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SEMIOTICS, ARTS AND REALITY

In 2024, in Warsaw, on the centenary of the birth (September 30th) of one of the most important Polish semioticians—Professor Jerzy Pelc—the 16th World Congress of Semiotics / 16th World Congress of the IASS-AIS (WCS) was held under the auspices of IASS-AIS, with the main theme being “Signs and Realities”. This topic was related to the research of Jerzy Pelc, and this choice was intended to not only recall this outstanding semiotician, but also to remind us of what has always been the essence of semiotics, and which, in our times, is sometimes blurred in the “craziness” of always searching for something new. At the same time, it is an extremely current topic in an era of realities largely created by mass media, artificial intelligence, algorithms and special effects, often combined with created worlds and experiences that change and sometimes, even, pervert the perception and experience of real life.

The topic of “art and reality” is one of the most widely discussed in the history of the visual arts, but not so much in other arts such as music, cinema, performative or multimedia arts, etc. This topic has been well elaborated upon by many scholars, such as Ernst Gombrich and his colleagues Julian Hochberg and Max Black, who, in their book titled *Art, Perception, and Reality* (1973), discuss the relationships between art, reality, and the human perception of those elements from a triple perspective: that of the history of art, of psychology and of philosophy. Joyce Cary, for his part, in his book titled *Art and Reality: Ways of the Creative Process* (1958) examines, from practical experience, “the relation of the artist with the world as it seems to him, and to see what he does with it” (p. 11) and asks how varying arts present different forms of the “truth”. More contempo-

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rary research on this topic includes the book by Dennis J. Sporre titled *Reality Through the Arts* (1991) in which the author offers a wider view, not only of the visual arts, but also of other arts, seeing art as a tool for artistic actions composed of various media.

The topic “art and semiotics” has also been well-elaborated upon. I could here cite Mike Bal and Norman Bryson and their classic essay “Semiotics and Art History: A Discussion of Context and Senders” (1998), or the Prague School and its semiotic approach to the arts (cf. Titunik, Matejka, 1984), or Meyer Schapiro and his famous essay “On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs” (1972–1973).

Many semioticians say that “We inhabit two worlds—the world of matter and the world of meaning” (O’Halloran, 2023; cf. also Halliday, 2005). Could we see the world of matter as an artistic one that refers us to the world of meaning and for which human experience is necessary to put together both worlds? Moreover, regarding the arts we can also ask the question of which kind of reality we are analysing: artistic, semiotic, or other? We can compare artistic and semiotic (scholarly) realities—perhaps both create the same image of reality, but use different tools or have other aims. Perhaps the artistic reality is subjective, and that of semiotics could be objective (cf. the famous dichotomy: objective/subjective—in the sense of Heidegger or Deely)? Additionally, one could ask: what do we understand as reality? Is there one or more? The subjectivity of perception causes us to perceive more than one reality or to see the same reality from various perspectives or, if we believe quantum physics, there is possibly more than one universe—all of which provokes questions on the singularity or plurality of reality, parallel worlds, and even the multiverse...

We can see the arts as a tool of communication composed of signs, codes, and even systems, and semiotics offers various tools to analyse the relationships between art and reality (e.g., Popova, 2003). One can also compare different arts to find common elements in all arts or similar artistic practices and tools that serve for communication, to code and decode messages in the various systems (e.g., Souriau, 1947).

Some scholars propose quite complex theories or methods that allow us to analyse, among others, the arts and their relationships to reality (cf. Barry, 1999; Schechter, 2008; Solomonick 2015; Tarasti, 2000). Others have proposed a common reflection on semiotics and the arts in volumes in which all of the arts are placed together, close to each other, such as *Bloomsbury Semiotics Volume 3: Semiotics in the Arts and Social Sciences* (Pelkey, Petrilli, Ricciardone, 2023), *Open Semiotics. Volume 3: Texts, Images, Arts* (Biglari, 2023), or *Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities in the Post-Truth Era: The Reality Machine* (Günay, Kalelioğlu, Bayram, 2024).

