

Carte semiotiche – Annali 13: The Concept of the “Theoretical Object”

Deadline: Jun 15, 2025

Carte semiotiche

In 2025, we will celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *La macchina della pittura* by Omar Calabrese. This issue of *Carte Semiotiche* wishes not only to pay tribute to that work, but to bring attention to some of the themes it addresses, both in terms of theoretical proposal and analytical practice.

Consistent with the best semiotic tradition, the book proposed a series of analyses of pictorial texts, not as exemplifications or applications of pre-determined concepts but as objects that raise questions useful for testing and developing theoretical perspectives and analytical models.

As the first systematic attempt in Italy to practice a semiotics of painting – particularly of post-Renaissance perspective painting – the book critically engaged with ideas and influences drawn from French art semiology, especially from the works of Louis Marin and Hubert Damisch, from the Greimasian semiotic tradition, but also from art historical theories, with references to Gombrich, formalist theories, Panofsky, and especially to Aby Warburg. It is from Warburg, as suggested by Calabrese in his introduction, that we might derive the hypothesis of a different idea of development in iconology, related to textual structures rather than to grand configurations.

Calabrese remarks that Warburg’s proposal differs substantially from the subsequent iconology that made him its founder, revealing instead relationships with methodological approaches and epistemological conceptions that were being developed, in Warburg’s time, in the fields of anthropology and linguistics. These conceptions shift the emphasis from a “historical” relationship of sequence (antecedent-consequent) to a “topological” conception of formal organization principles, culminating in the anachronistic model of the *Mnemosyne* panels.

In this perspective, Calabrese suggests adopting, alongside or instead of the historical model, a “geographical” model that allows us to relate the notable places in historical-artistic production. But what would be the notable places on this “map”? What criteria define them? In this regard, Calabrese adopts the concept of theoretical object, developed in various ways by Damisch and Marin, which we wish to highlight in this issue of *Carte Semiotiche*. Our attention extends both to the formulation proposed by Calabrese and to the original conception by Damisch and Marin, as well as to the later developments of the theoretical object’s operational use, which has also found application outside the pictorial field in which it originated.

In Calabrese’s view, which closely aligns with Marin’s, theoretical objects are those pictorial texts that do not merely “represent” something or construct a scene but, more or less overtly, perform a reflexive operation, thematizing the act of painting itself. This assumption stands in explicit conflict with the largely Benveniste derived idea (from *Sémiologie de la langue*, 1969) that only verbal

language can serve as a metalanguage, i.e., be capable of speaking about language itself. On the contrary, the idea of a theoretical object suggests that figurative practice can also be conceived as a "language" that does not just "talk" about what it represents, but also about itself, about its conditions for being a representation.

In Marin's research, for instance, this unique declension of the theoretical object finds full formalization in *Opacité de la peinture* (1989), where the author – focusing on 15th-century Italian painting – emphasizes the relationship between the past text and contemporary theory. Making them work together, in a reciprocal way, is what allows to highlight the heuristic potential of the theoretical object: "The past text, prompted by contemporary theory, develops one of its possible profiles, but conversely, contemporary theory also discovers, through the very displacement of the text it applies itself to, unsuspected virtualities of the theoretical force inherent in it." If this is the virtue of a theoretical object that emerges from the dialectical tension between theory, empiria, and methodological issues, how can an iconic text be configured as such?

The singularity Marin attributes to the *Annunciazione* by Benedetto Bonfigli or the frescoes by Luca Signorelli for the sacristy of the Cura in Loreto lies in the fact that these textual forms are able to reveal the operation of the enunciative device that underlies them. This aspect, in Marin's research, is rooted in the dual status of representation. The transparency that allows the text to show the theme it addresses implies a reflexive opacity where the text allows access to and renders intelligible the conditions for its own enunciability: the theoretical object – to put it another way – "shows itself in the act of showing the showing." For iconic texts, this self-reflexive gesture is inevitable since the expressive substance of the visual finds its mode of meaning precisely in the ostension, in the deixis, what Marin calls the presentation of representation. However, textual configurations that do not belong to the realm of visibility can still constitute a theoretical object.

