

---

Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Arts

Author(s): Algirdas Julien Greimas, Frank Collins and Paul Perron

Source: *New Literary History*, Vol. 20, No. 3, Greimassian Semiotics (Spring, 1989), pp. 627-649

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/469358>

Accessed: 09-11-2019 09:41 UTC

**REFERENCES**

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/469358?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/469358?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*The Johns Hopkins University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *New Literary History*

# Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Arts\*

Algirdas Julien Greimas

## Preface to a Postface

THIS TEXT that we are submitting to the reader is curious enough. It amounts to the postface for a collective work edited by Jean-Marie Floch and entitled *De l'abstrait au figuratif*, which for “technical reasons beyond our control” was never published. Thus it would be advisable to read it both as an anticipation of Floch's *Petites mythologies de l'oeil et de l'esprit* and a well-intentioned interpretation of Felix Thürlemann's *Paul Klee*.<sup>1</sup>

The present text, which goes back some time and is perhaps a bit out of date, deserves to be published if only because it retraces the slow development to maturity of our visual semiotics workshop, first set up by our friend Abraham Zemsz and since then led without interruption and with great determination by Jean-Marie Floch (with the collaboration of Felix Thürlemann, Denis Alken, Diana Pessoa de Barros, Ada Dewes, Alain Vergniaud, and others). Jean-Marie Floch expertly led this theoretical project and coordinated important concrete analyses. The present author limited his role to that of observer and advisor.

If this text—and maybe also our collaborative efforts of the time—are a bit out of date, it is primarily for intrinsic reasons. It seemed important to us semiotically to know in what way abstract art was an art, but the change in our point of view, influenced by what was in vogue, is already recognizable in the shifting meanings found in the title of the aborted work. Let the formerly exclusive admirers of Vivaldi or Alberone, who have gone bag and baggage over to the operas of Verdi, cast the first stone.

Progress within general semiotics played a determining role. Thus our collaborative thinking about the problems of figurativity, which

\* This essay first appeared as “Sémiotique figurative et sémiotique plastique,” in *Actes sémiotiques-Documents*, 60. This translation is authorized by *Actes sémiotiques-Documents*, Paris, France.

led us to recognize several levels at which it is manifested and made explicit, could not fail to incite us to a reexamination of our provisory givens in visual semiotics. For example, we asked whether the semiotics of the plastic arts corresponded to the deep and abstract levels of figurativity, which is a concept of a much wider scope. Likewise, if the pictorial, which we usually perceive in terms of its framed surfaces, lent itself to more in-depth, paradigmatic analyses, we should ask whether it in fact has sufficiently exploited syntagmatic modalizing. New problems—or old problems brought again to the fore—are posed. What about those collective connotation systems of a pathemic, mythical, or epistemic nature which, although foreign to denotative plastic expression, cover, to the extent of entire billboards, both canvasses and epochs? These, among others, are the questions this text would have treated, had it been written today.

(1984)

## Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Arts

### 1. Figurativity

#### 1.1. *Visual Semiotics*

If one of the *raison d'être* of semiotics is to give rise to new areas of inquiry into the world around us and to help these areas of inquiry become autonomous disciplines within the general framework of anthropology, it will be recognized that despite the efforts of the last decades it has up to now not succeeded very well in coming to grips with the vast field of significations which, because of their mode of expression, we have tried to group together under the rubric of visual semiotics. The theory of the visual—and even more, that of the audiovisual, which is nothing more than a convenient label—is far from being fully developed. Also, visual semiotics (or the semiology of images) is often no more than a catalogue of our perplexities and incorrect facts.

It is commonly agreed that visual semiotics should be defined in terms of its *constructed*, artificial, nature—that is, as opposed to “natural” languages and worlds, those two macrosemiotics within which our human condition, despite ourselves, places us. Such a definition, as obvious as it might seem, will certainly appear to be somewhat artificial. How, for example, can you separate “natural” gesturality, which accompanies our verbal discourses, from the languages of

deaf-mutes or of monks who have taken a vow of silence? Upon analysis, their elementary forms seem identical. Where do we place this phenomenon of the visual which is both “natural”—because it is manifested, “transcoded,” within our verbal discourses—and “artificial”—because it constitutes, in the form of “images,” an essential component of constructed poetic language?

We think we can restrict the object of our investigation if we define visual semiotics in terms of its *planar structures*. We thus require that surfaces speak of tridimensional space. Pictorial, graphic, and photographic representations are thus grouped together in terms of a common “being present to the world.” But such a planar semiotics also includes the various types of writing, the languages of graphic representation, and so on. All of this means that our scarcely articulated specificity of the planar visual phenomenon evaporates.

What is more, the choice of the word *semiotic* to designate the area of investigation which we want to stake out is not without consequences. It implies that the markings covering the surfaces chosen to receive those markings constitute signifying wholes and that collections of these signifying wholes, whose limits are yet to be defined, in turn constitute signifying systems. This is a strong hypothesis which justifies the intervention of semiotic theory and which, initially, does not allow us to be satisfied with a definition which would not take into account the material nature of the traces and tracks found imprinted upon the concrete medium.

