

# Ambiguity in meaning-making: Filmmaking, curating, and interpreting

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## ABSTRACT

Both the semiosphere we live in and the curating we practice are constantly changing. Hence, the meanings these practices produce are unstable. In this essay, I attempt to join semiotics, the theory of signs and sign use for communication, with its 'sphere,' and curatorial practice, as a mode of making art active, inter-active; to make it work. In my latest book, currently in press, I argue, through invoking life experiences of the most diverse kind, that the tools of meaning-making are not simply a solid knowledge of the language. They involve listening, dialogue, the temporal aspect of looking back, and the creativity of imagining other possibilities. Meaning happens in encounters. The practice of curating is a key one of those. And so is, to bring in my own practice, filmmaking. The primary one of the encounters that curation produces is the first- and second-person exchange between viewers/participants and the work of art (rather than artworks as things). Semiotics is the theoretical field where this is recognized and theorized so that it becomes possible to analyze meaning-making without dictionary-like simplicity and rigor, and without eliminating subjectivity, which is neither void nor all-encompassing. The second part of the concept of *semiosphere* comes from an awareness of the spacetime-specificity of meaning-making. This is what semiotics and curating also have in common. Ambiguity is crucial to meaning-making, and specific semiospheres can become prominent as the meanings shift and multiply. To understand, negotiate, and deploy meanings in the European semiosphere, alertness to ambiguity as productive is of crucial importance. In this essay, I go through several of my works in which filmmaking and curating have joint forces. The key term that connects them is the 'essay' in Adorno's sense.

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## 1. Entering the semiosphere

With the current precarious state of the world, the post-Brexit turmoil, and the militant aggression at the Poland-Belarus border, not to speak of the Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine, it seems unproductive, even hazardous, to look especially to Europe if we seek to understand how meaning comes about in specific contexts. 'Europe,' instead, seems to be embedded in Deleuze's 'Sahara aesthetic': a constantly changing, mobile (non-) form, the instability of which carries political risks of severance rather than aesthetic binding. Europe is no longer a reliable unity, if it ever has been. This raises the question of the borders of the semiosphere: the delimitation of the cultural area within which meaning-making follows certain conventions that make meaning transmittable or, rather, sharable. This is semiotics's primary point, as it is also of exhibitions. The concept of semiosphere is, in this sense, a key term of semiotics since it acknowledges the non-universality of meaning-making, as well as its social-cultural nature. Both the semiosphere we live in and the curating we practice are 'Saharic': constantly changing.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I attempt to join semiotics, the theory of signs and sign use for communication, with its 'sphere' and curatorial practice as a mode of making art active and inter-active, and to make it work. The first part of the title of this essay is derived from a fragmented autobiographical serial publication, now in production as a book, *Moments of Meaning-Making*, of which the first installment appeared in 2021 in the journal *Philo-SOPHIA*. There, I argue, based on life experiences of the most diverse kind, that the tools of meaning-making are not simply a solid knowledge of the language. They involve listening, dialogue, the temporal aspect of looking back, and the creativity of imagining other possibilities. Meaning happens in encounters. The practice of curating is a key such encounter, and – to bring in my own practice – so is film-making. The primary encounters that curation produces are the first- and second-person exchanges between viewers/participants and the work of art (rather than artworks as things) Semiotics is the theoretical field where this is recognized and theorized, so that it becomes possible to analyze meaning-making without dictionary-like simplicity and rigor, and without eliminating subjectivity, which is neither void nor all-encompassing. The second part of the concept of the *semiosphere* comes from an awareness of the spacetime-specificity of meaning-making. This is what semiotics and curating also have in common.

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<sup>1</sup> On meaning-making, which he terms meaning generation, as a general issue in semiotics, see Yu (2019a). I use the term "aesthetic" in the sense of Baumgarten (1970 [1750]), excessively succinctly, as 1) binding, 2) through the senses, 3) in public space. This comes close to the concept of the semiosphere. For a brief explanation, see Hlobil (2009). On Deleuze's 'Sahara aesthetic,' see Buydens (2005).

In a very useful volume occasioned by the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Russian-born (1922-1993) literary scholar Juri Lotman, one of the foremost semioticians, edited by Marek Tamm and Peeter Torop, the latter, an Estonian scholar of the semiotics of culture, opens his chapter on the concept of ‘semiosphere’ by stating that this “marks his [Lotman’s] move towards *dynamic cultural analysis*.” Adding that “the concept has traveled from one terminological field to another,” he concludes this introductory paragraph by arguing that the “‘semiosphere’ marks the complementarity of disciplines studying culture, the movement towards the creation of general theory of culture and *flexible methodology*” (all emphases added).<sup>2</sup>

Besides everything else I can learn from that rich 2022 book, in these opening sentences, three terms speak to me in particular: ‘cultural analysis,’ ‘the concept has travelled,’ and ‘flexible methodology.’ The first of these, ‘cultural analysis’ as distinct from ‘cultural studies,’ formed the grounding of a research institute I co-founded at the University of Amsterdam in 1994, the thirtieth anniversary we are celebrating on December 13, 2024. The insistence on ‘analysis’ is crucial and congenial to Lotman’s commitment to close reading. The second underlies my book on ‘travelling concepts’ in the Humanities. And the third statement has been a long-time directive for my research and teaching work. Boundaries between disciplines have never satisfied me and always hindered the depth of thinking and analysis. This circumscribes my personal-academic ‘semiosphere.’

I don’t even remember if I learned any of these concepts/ideas or all three, primarily from Lotman, or if, in contrast, recognizing these issues in his work endeared it/him to me because I was so preoccupied with them. My academic work has always been semiotic-inspired, and the three angles Torop mentions in that first paragraph explain why. Lotman, along with Peirce, has been my semiotic sources of inspiration. Lotman insisted on close analysis as a more detailed engagement than what cultural studies propagated. Hence, the “Cultural Analysis” in the title of our research institute. The fact that concepts and conceptual thinking ‘travel,’ adapting to disciplinary, geographical, and historical shifts in different semiospheres was particularly relevant for Lotman in his Russian-European (spatial) and politically transforming (temporal) context. My book on ‘travelling concepts’ explains this in detail, without focusing specifically on Lotman. And although he remained primarily concentrated on literature, that art form was never isolated from the broad context in which he worked.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Torop’s phrases or terms I quote in the following paragraph are all on the first page of Tamm, Marek and Peeter Torop (eds.) 2022. *The Companion to Juri Lotman: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. London: Bloomsbury.