Looking at Marin's long research, one can notice that the critical act of revealing the self-reflexivity of non-iconic texts can be found in studies on autobiographical narratives, such as Stendhal's, or in the construction of logical discourse at Port-Royal. The latter, in particular, is tackled by Marin in *Critique du discours*, where, although the question of the theoretical object is not explicitly addressed, a similar critical gesture is made in investigating the enunciative framework that governs the formalization of the theory of knowledge by Arnauld and Nicole. The analysis Marin conducts of the *Logica* through the examination of its different editions (1662- 1683) and Pascal's *Pensées* allows for another aspect of the conception of the theoretical object to emerge, this time closer to Hubert Damisch's idea, where the notion of a series of plural textual forms comes into play. In this sense, as recently recalled about the *Theory of the Cloud*: "As a theoretical object, the cloud finds itself in a new circuit, or in a new series, where it enters into a constellation with knowledge, objects, and practices related to geometry and mathematics" (Careri 2025, 13-14).

The different perspectives outlined above, despite their specificity, all share a textual approach to the objects. This does not mean that the theoretical object necessarily has the form of a "text," understood as a singular artistic work, although this can sometimes be the case, as in many examples in *La macchina della pittura* or Marin's *Opacité de la peinture*. In other cases, as in the *Theory of the Cloud* by Damisch or in the essays on figures and configurations such as the */bridge/* (Calabrese 1985), */water/* (Calabrese 2006), or more recently the */gibbigiana/* (Zucconi 2025), the theoretical object is not reducible to specific textual forms but it rather addresses particular figura-

tive aspects, such as the representation of clouds, thematic configurations, such as the “judgment of Paris,” or figurative devices like perspective.

The theoretical object, according to Damisch, is what compels us to do theory, as its historicity is not enough to entirely account for it. At the same time, Damisch remarks, it provides us with the means to do theory, highlighting the self-referential character of the theoretical object, and finally it invites us to question what “theory” actually is (Bois, Hollier, and Krauss 1998).

As summarized by Paolo Fabbri, “For Damisch and Calabrese, the theoretical object is a model as a syncretic configuration – chosen or constructed – that operates on the tension between different planes (e.g., the mirror, the shadow, the point, etc.). A Janus-faced figure that forces the analyst into theory and encourages reflection on the very meaning of theorizing; it provides the tools for establishing ‘chronotopic’ connections with other discursive series; it offers the heuristic opportunity for transformation and discovery procedures. It deserves, and the experience proves it, to be revived” (Fabbri 2017).

Finally, let us recall that seminars and conferences have been dedicated to the theme of the theoretical object over the years at the Center for Linguistic and Semiotic Studies in Urbino:

- 1981, *L’oggetto teorico arte*, directed by H. Damisch
- 1986, *Arte: oggetti teorici*, directed by H. Damisch, L. Marin, and P. Fabbri
- 1989, *Arte: oggetti teorici plurali*, directed by H. Damisch
- 2006, *L’oggetto teorico arte 2*, directed by H. Damisch and O. Calabrese

Possible lines of research:

- The concept of the theoretical object: origins, clarifications, and developments
- The theoretical object in the practice of text analysis
- The theoretical object, from painting to other fields of artistic production
- La macchina della pittura and its textual analyses
- Omar Calabrese’s contribution to the Semiotics of the Arts
- Beyond ‘motifs’: theoretical object and a critique of iconology
- Relationship between semiotics, iconology, and visual culture
- Theoretical object and anachronism: the theoretical object as a construction of anachronic series
- Semiotics of painting and intertextuality
- The semiotic issue of genres in painting
- Visual arts and enunciation
- Reception theory and the status of the viewer
- Semiotics of the image between constellations of meaning and logics of culture

The editorial board of *Carte Semiotiche* invites authors to submit proposals in Italian, English, French or Spanish (max. 2,000 characters including spaces or 500 words), accompanied by a short biographical profile (max. 10 lines), by 15 June 2025 to the following addresses: cartesemiotiche@semio-cross.it; giovanni.careri@ehess.fr; tarcisio.lancioni@unisi.it; mircovannoni@gmail.com.

Reference:

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