## 1.2. *Systems of Representation*

Two cultural traditions—one philosophical and aesthetic, the other logico-mathematical—together ensure that the concept of *representation* becomes the necessary point of departure for any study of the visual. Are visual configurations, which are constructed upon planar surfaces, representations? And further, at the moment when they are produced, do these configurations converge toward the same goal? Are they governed by a “code” which enables them to be “read”? If the answer is yes, do these signifying wholes constitute *systems* of communication (like highway signs, for example)? Are they formulation systems (like schemata and writing systems)? Are they “conception” systems (as is the case with architectural plans)? Finally, are these systems recognized as such, are they languages? In other words, can they speak of something other than themselves? All of these questions implicitly seem to entail ready-made positive answers. Yet they are far from trivial. When we reflect upon the particular type of planar manifestation that writing is, can we, for example, say that the letter /o/ is

a constructed figure that “represents” the sound “o,” which is a “natural” figure? And what does the word “represent” mean in this case? The letter is certainly not an icon of the sound: there is no “resemblance” between the two figures. In this case representation is no more than a correspondence between the totality of letters (and writing systems) and the totality of sounds. It is a correspondence between two systems—graphic and phonic—such that the figure-units produced by one of the systems can be globally homologated with the figure-units of another system, without any term-by-term “natural” link being established between the two kinds of figure. For this kind of resemblance, all we can speak of is an analogy between the two systems, and that is something very different.

It is quite another matter when we come to the construction or use of systems of logical representation such as formal languages. Although these languages sometimes use the same “alphabet” that writing uses—and this is one of the reasons for calling upon this example—the internal organization of the visual figures is a matter of indifference to them. Whereas writing as a system depends on the oppositions between its various graphic features (“round,” “hooked,” and so on), formal languages consider the letters they use to be discriminatory. If, taken as a signifier (= level of expression), writing is a graphic system, formal language is, in contrast, no more than a catalogue of discrete symbols. However, what gives this catalogue its status as a language is the articulation of its signified. This underlies the graphic manifestation of the formal language and is organized into a coherent conceptual system.

If we now set aside the rapprochement between graphic and phonic systems—which we needed only in order to bring out their articulatory specificity—we see that in the case of our two extreme examples we can speak of two “representation systems” and mean two different things by that. Writing is an articulated visual mechanism which can represent anything (the semantic universe in its totality). Formal language on the contrary appears to be a “corpus of concepts” that can be represented in any way (using various symbol systems). What seemed especially interesting to us was to show that one and the same alphabet could be used to two different ends, that one and the same signifier could be articulated in two different ways and thus be used to constitute two different languages.

### 1.3. *Iconic Representations*

As opposed to the concept of representation we have just identified, and which can be formulated as an arbitrary relation between the

representing and the represented (it is of no importance whether the correspondence is one of system to system or term to term), there exists a quite different interpretation of representation. We could call this interpretation *aesthetic* if the word had not fallen into disuse. The cultural heritage in this area is particularly heavy, and it is as if, despite the camouflage of some terms and the modernization of others, we had not succeeded in refocusing our investigations or in changing the problematics concerned. So it is with *icon*, a “naturally motivated” sign representing the “referent,” and with *iconicity*, a concept that is at the heart of all debates concerning the semiology of the image and that is also quite naturally involved in the ancient notion of an “imitation of nature.”

Iconic systems of representation, they say, are different from others because the recognizable relation they establish between the two modes of “reality” is not arbitrary but “motivated,” because they presuppose a certain identity, total or partial, between the features and figures of the represented and the representing. Under these conditions—and despite all the refinements that centuries of thought have brought to the concepts of “imitation” and “nature”—the activity of a painter, for example, must be understood as a totality of procedures which are covered by the term *imitation* and whose aim is to reproduce what is essential in the features of “nature.” We can see that on the part of the “imitating” painter, such an activity presupposes a very thorough implicit analysis of “nature” and a recognition of the fundamental articulations of the natural world that he is supposed to reproduce. If we consider the natural world as the world of common perception, we must recognize that the “imitation” operation consists in a very marked *reduction* of the qualities of the world. This is because, on the one hand, only the exclusively visual features of the natural world are “imitable,” whereas the world is present to us through all of our senses, and, on the other hand, only the planar properties of this world are “transposable” and representable on artificial surfaces, whereas area comes to us in all its depth and volume. The “features” of the world—traces and tracks—that are thus selected and transposed onto a canvas are really nothing very much compared to the richness of the natural world. They are perhaps identifiable as figures, but not as objects of the world.

To adopt the point of view of the painter who reproduces “nature” probably does not help us much in our attempt to understand the phenomenon at hand. The concept of *imitation*, which in the communication structure refers to the enunciator’s sending instance, corresponds to the concept of *recognition*, which refers to the receiver’s instance. To “imitate” in the precarious conditions we have just de-

scribed makes no sense unless the visual figures thus traced are offered to a spectator in order for him to recognize them as configurations of the natural world. But this is not “doing painting.”

Thus posed, the concept of recognition is seen to be part of the more general problem of the legibility of the natural world. What is “naturally” given? What is immediately legible for us in this spectacle that the world is? If it is figures (which are constituted by features coming from different senses), they cannot be recognized as objects unless the semantic feature “object” (insofar as it is, for example, contrastable to “process,” is interoceptive rather than exteroceptive, and is not “naturally” inscribed in the primary image of the world) is joined to the figure in order to transform it into an object. If we suppose that we can then recognize such and such a plant or animal, the meanings “vegetable kingdom” or “animal kingdom” are part of the *human reading of the world*, and not of the world itself.

It is this grid through which we read which causes the world to signify for us and it does so by allowing us to identify figures as objects, to classify them and link them together, to interpret movements as processes which are attributable or not attributable to subjects, and so on. This grid is of a semantic nature, not visual, auditive, or olfactory. It serves as a “code” for recognition which makes the world intelligible and manageable. Now we can see that it is the projection of this reading grid—a sort of “signified” of the world—onto a painted canvas that allows us to recognize the spectacle it is supposed to represent.

