information to recall the emotions and feelings associated with autumn. How do these leaves make you feel?



"Leaves of October", from Audobon, Sept. 1979,
p.5, reprinted by permission of Les Line



"A Harvest of Decay", reprinted by permission
of Thomas Eisner, *Natural History*,
August, 1986, p. 5.

“Like astronauts in soft landers, we are descending in these photographs toward the surface of fallen leaves, and already we can see them in a very different way. The green of the chlorophyll has faded to unmask the blues, reds, and yellows of the anthocyanins and carotenoids, creating combinations that vary from one species to another. The cell walls divide the surface into local fields of chloroplasts, among which veins meander and split to create repetitive, fractal designs. The complex production and delivery system is no longer functional. But the leaves have been invaded by millions of bacteria and fungi, and these microscopic organisms proliferate into new patterns as rich as the ones on which they feed.”

STEP SIX

Is it possible that Ferdinand de Saussure’s choice of “tree” to illustrate the arbitrary nature of the sign is not itself

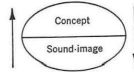
arbitrary? Is it accidental that *arbre* and the *arbor* are heard in the *arbitrary*? Saussure himself started listening to poetry this way, hearing puns on the names of the gods in Latin verse. He never published this research because it was not falsifiable. In hobby theory, of course, this would be an advantage.

Course in General Linguistics

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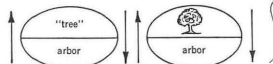
gests vocal activity, is applicable to the spoken word only, to the realization of the inner image in discourse. We can avoid that misunderstanding by speaking of the *sounds* and *syllables* of a word provided we remember that the names refer to the sound-image.

The linguistic sign is then a two-sided psychological entity that can be represented by the drawing:



The two elements are intimately united, and each recalls the other. Whether we try to find the meaning of the Latin word *arbor* or the word that Latin uses to designate the concept "tree," it is clear that only the associations sanctioned by that language appear to us to conform to reality, and we disregard whatever others might be imagined.

Our definition of the linguistic sign poses an important question of terminology. I call the combination of a concept and a sound-image a *sign* but in current usage the term generally designates only a sound-image, a word, for example (*arbor*, etc.). One tends to forget that *arbor* is called a sign only because it carries the concept "tree," with the result that the idea of the sensory part implies the idea of the whole.



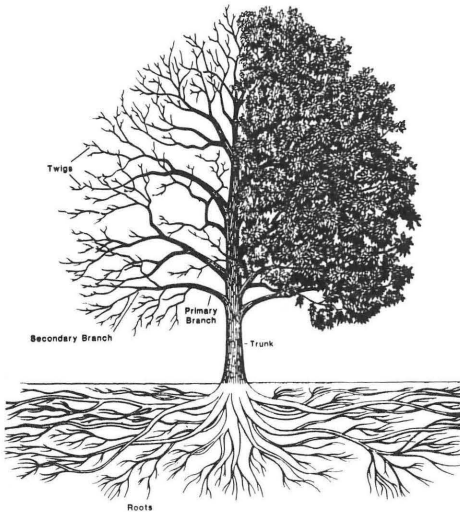
Ambiguity would disappear if the three notions involved here were designated by three names, each suggesting and opposing the others. I propose to retain the word *sign* [*signe*] to designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-*

"Tree Diagram", from *Course in General Linguistics* by Ferdinand de Saussure, reprinted by permission of the Philosophical Library

STEP SEVEN

Study the logic associated with the “tree diagram” (the outline form, named after the branching structure of the tree).

PARTS OF A TREE



Parts of a Tree, Ian Breheny, illustrator

Compare the tree with the dialectical logic of Peter Ramus.

[illegible]

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curriculum of rhetoric, especially the elimination of 'artificial memory' (Yates 1966: 228). Foremost among these reformers was Peter Ramus (Pierre de la Ramee, 1515-1572, massacred as a Huguenot), who attempted to replace the earlier techniques of memory with new ones based upon 'dialectical order', a 'method', a 'logic' resting on the analytical study of texts, which as Ong has pointed out owes a great deal to the diffusion of printed texts and the reproduction of charts by means of newly invented typography (Ong, 1971: 167). This order was set out in schematic form which the 'general' or inclusive aspects of the subject came first, descending thence through a series of dichotomised classifications to the 'specials' or individual aspects." [From Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge University Press]

STEP EIGHT

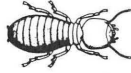
Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have proposed a new image to replace the tree as a model for reasoning and memory — the rhizome.

“A first type of book is the root-book. The tree is already an image of the world, or rather the root is the image of the tree-world. It is the classic book. . . . the radicle system, or fasciculated root, is the second figure of the book, from which our modernity gladly draws its inspiration. In this case the principal root has aborted, or has been destroyed near its extremity and some immediate multiplicity of flourishing secondary roots has come to graft itself onto it (eg. Burroughs, Joyce). . . . We are tired of the tree. We must no longer put our faith in trees, roots, or radicles; we have suffered enough from them. The whole arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. On the contrary, only underground stems and aerial roots, the adventitious and the rhizome are truly beautiful, loving, or political . . . Many people have a tree planted in their heads, but the brain itself is much more like a grass. . . . In itself the rhizome has very diverse forms, from its surface extension which ramifies in all directions to its concretions into bulbs and tubers. Or when rats move by sliding over and under one another. There is the best and the worst in the rhizome: the potato, the weed, crab grass.” [Deleuze and Guattari, *On the Line*, *Semiotexte*]

COMMON HOUSE AND GARDEN PROBLEMS



Rattus rattus
Brown Rat



Isotermes sp.
Subterranean Termite



Digitaria sanguinalis
Smooth Crabgrass

Common House and garden Problems,
Ian Breheny, Illustrator

Reflect on crab grass as a model for a new logic. Compare the emotions you associate with crab grass with the emotions associated with autumn leaves.

