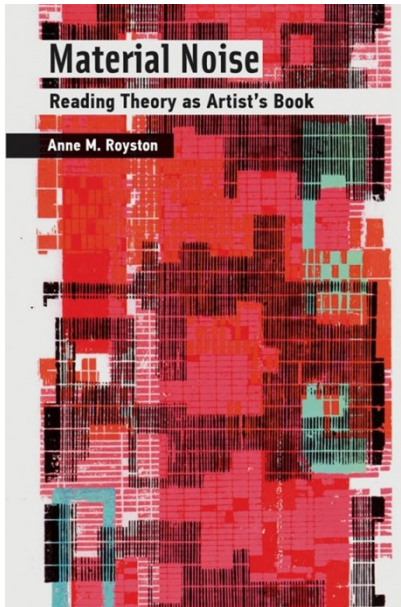# Noise, please: let the body of the text unsettle your readings

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Anne M. Royston. *Material Noise: Reading Theory as Artist's Book*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019. 213 pp. ISBN 978-0-262-04292-5.

Shannon and Weaver would be astonished by this book. Taking into account the concept of noise from the mathematicians' model of communication, Royston shifts it from mere casual media disruption to "a deliberate presence — and a necessary one" (5), using it as a tool to broaden the scope of media studies as well as questioning genre restrictions within the domain of materially-focused reading theories. Moving from the paradigms about how dull the material form of theoretical books should be so as not to disturb the reader's attention, she proposes analyzing some standout examples of theoretical production in which the arguments are boldly presented in both nonsemantic form and semantic content, pointing out the artistic and literary value of these works. She states that the first outcome of any materially-oriented reading is intrinsically related to the way the

form of an argument complexifies and amplifies the range of its own inter-
pretation, bringing up the term *artistic argument* as a way to revise "the ex-
pectations of theory or criticism genre, specifically by employing significa-
tion that exceeds the semantics of printed text" (4). In fact, when
considering artistic arguments, the distinction between discourse and tech-
nique is not applicable, rather, one is strongly intertwined with the other,
surprisingly echoing current material concerns such as "the cultural and
literary shift from print to digital media" (15). Deeply informed by "ideas in
media studies, poetics, communication theory, and linguistics" (19),
Royston analyzes meaning primarily in its nonsemantic instance, emphasiz-
ing how this perspective of reading, whether it is on the page or on the
screen, changes the way we deal with textual interpretations and techno-
logical evaluations. Beyond a positivist viewpoint, the author argues that
noise actually boosts attention, instead of diminishing it, and thus increases
the reader's commitment to retrieve and produce meaning.

Beginning her analysis with the intriguing set of three fascicles known
as *Encyclopedia Da Costa*, Royston points out how the material, social and eco-
nomic conditions that surround the conception of a text are "mutually in-
formative with its explicitly semantic content" (35). To underline the role of
noise, however, she stresses the value of nonsemantic features, i.e. "a range
of nonsigns that still signifies" (38), as a kind of path in finding these en-
tailed conditions within the text, made explicit in her bivalvular analysis of
Da Costa fascicles. In such material reading of this unremarkable work,
Royston evokes the idea of artistic argument as a "bivalvular argument",
with "two parts that operate in tandem without a central unifying principle"
(35). At the same time, this main idea brilliantly shows the dynamic of the
relationship between the author's expositions through the signatures
"acéphale" and "anonymat", while also (nonsemantically) suggesting a her-
meneutic model to explore the possibilities of signification without a sense
of hierarchy and accuracy commonly present in a semantic approach to the
text — just like *Da Costa* (non)semantically states a sense of displacement
and of waste to critique epistemological issues within the encyclopaedic sys-
tematization of knowledge. As Royston puts it, "this tempered view indi-
cates that any theoretical position that relies on semantics to communicate
can only go so far before it fails" (59), arguing that failure involves more
than deviation from purpose — once it brings awareness of the limits of the
language, she reasserts "how an argument of deliberate formlessness might
communicate [...] its own attempts to communication" (60) even in being
labelled noise.

Jacques Derrida's unique work *Glas* is the protagonist of the second
chapter, where the three types of nonsemantic presence examined by

Royston — semisemantic (e.g. puns, *portmanteaus*), material (e.g. paper, ty-
pography) and structural — are strongly correlated with the cognitive shift-
ing brought about by the digital experience of reading. The double-col-
umned book, which is already acknowledged for its forerunner hypertextual
mechanics, offers an even more complex level of significance: "the shape of
the work as enacting something over and above its stated argument" (62).
In *Glas*, reading the text implies reading its architecture through typo-
graphic modulations and columns with variable widths. The restless eye
movement is also a cognitive quest for meaning, oscillating between "form
and content simultaneously" (62). Between the two columns, as Derrida
himself points out, there is a "relation without relation", or accordingly to
Royston, a spatial relation in which the white space is the expression of re-
sistance to integration or to a determined interpretation, inquiring about
"*how* we read *as* we read, attending to the implications of the material form"
(62). Therefore, the graphical features of writing, even in its empty spaces,
gain as much prominence as the semantic dimension in an argument, and
thus distinguish *Glas* as a printed text that shows the flexibility beyond the
presumed media confinement through its multilinear logic. In this sense,
the book also anticipates common cognitive issues of the networked digital
age, stating the vulnerability of the "connections between concepts and
readers while further destabilizing the spaces in which such connections
happen" (81). Through her nonsemantic reading argument, Royston high-
lights that the "endlessly deferred" signified enacted by the dynamic of *Glas*
not only presents the potential of hypertextual structures but also enhances
critical aspects of this discussion.

