

## Split-Screen: Style, Mediation, and Postcolonial Theory in the Digital Age

Jonathan Fardy  
Idaho State University

### Video/Recall

In what follows, I have taken my methodological cue from Roland Barthes. In his last book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Barthes abandoned his commitment to semiology finding it entirely ill-suited to the peculiar and psychically impassioned way he looked at photographs. Rejecting the siren call of systematicity and finality, he opted to do what he calls a “casual phenomenology” of his own looking in retrospect (*Camera* 20). That is, he takes as his object of inquiry his phenomenological reactions to a set of photographs as he remembers them. Thus, it is not quite accurate to say that the book is about photography as such—despite photo-theorists who still regard it as a theory of photography—still less is it an examination of particular photographs. What is at issue is a set of photographs as remembered or recalled. I have here taken something of Barthes’s approach in this essay by taking my memories of a YouTube video of a lecture by Homi Bhabha as a point of departure for a speculative inquiry into the question of style, mediation, and transformation made possible by the virtualization and digitalization of theory generally, and postcolonial theory specifically. To what extent do hybrids of image and theory, cultural and intellectual location, become available as both an object of critique and an inspiration for new modes of theoretical intervention?

Bored at a desk job I took between the end of my Master’s degree and the start of my doctorate, I browsed the internet for “theory” and stumbled on a YouTube video of a lecture by Homi K. Bhabha entitled “On Global Memory: Thoughts on the Barbaric Transmission of Culture” (figs. 1-3). I can still vividly recall the timbre of Bhabha’s voice and the salvo of word-pictures with which he began. “The skies are strafed with messianic messages and false storms. The air is thick with the fog of war, the dust of collateral damage. The air-brushed, abused of Abu Ghraib heaped and mangled in their indignity” (“Global Memory”). The word-pictures struck me with a rapidity I thought only reserved for avant-garde film. It was the style that drew me in and prompted me to read Bhabha. I kept on returning to this video for reasons that are still partly obscure, but surely have to do not simply with the ideas contained in the video, but with its form, its style—its mixing of theory, performance, and art.

Towards the end of the lecture, Bhabha introduced a work by the Palestinian artist Emily Jacir—her remarkable split-screen

photographic project entitled *Ramallah/New York*. The work presents a series of images of Ramallah and New York on a pair of parallel screens. The paired shots are of similar spaces and activities: shopping, office work, eating, hairdressing, and the like. But Jacir does not tell us from which place each image hails. These paired images of places split the viewer's attention, positioning the gaze at a border adjoining two discontinuous places as if the viewer was a pivot positioned on the axis or the slash that splits the names of the places in the title. It is little wonder that Jacir's work appeals to Bhabha's critical eye. Her work, like his, complexifies the concept of borders, national cultures, and identities. Jacir and Bhabha's work solicits us to think beyond the limits imposed by geographical, cultural, and political borders, while never forgetting that these borders matter and materialize their effects in ways of being and belonging. I would spend more time thinking about Jacir's work, but my aim here is on something else. I want to probe the stylistics that underwrote my encounter with this cyber-hyper-object—part art and part theory.

## Media/Theory

The question of the critical positioning—the pivotal positioning—of the viewer is central to any theorization of online theory. I certainly do not mean to equate the *pivotal positioning* of Jacir's intended viewer with my position at my boring desk job years ago. But there is a link—a mediated one—but a link. I was split between looking as if I were doing my job and stealing glances back to the video. I was on the pivot point between two ways of life and thinking. Split between two screens and two timeframes—work and thought. My memory of that video is still bound-up with images of the watchful eyes of my boss. I was doing spreadsheets in the office while simultaneously exploring a new world of theory marked by an online representation of an intellectual. But what is it that I was encountering at that moment? What is an intellectual? I turn to Said for answers.

In his remarkable series of BBC lectures, ingeniously entitled *Representations of the Intellectual*, Edward Said asks: how is the intellectual represented in society, by whom, and for what purpose? In these lectures, broadcast for a general audience, Said counters the image of the expert with that of the amateur. The amateur eschews the trappings of expertise with its self-satisfied claims to authority. As a way of “maintaining relative intellectual independence,” writes Said, “having the attitude of an amateur is the better course” (87). Said concludes that “amateurism means choosing the risks and uncertain results of the public sphere—a lecture or a book or an article in wide and unrestricted circulation” (87). To be sure, the online environment suits Said's model of the amateur intellectual; and indeed, the recent success of movements such as speculative realism and non-philosophy testify to the potential to use cyberspace as a means to circumvent the gatekeepers of academic and professional knowledge. Both speculative realism and non-philosophy have not only been disseminated largely

online, but the online environment is conceptually suited to the aims of each movement. Speculative realism embraces a realism that includes the virtual and imaginary and non-philosophy seeks to open spaces for thought outside the professionalized sphere of academic philosophy and university presses.