<sup>3</sup> In the order of the Torop citations, see my related books: 1996, 2002, 2022. I make a case for interdisciplinarity as a “flexible methodology” in my earlier book (1988).

When I discovered the idea of semiotics, now decades ago, my excitement about it concerned the integration of philosophy (thinking) and (close) analysis (doing), as well as the resistance against media-essentialism and disciplinary constraints, with their methodological dogmas. Semiotics offered the possibility and tools to facilitate this integration so that my passion for both, with teaching as an important third, could ease in as an activity that *made sense* – to use a semiotically relevant phrase to be taken literally as well as figuratively. On the side of philosophy, besides Spinoza, Bergson and Deleuze, Theodor Adorno always accompanied my thinking. That attachment is due to his integration of socio-political wisdom with philosophical rigour. In spring 2020, just one week before the worldwide lockdown, I encountered that double integration once again. To my astonishment and delight, I was invited by the famous film school in Łódź, Poland, to make an experimental ‘essay film.’

I had one week to conduct a day-long seminar about the essay film, to discuss the project with the participants, and to shoot, edit, and finalize the film in a semi-foreign semiosphere, working with actors, cinematographers, sound engineers, and editors whose language I did not understand at all. Fortunately, English was, as usual, a helpful tool. The word ‘essay’ in its meaning of ‘trying,’ in turn in its Anglo-Saxon two meanings of ‘attempting’ and ‘challenging,’ was more than appropriate. From beginning to end, ambiguity and its productive side-effects and affects accompanied the process. Trying as it was, the activity turned out highly exciting and satisfactory. And ambiguity, with the resulting instability of meaning, made a crucial contribution. I wish to put ambiguity at the heart of the concept of the semiosphere, as well as of the practice of curating. This is what makes it, like semiotic practice in general, both stable in the sense of delimited and unstable. Curating is this, too. It happens in a delimited space but can never be fixated.<sup>4</sup>

Ambiguity is crucial to meaning-making, and specific semiospheres can become prominent as the meanings shift and multiply. To understand, negotiate, and deploy meanings in the European semiosphere, an alertness to ambiguity as productive is of crucial importance. The foregrounding of ambiguity in William Empson’s classic book from 1930 had a decisively enriching impact on the practice of literary criticism. Through ambiguity, we can also be alerted to something like an international semiosphere, as well as intermedial curating. To make the case for the beneficial effects of ambiguity, in what follows I will first primarily consider the effect of one *sign*, in fact a simple one much used in Europe, which changed everything in the essay film I made:

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<sup>4</sup> For my views of teaching, specifically concerning visuality, see the interviews organized by Lutters in the 2018 book. The invitation to Łódź came from Dr. Jakub (Kuba) Mikurda. The genre of the essay film has recently been discussed widely (esp. Rascaroli 2008). Mostly, however, these essays discuss films, so, they are highly self-reflexive, and relatively difficult to bring to bear on other issues, such as curating, which, for me, is crucially ‘essayistic.’

*the exclamation mark: '!' It is not a word nor a letter; it is not part of an alphabet nor a signifier carrying a signified in the line of Saussure. It is neither iconic nor indexical, in terms of Peirce's semiotics. Nor can it be considered part of Lotman's secondary modeling systems because it does not translate language into an artistic text. Yet, it is undeniably something like a sign, semiospherically specific as it is, and as such, it is quite powerful. It changes meanings, intonation, and interaction with addressees. It can also help transform the practice of curating from 'bossy' to leaving visitors/spectators free, as active participants. In my view, the appeal to active participation is the key to successful curating. So, curating is not primarily a mode of showing, but a mode of staging encounters, where the work of art comes alive and works to initiate a first-second-person exchange.<sup>5</sup>*

To be precise, thanks to the exclamation mark there are simultaneously two titles to my 2020 film, each carrying its own meaning, semio-situation, and effects. The first is IT'S ABOUT TIME. – ending on a full stop, denoting the subject or theme of the film – what the film is 'about' in the ordinary sense of that preposition. This is a kind of 'third-person discourse,' the impersonal language use where the object (the 'about') is absent from the scene. This thematic center concerns my ongoing interest in and argument for revising our sense of history by turning the linearity of chronology into a mutual movement or directionality between present and past. I have argued for that temporal mutuality by proposing the term 'pre-posterous' (1999). This term is ambiguous, with a self-ironic wink, alluding to the way I have been scolded for writing about art in a (wrongly) allegedly ahistorical way, considered 'preposterous' in the sense of 'absurd,' whereas I simply ('literally') sought to make the prepositions 'pre-' and 'post-' dialogic.<sup>6</sup>

But the small sign – a term I will continue to use, if only because it is so simple and short, but without essentializing it – that changes everything in the film's title is the exclamation mark '! The title is, in the final version: IT'S ABOUT TIME! with the subtitle: REFLECTIONS ON URGENCY, appealing to a typical phrase current in the Anglo-Saxon semiosphere: it's about time we do something; something must happen! This is the rallying call for climate activism; as such, it is a first-second person discourse in a personal, interactive language situation. Of course, it is also, or should be, the rallying cry for the abolition of racism and the current anti-Islamic and anti-migration hysteria. This small sign completely transforms the meaning and the communicative situation. The exclamation mark also changes how we pronounce the title, becoming a sound figure. It makes us raise our voices and even, imaginatively, raise a

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<sup>5</sup> William Empson's book on poetry first published in 1930, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, had a decisive impact on literary criticism in the 'close reading' mode, especially concerning ambiguities and other complexities of poems.

