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ART AS A LANGUAGE FACING REALITY

SUMMARY: The paper examines the complex relationship between language, art, and reality through a semiotic perspective. Drawing on key theorists such as Eco, Greimas, and Barbieri, it argues that art operates as a distinct language that challenges perceptual and cognitive habits by subverting expectations. Aesthetic experiences are viewed as transformative moments that reshape the individual’s worldview and interpretive abilities. The analysis highlights how artistic texts, through ambiguity and self-reflexivity, encourage deeper engagement and innovation in meaning-making. The paper also considers the impact of digital technologies, suggesting that while they risk dulling sensory and imaginative faculties in programmed environments, they simultaneously offer new creative opportunities. Ultimately, art remains a crucial site for reflection and transformation, capable of redefining the boundaries of reality and driving cultural and subjective change. The paper advocates for a mindful engagement with media, underscoring the liberating power of artistic manipulation and the necessity of protecting imaginative freedom.

KEYWORDS: reality, language, art, expectations, digital technology.

1. Introduction. Reality: From Languages to Art

There was a time when, in semiotics, the use of the word “reality” was strongly discouraged: there was a risk of being considered incurable idealists. An exception could be made by putting the term in quotation marks. However, doing so left the door open to a wide variety of interpretations, including contradictory

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ones, between these two extremes: 1) semiotics has nothing to say about the world we live in (“reality”); 2) semiotics continues to be a referential theory (too rigid, empirical, and adhering to “reality”).

All misunderstandings revolved (and sometimes still revolve) around a fundamental principle of semiotics: the primary task of languages is not so much to provide an effective means of communication as it is to give form to the world of experience. However, this does not mean that there is not “something out there”; it just indicates that we know nothing more about it than what our semiotic systems allow us to focus on and express. This, in turn, does not imply that the signs these systems organize correspond point by point to what we perceive; each system follows its own rules of organization, incorporating specific perspectives. In summary, even “reality” is a word; that is, an expression linked to a content, but something stimulates us to use this word in some senses and not in others.

Every great semiologist has elaborated on this assumption, emphasizing various aspects of it. Sebeok (1986) credited the addition of the communicative function to the phylogenetic development of syntax, particularly in the context of verbal language. Lotman considered languages to be modeling systems, assigning a privileged role to verbal language. He specifically acknowledged the existence of multiple languages and traced reality back to what is translatable in the transition from one language to another. Furthermore, this realm of untranslatability serves as a reserve of elements contributing to the renewal of languages, with which these languages are in constant contact:

[T]he world of semiosis is not fatally locked in on itself: it forms a complex structure, which always ‘plays’ with the space external to it, first drawing it into itself, then throwing into it those elements of its own which have already been used and which have lost their semiotic activity. (Lotman, 2009, p. 24)

The relationship between languages and reality is also a matter of translation for Greimas (1987a), who regards the “natural world” as a semiotic system, much like verbal language. In the translation process between these two semiotics, the plane of expression of the former becomes the plane of content of the latter. The world “out there” thus becomes an immense reservoir of non-linguistic languages and systems of meaning beyond verbal languages, which are translated into linguistic forms. Adopting this perspective, nature must be understood in terms of habit, specifically what occurs most often; in brief, the world is the realm of common sense, a universe already endowed with meaning. However, both the world and language are real nonetheless: the world because it is the actual reservoir of meaning for language, and language because it is effective (that is, produces real effects) in translating the world.

Ultimately, Umberto Eco’s approach, despite going through various phases, has consistently emphasized the relationship between reality and language, recognizing its role in constructing models of the world—always imperfect but 1) adequate enough to allow us to navigate the world without too much drama; 2) nonetheless dependent on cultural (and ideological) constraints. From this

perspective, the fundamental theoretical problem involves navigating between conflicting demands: the reasons for order and the claims of Adventure. For Eco, it has always been a matter of reconciling the dual nature of the world—an open horizon of possibilities and a system of constraints—with inherently dual languages, blending invention and recognition (Pisanty, Traini, 2017).