#### 1.4. *Figurative Semiotics*

A superficial examination of the problems posed by imitation and recognition shows that the concept of representation, applied to the domain on which we wish to focus, cannot be interpreted as an iconic relation, as a relation of simple “resemblance” between planar visual figures and the configurations of the natural world. If the resemblance were situated at the level of the *signifier*, then natural languages—given their phonic level of expression—and also musical languages, would have to be called iconic and would have to be said to have a resemblance, not with the visual dimension of the natural world, but with the auditory. If there is a resemblance, it is at the level of the signified—that is, at the level of the reading grid that is common to both the world and the planar artifacts. But then it would no longer make sense to speak of iconicity.

On the contrary, the concept of a reading grid raises a whole new problematic. It is obvious that this grid, being of a social nature, is subject to cultural relativism, that it is largely—but not infinitely—variable in time and space. Given this, since each culture is endowed with its own “vision of the world,” then each culture will set its own variant for the conditions under which visual figures are identified as “representing” objects of the world. To do this it will often be content with vague schematizations, but will sometimes require a minute reproduction of “veridical” details.

That is the main point: the question of the figurativity of planar objects (“image,” “painting,” and so on) is posed only if an iconizing reading grid is postulated and applied to the interpretation of such objects. Yet this is not the necessary precondition for their perception, and it does not exclude the existence of other modes of reading that are just as legitimate. The reading of a text written in French does not raise the question of a resemblance of its characters to the figures of the natural world.

Such an iconizing reading is, however, a semiosis—that is, an operation which, conjoining a signifier and a signified, produces signs. The reading grid, which is of a semantic nature, solicits the planar signifiers and, bringing under its wing the bundles of visual features which vary in their respective densities and which it makes into *figurative formants*, endows them with signifieds. It thus transforms visual figures into object-signs. A more attentive examination of the act of semiosis would show that the principal operation constituting it is the selection of a certain number of visual features and their subsequent globalization. This is a simultaneous grasping that transforms the bundle of heterogeneous features into a format, that is, into a unit of the signifier. This unit is recognizable, when it is framed by the grid of the signified, as the partial representation of an object from the natural world.

The theory of formants, which despite Hjelmslev’s vow has not yet come to make up a linguistics, should be given consideration here. We can see that the formation of formants, at the time of semiosis, is no more than an articulation of the planar signifier, its *segmentation* into legible discrete units. This segmentation is done with a view to a certain kind of reading of the visual object, but as we saw in connection with the twofold function of the alphabet, it does not exclude other possible segmentations of the signifier. These discrete units, constituted out of bundles of features, are already well known to us. They are the “forms” of Gestalt theory, “figures of the world” in the Bachelardian sense, “figures of the level of expression” according to



Hjelmslev. This convergence of points of view originating in seemingly very disparate preoccupations allows us to speak here of a *figurative reading* of visual objects.

This group of heterogeneous features that make up the figure that serves as a formant in the instance of a reading poses the problem of the density of those features and their organization. The concept of pertinence could be called upon to help clarify things. We might say that a figure has a “normal” density or, in other words, that a figurative formant is pertinent, if the number of features it groups together is minimal, that is, a necessary and sufficient number to permit us to interpret it as representing an object of the natural world. Thus the figures drawn by Klee in his *Blumen-mythos*, which are legible as “pines,” “hills,” “stars,” and so on, would be characteristic of “normal,” “average” figurativity such as is found in many non-European cultures, but also in children’s drawings and in the icons used in various artificial representation codes.

It is obvious, however, that figurativity understood as a kind of mode of reading—and of production—of “constructed surfaces” is not necessarily linked to some normality or other. It is obvious that it can give rise to excesses and insufficiencies. The desire to cause-to-be-like, to cause-to-believe, manifested by such and such a painter, such and such a school of painters, or such and such an era, leads to excessive *iconization*. On the other hand, cutting way down on the number of figures in order to make the recognition procedure more difficult—leaving, as in Kandinsky’s *Improvisation*, only “virtual” objects—gives rise to *abstraction*. Iconization and abstraction are thus no more than varying degrees and levels of figurativity.

This mode of reading that produces semiosis—a criterion which allows us to speak on the semiotic nature of the object under study—brings us to a semiotics that we can call *figurative semiotics*. We must however make clear that such a semiotics does not cover all of the signifying articulations of planar objects and that it represents only a particular point of view according to which it endows those planar signifiers with “natural” interpretation. If this is made clear, then analyses of figurativity are justified and constitute an autonomous field of investigation.

Conversely, if a figurative approach to visual objects is a biased—and partial—means to their understanding, figurativity itself, and the studies surrounding it, seem to go beyond the limits of the planar vehicle or support, upon which its manifestation is based. Keeping in mind the fact that the qualities of the natural world, after being selected, serve in the construction of the *signifier* for planar objects, but that those qualities also appear at the same time as features of the

*signified* of natural languages, we can see that verbal discourses carry within themselves their own figurative dimension, because the figures that constitute that dimension are figures of content and not figures of expression. Now we can see that the problems posed by the analysis of “visual texts” are comparable to those posed by verbal texts, be they literary or not. The question raised by the internal organization of visual figures that are called upon to be read as objects of the world immediately recalls the question that has to do with the way images and other metaphors and metonymies work in verbal discourse. When we present iconization as a procedure of veridictory persuasion, we are not far removed from the “rhetoric of the image” as suggested by Roland Barthes. The problematics of “motifs” is common to the history of art and of ethno-literature, although it is badly stated in both. The same can be said concerning the presence of “stage settings” and narrative structures, recognizable in both. Consequently, figurative research is an autonomous component of general semiotics although it does not yet seem able to specify the exact area it seeks for itself.