STEP NINE

Analogy Project. One of the skills which you must continually practice to maintain your theorizing is analogy. Work out the implications of the following analogies as part of building your own model of a new memory.

Tree : dialectical logic : Rhizome : _____?

hints:

—The tree as a thing and as an image of classification is associated with the printing press and mechanical reproduction.

—Ramist dialectical logic replaced artificial memory (orators memorized speeches by placing their arguments in familiar settings — one's home, or a public building—associated with violent or striking images).

—The rhizome may be associated with computers, video, and electronic reproduction. If you find that you can't get started, Rub your copy of *Teletheory*:

The Making of "Derrida at The Little Big Horn".

A variation on this exercise is to select a different natural form as the vehicle of the metaphor (Tree: dialectical logic:

[a natural form: a classification system]). Remember, there is no need to make anything up. Everything you need to make a theory is always already available (see the other numbers of the handbook, especially the entry on “Invention”). One of the goals of the project is to formulate an approach to reading that will give access to electronic media similar to the way leaf rubbings give access to books. Make a model of reading.

STEP TEN

Paradigm shift project. Tree Mourning.



“American Elm”, from *Knowing Your Trees* by G. H. Collingwood and Warren D. Brush, Washington, DC: American Forestry Association, 1947.

U. Ulmus *U. carpinifolia* (smooth-leaved elm),
U. parvifolia (Chinese elm), *U. pumila* (Siberian elm)

“The stately elms that graced the village streets of 19th Century America are almost gone now, victims of Dutch elm disease or an infection called *phloem necrosis*, and it is foolhardy to plant elms today — with a few exceptions” (Crockett, *Trees*). Compare the endangered status of the elm with the similar status of the lemurs in Madagascar. Lemurs are endangered due to the destruction of their habitat, the great forests of Madagascar. Is the lemur important? Reflect on the fact of evolution, that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, mankind came down from the trees, but kept the tree in mind as a model for logic. Relate the need for a new model of memory to the deforestation of the planet caused by the pollution produced by fossil fuels. Speculate.

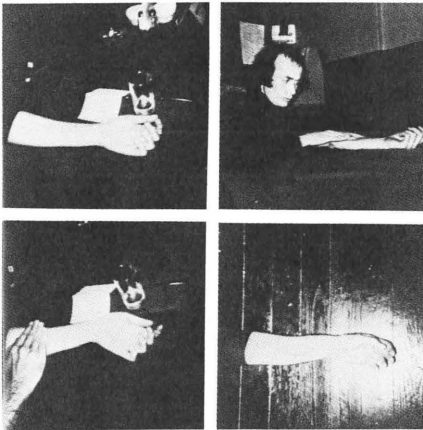
Activities of related interest

Projects For Writing Without Paper (A good source of ideas for individual or group theory activities is the experimental arts. Two examples follow.)

AT HOME: VITO ACCONCI

Rubbing Piece

Action: Select a spot on the body. Rub it until a sore is produced.



"Rubbing Piece", from *Vito Acconci* by Vito Acconci, by permission of Mario Diacono

Interviewers: "Why did you initially make the decision to leave writing?" Acconci: "Because towards the end of the time I was writing, I started to be more and more committed to the idea of a page as a space to move over. I became obsessed with things like, how do you go from left margin to right margin? How do you go from one page to the next? I was really using the page as a space for me, as writer, to travel over. And in turn, a space for you, as reader, to travel over. Gradually it occurred to me that if I was so interested in moving over a space, why was I limiting myself to an 8 1/2 x 11" piece of paper? Why didn't I walk on the floor? It seems like a lot of my first pieces were a way to get off the page, out of a closed room, and throw myself outside into the world." [Interviewed by Margaret Sundell and Thomas Beller in *Splash*, April, 1988.]

ON THE ROAD: ROBERT SMITHSON

"Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan."



"Second Upside-down Tree", from *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, by Nancy Holt, editor, reprinted by permission of New York University Press.

Action: Following a tourist guidebook, drive through the Yucatan (or any suitable place) stopping at various sites to photograph an arrangement of mirrors, and/or a tree that you have planted upside-down. Lines drawn on a map will connect [the upside-down trees]. Are they totems of rootlessness that relate to one another? Do they mark a dizzy path from one doubtful point to another? Is this a mode of travel that does not in the least try to establish a coherent coming and going between the here and the there? . . . Are they dead roots that haplessly hang off inverted trunks in a vast 'no-man's-land' that drifts toward vacancy? . . . The 'trees' are dedicated to the flies. Dragonflies, fruit flies, horseflies. They are all welcome to walk on the roots with their sticky, padded feet, in order to get a close look. "Why should flies be without art?" (Smithson). Smithson also thought of his work as a kind of writing without paper.

“Initially I went to the Pine Barrens to set up a system of outdoor pavements but in the process I became interested in the abstract aspects of mapping. So I decided to use the Pine Barrens site as a piece of paper and draw a crystalline structure over the landmass rather than on a 20 x 30 sheet of paper. In this way I was applying my conceptual thinking directly to the disruption of the site over an area of several miles.”

Now you are ready to design some ACTIONS of your own, featuring trees, rubbings, and other related items, practices, and information, addressing the problem of a writing without paper. Document the process and file the materials for later use in the theory you are making.