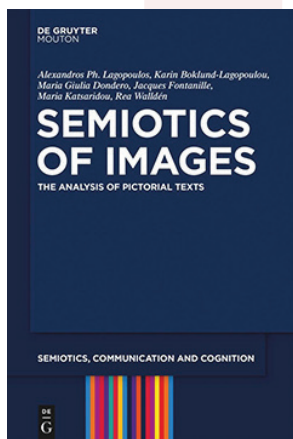


# Semiotics of images. Effectiveness and promises of the structuralist paradigm

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## Semiotics of Images. The Analysis of Pictorial Texts

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### 1. A defining moment in literature

The book under review marks a major advance in scientific research on images, in the sense that it is an essential point of both arrival and departure. Specifically, it marks a defining moment in the literature on the semiotics of images, as it reconceives and treasures the investigations conducted over the years while also providing groundbreaking insight into the challenges raised by new visual experiences.

The book is divided into three parts: I. *Theoretical issues*, II. *Interpreting the static image*, and III. *Interpreting the dynamic image*. In the first chapter, Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou discuss the approaches to the semiotics of images regarding the theoretical premises and the visual aspects of the objects of study. The same authors' second and third chapters concern the developments in the semiotics of the static (drawing, painting, mosaic, sculpture, etc.) and dynamic images (above all cinema and digital games). In addition to exploring the manifestations of temporality and narrativity in images, Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou discuss various theoretical models, such as those of Group  $\mu$  on the visual signs, James Elkins on modern art, Umberto Eco on cinema as

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*langue*, Christian Metz on cinema as *parole*, and revisit several in-depth analyses, such as that of Jacques Fontanille on the painter and composer Mikalojus K. Čiurlionis. In the following two chapters, Fontanille and Lagopoulos return to the iconic and plastic dimensions, focusing on the function of aspectualisation and the expression substance of the plastic signifier. As for the material turn of big visual data, Maria Giulia Dondero deals with enunciation, the metavisual, and gestures of inscription in the digital image. The second part of the volume is opened by Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, who examines isotopies in painting through specific examples. Fontanille then analyzes the seriality of the pictorial work, while Dondero directs attention to the semiotics of photography. In the third part of the book, centered, as we have said, on “dynamic image,” we have four chapters on the semiotics of cinema. Rea Walldén is the author of chapters 10 and 12, which look at light, shadows, and revolution in avant-garde art, and Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* (1957 respectively. Chapter 11, by Boklund-Lagopoulou, reveals the structure of the isotopies in the film *Arrival* (2016), while in Chapter 13, Maria Ilia Katsaridou delves into the semiotic analysis of animation films through the case study of *Ratatouille* (2007). In the closing chapter, as Katsaridou and Kosmas (Makis) Stergiou focus on digital games, Katsaridou again proposes a semiotic methodology for the script creation based on an interactive narrative.

## 2. Not Just a Statement

The volume's introduction, signed by all the authors, is impressive due to its clear position. Semioticians tend to mediate between their own perspectives and those of others; they are prone to incorporate and mix different theories and methodologies. This attitude certainly encourages dialogue with other schools and disciplines. Still, it runs the risk, by seeking analogies between fields of knowledge, of creating a soup of ideas, of overshadowing specific tools and concepts or, worse, of focusing on advances in other fields while neglecting to develop one’s own. *Semiotics of Images* distances itself from this trend. Here, the authors convincingly assume that the Greimassian *modus operandi* is “the most appropriate approach to the vast universe of images from the point of view of their signification” (p. 7). By making this statement, they are saying something that is verifiable and that they verify. Indeed, their position is not a question of principle, of ‘fundamentalist’ loyalty to the system to which they belong. Rather, they present, examine, and compare several theories. The most relevant ones can be traced back to Halliday’s social semiotics, to cognitive semiotics (Göran Sonesson, Warren Buckland), and Michel Foucault’s epistemology, to the Visual Studies, with the “iconic turn” and the “pictorial turn” by Gottfried Boehm and W.J.T. Mitchell, all via Gillian Rose’s viewpoint (pp. 1-6) and the Peircean visual semiotics by Tony Jappy (chapter 1, Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou). A strict comparison allows the authors to

infer that “the French school of semiotics of the Saussurean–Hjelmslevian–Greimasian tradition is the strongest, best developed theory we have for the study of signification, including the signification of images” (p. 7).