## 2. The Plastic Signifier

### 2.1 *Another Language*

When Diderot, moving in Parisian circles, began to frequent painters’ studios, he was surprised to discover another language there, a different way of speaking about painting. When he undertook to provide descriptions in his *salons* he decided to divide his presentations of the paintings into two parts, one traditional “ideal” part and one “technical” part in which he praised the “doing” of the artist and sanctioned it according to a very complex pictorial axiology. While practicing a *figurative* approach, as was required of him by his correspondents, he gave equal attention and space to a *plastic* approach to the same objects. After segmenting the painting into “nameable” objects, after grouping them and organizing them into scenes—that is, after having interpreted what the painter wanted to “say” to us—he moved on and, carefully examining the marks the brush had left on the canvas, sought to understand what the painter had wanted “to do.” All this was done without succeeding in bringing, or trying to bring, the two points of view together. The reader of the *salons* thus finds himself uneasy, not knowing whether he is dealing with two describing-subjects presenting one painting or just one describer who

is trying to account for two distinct objects. This shows the extent to which it is true that a semiotic object, instead of being a given, is the result of the reading that constructs it.

This possibility of speaking about another language becomes a necessity when one chooses as the "corpus" to be analyzed a certain number of "surfaces" constructed after—or at the moment of—the "epistemological rupture," when a figurative reading is put into question or even rejected. Such is the case with Kandinsky, who seeks through successive "improvisations" to strip the object of all figurative traces. It is also the case with Klee, who exploits the figurative by using it not to constitute an image of the world, but in order to deconstruct it and make of it a scene from his own "world." The same can be seen in Boubat's photography when, going beyond the technical constraints that make photography the height of iconicity, he seeks to make it speak in a new way.<sup>2</sup> It can be seen in Mies van der Rohe's design, which sets aside its representative and communicative functions and, as a "surface," gives rise instead to an "aesthetic" reading. Persuaded that these objects have a common language that they use in order to "speak" to us, but also—and especially—persuaded that we can construct a language that will allow us to "speak" about them, the semiotician seeks to establish an area of investigation wherein to inquire into the how and why of their presence.

## 2.2 *The Initial Steps*

How indeed can we take over such a locus and justify such an investigation other than by starting *tabula rasa* in terms of any preexisting doxological discourse, and by raising our naive viewing procedures to the status of a scientific postulate? Will we not have to use as givens only the "material" surface, which is filled with traces and tracks, and the "intuition" of the viewer, who receives the "meaning effects" from the spectacle before him? These are the necessary but not fully sufficient conditions for our desired fresh and ingenuous reading, for the simple reason that our viewing is never naive and intuition is never pure. Thus it would be better, while still preserving their necessary availability, to make one's cultural referent explicit, and clearly pose, in order to be able to use it knowledgeably, the epistemological minimum with which to guide the first exploratory steps and thus allow us to make some provisional clarifications. This epistemological minimum can be summed up briefly.

a) To say that a constructed planar object produces "meaning effects" is to postulate that it is a signifying object and that, as such, it

is of the order of a *semiotic system*, of which it is one of the possible manifestations. To state the existence of a semiotic system—as much in its modes of organization as in the contents that it is able to articulate—is unknown to us. Such a system, which is said to exist but which is unknown to us, can have a chance of being grasped and made explicit only through an examination of the *semiotic processes*—that is, of the “visual texts”—by which it realizes itself. Knowledge of particular planar objects alone can lead to knowledge of the system which underlies them. This means that if the processes are grasped in their realized form, they presuppose the system as a virtual one, and thus as one that can be represented only through an ad hoc, constructed language.

b) To say that a planar object is a process, a text that is realizing one of the system's virtualities, is implicitly to consider the surface that is given to us materially as being the manifestation of a *signifier* and at the same time to inquire into its internal articulation in terms of its being a “possibility for signifying.” When we examined above the two ways of using the alphabet, we found that a conceptual grid posited a priori allowed us to interpret the figure-letters as compact objects. We found that a written text considered in itself as a signifier, on the other hand, could give rise to a subarticulation of letters into their constitutive features, thus revealing an underlying graphematic organization. Given this, we can now ask whether, alongside the segmentation of the painted surface that is brought about by the figurative reading grid, we might not be able to effect another segmentation of the signifier which would allow us to recognize the existence of strictly plastic units which ultimately are carriers of significations unknown to us.

c) Now, given a visual text which we consider to be a segmentable signifier, we need but enunciate our final postulate, that of *operativity*. This consists in saying that an object can be grasped only through its analysis. Put simplistically, it can be grasped only through being decomposed into smaller units and through the reintegration of those units into the totalities that they constitute. General semiotics offers the semiotician who is concerned with the problems of virtuality many diversified conceptual and procedural tools. It does not, however, offer him any ready-made recipes. Above all it does not oblige him to transpose figural units into linguistic procedures which, although fully accepted, might be inappropriate for areas whose signifying articulations intuitively appear to be very different from those of natural languages. Given this, it is of little importance whether such an analysis begins with the identification of the minimal features which combine to produce its figures and plastic formants, or whether

it begins by grasping “blocks of signification” of “mechanisms,” units of much greater dimensions which can be decomposed. In both cases we have segmentation procedures which, in large measure, are founded on intuitive graspings whose mechanisms we must start trying to describe precisely so that we can formulate general rules for their use. At this stage in our research what counts above all is the degree to which we can compare these partial results of ours with the identification of the principal *areas of operation* where the problems raised in the course of our work are brought together and coordinated with each other.