These last two characteristics highlight the linguistic nature of art. Aesthetic theories and the history of poetics have consistently relied on mimesis, on one hand, and novelty, on the other. According to Lotman (2011), secondary modeling systems; text-laboratories, as proposed by Eco (1976; 1979); and places of perceptual fracture, as explored by Greimas (1987b), artistic languages, artworks, and aesthetic experiences serve consistently as sites of tension in semiotic reflection, where the world is redefined and our expectations are challenged. All of this will be discussed in paragraph 2. Paragraph 3 will focus on brief reflections regarding the impact of digital technologies on the relationship between languages, reality, and artistic works. It seems necessary to devote at least some thought to this subject, considering that we are now attempting to untangle ourselves from the opportunities offered by new technologies and the reality crisis they threaten.

2. Artistic Languages and Aesthetic Experience: Forms and Expectations

The purpose of art is to wash the dust of daily life off our souls

Pablo Picasso

Only he is an artist who can make a riddle out of a solution

Karl Krauss

The quote from Picasso does not define art as an amusing diversion. Instead, the dust he refers to can be seen as a veil of habits that ultimately weigh down and obscure our view of reality. In this context, the quote assigns the role of “cleaner” to art, which is capable of giving our perceptual habits a vigorous shake-up. Krauss agrees, adding the characteristics of cognitive complexity and reflexivity to artistic practices.

The idea that artworks always involve a revolution, or at least a modulation of perceptual habits, aligns with most semiotic approaches to art and aesthetic experience, as we noted at the end of the introduction. Here, I will focus on Eco’s and Greimas’s theories. Although they might seem disparate and inconsistent, I believe we can discover a common ground that could serve as a foundation for fruitful developments in our discourse.

According to Eco (1976), aesthetic quality, following Jakobson, depends on the coexistence of two characteristics: ambiguity and the self-focusing use of codes. Ambiguity arises from the wealth of possible interpretations; in short, aesthetic quality functions due to the openness of the text. Self-reflexivity closely relates to this: the greater complexity of the aesthetic text draws attention to its

construction, compelling the interpreter to engage in additional cognitive work. In brief, the interpreter is prompted to make inferences to understand the text and how it intrigues them. The process is thus characterized as a back-and-forth between the expectations generated by the text at each step and their satisfaction or frustration: the greater the surprise, the greater the pleasure; the more profound the understanding of the text's craftsmanship, the more significant the impact on the interpreter. In this way, the aesthetic text must innovate to some degree (moderately or radically) to achieve its effects. The renewal of existing codes challenges expectations while simultaneously altering the worldview (or changing the structure of the Encyclopaedia, Eco, 1976; 1986). In summary, through this experience, the subject undergoes two transformations: it develops new interpretative abilities and, as it is a product of the "debris" of the Encyclopaedia (Eco, 1986, p. 45), it contributes to the development of a new "worldview". In other words, 1) the subject learns to see the world differently, thereby modifying the relationships it is part of; 2) the aesthetic text, in the long run, alters the culture in which it exists, reshaping the relationships in which the subject is involved.

Greimas' approach to aesthetic experience is quite different, as exemplified in *De l'imperfection* (Greimas, 1987b). In this small volume, Greimas goes beyond the realm of recognized aesthetic texts, which are the primary objects of Eco's analyses, to delve into everyday experience. In his analyses, he explores certain sudden events that, through a translation from one sensory domain to another, lead the subject to merge with its object of contemplation, redesigning the initial attentional structure. Subjects transform themselves by eliminating the distance from the object and gaining a new awareness, a new way of feeling. However, this process is made possible by a rupture; the habitual course of experience is interrupted by the event: this is the aesthetic grasp, defined by Greimas as "wait for the unexpected". In short, a feeling emerges from the encounter between a particular cultural predisposition of the subject and a particular material poignancy of the object, which anticipates and enables the new reciprocal constitution of the Subject and Object. The subject will only complete its transformation later, becoming fully aware of the nature of the event, albeit imperfectly.

Beyond the differences, we first note 1) that both authors attribute to aesthetic experience the capacity to transform the subject through a sensorial experience. Admittedly, Eco places less emphasis on the impact on the senses, but for both, the outcome is a lasting change in the subject's status and capabilities. Furthermore, 2) both describe the aesthetic experience as the feeling produced by a rupture; something occurs that does not align with expectations. The subject is confronted with aspects that undermine their system of expectations. In summary, for both, albeit in different ways, the aesthetic experience serves as a kind of incongruous (and powerful) response to the subject's expectations.