<sup>6</sup> I won't debate the possibility of using the term 'sign' here. Many replace it with 'model,' as a "form of meaning." See Yu (2019a) and, more extensively, Sebeok and Danesi (2000).



warning finger, with a transformation of meaning and of address as a consequence. It is what turns a film on (about) an intellectual issue into a political one – thanks to the ambiguity of English – with the result of integrating the two. And similarly, it is what turns an exhibition from a ‘purely’ aesthetic occasion for enjoyment into an enticement for thinking. Thus, it inflects the quick absorption of information from so-called ‘social media’ – which are not social at all – into a more time-consuming, (self-)reflective attitude. This integrative transformation through ambiguity is, for me, the most crucial aspect of semiotics over disciplinary fields – its relevance. But how can this small sign that hardly belongs to a category of signs be understood in a semiotic framework, how can it address, call on the visitors of an exhibition? This is the question I am raising here. It is crucial for the encounter between semiotics and curating. Both fields are sites of encounter between individual viewers and the objects, be it films or artworks, they are invited to respond to.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Trying semiotics

The kind of film I was asked to experiment with was called ‘essay film.’ This essay is about the essay, then. This is what the essay has in common with curated exhibitions. Not the essay as a genre, though, but as a form (as Adorno called it) of thought alive that is ‘partial’ in the two senses of that felicitously ambiguous word: subjective and fragmented. This sounds excellent as a definition of curating. Thinking as social, performative, active, and always unfinished; as dialogic. Rather than taking a fixed semiotic theory as my point of departure, as a filmmaker and curator, I had to start in practice; from the essay film as a text in the film medium, and its needs, in search of suitable concepts, techniques, and creative ideas. This is also part of semiosis, not easily fitted in Lotman’s sequence of language-text-culture-semiosphere. Instead, language comes in as a helpful tool for providing information, in curating through captions and catalogues, and in film through dialogue and subtitles. But in both cultural practices, the key point is the freedom of the viewers to think and to change their opinions if they see the point of that, solicited by what they see. To begin with, the film needed a story to hold viewers’ attention, just as curating needs to bring in artworks or other objects they can focus on, mostly unified in historical position, thematic relevance, or stylistic commonality. And, as a film, it needed (audio-)visuality. Specialists in communication theory call this ‘transmediality’ – a term I decline to use

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<sup>7</sup> The essay film can be watched on my website, at <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/its-about-time/> My 1999 book *Quoting Caravaggio* lies at the heart of the intellectual reflections on time (‘about’). In the film, Cassandra, playing a teacher (with Walter Benjamin as her student) quotes from that book.

because of the ‘indifference’ implied in the preposition ‘trans-’ but here, indicating a transformation from one medium to another; hence, let’s call it ‘intermediality.’<sup>8</sup>

This was my primary challenge. For developing the script, which I wrote before traveling to Poland and encountering the participants, I took on the mythical figure of Cassandra. She could foresee the future but, in an antique *#MeToo* case, when she declined to sleep with him, was cursed by her boss Apollo to never be believed. With Cassandra’s story, retold by East-German writer Christa Wolf in an updated, ‘pre-posterous’ version from 1983, I tried to ‘figure’ the rallying call implied in the English phrase “It’s about time!” The verb ‘to figure,’ on which more below, stands for the effort to make a figural shape for the thoughts on the indifference of people towards the imminent ecological disaster of the world, and through that figuration, to make those thoughts ‘contagious.’ The exclamation mark in the title indicates that side of the film’s title. But if Adorno so enigmatically but also inspiringly called the essay a ‘form,’ I had to find a corresponding form that would integrate story and image, audiovisuality and language, as I had done in 2017, while curating an inter-medial exhibition. This is how curating and meaning-making join forces, media, and skills.<sup>9</sup>

For my purposes, along with Lotman’s key concept, I was compelled to (intellectually) cross the Atlantic and, acknowledging that he had become a world-wide semiotic master no longer confined to the American semiosphere, to call on Charles Sanders Peirce. Primarily through Umberto Eco’s work, Peirce became semiospherically European. At first sight, Peirce’s concept of the ‘icon,’ the category of signs grounded in correspondence, relied too much on resemblance, raising the unanswerable question of the referent. Peirce’s index could work but lacked the visuality cinema and exhibiting need. And ‘symbol’ would remain too close to convention, whereas innovation was my goal. Instead, after much reflection, I temporarily suspended the semiotic framework to end up with French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s concept of the *figural*. This concept is not particularly semiotic, although I find it very fitting in semiotic thinking. The philosopher came up with that concept in his attempt (essay) to overcome the tenacious word-image opposition. In his 1971 PhD thesis, he argued for language as more dynamic than it is usually seen, turning it into a force, a movement. As such, he argued, language is closer to the Freudian unconscious as laid out in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) than to any Saussure-derived structuralist conception of it; dynamism as opposed to structural stability.

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<sup>8</sup> All terminology and ideas on (inter)mediality are engaged with the two-volume collective work edited by the late Lars Elleström (2021). His introductory essay is a theory on its own. I wrote a foreword to these volumes. On intermediality, see also my 2024 article.

<sup>9</sup> The Cassandra story came to my attention again through the brilliant artwork by Indian artist Nalini Malani, who mobilized it in several works of painting, video-shadow-plays, and animations. See my study on her video-shadow-plays (2016), the first chapter of which is devoted to the Cassandra work she made for the Kassel Documenta in 2012.