The amateur exile is drawn to essayistic forms for their scale do not easily suit the aims of mastery and expertise. The contemporary theoretical essay since the late 1970s has been the site of a tremendous amount of critical experimentation that has taken the fragmentary and the elliptical as strategies for deconstructing the rhetoric of mastery and expertise even if, ironically, many of these same essays now populate our course syllabi and exam papers. Bhabha's work is a key example of this essayistic impulse of late-twentieth-century theory. Of course, Bhabha is identified with a book, *The Location of Culture*, but that "book" is a collection of essays bound by a set of themes among which the question of locality is paramount, particularly the location of the border whether in its national, discursive, or disciplinary forms. The question of the border, of the dividing line, locates *The Location of Culture* on the borderline, in the ambivalent place of interdisciplinary theory. This ambivalent place has grown only more ambivalent in the digital age.

How might we think the digitalization of theory without subordinating its ambivalence to the established frameworks of "media theory" that would seek to clarify what is unclear—and productively so—about theory's position in the online environment? In *What Do Pictures Want?*, W.J.T. Mitchell argues that media theory would do well to consider the idea that "the media" might not really exist. We are, argues Mitchell, never addressed by "the media" but only ever by representations, representatives, or "avatars" of media (217). Cable news, sitcoms, YouTube, iTunes, etc. are "avatars" or personas by which media address us indirectly. To assume that there is a critical object called "the media," according to Mitchell, is ironically to forget the work of representation and mediation in a field—media theory—which advertises itself as a critical interrogation of media and media representation. Mitchell goes further. He argues that "media theory" is itself an avatar of media. It is a way of representing media even when it does so in his view incoherently as when it theorizes about "the media." But he goes yet further to argue that "theory" as such does not exist. There is no "theory" in the singular and theory does not address its readers directly but through avatars like Bhabha or Mitchell himself. It follows that for Mitchell there can neither be a "theory of media" nor a "theory of theory," for "theory" is itself nothing more nor less than a medium in which its avatars operate. The "medium of theory," writes Mitchell, thrives in lectures, essays, conferences and, today, in online videos, in a multiplicity of forms of "embodied discourse ... constructed around critical metaphors, analogies, models, figures, cases, and scenes" (209).

Now more and more, "scenes" of theory are staged outside the academy in odd jobs like mine or in the non-places of adjunct labor. Conferences and books cost money and students as well as emerging

scholars are looking more and more to what can be found on, and made possible by, online media. We are in the course of making an archive of theory in the form of blogs, videos, cribbed texts, and so forth; these are the visible signs of desperate times. The current crisis in the humanities is not that of yesteryears. Would we not all long for a crisis of theory? The current crisis is the existential threat posed to any form of scholarship that cannot state its reason for being within the increasingly narrow-minded anti-intellectualism of neo-liberalism. Are we not in the teeth of what Adorno called “administered life”? I cannot here offer any saving solutions. I want merely to affirm to the end that thought—speculative, theoretical, open-ended thought—will not end with the academy. It is too seductive. It finds its way now by digital means into the lives of people like me years ago who went looking for something intellectually stirring that was somehow not quite “academic.” Indeed, the academic canonization of theory is something of an odd turn of events. Theory in the 1970s and 1980s, at least in the English-speaking world, was something of an underground affair. It bubbled up on the margins of official academe in then lesser-known outlets like Semiotext(e)’s now-famed “Foreign Agents” series. It had something of the scene of punk-philosophy about it—a do-it-yourself attitude that has come back around in digital form today, which is not to say that the current fashion of digital humanities is necessarily on the theoretical vanguard.

Digital humanities has done much good work in advancing methodologies that befit our digital present. But methodological innovation alone does not necessarily entail a theoretical turn. Tom Scheinfeldt, for one, recognizes the theoretical deficit of digital humanities even while he remains committed to its potential for future success. In “Theory, Method, and Digital Humanities,” Scheinfeldt writes: “The criticism most frequently leveled at the digital humanities is what I like to call the ‘Where’s the beef?’ question—that is, what questions does digital humanities answer that can’t be answered without it? What humanities arguments does digital humanities make?” (55). Scheinfeldt goes on to argue that historically method has often preceded theory. That is, methodological innovations within a subfield have often led to larger trans-disciplinary theoretical advances. Scheinfeldt takes his cue from the sciences. He sees the current fascination with research machines by digital humanists as analogous to the fascination eighteenth-century natural philosophers had with electrical apparatuses. “Sometimes new tools are built to answer preexisting questions,” writes Scheinfeldt, and sometimes “new questions and answers are the byproduct of the creation of new tools. Sometimes it takes a while; in which meantime tools themselves and the whiz-bang effects they produce must be the focus of scholarly attention” (“Theory” 55-56).