One might wonder why. Some approaches are unsatisfactory when it comes to analysing and understanding pictorial texts and images, but it should be demonstrated that Greimas's approach is unique in this regard. Alongside the evidence for the effectiveness of this paradigm that the authors provide, we can highlight how the great force of the Structuralist tradition lies in the reciprocal presupposition between the “plane of expression” and the “plane of content”. In Greimassian semiotics, any syntactic articulation implies a semantic articulation, and vice versa, as in Saussure's famous metaphor of the sheet of paper. A perceptive form of the natural world is, first and foremost, something that is already charged with cultural meaning, and it generates new signification every time it encounters a new gaze. The conception of semiosis as a coupling between forms (and substances) of expression and forms (and substances) of content, concerning the competence of the subject that experiences meaning, is specific to the Greimassian approach and makes images more intelligible.

### 3. Delimitations

In an attempt to circumscribe the field of the semiotics of images, Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou set the criteria for the systems to be included:

First, they should be among the systems that Hjelmslev calls connotative semiotics, and thus (spontaneous cultural) communication systems. Second, they should be “visual”, that is, addressed to the eye. Third, they should be structured by geometry. Geometry is not only concerned with the well-known elementary forms, such as circles, squares, spheres, or pyramids, but in general “with questions of shape, size, relative position of figures, and the properties of space” (Geometry, *Wikipedia*). It thus covers any visual semiotic system, from so-called primitive art to realism to non-representational abstract art. From the slightest line to the most complex form, all forms are “geometry” (Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou, Chapter 1: 43-44).

So, they begin with what should not be taken into consideration. The two authors then follow this by indicating their focus on the major visual systems – both historical and contemporary - and the exclusion of “metalanguages such as diagrams and maps, nor functional objects such as toys and architecture” (ivi: 45). They also inform the reader of their preference for the term “visual systems” over that of “visual arts”, which would be “Eurocentric”, implying a hegemonic Western idea of aesthetics (ivi). On this second point, a commentary will prevent misunderstandings. We agree that the objects of the concerned field must be “visual”. However, images always involve not a single channel, but sensomotricity. In the mid-1990s, French scholars proposed to move from a visual

semiotics to a *semiotics of the visible* (Fontanille 1995), by rejecting the dominance of the optic. Indeed, images consist of heterogeneous and mixed syntaxes, made of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. Whether analogue or digital, they are produced by the senses working together. The intervention of sensible and synaesthetic processes in images is quite normal. Again, it is not a matter of pure impression. According to the main Greimassian epistemological minimum, perception is overflowing with signification and cultural construction of the world (Greimas 1966), with “soma” and “sema” intertwined (Fontanille 2004; Marrone 2005). This belief stems from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and has never been abandoned.<sup>1</sup> In the structuralist paradigm, there is no semantics, there are no meanings, without people who are committed to them.

#### 4. Systems of Value and Valence in Images

Technically, according to Saussure, semiotics is “the science that studies the life of signs within society” (*au sein de la vie sociale*, Saussure 1916, Engl. Transl.: 16). And the challenge posed by Hjelmslev’s structural semantics was to study the “collective appreciations” through the study of the form of signs (Hjelmslev 1957). Meanings and significations, already in Saussure and Hjelmslev, later in Greimas, underlie values and valences. Greimas conceived semiotics as an “axiological adventure” or a ‘search for values’ by grasping how things matter to groups of people and to individuals and how they are conjoined with or dislocated from them.<sup>2</sup> The small scale of daily village life in *The Census at Bethlehem* (1566) by Pieter Bruegel, well highlighted by Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou in the book (pp. 201-207), leads us to clarify this issue. It conveys meaning directly via its plane of expression. In the lower right corner, the miniature of Joseph and Mary marks their adherence to a perspective and a world that is not that of the ruling class, but of the governed. The Holy couple stands here on the side of the subordinates. Exceptional dimensions, for the two characters or the painting, would have instead communicated an ‘empathy’ with the majestic and royalty. The nexus between meanings and values is essential: things do not signify in themselves, but in relationship with subjects to whom they belong and that struggle to defend or conquer them. As a new category for analyzing figurative and plastic language (Migliore and Colas Blaise 2022), size enables us to see how images articulate these connections. In Western cultures, physical dimensions are often correlated with political or moral positions, in a fairly fixed scheme: big indicates hierarchical superiority