And the importance of visuality and other sense-based aspects in Freud's theory of interpretation, with its semiotic implications, has not been appreciated enough, whereas it is crucial for his thinking. In a sense, it implies a form of intellectual curating: bringing images into contact. Including, especially, *force* in his concept of language, Lyotard describes meaning as sense, in terms that include affect, sensation and intuition, movement, and also spatiality. For him, language and the meanings it produces are primarily dynamic. This corresponds with Lotman's flexible methodology as invoked in Torop's aforementioned paragraph. I consider Lyotard's concept as an ideal encounter between semiotic and curatorial thinking and practice; between entering a semiosphere and creating one. In that sense, an exhibition is a particular, spatially limited semiosphere, becoming intensely activating. And if the visitors walk through it, the moving nature of film comes nearer. So, let's consider Lyotard's concept. Force, for Lyotard, is inherent in language, and it is

... nothing other than the energy that folds and wrinkles the text and makes of it an aesthetic work, a difference, that is, a form... And if it expresses, it is because movement resides within it as a force that overturns the table of significations with a seism that makes sense...<sup>10</sup>

I find the word "seism" particularly powerful in this revision of what language is and does, akin as it is to images, to movement, to figuration, to any endeavour to *show*. The word re-introduces iconicity in the figural view of language. These words affiliate language with, specifically, cinematic language, based on the etymological sense of 'movement' (*kinetic*) rather than any technical specificity. Both languages, in their great diversity in Europe, and the cinematic as an informational tool, a mode of communicating and an art form, are prominent in the European semiosphere. And we can juxtapose curatorial practice to these two semiotic forms or even embed them into curatorial practice.<sup>11</sup>

I also found it remarkable that Adorno's extensive writings on literature (two volumes in English) begin with an essay on... the essay, thus giving that category pride of place in literature, coming before poetry, prose, or theatre. But surprisingly, it comes as a 'form.' I interpret that term in Adorno's essay title as congenial with Lotman's sense of 'structure' as a 'secondary modelling system,' although without the rigour Lotman attached to structure (probably in line with Saussure). However, Adorno does not define

<sup>10</sup> I quote from film and philosophy scholar D.N. Rodowick's rendering of Lyotard's concept (2001: 9-10). To grasp the concept more fully, it is rewarding to read Rodowick's first chapter, 'Presenting the Figural,' 1-44.

<sup>11</sup> For another solid explanation of the figural in relation to and distinction from 'figure' and 'figurative,' within the context of art history in its relation to psychoanalysis and philosophy, see Vlad Ionescu (2018). The author discusses the ideas of influential image theorists. I discuss the conception of the cinematic as kinetic apropos of the paintings by Edvard Munch and Flaubert's prose in *Madame Bovary*, making an implicit case for the figural (2017: 24-43).



his key word 'form.' Did he have difficulty defining it? I suppose so. What kind of form is that, where nothing can be fixed? In line with Deleuze's 'Sahara aesthetic' I decided to give the film, as well as the essay I published in the wake of it, the formless and unfixable form of short fragments, which could be seen with the full stop / third-person discourse, and the exclamation mark as the sign of second-personhood. I did something similar when I was invited to curate an exhibition at the Munch Museum in Oslo and was asked to integrate our video installation MADAME B: EXPLORATIONS IN EMOTIONAL CAPITALISM in it. This was an opportunity to foreground the interdisciplinary encounter that both semiotics as a theory and curating as a meaning-making practice compel.<sup>12</sup>

Adorno devoted much of his essay on "The Essay as Form" to bridging the gaps that binary oppositions tend to dig, which he did through nuancing, even if he does not foreground that verb. This resistance against binarism is one of the motivations for my ongoing interest in this philosopher. The following passage characterizes the philosophical *tone* – a nuance that goes well with Adorno's use of "form":

The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character. (Adorno 1991:9)

Along with the series that ends on the rejection of reductionism, of these words of wisdom, 'partial' – mind the ambiguity of that word! – and 'fragmentary' in particular seem to bring us closer to what an 'essay' can be or do, as well as what curating, with its choice-making and activating force, consists of. Both words resist the idea of the total, of the encompassing whole, but also, in its shadow, the totalitarianism that seems to have many places of the current world in its grip. Adorno contrasts binary thinking with an endorsement of ambiguity, as I do in the present text.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to being the opposite of totality, 'partial' also means 'subjective,' in the sense of acknowledging that what the essayist brings forward cannot pretend to be an objective, factual truth but instead, lays close to her or his heart. This is where semiotics and curating join forces. This subjectivation accords well with semiotic thinking, where acknowledging the indispensable role of the act of interpretation is always a key element.

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<sup>12</sup> The video installation of MADAME B was displayed in its most extensive, 19-screen version. For more on it, and the exhibition as a whole, see my 2017 book, which was initially meant as a catalogue but became a fully-fledged study of Munch's work, our installation, Flaubert's literature and of curating as a meaning-making practice, which relies on semiotics to be possible.

<sup>13</sup> I published an essay on experimental film in *Text Matters* (2020a). Mark the productive ambiguity of the journal's title. I recycle some of the ideas laid out here from that essay. Ambiguity, crucial in my analysis here, is not just reducible to Empson's seven types, but more generally, a kind of uncertainty of the kind Copley advances (2016: 88).

Elleström, who was keen on implicating semiotics, called it “cognitive import”: the transfer of the message/sign/ ‘media product’ – to use a media-unspecific term – to the perceivers, who are set to work to transform it into their own semiospheric habits. For interpretation is social, responding to what others have advanced on the text or image, the ‘media product’ under consideration. This makes curating such an important practice. In curation, interpretation in this social foregrounding is the basic semiotic practice without which curation would be senseless. Partiality also means ‘passionate,’ in that the holder of the view brought forward cares about it. And then, there is the element of ‘rational,’ since partiality also encompasses the wish to persuade. And this can only be done through rational arguments. In curatorial practice, such arguments remain implicit, but activating viewers requires their presence. As for ‘fragmentary,’ this accords well with the non-total(itarian). Let us keep these two words, ‘partial’ and ‘fragmentary,’ in mind, with their multiple meanings, together foregrounding even more strongly that nothing can be whole – which is a key feature of curatorial practice. Following Adorno’s thinking, my semiotic reasoning here, is geared towards ambiguity as a key to cultural complexity. This is always bound to particularities of semiospheres and therefore undermines any ambition of universalism. The primary task of curating is to preserve, and foreground, ambiguity, as an incentive to think on your own.