Must it? Is not part of the problem here one of analogy? Eighteenth-century natural philosophers were fascinated by electrical machines because they were fascinated by electricity. Why “must” digital humanists make the “whiz-bang effects” of computing the “focus of scholarly attention” unless they are principally interested in

computers and computing? That is, I do not see why, for example, someone using a program to find out how many times the word “colony” is used in nineteenth-century British novels should make the program the focus of their scholarly attention when it obviously is not. And for those digital humanists who study digital culture more broadly, there is already a wealth of theoretical resources to draw on and develop in critical media theory. So, indeed “where is the beef?”

Gary Hall has recently pointed out that the current fascination and furor over digital humanities obscures a perhaps deeper set of questions, questions concerning the future of theory itself. Hall suggests that the debate is ultimately not one between quantitative and qualitative scholarship—between essays and graphs—nor even a debate over what “methods” are “appropriate” today. “Instead, the development of...theory” today, writes Hall, will “require...in the words of one twentieth century theoretically committed intellectual, ‘something else besides’—something that challenges conventional distinctions and, in so doing, ‘contests the terms and territories of both’” (*Pirate* 54).

Hall is in fact quoting from Bhabha’s “The Commitment to Theory.” While Hall does not name Bhabha he has recourse to his thinking if only to make clear the point that digital humanities is a question for theory. What I think digital humanists have done (among other things) is to remind us that the medium matters. And, indeed to have made us more keenly critical of what precisely a medium is, including the idea that theory itself is a medium. And if the medium is indeed the message, then one of the aims of digital humanities must be to draw out what forms, styles, and modes of presentation are made visible and possible through theoretical construction and/or its dissemination.

If we take seriously that theory is a medium and, by that logic, that Bhabha is one of its avatars, then it follows that “On Global Memory” is a case of nested media in which the medium of video art represented in reproduced form by *Ramallah/New York* is nested within Bhabha’s embodied postcolonial discourse. And we can go further: Jacir’s images are also avatars of *Ramallah* and *New York*, which are themselves imaginatively and politically reframed as borderline locales through which passes a virtual transmission of postcolonial theory. In the superposition of time, place, and theory that the online lecture frames, one encounters a telescoping of timeframes and “time-lags” that remain, in the last instance, heterogeneous to one another. These locales hail from real and virtualized borderlands; from in-between, or interstitial places and times arrayed along a rhizomatic network of archived images and viewers who likewise exist in bordering locales adjoined and disjoined by spatial, cultural, technological, and discursive differences. It is across these digitalized divides that the here-and-now of contemporaneity is re-placed and re-timed through real and perceived “time-lags” and gaps, which collectively relay a polyvalent transmission of the “enunciatory present” (*pace Location*). Part of our contemporary “enunciatory present” is that strange multilayered temporality of online life. It is

there that one, like me, might encounter theory. Online theoretical objects have their own styles and modes of enunciation. It is important today to understand not only the content of this mode of theory, but its form or style. This attentiveness to style proves not only important for thinking theory's cyber-present; style has always been a significant, though often neglected, aspect of theory's history. It is to that aspect of theory's history—theory's style—that I now want to turn before returning to theory's contemporary online existence.

## Style/Conditions

To a large extent, Bhabha's discourse has been a medium through which the "presentness" of postcolonial theory was conditioned. And we should not discount the significance his *style of writing* had on this. Indeed, that is what drew me in. It was the character of his writing and his skill at marshalling dialectical images (*pace* Benjamin) to convey ideas that might need a book to resolve, but powerfully function as flashes of insight within the compacted spaces of essayistic forms. To speak of style in theory may appear superficial especially when seen from the perspective of postcolonial themes of dispossession, colonialism, racism, violence, and murder; but even, or especially, when the thematic is dire, style matters for it is the medium through which urgency and timeliness can make themselves viscerally felt.

Bhabha has insistently enunciated the ambivalence of postcoloniality. And his style of writing lends his thought a degree of ambivalence as well that the reader is solicited to grapple with. To be sure, Bhabha's prizing of ambivalence has exposed him (and other poststructural cultural critics) to the charge that the attack on normative categories, hard and fast distinctions, binary oppositions, and the like in favor of ambivalence broadly construed inevitably leads to a loosening of ethical standards and political convictions. Bhabha seems to respond to this by asking in the opening essay of *The Location of Culture*: "Must we always polarize in order to polemicize?" (28). The question of critique for Bhabha is: how does one construct a mode of critical agency and even critical commitment to Western "high theory," while simultaneously calling into question the Eurocentric legacies of intellectual production? As always Bhabha's critical strategy, like that of *Ramallah/New York*, is two-fold. It is at once a theoretical intervention within locations of culture, and simultaneously a creative intervention into theoretical writing that asks "what the function of a committed theoretical perspective might be, once the cultural and historical hybridity of the postcolonial world is taken as the paradigmatic place of departure" (31).