### 2.3. *The Topological Mechanism*

The study of the plastic signifier begins—generatively and not genetically—with the setting up of an area of study concerned with the topological conditions for the production as well as for the reading of the planar object. This object will remain insufficiently defined, even in terms of its material manifestation, as long as it is not closed in on, delimited, and separated from that which it is not. This is the old problem of *framework-format*, or in the terms of semiology, the *closure* of the object. Our object is a deliberate act of a producer who, placing himself in a detached locus of enunciation, by a kind of disengagement institutes an enunciated space in which he is the only master on board, able to create a “utopic universe” that is separate from the act. He thus guarantees that the object so circumscribed will have the status of a “totality that signifies.” The object is thus also the locus from which we can begin our operation of decoding the framed surface.

Whereas the reading of a written text is linear and unidimensional (from left to right or vice versa) and allows us to interpret spatialized speech as smooth or flat syntagmatic, the painted or drawn surface offers no obvious artifice which might reveal the semiotic process that is supposedly inscribed upon it. The frame appears to be the only sure point of departure. It allows us to conceive of a *topological grid* that virtually underlies the surface that is being offered for our reading. *Topological categories*, some “rectilinear” (such as upper/lower or left/right) others “curvilinear” (peripheral/central or enclosing/enclosed) as well as their derivative or compound structures, carve that surface up into a grid, starting with that which it is not, namely the frame. They carve up the framed surface by marking out its axes and/or by establishing the borders of its various sections. This is a twofold function: the segmentation of the whole into discrete parts and the map-

ping out of the possible trajectories that the various aspects of the reading will follow.

This topological mechanism, even if it is initially recognizable in the material aspect of the frame and in the choice of format, and even if it is founded upon convention and subject to cultural relativism, will nonetheless have a virtual existence which is guaranteed by a logically presupposed contract between the producer-enunciator and the reader-enunciatee. These topological categories, projected upon a surface whose richness and polysemy would otherwise render it indecipherable, bring about its reduction to a reasonable number of pertinent elements necessary for its reading. This it can do after eliminating those elements which constitute only "noise."

We need hardly add that, as sketched out above, the mechanism can take on a twofold character. It is present and becomes actualized upon the act of enunciation, when it first spatially organizes the semiotic object. It can also be projected, wholly or partially, into the interior itself of the enunciated surface and thereby constitute a new, semi-autonomous reading grid.

## 2.4. *Plastic Form*

If application of the topological mechanism allows us to undertake the analysis of the framed surface and also makes possible an initial segmentation of the object into discrete substructures, it becomes obvious that the description of the object in terms of its being a visual signifier will be judged as satisfactory only if its articulation can be formulated in terms of *plastic categories*. This will allow us to identify the "minimal" units of the signifier whose more or less complex combinations will, in an ascending set of stages, meet the substructures already identified through the topological segmentation. Phonology—having succeeded in the reduction of the inventory of the fundamental articulations of the natural languages—offers a fascinating model in this area, though one which it would be difficult to follow.

Starting with the conventional observation that on a painted surface we find both colors and forms, the distinction between *chromatic categories* and *eidetic categories* might appear as a simple terminological flourish. An analysis that seeks to identify a sufficiently deep and abstract level where such a distinction would prevail should begin within the painted surface in its raw state, when it is covered with undifferentiated "sections" or "tracks." From this, the analysis could then go on to postulate that only the viewing of the reader (or, what amounts to the same thing, the implicit intention of the producer) is

able to grasp certain sections in terms of their isolating and discriminatory function (that is, as lines and contours). It grasps other sections in terms of their individuating and integrating function (as "full surfaces"). Such a distinction would be founded upon two epistemological postulates that are part of general semiotics. The first states that the distinction between the eidetic and the chromatic does not have to do with the material aspect of the signifier (its phonetic substance), but rather with its *relational grasping* (its phonological level), that is, with the function that the reader attributes to such and such a term vis-à-vis the other terms. The second states that to grasp a term as a unit presupposes a twofold perception of it: it is grasped as a unit because of its discrete nature, distinct from all that surrounds it, and it is also grasped as a unit because of its integrated character, which individuates it in terms of itself. As long as one does not consider black and white as "colors" (even by calling them "noncolors"), one can call eidetic those categories whose responsibility is to establish the way in which the different units of the signifier exist as discrete entities, and chromatic those categories which have to do with the individuating grasp of the term in question.

Whatever fruit the above observations might bear, and they may appear futile to some because of their technical or sophisticated nature, they must not conceal the importance of those procedures which break down into "minimal" units those compact structures that "colors" and "forms" represent. These minimal units underlie the manifestation of the object, and the colors and forms are materially inscribed on the surface. Likewise, these observations must not hide the importance of those procedures which take these minimal units and use them to formulate categories, univocal metalinguistic entities, one of whose merits, and by no means the least, is found in the ultimate compatibility of any given analysis. The minimal character of these units is in any case very relative: instead of aiming for phonology's ideal, analysis of the plastic signifier must be satisfied with the example offered by semantics. Semantics, faced with the impossibility of establishing a limited inventory of its semic categories that would still cover the whole of the cultural universe, has to be satisfied with taking into consideration only those categories that are relevant to the analysis of such and such a given microuniverse. Thus, for example, the differences we see from one analysis to another in their inventories of chromatic categories can be explained in exactly the same way. Only a more extended analysis will perhaps allow us gradually to distinguish between "basic" categories and those categories which are "signifying" only in the case of a given object or corpus.