‘Essay’: in addition to taxing, difficult, the word means ‘trying’; attempting to say something for which no ready-made (literary) form or genre exists as yet. This is the Sahara aspect of the semiosphere, as well as of curatorial practice. And ‘genre’ is not where we should look to understand the essay, then, but rather, keeping the words in movement, explore the word-name itself. The modesty that word includes is crucial: trying is attempting, groping towards, fumbling, even floundering. That modesty itself acknowledges that nothing is perfect nor finished, and also, that no one does anything alone; that making something is collective and social, and always in process. Curating resonates with that view of making. This accords well with Lotman’s view of semiosis as social, as well as with curatorial practice. It also has a temporal consequence since it intimates the idea that ‘things,’ such as artworks or films, are never completed; they are, as the Deleuzian saying has it, ‘in becoming,’ since ‘trying’ is never over. If anything fits well with the attempt – essaying – that curating is by definition, it is this insistence on becoming.<sup>14</sup>

But ‘essay’ also includes ‘thought.’ You don’t try something without, first or during, thinking about it. As it happens, one of my films that Kuba Mikurda considered essay films, and which had enticed him to invite me for this experiment, REASONABLE

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<sup>14</sup> For a lucid and succinct explanation of Deleuze’s conceptual use of the verb form ‘becoming,’ see Biehl and Locke (2010).

DOUBT: SCENES FROM TWO LIVES (2016), concerns precisely thought; the social, collective, performative aspects of the activity and the resulting ideas. The narrative strand of that film consists of scenes from the life of René Descartes, Western modernity's primary rationalist who, as my film suggests, was far from being so exclusively rational as we have made him out to be. According to the essayistic thrust of that film, thinking itself is tentative. Thinking, then, occurs in the essay-mode. This makes the essay an important, indeed, crucial cultural phenomenon, and an indispensable support for curating. I would even contend that curating is, by definition, in this Adornian sense.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Relationality

There is one other aspect of the essay that I consider as fundamental as arguing through implicit choices because it is as social as it is semiotic, one that derives from it. That is reciprocity, mutuality, reversibility: dialogue, not monologue. This is the socially crucial aspect of relationality. Whether or not curators as essayists are alone when making/writing it, they are already responding to other ideas that are around; an essay is bi- or multi-lateral. As convinced as the essayist is likely to be when embarking on making an essay, the fact that nothing can be done in isolation – even sitting in a study in front of a computer, one is intellectually, mentally surrounded by others – entails a responsive attitude to the call and contribution of other people inhabiting the same semiosphere to the topic of the essay and the essayist's argument. This is the dialogic nature of thought and of the subsequent 'trying.' In this sense, the essay 'as form' is a model of thinking in general, and its figuration (its form) is exemplary in this sense. This holds not only for the other people directly or indirectly involved, which, in curating, are usually quite a few, but also for what, in our binary mode of thinking and considering the world, we take too easily to be the 'object.' In my work on visual and literary art, and my few curations, I have frequently advocated an open ear and eye for what the object, so to speak, has to say. In this line of thought, I have put forward one of my academic catchphrases, "the object speaks back." By that phrase, I mean that the object of analysis must be given the opportunity to resist an interpretation the subject, the academic, comes up with. This can be done by employing a simple

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<sup>15</sup> On this and my other films, see <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/> This film, on René Descartes and Queen Kristina of Sweden, premiered in the Muzeum Sztuki MOCAC in Kraków, in the film and philosophy festival in 2016. Professor Roma Sendyka made this possible. Simultaneously, the Museum of Photography displayed the 5-screen installation that I made on the same subject, curated by Roma Sendyka and Curatorial Collective, with an Open Access catalogue (in Polish): <http://jagiellonian.academia.edu/KolektywKuratorski>. A book on this project appeared later (also in Polish).

procedure: whenever we cite or quote something or use an image to ‘illustrate’ an argument, it pays off to look back and check the alleged example against what we just wrote about it. The point is this. If it doesn’t quite match, so much the better; thinking that non-matching through, we learn from the object.<sup>16</sup>

This bi-lateral collaboration also holds for thought itself. The most effective formulations of this I know come, not coincidentally, from a psychoanalyst and from a cultural analyst, both brilliant and original in their respective fields. Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas wrote, in one of those sentences that became an enduring guideline for my work: “I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it.” (1987: 10) Not only does this phrasing express modesty – the author acknowledges that he does not yet know precisely what he is busy thinking about or thinking out – but also, it qualifies the intensity (“engaged”) and the liveness of the thought-in-becoming. Most importantly, Bollas’s idea of trying to think up itself collaborates with him. This should not be taken as an unwarranted personification. Instead, it signifies the limit of the thinker’s power, as well as the dynamic quality of thought as an activity. The author and his ‘object,’ the idea he is working on, the idea in becoming, do it together. The idea ‘wishes,’ strives to be thought; it even struggles to achieve the status of idea. Rather than personifying the idea-in-becoming, the phrase acknowledges the need for collaboration, the integration of tentative process with Saharic results, and “second-personhood,” that crucial feature of curating.<sup>17</sup>

In a strikingly comparable formulation, the cultural analyst, semiotician and film scholar Kaja Silverman formulated her theory of the image of, or *as* memory, in the following way:

If, in trying to make sense of this strange account of unconscious memories, I am unable to avoid attributing to them the status of a subject, that is because subjectivity itself is in its most profound sense nothing other than *a constellation of visual memories which is struggling to achieve a perceptual form*. (2000: 89, emphasis added)

That struggle is not only bilateral; given that both Bollas, the author and the idea-in-becoming, are connected to many other beings, issues, and things, it is multiple. It is more like an exhibition than a simple dialogue. Silverman’s word ‘constellation’ intimates that same multiplicity. This is also a feature of the essay as form, approach or genre, if we endorse the following summing up in a reflection on Adorno’s essay:

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<sup>16</sup> See for a more detailed explanation the interviews in Lutters, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> I borrow the very useful term “second-personhood” from the feminist Canadian philosopher Lorraine Code (1991).