<sup>1</sup> The semiotics of cinema, which is widely practised in Italy, has maintained this foundation and made significant progress in research. About *Ratatouille* see for instance Marrone 2022.

<sup>2</sup> “Future generations have to elaborate discursive semiotics, and also the ‘expression’, which has not been studied semiotically yet. So far, discursive semiotics has dealt with the content plan. The next step will be the ‘axiological adventure’: the epistemic, ethic, and esthetic axiology required for the discovery of the systems that exist culturally and transculturally – in other words, we must give semiotics the ideological mission ‘to give value to the world. Le fin mot de l’histoire est l’aventure axiologique’” (Greimas 1986:57, Engl. Transl.: 33).

versus small, which indicates hierarchical inferiority. *The Census at Bethlehem* is the perfect candidate for reversing this stable formula. In Bruegel's painting, "God is in the details" (Flaubert). Small means magnificence, grandiosity, and extraordinary events, while big means ordinary life. In the system of values this new family belongs to, the smaller and more invisible you are, the greater you are.

Does this conception, for which the painter is responsible, affect, at a higher level, the posture of the researcher? Do the objects of our analyses challenge us and transform common ways of thinking and behaviours? Actually, the *Census at Bethlehem* leads the viewer to become aware of a different axiological scale that can be adopted in their form of life. Following in the footsteps of Paolo Fabbri, Gianfranco Marrone, and Isabella Pezzini, Italian semiologists attempt to discover values and passions in the texts, discourses, and practices they analyze. Still, they also know that there is a passion in researching. "Text and receiver are constituted in their mutual relation, in other words, the text is valorised by the practice of the receiver, but in return, it is the text which has the power to orient the receiver towards a certain practice" (Dondero, Chapter 9: 252).

Fontanille's analysis of seriality in the pictorial work (Chapter 8) is suitable for a re-reading in this sense. First of all, the way he approaches intertextuality differs from that of Floch with *Composition IV* (1911) by Kandinskij. In both cases, we deal with an identical genre, the series: a class of texts. However, Floch tracked down the variants and variations associated with *Composition IV* to explain the signification processes of this specific work of art. In Floch, the series is functional in explaining a single text. Conversely, Fontanille starts directly from the series of two artists, Mehdi Sahabi and Georges Laurent, and considers the "trans-sensible dimension" that one can grasp in the interstitial space-time of some groupings of paintings. The level of pertinence is not the same: the series is just a means for Floch, while it is the object, the goal of Fontanille's study. Yet, the interstitial space-time of the series in which Fontanille is interested cannot occur without the "cooperation" of the spectator, also in the Echian sense of the term (Eco 1979).

A degree of competence is required to find the similarities, grasp the orientations and the diachronic transformations, and fill the gaps. Then, when it comes to the internal rhythm and tension of the two series, the value of repetition does not exist in itself. The return of the identical can either comfort the viewer and lead her/him to engage with the series, or render it boring. Last but not least, the pictorial technique seems quite different. That of Georges Laurent appears flatter, while that of Mehdi Sahabi, aptly titled *Graffiti*, shows thicker layers and actantial strata, between the poles of ostension and concealment. Together with the cognitive reactions that can be useful when reconstituting the series, the expressive substances produce aesthesic and aesthetic effects on the receiver, likely inviting her/him to move closer and touch the paintings. A second volume of *Semiotics of Images* could cover the theme of the artistic strategies for attractiveness. Images attain a mode of existence realised only in cooperation with the analyst/interpreter.