The postcolonial-poststructural orientation is committed, but it leaves open the question of commitment itself. Bhabha asks: "Committed to what? At this stage in the argument, I do not want to identify any specific 'object' of political allegiance" (31). In the context of an argument, a theoretical intervention in language, it may become necessary to specify a political allegiance. But if theory

becomes political, or if politics becomes theoretical, it must in either case be discursive and this itself may imply, entail, or even demand a certain political allegiance. Bhabha resists the easy dichotomy between theory and practice in favor of a recognition of the ambivalent process of cultural articulation that conditions *both* theory and practice. Between the theoretical article and the activist's leaflet passes the act and work of inscription and signification. "It is a sign of political maturity to accept that there are many forms of political writing whose different effects are obscured when they are divided between the 'theoretical' and the 'activist'" (32). "The leaflet has a specific expository and organizational purpose", writes Bhabha, while the theoretical text "makes its contribution to those embedded political ideas and principles that inform" political struggle (32).

Bhabha critically brackets the question of the difference between theory and practice in order to focus on the ways in which both emerge through cultural processes. The cultural "negotiation" between practice and theory constitutes a matrix from which political acts and theoretical statements emerge and signify. Once practice and theory are understood as subject to the contingencies of cultural emergence, then meta-theorizing about either demands an interrogation of the cultural conditions of each. These cultural conditions are so complex and multifarious that to pose the question of the cultural conditions of theory is to ask in "what hybrid forms" might "a politics of the theoretical statement emerge?" (33). The work of theory and activism is "always marked and informed by the ambivalence of the process of emergence itself, the productivity of meanings that construct counter-knowledges *in media res*, in the very act of agonism, within the terms of a negotiation ... of oppositional and antagonistic elements" (33). Seen in this way, a counter-discourse of theory's political efficacy must be understood in terms that are as attentive to the politics of form and style as to explicit politico-theoretical concepts.

To further explore this question of style, I want to take a detour through the critical reception of Frantz Fanon's writing, which offers a case study in the question of the relation between theory and style in the postcolonial context. My aim is not to simply rehearse a part of theory's history, but to show how the question of style has been (and continues to be) a theoretical question.

The creative impulse of theory is certainly manifest in some of Continental theory's well-known texts. Consider, for example, the avant-gardist sensibilities that underwrite texts such as Derrida's *The Post Card* or *Glas*; Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*; or Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* to name only a few. But one also finds such stylistics in standards of postcolonial theory, notably the texts of Frantz Fanon such as his *Black Skin, White Masks*. In his biography of Frantz Fanon, David Macey (2012) notes that the "opacity of language" of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* along with its "constant shifts of register...from medical discourse to poetry and back again, often make the text uncomfortably difficult to read" (162). Macey advises that the "best way to approach" *Black Skin, White Masks* is to "regard it as an extended exercise in bricolage" (162). Macey argues

that bricolage best describes what Fanon was doing in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “using elements of a then modernist philosophy and psychoanalysis to explore and analyze his own situation and experience, even though he had no real academic training as a philosopher and no extensive knowledge of psychoanalysis” (163).

The problem with Macey’s suggestion is that it fails to grasp the style of Fanon’s texts as a self-consciously and culturally produced *style*. Macey sees the bricolage quality of Fanon’s texts only as a symptom of cultural dislocation. Macey might have done well to consider the character of the text as much as the character of his subject. He may have therefore considered Bhabha’s important work on Fanon’s writing. In chapter two of *The Location of Culture* entitled “Interrogating Identity,” Bhabha writes: “To read Fanon is to experience the sense of division that prefigures—and fissures—the emergence of a truly radical thought that never dawns without casting an uncertain dark” (57). To read Fanon may be “uncomfortably difficult” but that uncomfortable feeling may be exactly the point of his style *and* his theory.

Bhabha’s critical intervention to read (into) the stylistics of Fanon’s texts has however, once again, been greeted with the charge of substituting “real” political agonism for cultural contest. Nigel Gibson, for example, criticizes Bhabha for seeking to reposition the radical psychiatrist and revolutionary anti-colonialist’s writings as *cultural* texts marked by ambivalence. The study of Fanon “has shifted from radical politics,” writes Gibson, “to a liberal cultural studies” (100). Gibson takes Bhabha’s question concerning the relevance of Fanon today as telling: “Why invoke Fanon today, quite out of historical context? Why invoke Fanon when the ardor of emancipatory discourse has seemingly yielded to fervent, ferocious pleas for ‘the end of history,’ ‘the end of struggle?’” (188). Gibson argues that the rhetorical reading of Fanon popularized in the 1990s by Bhabha and others was a political harbinger of the neutralization of emancipatory praxis. While I am sympathetic to some aspects of Gibson’s criticism, I think he too quickly elides the complexity entailed by a serious grappling with the *politics of culture* in the writings of Fanon or Bhabha.