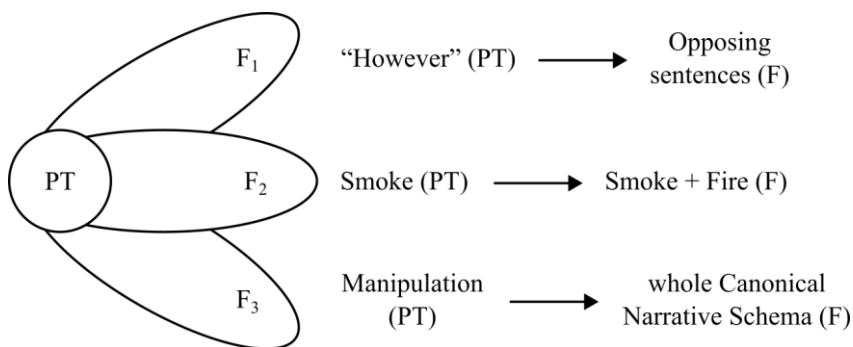
An accomplished treatment of semiotic and aesthetic activity, regarding the tension between expectation and experience, can be found in the work of Daniele Barbieri. For Barbieri, time and meaning hold a fundamental relationship. The

tension toward what is imminent constitutes an essential aspect of our lives, and expectation results from not being passive before the world. The expectations that arise during interpretation are triggered by the recognition of textual elements, which stimulate anticipations. These elements are referred to as perceptual terms (PT) by Barbieri (2004), which in turn give rise to forms (F) of various extensions. A form is described as any perceptual or conceptual configuration to which we can attribute some completeness. These configurations are “sent to memory”, so to speak, depending on the subjects’ cultural organization and perceptual abilities. Now, Peirce has taught us that there is always a habitual mode of arranging our experience, considering its subjective and emotional nature. According to Peirce, regularity always precedes (and makes possible) singularity. Peirce discussed habits or dispositions to action rather than mere action routines. Thus, producing a text is always a matter of habits and adjustment to the current situation. In this process, we do not merely implement a rule; instead, we follow regular dispositions and adjust them in real time.

The size of perceptual terms and forms depends, of course, on the applied principle of relevance, and a single perceptual term may give rise to the expectation of several possible forms, some of which are more probable. The fact that we first recognize perceptual terms rather than forms entirely depends on the inherently situated nature of perception. To give just a couple of examples (Figure 1): if we see smoke (TP), we will expect the overall smoke-fire form; if we read “but”, we will expect a sentence that contradicts in some way what has just been stated; if we detect the manipulation phase, we will expect the entire sequence of the canonical narrative pattern (Greimas, Courtés, 1979, *ad vocem*).

Figure 1

Barbieri’s Theory of Tension: Examples



Note. Source: author’s own elaboration.

Barbieri also suggests that the interplay of pro-tensions and distensions precisely constitutes the aesthetic function; that is, an aesthetic text can effectively manage expectations.

More recently, Barbieri (2020) introduced notions that clarify his approach, particularly the characteristics of aesthetic experience from a tensive perspective: *Stimmung* (agreement), Cognition, and Participation. *Stimmung* is understood as an alignment between subjects and their experiences. In short, *Stimmung* is the euphoric response to the world, becoming more intense the less predictable it is. It is a general phenomenon that can be specified as Joint participation—a *Stimmung* that pertains to a subject who feels the alignment but is not consciously aware of it. At the same time, proper Cognition occurs when the accord between internal and external states becomes the object of awareness. Aesthetic experience thus consists of feeling a profound attunement that cannot be immediately transformed into Cognition for communicative purposes. In brief, the subject is somewhat “suspended”, serving as a witness to what he is experiencing; once the subject becomes aware of this, the feeling disappears (imperfection). Joint participation is always an interpretation, but a kind of “subjectless” one, where the rhythmic aspects typical of Co-participation are predominant, and the tension (a cognitive phenomenon) takes time to assert itself.

From this perspective, aesthetic experience is a type of experience that initially surprises the subject by imposing an unexpected rhythm, leading to a new level of awareness. It is a complex phenomenon that does not allow for the identification of a specific form (ambiguity) and results in a different understanding of the possibilities of perception (self-reflexivity). This phenomenon suspends all explicit cognition, undermining the translation of bodily patterns (esthesia) into specific forms and blurring the line between subject and object. The translation will only be reactivated afterward (imperfection), but the discovery of new possible dimensions will change it. Therefore, it is a transformative experience in which the subject acquires new habits (Peirce, Eco) or, in other words, adopts a new position among the figures of the world (Greimas).