Nearly all the familiar topoi are here: the apparent spontaneity of presentation, the emphasis on rhetorical sophistication, the exaltation of the incomplete, the rejection of a purely deductive logic, the eschewal of heavy-handed profundity, the antipathy toward systematic dogmatism, the treatment of non-scientific, often unconventional subject matter, the central importance of play, the insistence on human fallibility, the image of a meandering, exploratory journey. (Pourciau 2007: 624)

When read in detail and with ambiguity, this passage can be seen as a philosophical curation of an idea. If we continue to read for intermediality, this can be understood in a way that brings the visuality in more strongly. This list reads like an impressionist painting, Sahara-like unstable. The features are like the dots that, without line drawing, end up figuring something. There is nothing systematic about it, which, in positive terms, helps to characterize the essay even better. It assists us in avoiding any prematurely fixating attempt to define the essay as a genre. It also helps to renounce efforts, on the part of the essayist, to fulfil all these expectations, since incompleteness is part of the essay-as-attempt. In curatorial practice, the possibility to make changes in an exhibition during its tenure can lean on the passage as well. In an exhibition I co-curated and that travelled to four different countries, this openness became central when we decided that in each country, a local artist would be added to the exhibition.<sup>18</sup>

So, if only as a tactic in curatorial practice, it is useful. But how, then, could I begin thinking of an essay *film*? From the awareness of the importance of bi-laterality and without fear of contradiction, let me briefly enter into the fictional world, which is undeniably an element of the semiosphere. I now reflect on my primary interlocutor, who is a fictional being – one of those struggling ones. Fictionality is omnipresent in art, even abstract art, where it is possible to invoke the potential of ‘visibilisation’ in the case of a film I co-made with Lena Verhoeff, the migrants with whom the busy urban people in the European countries decline to engage.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This was the exhibition 2MOVE I curated with Miguel Angel Hernández Navarro in 2004-2008. The ambiguity of the title integrated the moving image of film and video with the movement of people in migration. The videos were not *about* migration. See our book from 2008.

<sup>19</sup> See our semi-abstract film REFUGEEEDOM: LONELY BUT NOT ALONE, which I made with Lena Verhoeff in 2022-23. The genre of the essay film has recently been discussed widely (esp. Rascaroli 2008). Mostly, however, these essays are films on films, so, they are highly self-reflexive, and relatively difficult to bring to bear on other issues. The concept of ‘tactic’ as distinct from ‘strategy’ has been developed by Michel de Certeau in the introduction to his 1984 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In a brilliant recent study, Tingting Hui brought it to the present world. Exceedingly briefly put, a strategy is for the powerful who seek to win a battle; a tactic for the ordinary people who seek to live (Certeau xix).



#### 4. Figuring characters as signs

In my search (attempt) for semiotic forms that could make the thoughts I wanted to propose and convey, the ambiguity had to remain intact. Hence, the 'about' and the rallying cry had to stay paired, even intertwined. The characters had to figure meanings as signs, no matter what (Peircean) category is the principal one. Iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity are always merged in any sign use, albeit in different proportions. The primary issue is the interaction between the figures, where narrativity comes into play. I figured the 'about' idea through the enactment of a tableau vivant of Cassandra's lover Aeneas as Caravaggio's *John the Baptist in the Wilderness* (1604), with an allegedly abstract but in fact, highly sensuous contemporary painting by American painter David Reed shifting over it; and by interactions of Cassandra with two paintings by South-African-Dutch painter Ina van Zyl, which precariously balance on the sharp and impossible distinction between reality and fiction; as well as semiotic utterances and 'real life.' This is how filmmaking, in my practice, becomes a form of curating, and vice versa: how curating, by compelling visitors to move around in the exhibition space, produces movement that turns the visitors into cinematic figures. The enactment juxtaposed with the historical painting becomes a live commentary on the latter. The juxtaposition speaks for the resulting image combination, to which the viewers are invited to respond. In such cases, film viewers and exhibition visitors share their participation in the 'work' of art.



Figure 1. The enactment

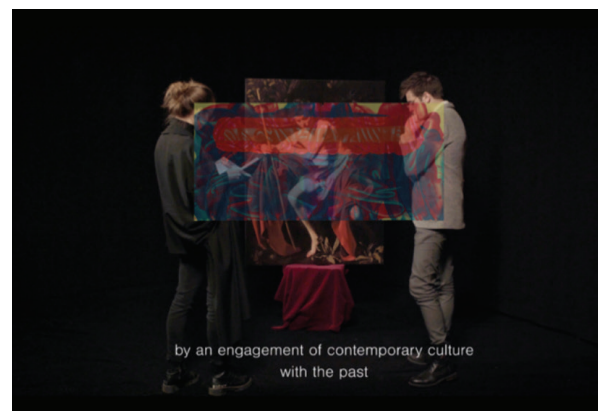


Figure 2. The lesson

In both instances, the characters become figures, and as such, figurations of ideas. The living body of the actor playing Aeneas, and the photocopy of the 17<sup>th</sup> century painting – a still of a still – intermedially produced a media product: the *tableau vivant*. Then, during a history lesson in which Cassandra (now acting as a teacher) explains pre-posterous history to her lover-student, who was dressed up as a Walter Benjamin look-alike, the media whirl around. In a discussion with his teacher, Aeneas quotes a passage from Benjamin's fifth thesis on the philosophy of history, which has been profoundly influential for my thinking on history: "[E]very image of the past that is not recognized by the present *as one of its own concerns* threatens to disappear irretrievably" (emphasis added). Theory – here, philosophy – participates as a medium in itself. But this quotation also foregrounds the urgency of curating as a mode of compelling thinking in the visitors/participants now. For, curating works in and for the present, even if artworks from the past are included in the exhibition. Through its compelling effect on visitors, it insists on the simple but often-forgotten fact that looking, by definition, is an act in the present tense.<sup>20</sup>