The now familiar argument that the rise of theory in the academy was a function of the left’s retreat from activism and struggle is too quick by half. Theory then (as now) was no safe-haven for leftist academics. Theory has often been greeted like an unwelcome intruder on many campuses. And it is still routinely criticized for “politicizing” the study of culture and for allegedly peddling fraudulent academic goods in the form of bad “Continental” philosophy plus a dash of literature or literary flair. Critics then and now continue to be on the look-out for the tell-tale signs of theory in the form of “bad writing” (as if academic prose was mercifully free of this before the theory invasion). The now well-known fact that Bhabha won the 1998 runner-up prize to Judith Butler for “bad writing” from the *Journal of Philosophy and Literature* offers a window into the scandal of theory. Those interested to know need only do a Google search to find the late



professor Denis Dutton's webpage detailing the "Bad Writing Contest." The rules for the contest—which tellingly ran from 1995 to 1998—were simple:

The Bad Writing Contest celebrates the most *stylistically* lamentable passages found in scholarly books and articles published in the last few years. Ordinary journalism, fiction, departmental memos, etc. are not eligible, nor are parodies: entries must be *non-ironic*, from serious, published academic journals or books. Deliberate parody cannot be allowed in a field where unintended self-parody is so widespread. (Dutton, my emphasis)

I emphasize the words "stylistically" and "non-ironic" for they clearly confirm Marc Redfield's argument that the contested reception of *theory as deconstruction* was chiefly an aesthetic scandal. In his remarkable recent book, *Theory at Yale*, Redfield argues that the scandal of theory from its start in the 1970s to its high-water mark in the 1990s was a scandal concerning the seemingly illegitimate use of literary language in the writing of theory and criticism. Redfield writes that the "Yale Critics" were "charged" with an "aesthetic offense: overblown writing that, as its critics saw it, aspired to literary status" (30). It was the *style* of self-critical theoretical writing that was the cause of the scandal as much as, and sometimes more than, the political perspectives advanced by it. And this is precisely what the case of the Bad Writing Contest discloses. Is it not telling that the editors of *Philosophy and Literature* thought it necessary to stipulate that entries to the contest had to be examples of "non-ironic" prose. Were they concerned that even "professionals" in "the field" like themselves would not be able to detect irony when they read it? Their curious stipulation against irony was an aesthetic rule: all entries were expected to conform to the standard style of "serious," academic prose.

The high drama and low stakes notwithstanding, the Bad Writing Contest was an index of the aesthetic scandal surrounding the use of "literary" language by critics and theorists. The fact that this was a minor scandal at all seems to support Gibson's point concerning the shift effected by theory from the political to the cultural insofar as the conflict was here a matter of taste and aesthetics rather than politics. But that assumes that "the political" is a circumscribed concept. Such a view elides how theory was often read politically within culture. Writing that is marked as "difficult," "bad," or "obscure" has often functioned as a protective measure taken by those who are impatient about "staying with the trouble" in the words of Donna Haraway (2016). The commitment to "clear," "jargon-free" prose was read by the editors of the *Journal of Philosophy and Literature* (and those like them) as an opposition to "the commitment to theory," but this opposition, as we can see, also functioned as a cover for an *aesthetic ideology* that imagined away complexities, including the complexities that inhere in the relation between culture and politics and aesthetics and ideology.

To return to our subject, reading Fanon culturally or politically requires in either case to *read* his texts. And reading occupies a troublingly ambivalent space that cannot always be easily marked as a political or cultural activity. To take seriously the "style" of Fanon's

writing is not simply to *culturalize* its political content; it is to take seriously the cultural conditions of political theory. If *Black Skin, White Masks*, is “the product of bricolage” it is also a product of the political conditioning of the cultural resources of literary language and that is at once a stylistic, cultural, political, and theoretical problematic. And to see the style of theory as a theoretical question opens a perspective on theory more generally. Much of what has been called theory since the 1970s is marked by innovative stylistics as previously noted. Theory’s penchant for stylistic invention and innovation might be understood as the adoption of avant-gardist techniques in an effort to stylistically render theory strange in ways akin to the strategy of defamiliarization deployed by modernist artists of the past. Such theory blurs the line between creation and critique and thereby exposes in surprising ways the ideologies that structure that division.