If subjects are shaped by the expectations they formulate, aesthetic experience radically rearranges their system of expectations, making them more aware of their *modus operandi* in retrospect. In this way, art is “a sort of reflection in action on the internal image through figures” (Garroni, 2005, p. 98). In this sense, “art makes the observer realize the cognitive mechanism on which his or her relationship with the world is based” (Cimatti, 2017, p. 42).

To sum up, if languages make reality visible to us, artistic languages provide specific forms of visibility. While one of the most critical tasks of language is to offer a stable way to manage our expectations, artistic languages essentially play with them. Starting from what languages have carved out and “torn away” from reality, we produce expectations; art questions them. We understand that artistic languages can rework elements of reality to challenge our perceptual habits or our usual way of textualizing experiences to the point that an entire culture could change its worldview—that is, its understanding of reality. They can also help us

rediscover and appreciate what we often take for granted and view as trivial, prompting us to be aware of how our perception and meaning-making processes function. This is made possible by presenting us with different ways to connect perceptual terms and forms; artistic languages can show us the immense variety of forms that are possible, stimulating our imagination and challenging our need to ground ourselves in what we already know and what we are used to doing.

3. A Few Considerations on the Digital Revolution

*Technology is a way of organizing the world
so that man does not have to experience it*

Max Frisch

*Digital technology is the same revolution as adding sound to pictures and the
same revolution as adding color to pictures. Nothing more and nothing less*

George Lucas

It may seem that with the rise of digital technology, the relationship between languages and the reality we have envisioned could be compromised. A movie, video, or image produced through CGI or Generative Adversarial Networks depicts what is not physically present in front of the camera. Furthermore, the fact that we live in technologically mediated environments may challenge what we have stated about the power of language and art to shape reality. Of course, opinions on the actual impact of digital technologies on our relationship with reality vary widely, as evidenced by the two quotes above. Who is right: those who argue that this is a real revolution or those who downplay it? Eco (2000) taught us to take a stand between opposing extremes. Therefore, it is wise to proceed with caution, favoring an analytical and dispassionate approach.

First and foremost, we must acknowledge that our habits as human beings have always been technically mediated. Pietro Montani (2014), among others, considers this our distinguishing feature, and he goes further by interpreting even verbal language as a technology—an external technology that we introduce during phylogeny and ontogeny, which in turn influences our way of thinking. He argues that technical mediation has always been a two-way process: we modify the world through technology, and technology, in turn, modifies us and our way of perceiving the world. If the human world has always been a media environment, today we are faced with a new digital technological environment that is increasingly replacing the physical world.

However, this replacement lacks the features of Baudrillard's "perfect crime" (Baudrillard, 1996). It is not merely the world becoming a fable, as Nietzsche said. Nevertheless, it profoundly impacts our lives. This impact stems from two interconnected aspects of this process. First, just a few years ago, access to media was temporary and typically self-controlled; we could enter and exit at will, turning it on and off as we pleased. Now, we find ourselves in a digital environ-

ment without even noticing the transition. There is no longer a distinct shift: we now inhabit a mixed environment known as the post-media condition. Second, the defining feature of a digital environment is not that it is fake; more significantly, it is entirely programmed. It is designed to elicit specific responses.

Moreover, it is a fast-paced environment. We have no time to explore or implement creative or unforeseen responses. There is only room for reactions, which limits our field of experience. Furthermore, this significantly affects our perceptual habits. We gradually lose our ability to identify new and unexpected affordances and respond to potential ongoing changes in the environment. We have specialized in interacting with a programmed and rapid setting. As a consequence, we become increasingly unable to devise rich and diverse textures (coherent textual paths). It is what Montani (2007) calls anesthetization: a canalization of our sensory skills and imagination. Since we shape ourselves as subjects precisely through sense-making processes, the depletion of our ability to textualize experiences directly impacts us. Today, we are more submissive, scared, and angry as subjects because we are less prepared to confront unexpected events.

In a more direct relation to the issue of reality, the proliferation of deepfakes and similar technologies could foster a “spiral of falsehood” (Leone, 2023), making us less certain about what we perceive as reality. This impacts our ability to explore various ways to connect perceptual terms and forms: we do not know for sure which habit or which form to “summon” or use.