It is after this quoting-reading, with the staged copy of the Caravaggio painting, with the *tableau vivant* just seen still in the perceiver's mind, that this is literally and concretely turned into an intermedial product when the painting by David Reed shifts over it. For a moment almost – but not quite! – this contemporary painting hides the older work, or 'pre-text,' as I like to call such precedencies. In the same vein, 'figuration,' here, is a more precise and specific term for a particular kind of intermedial sign. These figures are also needed as a controversial, slightly polemically entangled couple of lovers. Cassandra, in one of these cases – the other one concerning the precarious distinction between sign and thing – also acts as a teacher of history, which is key to her later decisions. In that role, she explains the concept of 'pre-posterous history,' in a slightly pedantic tone. And Aeneas, allegedly her student, responds to her teaching in the (quoted) words and with the looks of Walter Benjamin. These two figures are thus figural instances of pre-posterous history, as its personifications. Whether you wish to call them in that capacity signs, figurations, or models, is up to you. This depends on your theoretical semiotic framework. But the effect of these moments in the film brings the essay film very close to curation.<sup>21</sup>

For Cassandra (played by Magdalena Žak), I had to develop ideas about how to visually render stubbornness and despair. In that context, I also thought about something

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<sup>20</sup> Needless to say, this Benjamin quote supports the idea of "pre-posterous history." To preserve the past, it must be made actual in the present and have relevance there. This can be considered an epigraph to all my work on or with art, including my few curatorial experiences.

<sup>21</sup> Cassandra reads the key passage from the introduction of my 1999 book on pre-posterous history, and the enactment of the Caravaggio, with the Reed painting shifting over it, is an example, or embodiment of it.

that seems banal but is, in its materiality, also firmly anchored in the semiosphere: costumes. As a teacher, she looks proper and serious in a black suit, with her hair in a bun. For the scenes in the palace, but also a scene where she explains her position and vision to the public, I brought a shapeless and colourless (off-white) silk dress, underneath which she wore her own contemporary ‘punk’ half-boots. I also brought a large link necklace, a chain that, coming close to merging iconicity with indexicality, would bring in the idea of captivity. This brought the serious historical (alas, non-fictional) topic of slavery into the temporary European semiosphere. Is that historically justified? Unfortunately, it is. Slavery is a theme I had been intensely focusing on in the video project I had made in 2019 and am currently showing, DON QUIJOTE: SAD COUNTENANCES. For each presentation of this installation I did what I had done much earlier with my project NOTHING IS MISSING, a multiple-channel video installation (5 to 17 screens), of 25–35 minutes (looped), on mothers of migrants, from 2006–2010: I asked the local museum managers or curators to curate, hence, to make the installations.

Although Cervantes created Don Quijote after five and a half years of suffering slavery in Algiers, hence, outside of Europe but captured within the Mediterranean, we know only too well that slavery also continues to occur within the European semiosphere. In Wolf’s novel, from (then) East-Germany, Cassandra reflects on her captivity, even if it is in the rich palace of her parents. This poignant contrast had to be figured as well, and the location in the Herbst Palace, part of the Museum Sztuki, was perfect for this contrastive figuration.<sup>22</sup>

For the role of Aeneas, Kuba’s creative expertise found the actor Adrian Budakow – like Magdalena Żak, a true find. To make a somewhat banal point, which does, however, concern the semiosphere: a preliminary question I asked him was if he would mind appearing half-naked in a figuration I had conceived but not yet written. This was the impersonation just mentioned, as a *tableau vivant*, of Caravaggio’s 1604 *John the Baptist* – an act I had been nurturing for some time, even before I embarked on filmmaking, as a demonstration of my concept of ‘pre-posterous history’ as well as my conception of Baroque as both philosophical and artistic. Such mundane-seeming issues are all part of designing a film and curating an installation or exhibition. No strictly delimited semiotic theory can obscure it; the semiosphere is also a socio-political sphere. Thankfully, Adrian didn’t mind.

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<sup>22</sup> The 16 screens of the Don Quijote project are available at: <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/installations/don-quijote-sad-countenances/>. An extensive catalogue of the Don Quijote project has been published in English and Spanish (see Bal 2020). On slavery in Cervantes’s case, see the incisive, well-documented, award-winning study by Colombian literary scholar María Antonia Garcés (2005). On contemporary slavery, see Bunting and Quirk (eds.) 2017. NOTHING IS MISSING is documented on my website, at [miekebal.org](http://miekebal.org), under artworks/installations. I have written about it in different places, the first being “Nothing is Missing,” in *Intermedialités* 8, ed. Johanne Villeneuve (2006: 189–224).

Then, as another banal-seeming issue, a title was needed, which would have to harbour the allusions to the many aspects of the Cassandra figure and of time. Semiotics does not easily signify time. Determined to bring together, not in harmony but as a “discussion,” my many concerns about time, the ambiguous title *IT’S ABOUT TIME!* came up, with the exclamation mark as the shifter between the two sides of the sign’s meanings. As mentioned above, I have developed and put to work a notion of time that acknowledges that not only does the past influence the present, hence, also the future, but also the other way around. But the title contains a warning, too: hurry up! figured through the exclamation mark. Hence the subtitle, *REFLECTIONS ON URGENCY*. But there is more to temporality, and the semiotic figuring of that is not so easy. Another figural aspect of time is rhythm. This has a bodily side to it, which is essential if we want to recognize the importance of the body as not separate but at one with the mind. This was a decisive issue in the film on Descartes I mentioned above. In the essay film, rhythm is always important, but especially in one which is about time. In view of the second meaning of the title, the rhythm is almost hectic, becomes stronger as the film progresses, and closes on a frantic dance by Cassandra. She ends up saying: “the future is now,” perverting chronology even more strongly, but with a real-sounding urgency. In fact, the different episodes of the film I have mentioned can very well be displayed, curated, as an exhibition. This is a feature of all my films, whether or not we made an exhibition version along with the feature.