The absence of a strict terminological consensus or the presence of

the various theoretical differences (can color be completely broken down into chromatic categories or does there remain an “essential” residue which, for example, accounts for the opposition blue/red?) is less important for the success of our analyses than is the clear and unequivocal determination of the instance of the grasping of plastic phenomena. Just as sound can be grasped not only at the moment when articulatory gesturality produces it but also at the moment of acoustic transmission or auditory reception—and this without its necessarily being easy or even possible to effect a homologation of these two instances—so visibility and its articulation into categories are dependent upon this homogeneous grasping that we have required of ourselves. Without mentioning the misunderstandings resulting from the application of articulations of the chromatic spectrum to the interpretation of painting—and this application is of a scientific nature comparable to the acoustic study of sound—it is interesting and even necessary to examine separately, and then set up in a parallel arrangement, the chromatic and eidetic phenomena as they are grasped not only at the moment of the reading instance but also at the instance of their production when their articulatory gesturality takes the form of the painter’s “way of doing.”

It goes without saying that recognizing the chromatic and eidetic topological categories that constitute the deep level of the signifier’s form does not represent an exhaustive description of its articulation. These categories are no more than the taxonomic bases which allow us to effect our analyses of this level of language. The procedures by which the semiotic object is constructed consist in determining combinations of minimal units—which we will call plastic figures—and then moving on to still more complex configurations, thus confirming the general postulate according to which all language is at first a hierarchy. Among these plastic forms which show unequal complexity, we must reserve a separate place for *plastic formants* (comparable to, but distinct from, *figurative formants*), which are particular organizations of the signifier defined only by their capacity to be linked with signifieds and become signs. But, whereas figurative formants do not begin to signify, so to speak, until the reading grid of the natural world has been applied, plastic formants are called upon to serve as pretexts for the investment of other significations. This authorizes us to speak of a *plastic language* and to close in on its specificity.

## 2.5. *The Plastic Text*

The taxonomic articulations of which we have been speaking represent only one aspect of the analysis of framed planar objects. Rec-



ognizing plastic categories and figures informs us as to the mode of existence of plastic form as it underlies its manifestation on one or several surfaces, but it tells us nothing about the syntagmatic organization of these forms. And this organization alone can enable us to treat these objects as semiotic processes—that is, as signifying texts. The paradigmatic axis of any language—that is, the axis that defines the units making up the language in terms of the “either/or” relations between them—allows us to record the presence of a given feature on a surface we are examining in terms of the absence of its contrary or contradictory feature within the same category. For example, it allows us to speak of the “palette” of one painter as it is opposed to “other palettes.” But it is the syntagmatic axis, made up of “both/and” relations, that informs us as to how plastic terms and figures can both be present on the same text surface.

When we spoke of the distinction to be made between chromatic and eidetic categories, we proposed a definition of the latter which depended upon their discrete nature, the distinctive or distinguishing function of which is their responsibility. If chromatic categories can be considered *constituent*—<sup>3</sup>the painted surface first being no more than an area covered by undistinguished sections or tracks—then eidetic categories are *constituted*. These sections, given their contiguity, each delimit the other. To be able to confirm the copresence of units of the signifier, we must first have recognized their discrete character. Observations on contiguity, on clear borders, and on fluctuating ones,<sup>4</sup> are the first step in the establishment of the plastic text. We were already suggesting that procedure when we spoke above of the grasping of certain sections of a painting in terms of their isolating and discriminatory function, and the grasping of others in terms of their individuating and integrative function.

The next step has to do with those syntagmatic units that we can call contrasts.

In linguistics the term *contrast* is above all used to designate the “both/and” relation that is constitutive of the syntagmatic axis. Similarly, *plastic contrast* is defined as the copresence of opposed terms of the same nature (contraries or contradictories) from the same plastic category (or more vast units, organized in the same way). If a given category is present in a text somewhat in the manner of an antiphrasis, for example, if it is present through just one of its terms (the others being absent), the contrast in this case, as with antiphrasis, is characterized by the presence of at least two terms of the same category, whether or not they are contiguous on the same surface. Such a contrastive organization of the text offers an important advantage in our analysis. It allows us to recognize categories through those of their

terms that are present on just one surface. We are, thus, not obliged to resort to comparing different objects. The distinction between *plastic categories* and *plastic contrasts* is nonetheless very important and is quite indispensable for the carrying out of the analysis.

Textual organization of this kind is far from being specific to plastic language. We know that in large measure it is the basis for narrative discourses. The “lack” highlighted at the beginning of a story anticipates the “liquidation of the lack” which ends the dramatic tension and thus constitutes a “dramatic force.” Moreover, it is by projecting the paradigmatic upon the syntagmatic axis that, as we know, Jakobson has already defined the essence of poetic language. This rapprochement between the plastic and the poetic does not seem to us to be an accidental one. We will return to this point later.

The recurrence of plastic categories that is effected by the reintroduction of a given categorical term by its contrary (or contradictory) must be distinguished from another type of discursive recurrence which is known in semiotics by the term *anaphora* and which consists in the repetition and reintroduction of a term, but in a different context or, and it amounts to the same thing, within a different configuration. These recurrences of the similar and the different, of the same and the other, constitute a veritable texture covering the constructed surface. Because they are reconfigurable in the form of anticipating tensions and isotopies, they predispose one to globalizing reading.

What still seems to be missing in order for us to be able to say that we have all of the necessary conditions for our reading is its *orientation*. Is this just a badly defined concept, or is it undefinable? It is a source of epistemological preoccupation both in logic and in linguistics. The tempting and generally accepted hypothesis today to explain the reading of constructed surfaces consists in postulating the linearity of the reading process, a process that is identifiable from the movement of the eyes during the act of perception. All one would have to do would be to film this movement while a subject is examining a painting, and the painting’s syntax—or at least its syntagmatic nature—would be revealed to us. Beside the fact that such laboratory experiments would seem to us inconclusive, we do not see, on the theoretical level, that we have to admit that *linear and continuous reading* is the only way by which the surface can be apprehended. While admitting to this in principle, we can nonetheless conceive of the possibility that such a reading might sometimes be limited to partial trajectories (imposed, for example, by the deviations created by contrasts). We can also conceive of “anaphoric leaps,” whose function is to connect these different trajectories. Above all, and while still reserving a special

place for *oriented reading*, we can account for the generally accepted possibility of there being *simultaneous graspings* of the terms, graspings of mechanisms or structures endowed with categorical organizations.