During the Warsaw Congress, several of the nearly 50 panels concerned the arts—including one of the three under the patronage of the Polish Semiotic Society (PTS): “Semiotic and Artistic Realities” (Wąsik, 2024, p. 33–34, 242–257). For Jerzy Pelc, who was one of the founders of the PTS, one important element

of research was the process of using signs and their interpretation in the act of communication, which also can be applied to various arts. Pelc saw semioticians not only as philosophers or linguists, but also as specialists from various research areas, imagining collaboration on the basis of semiotics: psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnologists, theoreticians of literature, theatre, film and music. This collaboration should lead to discussions and “the search for a common language: both in terms of terminology, and in considerations about the rational division of tasks, and—most profoundly—in terms of substantive matters”,¹ as he claimed in the Introduction to the first volume of *Studia Semiotyczne* (Pelc, 1970, p. 9). This was also the case during the panel devoted to the relationship between art, reality and semiotics: it brought together philosophers, linguists, art historians, film and theatre scholars, literary scholars and musicologists drawing on various areas of semiotics to search for a common language and to deepen the understanding of the fundamental aspects of perceiving reality through art and its relationships with reality. This enabled a lively discussion resulting from the differences in “theoretical attitudes and habits, born for example from practising different disciplines or from conflicting schools, differences of interests and opinions” (Pelc, 1970, p. 9). Thanks to this, the discussions were extremely fruitful and allowed for the finding of common ground. The next step was to announce a call for papers for *Studia Semiotyczne*, founded by the Professor several decades ago, and which I have titled “Semiotics, Arts, and Reality”. I posed several questions to the authors:

1. Which means are used in the different arts to react to, describe, and create reality?
2. Which codes are used by artists to present reality?
3. How do the arts/artists describe reality?
4. How do codes and signs function in artistic reality?
5. Which tools do semiotics offer us for the research into these topics?

Responses came from all over the world. From those articles that addressed these issues, I ultimately selected nine, which I present to the reader today.

The concept of this volume is to begin with the broadest approach to the topic and then explore various arts—from performing arts to... performing arts, yet operating in different mediums and grounded in different theoretical concepts. The selected articles address not only different arts and differently understood realities, but also draw on various semiotic concepts. This provides the reader with a multifaceted mosaic showcasing the diversity of contemporary semiotics, which, despite its diversity, is always the same in its deepest assumptions. This allows us, as Professor Pelc desired, to connect specialists from various disci-

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are those of the author.

plines thanks to semiotics that serves as a kind of meta-tool and, at the same time, a common space.

The first article, *Art as a Language Facing Reality*, by Eduardo Grillo (Italy), is an in-depth reflection on the main themes of this volume—"the complex relationship between language, art, and reality through a semiotic perspective" (p. 11 of the current issue). It also provides the most theoretical introduction and provides a background for reflections on the reality of various arts. Next, Bujar Hoxha, in *An Epistemological Way of Exemplifying Artistic Realities: From a "Transformational" to a "Transcendental" Sign*, discusses the performing arts and their relationship to reality, drawing on the semiotics of passions (Greimas and Fontanille) and existential semiotics (Tarasti).

Irina Melnikova's paper begins a series of texts focused on specific arts, often illustrated by a particular case. In *Semiotic Mapping of Reading and Lolita's Interpretations*, the author discusses Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and its numerous interpretations, drawing on Peirce and adapting his semiotics to literary studies, including the issue of "textual materiality". The next article, Pacarrete: *The Aesthetics of the Screen in Journalistic Texts* (Gilmar Hermes), continues Peirce's contemporary applications, this time to "journalism focused on Brazilian films" (p. 65), which allows for the connection between textual and visual elements. A different perspective on these connections, in the context of Peruvian comics, can be found in the work entitled *Enunciation and Memory: Conservative Representations of the Peruvian Internal Armed Conflict through Comics* (Eduardo Yalán, Jose Miguel Guerra, Gonzalo Jara Townsend), in which the authors analyse comics as a medium for representing historical events.

Vivian Mizrahi's essay *A Naïve Realist Account of Depiction* shifts the focus to visuality and the visual arts, art history, and the perception of visual arts, our way of viewing and interpreting art. Maria Helena Martins Costa Pires's contribution (Garden of Eden. *Art and the Artificiality of the Natural*) examines the spatiality of art, its relationships with nature, reality, and the imagined, as well as "the meaning-making process of our contemporary sensitive experience" (p. 129), drawing on the concept of sociosemiotics. Leonid Tchertov, for his part, in his article *Semiotized Spaces in Pictorial Arts* drawing on the concept of the semiotics of space, analyses the perception of space in and through the fine arts in relation to reality, as well as in the context of "processes of subject-object representation and inter-subject communication" (p. 151). The volume concludes with Paulo C. Chagas and Ivana Petković Lozo's paper, *Sound as Modulating Reality: A Semiotic and Phenomenological Approach to Electroacoustic Music*, which states that music is a medium that organises reality, including space and our perception of art and the world around us.

Hoping that the multifaceted reflection in this volume will enliven the discussion on the relationship between art and semiotics, I wish readers a pleasant and research-inspiring read.

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