It is precisely into this defamiliarized space of *art-theory* that Bhabha’s lecture as online video is situated as a hybrid cultural, political, and theoretical object. What is art and what is theory is rendered more clearly ambivalent as each is iteratively reframed through the lens of the other. Bhabha’s lecture and Jacir’s work have been superimposed and refigured as a novel online cultural object subject to a continual series of translations and transmissions through what Bhabha might call the “Third Space” of cyber-spatial interpretation (53). “The production of meaning requires,” writes Bhabha, that interpreter and interpreted “be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space” (53). The ambivalent grounds of the Third Space are no less ambivalent in virtual, medial space. Nothing said nor shown in this *third (cyber)space* remains simply what it was before it was iteratively restaged as online theory. As Marshall McLuhan taught us, the force of the medium itself must be acknowledged as a translational and transformational process that leaves neither content nor form untouched. If we are to critically take hold of hybrid cultural-theoretical objects like Bhabha’s “On Global Memory,” then we must be attentive to their complex style of address and the multiplicity of frames through which an object addresses its diverse audiences. We must also take heed of the fact that the address is indirect for it passes through a number of mediatized frames that can be read as everything from an enactment of postcolonial theory to an instance of online communication. The style of online theory’s address must be taken into account as an agent in not only the process of circulation and distribution, but also as a *style* of address that does itself contain a form of theory. Open-access platforms for theory, for example, do not merely mark a new stage in the history of media. It is an event in theory itself. These forms of address are styles that have a theoretical charge for they expose and challenge the ways in which theory has been contained and controlled by privatized knowledge centers from universities to libraries to publishing houses. So, it is not the case that I simply learned about Bhabha and postcolonial theory the day I stumbled onto the YouTube video. The very manner in which I experienced it—its form of address and my location with respect to

that address—form part of the theoretical questions that a digital phenomenology of hyper-objects much account for. Still, some critics might charge that while there is newness in the theoretical content of my experience of Bhabha online, it remains an open question to what extent the stylistics of innovative theory that were developed by Bhabha and other “high theorists” of the last century still have critical purchase amidst the noise of online life.

### Visible/Visibilities

In her remarkable essay, “When Reflexivity Becomes Porn,” Rey Chow speculates that reflexivity has become *all show* in poststructural/postmodern theorizing. Chow argues that the rhetorical and textual strategies and self-reflexive style of much theory of the last few decades owes an unacknowledged debt to *modernist aesthetics*. Bricolage, montage, juxtaposition, disjunction, non-linearity: these are the visible after-images of modernist art in postmodern theory. Chow’s insight bears a family likeness to Gregory Ulmer’s argument in his landmark essay, “The Object of Post-Criticism.” Ulmer was arguing from a position deep within the “theory wars” that were then splitting humanities departments across the US. Ulmer saw the divide as an *aesthetic* as much as a *theoretical* contest. Theory then (as now) was frequently seen by its critics as a foreign import: the importation of Continental philosophy into literary and cultural studies *and* the importation of the literary into the critical and theoretical. The very style of the work of theorists such as Baudrillard, Lyotard, Derrida, and others appeared to confound (or deconstruct) the division of labor between artists and critics. Ulmer writes:

What is at stake in the controversy surrounding critical writing is easier to understand when placed in the context of modernism and postmodernism in the arts.... Criticism now is being transformed in the same way that literature and the arts were transformed by the avant-garde movements...The break with mimesis, with the values and assumptions of “realism,” which revolutionized the modernist arts is now underway (belatedly) in criticism. (83)

Chow, however, goes a step beyond Ulmer in rightly recognizing the role of self-critique that structured modernist aesthetics. The stylistic sensibilities of modernist art were not solely propelled by a questing after formal novelties, but by a self-critical questioning that sought to frame *aesthetic conventions as conventions* and thereby critically reframe what had begun to appear as the a-historical “given” of representationalism.<sup>1</sup> Chow sees this most clearly in the modernist theatre of Bertolt Brecht whose work was celebrated by one of the most stylistically inventive critics of his day—Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin, Brecht’s theatre *staged staging* or *theatricalized theatre* and thereby broke with the norms of mimesis that underwrote Aristotelian aesthetics. The self-criticality of modernist “epic theatre” was for Benjamin and Brecht a politically astute challenge for it called into question the self-legitimizing power of cultural traditions. Modernists

like Brecht and Benjamin understood self-critique as not simply a *style* but also as a *strategy* of political-cultural contestation. “The aim of Brecht’s theatre,” writes Chow, was to “de-sensationalize the emotional effects” of Aristotelian drama “by puncturing its well-wrought illusionism” (13). By doing so the stage became a place for the staging of a self-critical and self-reflexive form of art. Self-reflexive thinking likewise strives to make visible the material and intellectual conditions of art’s production. Chow writes that for modernists like Brecht and Benjamin, reflexivity meant making thought “*ex-plicit through staging*: rather than drawing things into itself by unifying them, it splits them up, and gives them independence, in a series of sensuous ex-plications (out-foldings)” (18-19).