Little by little we have drawn up a considerable inventory of these axes and mechanisms. What remains is for us to suggest where we should place it. When we described above the manner in which the topological mechanism is put into play following the act of plastic enunciation, we attributed to it, alongside its segmenting function, a role in orienting the reading. Indeed the different axes that it projects upon the surface can be considered as so many invitations to us to group the figures found on that surface into signifying ensembles. On the other hand, orientation marks can be recognized in different plastic figures while continuing to be elements that are inherent to their organization. This is as true for eidetic figures (in which the pointed/rounded category can orient reading) as it is for chromatic figures (the unsaturated/saturated category, which is of a graduated nature, has an “oriented” intensity). Figurative categories and formants can in turn be used as orienting indicators for the plastic text. The same can be said for categories whose principal function seems to be to iconize the figurative. Such would be the category clear/obscured or the various mechanisms whose responsibility it is to produce “depth” effects. To this must be added the direct use of the reading grid of the natural world. Thus, recognizing the figure “plant” implies the knowledge that plants grow vertically. Despite the appearance of order that we believe we recognize here, it would be dangerous to see this in terms of procedures that are applied almost mechanically, rather than as a set of phenomena available for the fruitful attention of the analyst.

### 3. Toward a Plastic Semiotics

#### 3.1. *Semisymbolic Semiotics*

The hypothesis governing all of our analysis—in conformity with generally accepted intuitions—consists in considering plastic objects as signifying objects. Thus the problem is not one of proclaiming that the plastic signifier, some of whose principles of organization we have been identifying, “signifies,” but rather of understanding how it signifies and what it signifies.

The wise *parti pris* of the semiotician consists in admitting, from the start, his ignorance concerning the modes of signification of these

objects. At the most he recognizes the “meaning effects” which are identifiable in the object and which he can intuitively grasp and interpret. He also seeks to identify what is generalized and regular about these “meaning effects.” Such a procedure is far from innocent. To postulate an ability to interpret already means to adopt a certain attitude according to which the *plastic* signifier constitutes, in and of itself, a monoplanar semiotics—but one which is interpretable, just as formal languages, chess games, and other symbolic systems are interpretable.

On the other hand, however intuitive our interpretation might be, it consists not only in formulating “meaning effects” in terms of a particular metalanguage, but at the same time in comparing and contrasting them with each other to develop a system of signifieds that is parallel and coextensive with the system of the symbols we seek to describe. Thus, for example, the description of the plastic mechanism that produces the meaning effect of “weight” would quite naturally lead us to inquire into the mechanism that gives rise to the meaning effect of “lightness.” We would want to know whether the figure representing “lightness” is comparable to that which represents “weight.” The symbols *a* and *b* of a formal language, if they represent logical classes, are independent from each other at the level of the signifier. It would be otherwise if the signifier figures *sa* and *sb* had “weight” and “lightness” as their signifieds, or even better, if two terms from the same category, *s1* and *s2*, could be homologated with the opposition “weight” and “lightness.” The semiotics they characterize could then be said to be no longer symbolic, but semisymbolic, because of these partial correlations between the two levels of signifier and signified. These correlations appear as a group of microcodes that are comparable to the gestural microcode “yes/no,” for example.

If we agree to reserve the term *semisymbolic semiotics* to these organizations of signification—defined according to the conformity between their two levels of language, a conformity that is recognized not between isolated elements, as with symbolic semiotics, but between categories—it will be noted that these organizations are found not only in gestural language (where we see, for example, disjunction/conjunction homologated with hand movements, on the lateral axis, in opposite direction, or attraction/repulsion expressed by movements of the trunk and arms along the prospective axis, and so on), but also in the natural languages and more particularly in poetic language, a secondary code of natural language. Poetic language has, of course, prosodic categories such as phrastic intonation, rhyme, and rhythm.

It is thus not surprising that the plastic categories that are part of the topological mechanism are comparable to these gestural and pro-

sodic categories and that they are also able to be homologated with the categorical articulations of the contents concerned. Thus, we would not hesitate to homologate upper/lower with euphoria/dysphoria and recognize, with the addition of the feature “orientation,” an ascent/fall microcode. We would not hesitate either to see possible ascent/descent interpretations in diagonals. It is of little importance if we know whether such homologations are founded upon cultural conventions or whether they are of a universal nature. It is the principle itself of this type of *modus significandi* that counts, and not the nature of the invested contents.

Given this, we can go further—and the semioticians I am speaking of do so, basing their conclusions on the results of their analyses—and declare, by way of generalization, that certain oppositions between plastic features are linked to certain oppositions between units of signifieds and that they are thereby homologable. For example:

pointed : rounded :: earthy : heavenly (Klee)  
contoured : flat :: naked : clothed (Boubat)

Such an observation, one that tends to define *plastic semiotics as a particular instance of semisymbolic semiotics*, naturally leads us to inquire into the semiotic status of the elements of the signified which are thus homologated with the categories of the plastic signifier. The fact that the number of concrete analyses already carried out is limited means that we cannot yet reach any absolute conclusions. We can, however, say that the above elements are categories that have to do with the form—and not the substance—of the content, and that, while seeming to result from the figurative reading of plastic objects, they can nonetheless be widely generalized. They appear as abstract categories of the signified. Thus the opposition earthly/heavenly refers us to the figurative universals of earth/air. The opposition naked/clothed constitutes the principal axis of the vestimentary dimension of a given culture. The opposition animate/inanimate, which in Klee's work is homologated with the opposition lines/surfaces, is an accepted one in linguistics.

