

The Language of Repair

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Repair Discourse – visual, physical, spoken.

In the field of linguistics, repair corrects spoken errors that disrupt sentences. If one were to apply this to material practice, repair becomes the correction of a physical disruption of a 'material sentence'.

Repair is a practice peculiar unto itself – it occurs in most disciplines, is practiced by many people in many different contexts, but is often not acknowledged. The same repair job can often be done by skilled or unskilled agent, can use specialist knowledge or be done by a layperson and can relate to seemingly unrelated practices. Repair may be done as an instant reaction to a break, or any time after, to improve an object or through need. It may be done in the same place as the object was made, by the maker, or elsewhere, by anyone else. As such, normative structures that often give an order to material practices (chronology, discipline, geography for example) do not suit the multidimensional nature of repair.

This essay considers the use of Foucault's Formation of Strategies¹ as a method for exploring the nature of repair practices. Foucault defines strategy as being a combination of the theme (origin of the language) and then theory (kinship between languages) of a discourse. Repair practice is complex and interlinked: its themes and theories stem from and are contained within that of making. Therefore the strategy of repair discourse is visual, physical and communicative, and signifies/shares narrative, material, method/system and agent. Within these domains it is layered; ordered and reordered; repetitive, specific and vague; borrowed and blended. Considering the material facts of this discourse and understanding the importance of what is extrinsic to it can help to grow the understanding of the practice of repair, the materials, methods and community of practice surrounding it.

Foucault divides language discourse into three: comparison, locality and appropriation. The use of these divisions in the material based discourse of repair will be discussed here.

COMPARISON

Foucault says, in order to define a discourse, one must find the 'points of diffraction'², which are points that may be created the same way but give alternatives to one another. In repair practice these points are written by damage and repair occurring, creating visual 'obtrusions'³, disrupting the **material** and **method/system** of the thing. Reading these repetitive patterns give us the equivalent and incompatible elements of the discourse; holes are created by breaking through but appear in different things - a hole in a pair of jeans / a hole in an exhaust pipe; a denim patch / a metal patch.

LOCALITY

Locality, 'the role played by the discourse being studied in relation to those that are contemporary with it or related to it'⁴, the relevant context, acknowledges that the discourse may have different meanings elsewhere, and creates an 'economy of the discursive constellation'⁵, the specific and effective use of it. The locality of damage or repair contributes to its **narrative**, and with **material** and **method/system**, the material thing physically locates the discourse within a discipline, time and space. Although the communicative and visual elements have commonalities, their localities vary, leading to transferable knowledge of how materials and methods/systems of repair work, but not necessarily the specific skills required. Thus, a textile practitioner may be able to patch jeans, and understand how to patch an exhaust pipe but lack the specific skills for that job.

APPROPRIATION

The agent, as interpreter, reads the visual and physical 'babble' (the 'chatter of meanings produced by the ensemble of artefacts'⁶) of the marks of damage or repair. Appropriation, the functioning of the discourse in its specific field, acknowledges the holistic discourse of repair and appropriates it to an exact discipline, and enables communication.

The repetitive nature of damage and repair begin the formations of repair discourse. As repair practice is cross discipline, often sited away from main elements of practice and disrupts typical chronologies, Foucault's system of comparing, locating and appropriating the visual, physical and communicative elements, (including what they are not) could aid the structuring and understanding of repair discourse. However, as it is both repetitive and sited

within the discourse of making, repair discourse can never be truly within a single context.

As damage and repair give space for innovation⁷, and garbaged information is still information⁸, to not engage with them is to misread repair discourse and risk missing information within and othered from it. The material sentences of repair discourse describe areas of action and value(s), narratives, materials and methods/systems interpreted by agents, opening points of diffraction for new areas of discourse to develop.