However, we should remember what Charles S. Peirce has said: we have no conception of the absolutely incognizable (Peirce, 1868). I believe this implies that no one, not even an intelligent machine, can create anything from nothing. Since we contribute to building reality as much as what stands before us, our expectations are grounded in reality and, more radically, are part of reality too. The process of digital creation is a form of bricolage; it takes something we can experience or imagine and combines it to produce new forms or perceptual terms that we have never encountered before. Essentially, this is what we do every day. Digital art can display several forms that are very labor-intensive to implement otherwise, with a strong realistic effect, and it can present a sign that does not point to an actual object in itself. However, that sign is merely the byproduct of many other signs that have already translated elements of reality. Digital artists transfer part of the creative process to a machine, involving it in a process of co-enunciation, taking advantage of what the machine can produce (D’Armenio, Delière, Dondero, 2024).

The same principle applies when we paint or film a movie, albeit to a different extent. The “digital” is, therefore, simply a different kind of language, more mediated, intercalating between languages rather than between what we can experience and languages.

Therefore, digital language outputs seem more likely to detach from reality. In some ways, they deceive us. However, art and artists have always misled us, in a sense, through their creative bricolage, their translation process, and their manipulation of our expectations. Nevertheless, they have also consistently en-

gaged with reality. Ultimately, our concerns with the digital environment and the artistic use of digital technology arise from the perception that they often seem to escape our control; that is, the problem remains unchanged: the ability of media products to manipulate us.

However, we know that manipulation is not necessarily a one-way process. In semiotics, manipulation is better understood as a field of pre-established possibilities offered to subjects; it is up to them to find their place within these possibilities. This encapsulates the idea of manipulation as presented by Paolo Fabbri in his article about catharsis (2000). In his work, Fabbri discusses the transformation process stimulated by psychologists through hypnosis. As Fabbri highlights, the psychologist merely proposes the cathartic transformation; the subject must decide whether to accept it. No one is cured if they do not want to be. Thus, we can view media products this way: they propose several different paths for us to follow and ultimately a set of possible identities to assume. We can regard them as both evil and hypnotic senders, as well as provocative and stimulating ones. If we accept being challenged by them, we will identify the different emotional roles we could assume in their presence, which opens a window for choice and, eventually, for an authentic, cathartic experience. Nevertheless, it involves making the sender function of media products consciously unstable, thereby allowing for the fluctuation of the roles we can embody before them.

This is precisely what artists can achieve in their creations, and they can do it for us. Several artists have begun to explore latent spaces in deepfake creations, while directors like Nolan have worked to limit their reliance on digital technology in films. I believe both approaches are valuable for maintaining our ability to imagine different possibilities—that is, to shape our reality. This is the only way to achieve what Pasolini called progress, as opposed to development (Pasolini, 1975). For him, development refers to purely economic and technological advancement, often driven by consumerism and modernization, without necessarily improving human or cultural values. Progress, on the other hand, implies a more profound transformation that enhances social, ethical, and cultural well-being. Well-being, we can argue, often corresponds, at least from a semiotic perspective, with a rich production of alternatives; that is, the freedom to actively test our expectations.

4. Conclusion

We have explored the relationship between language, art, and reality, demonstrating how aesthetic experiences can disrupt our perceptual and cognitive habits, reorganizing expectations through surprise, ambiguity, and self-reflexivity. Scholars such as Eco, Greimas, and Barbieri converge in identifying art as a form of language capable of transforming both the individual and culture, providing new ways to perceive and understand the world. Like other forms of language, artistic languages possess a dual nature, balancing iconic and informative ambitions on one hand and a productive and innovative character on the

other. What characterizes artistic languages is their ability to question established forms and expectations through their playful and experimental nature, which challenges our preconceived notions. Through this, they compel us to change how we shape reality.

The introduction of digital technology, while challenging, is seen not as a complete break with reality but as a further evolution of the technical mediation inherent to human beings. Digital technologies, much like traditional art, manipulate and redefine experience; however, they risk dulling perception when approached without a critical mindset. Nevertheless, digital art can still provide a space for imagination and awareness as long as it challenges our expectations rather than merely reinforcing them.

Ultimately, the work of art—whether analog or digital—continues to play a crucial role in making reality visible, disorienting the observer to enhance their awareness of the perceptual and cognitive structures through which they relate to the world. Art remains a fundamental tool for cultural, subjective, and societal transformation, capable of reactivating imagination and critical freedom.

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