Also dedicated to one single book, the third chapter brings an even
sharper understanding of mediation issues through the artistic argument
found in *The Telephone Book*, by Avitall Ronell, "offering a unique perspec-
tive on noise, and speaking even more directly to current concerns in me-
dia studies" (86). The typographic manoeuvers that create a defective ex-
perience of reading (or even an experience of non-reading) throughout
the book, make the reader mindful of the process of communication.
Ronell's work uses these nonsemantic effects not only to stress noise
avoidance for media efficiency, but also to raise the issue of social aspects
as a factor within the communication process, figuring out that the "illeg-
ibility slowly takes on a gendered shape, a 'technological feminine', in
which both terms (of gender and technology) are reconsidered" (87).
Royston's term seems to be inspired by references to the "Heideggerean
'young thing,' Carl Jung's schizophrenic Miss St., and Alexander Graham
Bell's deaf mother" (91) presented in the book, where they are used to elu-

cidate questions of "deviance from the established (masculine, able, articulated or semantic) norm" (91). The author also reinforces the role of white space as an inherent element of consciousness inside the communication processes, as in the previous chapter, and draws attention to the absence as a kind of awareness of the perception of presence. Finally, the idea of understanding the mechanisms inside a medium — the "de-blackboxing" — is revised by media theory critique, which is done through the technological feminine as an artistic argument.

In the fourth chapter, the author introduces a facet of the artistic argument which "goes further in its antipathy toward a depth model of reading" (110): what she calls "texts of skin". The particularities of this surface-oriented kind of text are detailed through the analysis of three out of the ordinary writing projects: *Hiding* and *The Réal, Las Vegas, NV*— both by Mark C. Taylor; and *Skin* (2003), by Shelley Jackson. As Royston goes further in exploring the tension of nonsemantic aspects in these texts, the unusual forms of the stories "characterize questions of meaning as questions of function" (111), bringing forth the complexity of the embodied act of reading by virtue of the relation between reader and surface. Considering that the reader's "skin is not a medium [...] but a mixture" (112), this dynamic highlights that the tension is not about conflict between types of medium, but how the fluidity of the organic reading body interacts with the inflexible mechanical boundaries of the medium's surface to multiply meaning possibilities. At this point, the sense of touch gains prominence in Royston's exceptional analyses as she presents the concept of loss as a common thread linking hose three texts: beginning with the recursiveness between *Hiding*'s writing topics and page aspects, thus featuring concepts through body sentience; randomly crossing the fifty-two hypertextual remains of a lost land of the lost (and losers) in *The Réal, Las Vegas, NV*; and finally getting spread on *Skin*'s 2,095 volunteers within their mortal bodies. In these cases, the instability of the presence of the text, "even at the word level" (131), makes what is materially unattainable both hidden *and* lost. The unsettled nature that passes over everything in the world is oddly settled on these texts by the "[a]rtistic arguments, with their networked, emergent, fluid surfaces that shift and disintegrate" (134). Losing, for Royston, is not only the inevitable result of noise but also the necessary shifting that brings awareness about the experience of reading.

The last chapter of the book is quite different from the average conclusion. Royston makes an interesting move, almost retroactive, this time presenting the theoretical and literary value of artists' books still through the logic of the artistic argument. While increasing the complexity of the author's thesis, this closeness to a more poetic language contributes to an

understanding of artistic arguments beyond genres. The two titles chosen for the challenging analyses — *Stochastic Poetics* (2012), by Johanna Drucker, and *Tom Tit Tot* (2013), by Susan Howe — use "explicit poetics" to raise discussions about critical topics in media studies and literature, making "arguments about production and reception through their material forms" (136) and providing embodied instances of "the way in which old media and new continue to inform one another" (136). In this chapter, Royston visits Jerome McGann's concept of n-dimensionality to corroborate her approach to the text as a field, where not only several dimensions coexist and merge, but where tensions among textual elements also create instability (and noise), as in a force field. In this sense, Drucker and Howe's works present this dynamic by means of their material self-reflexiveness, creating a myriad of non-definitive versions of themselves through the correlation between semantic and nonsemantic circumstances. At this point, Royston concludes her book by reinforcing the idea of noise as "what makes communication possible", recalling that the opacity created by the awareness of the medium and its mediation processes in the experience of reading is, somehow, fundamental for an understanding of the non-referential uses of language.