Folding out thought, making *ex-plicit* its social, political, cultural, and historical conditions, through a self-critical, reflexive structure of staging is reliant on an aesthetic of spatialization. Aesthetics of staging (*pace* Brecht) or critical strategies like dialectical images and constellations (*pace* Benjamin) are *critically* dependent on modernist aesthetic sensibilities. And this is no less true of postmodern art and theory like Jacir’s juxtaposed pictures or Bhabha’s interstitial spaces. What “we call ‘theory,’” writes Chow, “is inextricably bound up with the ramifications of reflexivity,” and “spatialization may well be one of theory’s predominant maneuvers” (19). The question for Chow is whether or not these reflexive “maneuvers” of spatialization have critical purchase in a postmodern world in which novel spacings are routinized and banalized by the continuous proliferation of screens, juxtaposed visual and verbal texts, and the multiplication of extensive and complex virtual spacings. Do novel spaces, stages, or screens shock us out of complacency or are they the frames through which complacency is virtually reproduced? “In the days of proliferating, hypermediatized screens and frames,” Chow asks, “is staging, which belongs to an older, modernist way of objectifying reflexivity, still meaningful?” (25). Has the critical utopia of self-reflexivity faded into the society of the selfie? Does the banalization of bricolage at the hands of smart phone users entail a diminution of the ethical and political potency of postmodern critique?

Chow’s somewhat bleak assessment of the potency of explicitly staging the stylistics of spatialization today might be tempered by a recognition of the specific medial forms unique to the online environment. For these do not merely relay theory—they transform it. Critically understanding hybrid art-theory objects like Bhabha’s “On Global Memory,” requires that we, in Chow’s prescient words (inspired by Deleuze), “come to terms with visibilities as information-objects we can hold in our hands and disseminate widely in a matter of moments” (165). The medium of theory has passed beyond the long shadow of traditional print culture, and it is time that we think not only about the media through which contemporary theory now operates—online video, open-access platforms, etc.—but also about how medial transmissions of theory are themselves theoretical problems deserving of critical attention. We need to learn to “see” theory or “picture

theory” as both an intellectual and medial discourse. Through this view new objects of (and for) theorization accede to visibility: we become critically aware that there are new things to theoretically capture and new visual modalities of capture to investigate.

Deleuze’s suggestive term “visibilities” as seen through Rey Chow’s postcolonial lens offers us a bifocal strategy for thinking through the migration of theory from page to screen. Deleuze coined “visibilities” in his monograph on Foucault. For Deleuze, Foucault’s studies of madness, criminality, and the logic of confinement index a deeper concern with the nature of the visible. Deleuze traces “visibilities” across the spectrum of Foucault’s work from the sovereign light of Velázquez to the spectacle of the scaffold. “Visibilities are not defined by sight,” writes Deleuze, “but are complexes of actions and passions, actions and reactions, multisensorial complexes, which emerge into the light of day. As Magritte says in a letter to Foucault, “thought is what sees and can be described visibly” (59). Chow seizes on Deleuze’s concept of “visibilities” because she sees it as “relevant to think with, especially in the broad context of postcoloniality” (156). Working in the bricolage form, Chow appropriates “visibilities” to marshal it into a “distinctive method ... oriented towards lines of mutation, mobility, experimentation, emergence, and freedom” (156). Chow sees Deleuze as looking for the “points of departure” in Foucault’s work on confinement (156). Chow writes:

Instead of simply corroborating instances of blockage and stasis (such as the weighty reality of incarceration), Deleuze, when confronted with such instances, seeks in them points of departure for an elsewhere, seedlings for a metastasis. Exactly where Foucault’s analytics seems to settle starkly on the inescapability of imprisonment as the way to define modern life, Deleuze reconfigures that settlement into a possible transit point, a novel flight path. (156)

Deleuze reads Foucault to develop a theory of freedom and contingency; Chow reads Deleuze on Foucault to construct a “distinctive method” for postcolonial theorizing that seeks the “flight path” through the archives of dispossession and colonial violence. I read Chow on Deleuze on Foucault because I see in Chow’s reconfiguration of visibilities a mode of thinking that makes visible how theory’s online mediatization may be grasped and constituted as a novel hybrid cultural object. Online theory today can (and should) be seen as marked by new visibilities: part theory, part visual object, part online media.