Indeed, the backbone of the essay film is Cassandra’s temporal awareness. This is another crucial feature of curating. When visiting an exhibition, viewers are compelled by time. Standing and strolling around burdens the body. This is why I have insisted on providing seating whenever I have curated a show. Cassandra’s repeated call for urgency is key, both to the ancient myth and Wolf’s subjectivation of it, as well as to my attempt to make an essay film on this issue. Aeneas’s interest in participating in political power, his rationality and his resistance against Cassandra’s wisdom, figure the other side, the impossibility of Cassandra’s wisdom winning the upper hand in a semiosphere where men have more influence than women, and (official) politics rules over, and overrules, the (social) political. And in addition to the three aspects of temporality – traditionally, in narratology, called order (sequentiality), duration, and frequency – the one that falls under ‘duration,’ rhythm, is figured in Cassandra’s frantic disco dance towards the end. The most personal, intimate moment in the film, I thought, should be one when the near-future infringes on the figures’ personal lives, and the power relations are put on hold.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The three aspects of temporality have been first systematized by Gérard Genette (1973). See my *Narratology* for succinct explanations (2017a: 66-103), and for examples of analysis based on them, Bal (2021: 100-124).

This became the moment when, walking in the rainy city streets, holding hands, Cassandra breaks up with Aeneas as her lover because he remains too close to the powers-that-be, resulting in a near future in which he would become stultified. Whereas he asks her to come with him to escape from the dangerous place wherein they are caught, she simply, and still, affectionately, refuses. This, in her wording, concerns the future – one she rejects. She abandons him with the poignant words: “I cannot love a hero. I do not want to see you being transformed into a statue.” This wording can be comparable to the exclamation mark: a gearshift of meanings. The metaphor of ‘a statue’ suggests rigidity, stultifying, death. This is the ending of Wolf’s novel. Cassandra’s words cited above, “the future is now,” spoken after her frantic disco-dance, marks the end of my essay film.

## 5. Space as a semiotic tool

One of the primary reasons for the relevance of semiotic thinking for curating is to expand the realm of meaning-making beyond language. This is as obvious as it is difficult to theorize and to fit into a methodology. To make the case for this “other” of language, remaining with the Lyotardian concept of the figural and engaging the communication theorists mentioned above, I will now turn to the least language-like medium for meaning-making, which is, precisely, curating. The work of art, in its inter-activity, has come to stand for certain social groups and the moral values it seeks to invoke; for moods, and event-occasions, historical periods, and ideas. This is certainly not universal but bound to the borders of particular semiospheres. The architecture of the space, the colours painted on the walls, and, before anything else, the selection of working artworks and their disposition in specific combinations, which, together, present the meaning of the exhibition, make curation the creation of a specific semiosphere.

This brings semiotic theory back in again. In an explanation of his three primary categories, Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness (of which the concepts icon, index, and symbol are better known to most), Peirce wrote:

If the universe is thus progressing from a state of all but pure chance to a state of all but complete determination by law, we must suppose that there is an original, elemental, tendency of things to acquire determinate properties, to take habits. This is the Third or mediating element between chance, which brings forth First and original events, and law which produces sequences or Seconds. (1992: 234)



To historicize Peirce's thoughts, it is useful to consider modernism. In a brilliant study of the modernist novel, Robert Caserio argues that any attempt to understand modernism itself as a totality and hence, to sum it up and surpass it, "goes against the grain of what modernism 'stands for'" (1999: 3). The most relevant element in this discussion of colour in the European semiosphere, however, is the paradox we cannot avoid running into. Here, we need to include Freud, who also kept wavering between law and chance in his theorization of the psyche. On the one hand, the psyche is self-divided and thrives on the haphazard wanderings of Eros, "which plays havoc with the attempt to render desire uniform and intelligible" (Caserio 1999: 20).

On the other hand, Freud insisted just as strongly on the fact that nothing the psyche does is accidental. The psyche is both plural and unified, but not coherent. The insight that chance with its agency is always around the corner makes any attempt to prescribe how art should be and how it should be received, futile by definition. Therefore, instead, curation is an essential contribution to the 'second-personhood' of art – the way it is active; it *works*. That is why I prefer to speak of 'the work of art' instead of 'artworks' as things. The task of the curator, or rather, the curatorial team, including the artists, is to make art *work* in this active sense, including meaning-making. That means that art must be set to work, 'speaking' as a 'first person' to the participating 'second persons' that are the viewers or visitors.<sup>24</sup>

One aspect of curating is chance: which space happens to be available, which work can work there, Surrendering entirely to chance, however, would be a disempowering attitude that might even lead to cynicism, and to giving up on the possibility of communication, which is the ground for meaning-making in semiotics, the concept of semiosphere, as well as the activity of curating. And denying chance in an absolutist belief in laws risks leading to destructive sciences, boring exhibitions, and totalitarian politics, which is equally disempowering. The solution is to be found in the tension between the two – a tension that is unstable and subject to a heterochronic temporality. This is productive to the extent that it provides agency and, at the same time, compels modesty. It is a case of temporal ambiguity. Here lies the power of art, not to compel viewers to open themselves up to the potential emergence of new forms and, subsequently, new social existence, but, paradoxically, to allow that to happen when chance meets habit.

In the face of totality, chance is both an opportunity and an obstacle, argues Caserio (1999: 6). He proposes the term *tychisms* (from the Greek *tychè*, meaning chance) for the different conceptions that not only admit chance but also its dual capacity to preclude totality and offer an alternative for it. In other words, tychism allows for the

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<sup>24</sup> In addition to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, for this integration of language, text and culture, I rely in this section on Caserio 1999 and Doane 2002, as well as Carlo Ginzburg's fundamental article on the index (1980).

*agency* of chance; its work. The insistence that chance is not just an occurrence, that it has agency and can cause things to happen, is key to understanding its philosophical importance and its compelling force in curation. Both William James and Charles Sanders Peirce struggled with chance in its opposition to the totality of law. In this guise, chance is an alternative subject for the second half of the well-known slogan: man proposes, chance disposes. Abstract artists often felt limited by the predominance of symbolicity and wanted to get iconicity and indexicality back in there. Hunting for ways out of the restrictive effects of these conventions, they looked to music and the language of poetry. This is where curatorial activity can meet semiotic theory.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For the bond between visual art and poetry, see art historian Michael Ann Holly's new book (2025).

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