### 3.2. Poetic Language

It is as if reading the plastic text consisted in a twofold diversion. Certain signifieds, postulated during the figurative reading, are detached from their figurative formants to become signifieds of the plastic formants that are being constituted. Certain features of the

plastic signifier are at the same time detached from the figurative formants with which they are integrated and, obeying the signifier's autonomous organizing principles, become constituted as plastic formants. We are in the presence here of much more than a "subversion" of the figurative. We are witnessing a process of autodetermination, the birth of a second language.

This process of diversion is illustrated by Alain Vergniaud's analysis of Mies van der Rohe's architectural plan. It shows how a functional object, used in social communication, can be transformed into an "aesthetic" object that exalts the virtues of orthogonality. It is also the case in one kind of writing which, being already partially diverted from its functionality because of would-be amusing print characters,<sup>5</sup> is able to produce calligraphic objects with a life of their own. However, poetic language as it functions within literary semiotics remains the best way to clarify the secondary nature of plastic language. Whereas the literary text, which is indifferent to its signifier but concerned with the figurative transmutation-representation of the human and natural worlds, is capable in every way of speaking about that signifier, the secondary poetic organization that is superimposed on that text takes over the signifier, up to then limited to its primary functionality, and articulates it in such a way as to reproduce the same fundamental forms that characterize the signified at its deep reading level. It thus gives rise to a *poetic reading* founded on the homologation of new poetic formants with renewed signifieds. If all this is so, then it is *poetic semiotics* as such, with all its structural organization and modes of signification, that should be considered as an autonomous and specific language. This would abolish the conventionally established boundaries that separate different domains of manifestation. If the substance of the signifier becomes of secondary importance, then, after recognizing the poeticity of such and such a text, we can note the differences between visual, literary, and musical poetics. Felix Thürlemann's suggestion that "the prose of the world is transformed into poetry by Klee,"<sup>6</sup> is now no longer just a metaphor. On the contrary, it describes what is really at stake for semiotics today in its desire to contribute to the already longstanding set of problems having to do with correspondences between the various arts.

### 3.3. *Mythical Structures*

Other "correspondences"—which we can identify only after our analysis is completed—are just as striking. When Claude Lévi-Strauss undertook his first examination of a mythical text—the Oedipus

myth—he found himself in a situation comparable to that of the semi-otician faced with a plastic text. The text, read on its surface, lends itself to a “figurative” reading that is at the same time both obvious and devoid of meaning, so great is the distance between the perennial nature of myths and the insignificance of their apparent meanings. The semiotician would also recognize his procedures in those adopted by Lévi-Strauss. Founded on the intuitive conviction that there exists another, deeper signification, the “vertical” reading he undertakes allows him to recognize both anaphoric recurrences of some of the greater aspects of the story and, at the same time, oppositions between “contrasts” involving the terms that have been used. Thus the narration, in all its overflowing figurativity, appears as a “noise” that one has to overcome in order to be able to identify the principal articulations of the object and proceed to an atemporal *mythical grasping* of this basic structure which accounts for the text’s global signification.

The basic mythical structure consists in placing into correlation two semantic categories which we can identify through their syntagmatic presence, in the manner of plastic contrasts, in a text in which they are manifested by groupings of mythical formants which have been detached from their figurative context. It should thus not be a surprise—after the fact—if the similarity of the procedures outlined above produces comparable results—that is, if the fundamental signification of Boubat’s *Nu* (Floch) or of Klee’s *Blumen-mythos* (Thürlemann) are founded on identical basic structures. On the contrary, the achronic grasping of signification starting from a categorical mechanism appears even more “natural” when we are dealing with plastic objects. Given their signifier, these apparently are condemned to a static condition that the spectator’s viewing tries to overcome. This is much less the case with verbal mythical texts, the linear reading of which emphasizes their temporality. The closed plastic surface appears to be predisposed to mythical manifestations.

Beyond these constraints upon the signifier, the structural identity between these two modes of signification is all the more clear. Although it seems “natural” that the simultaneous grasping of the deep meaning of the mythical object can be destabilized and thus give rise to the narrative developments that figurativize it, the same narrative phenomenon can be seen in plastic objects which authorize stories in which a woman undresses and “becomes natural,” or dresses and “rejoins culture” (Boubat). The desired bird and flower appear and transform the whole canvas into a woman’s upper body (Klee). These double and opposed stories, having exhausted their finality, converge and end up creating our great ambivalent mediating figures—characteristic of mythical thought, according to Lévi-Strauss, and typ-

ified by Boubat's woman, half naked, mediating between culture and nature and subsuming both, and Klee's flower woman, who brings about a conciliation between man and the cosmos.

PARIS

(Translated by Frank Collins and Paul Perron)

NOTES

1 Jean-Marie Floch, *Petites mythologies de l'oeil et de l'esprit: Pour une sémiotique plastique* (Paris, 1985); Felix Thürlemann, *Paul Klee: Analyse sémiotique de trois peintures* (Lausanne, 1982).

2 See Floch, *Petites mythologies*.

3 See Thürlemann, *Paul Klee*.

4 See Jean-Marie Floch and Denis Alkan.

5 See René Lindekens, *Essai de sémiotique visuelle: le photographique, le filmique, le graphique* (Paris, 1976).

6 Thürlemann, p. 38; my translation—Tr.