## 5. Methodological outcomes

The three-fold ambition of the book, “first, faithfully applying the foundations of Greimasian theory, second, extending it in new theoretical directions, and third, expanding and adapting it to new fields of investigation” (Introduction: 9), is largely fulfilled, grounding the theory at a methodological level. In its own way, every contribution improves the skills of academics in image analysis. One of its main achievements is the thesis stating that forms result from inscriptions of forces (Dondero, Chapter 6). René Thom, who investigated the mimicry dynamics between predator and prey in the animal kingdom, insisted that there are hidden forces in forms (Thom 1988). Also highly valid are the identification of isotopies (Boklund-Lagopoulou, Chapter 7) and the icono-plastic rhetoric - the tension between iconic and plastic language (Fontanille, Chapter 4).

However, a semi-symbolic homologation should complete the analysis in the case of the individual texts. This is especially the case if the aim is to understand them better and to avoid that semiotics “splits into two different approaches, one concerning depiction and connotation, and the other concerning syntax” (Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou, Chapter 1). In fact, as Jean-Marie Floch masterfully demonstrated in his study of Kandinsky’s *Composition IV* (Floch 1985), the plastic contrasts manifest themselves only in the syntax of the visible, and it is through the visual syntax that semantic, thematic, and narrative trajectories can emerge. To quote Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou, “depiction, connotation and syntax are all factors of the same semiotic system. A semiotic theory of the image must be one and unified” (Chapter 1: 33). Besides, Greimas (1984) not only suggested a series of tools and categories to describe the figurative and plastic dimensions, but indicated a procedure, a path of activities (Migliore 2021) from the identification of an ideal or a concrete frame that separates what is inside and what is outside the image, to the correct semi-symbolic correlation. This final act can never be the application of a mechanical formula, but it requires reasoning on the correspondence between surface manifestations and depth values. Clearly, as the significance of images is culturally determined, “the analyst must be well acquainted with the semiotic universe of the culture in which it was produced” (Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou, Chapter 2: 64).

## 6. Image and language: Opposed “de iure”, United “de facto”

Finally, one of the most recurrent problems discussed in the book is the relationship between natural language and images. This issue deserves separate consideration. By revolving around the conceptions of other scholars, the authors of *Semiotics of Images* admit that “the linguistic model cannot be transferred tale quale to visual analysis, i.e.,

to their search for a visual grammar focused on major compositional structures" (Lagopoulos and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, Chapter 1: 28). They reveal a thorough knowledge of the latest theories on the subject, especially on those of Mitchell and Boehm, for whom the new status of the image replaces the role of language (Introduction: 5). But once again, they take a clear stance on the topic and they do not hesitate to emphasize the consequences of the "exaggerated views of an assumed independence of images" (*ibidem*). The rendering extreme of the "iconic turn", as an "iconic intelligence, leading to a pure iconic meaning" (Boehm 2009:106), and the opposition between "text" and "image" based on the strict and old definition of the text as a "linguistic expression" (Mitchell 1994:83), risk "the rejection of any linguistic, more specifically textual, background for the interpretation of images and any linguistic – and by extension, semiotic – foundation for the theory of images" (*Semiotics of Images*, Introduction: 5).

Indeed, the visual system has its own autonomy of organisation and cannot be overwhelmed by the verbal system. Still, the two often function together in the production or consumption of communication. An image is usually combined with natural language to express meanings drawn from a common cultural source. Relations between images and written language are more frequent than one might think: in painting and sculpture, on ancient and contemporary urban walls, in any form of advertising, and in social networks. From antiquity to the nineteenth century, the visual tradition of European art is full of "verbo-visual" processes. The memorable research by Meyer Schapiro, 'Words, Script, and Pictures', shows how and to what extent these intersections are a historical reality. And, as the authors point out, if in abstract art the presence of language is diminished, "there is a factor structurally integrating the image within a common universe with language, namely semantics. The semantic micro-universe of images is [...] integrated within the culture to which it belongs, of which language is also a part" (*Semiotics of Images*, Introduction: 7).

In the challenge of building a general theory of the image, we need to estimate the specific visual ways of signifying without artificially isolating what is verbal and what is picture. Emblematically, writing, whether calligraphic or typographic, presents itself as a mixed system. The question of whether it is visual or verbal is misplaced.

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