### Captions/Coda

What would it look like to put the logic of visibilities to work in the reading of theory’s migration from page to screen as in the case of “On Global Memory” by Bhabha? Where to begin? I would want to begin with images to submit the video to a visual analysis. But here “visibilities” as concept cautions against too quickly assuming that we

know what we are talking about when we refer to “images in” online theory. What does “in” even mean? In what? In *media res*? To still by reproduction or to theoretically frame and segment the image from the online context is to construct a critical object—the image—divorced from the illuminating context that animated its strategy of visibility. And when we refer to imagery more generally we know even less of what we speak. To refer to the “image on the screen” brackets the decisive work of visibilities which are not solely optical in nature for visibilities work in concert and in tension with other senses through which we register a thing as “visible.” We must acknowledge that there are multiple, convergent, and divergent mental and digital frames that shape the medial encounter of seeing, hearing, thinking, and theorizing on, and through, the medium of cyberspace. The fantasy figure of “the image” and “the work” must be acknowledged as a perhaps unavoidable metaphysical concession once the medial complexity of such visibilities is taken as a paradigmatic point of departure. Nonetheless, I have opted to take hold of what comes to light in three screen captures from “On Global Memory.” I have situated my thoughts on these screen captures in the form of extended captions. Here it is again from *Camera Lucida* that I take my cue. Barthes’s captions for his selected photographs are personal reflections that unsettle our expectations for facticity (see figures 1-3). These captions are starts, perhaps even false starts, towards a “casual” phenomenology of the digital “presentness” of theory.

But larger questions remain for hybrid cultural objects like “On Global Memory.” What comes to light when thinking through the superposition of visibilities—visual, theoretical, embodied, and virtual? To envisage the legacy of postcolonialism, or theory generally, from a cyber perspective will necessitate the constitution of novel critical objects that, like a composite photograph, are conditioned by the combination of multiple visibilities but which cannot be reduced to any one. “On Global Memory,” as I have recalled in this essay, is not only about Bhabha, Jacir, or postcolonialism. It is about the recognition or even a re-cognition—a seeing or thinking again—of the medial distances and differences nested within the online circulation and distribution of theory today. To think the legacy of theory today we must be ready to think through the complexly mediated media of theory that circulate on the web. Such thinking may well mean, as here, thinking through memory. For online theory is in part a “global memory” of theory’s past in the form of a mobile, virtualized archive that re-equips us to think critically, as Bhabha and Jacir do, about the work of place and location, which have grown less distinct online, but without which we cannot think theory’s global legacy and future promise.



**Figure 1.** Screen Capture. Bhabha comments on a pair of images from Emily Jacir's 2005 work, entitled *Ramallah/New York*. The nested medial frames of art, theory, live-lecture, recorded video, and the world of YouTube are marked by differences and distances.



**Figure 2.** Screen capture. With a gesture, the line between theory and art is hybridized within the mediatized frame of YouTube. My eyes run in a triangular direction from Bhabha to Jacir's work to the man seated beneath the projected images. He looks out. We see him, and see that he does not see what now will be virtually available to sight forever, Internet being both a space of immediacy and immateriality.





**Figure 3.** Screen capture. The lecture is over. Professor Anthony Cascardi, then director of the Townsend Center for the Humanities at the University of California at Berkeley, approaches the podium. Images by Jacir are still being projected. A woman begins to applaud. A man is taking a picture. Where is the line to be drawn between art, performance, and theory? And do the lines change in the virtual space of YouTube? What articulation does the Third Space of cyberspace allow for? How to read it?

### Notes

1. Clement Greenberg forcefully argued that self-criticism is integral to the character of modernist art. See Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Francis Frascina, Charles Harrison (London: Sage, 1982).

### Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. "On the Language of Man and Language as Such."  
*Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume One, 1913-1926*.  
 Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Harvard UP, 1996.

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2004.
- . “On Global Memory: Thoughts on the Barbaric Transmission of Culture.” *YouTube*, uploaded by UC Berkeley Events, 21 April 2008, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fp6j9Ozpn4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fp6j9Ozpn4).
- Chow, Rey. *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking About Capture*. Duke UP, 2012.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Foucault*. Translated by Seán Hand. U of Minnesota P, 1986.
- Dutton, Denis. “The Bad Writing Contest.” *Philosophy and Literature*, 1998. [http://www.denisdutton.com/bad\\_writing.htm](http://www.denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm).
- Gibson, Nigel. “Fanon and the Pitfalls of Cultural Studies.” *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*. Edited by Anthony C. Alessandrini. Routledge, 1999.
- Greenberg, Clement. “Modernist Painting.” *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*. Edited by Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison. Sage, 1982.
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.
- Hall, Gary. *Pirate Philosophy for a Digital Posthumanities*. MIT Press, 2016.
- Macey, David. *Frantz Fanon: A Biography*. Verso, 2000.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. U of Chicago P, 2005.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Mentor, 1964.
- Redfield, Marc. *Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America*. Fordham UP, 2016.
- Said, Edward W. “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals.” *The Edward Said Reader*. Edited by Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin. Vintage, 2000.
- . “Professionals and Amateurs.” *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. Vintage, 1994.
- Scheinfeldt, Tom. “Theory, Method, and Digital Humanities.” *Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to Scholarship and Teaching from Digital Humanities*. Edited by Daniel J. Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt. U of Michigan P, 2013.
- Ulmer, Gregory. “The Object of Post-Criticism.” *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. New Press, 2002.