

Semiotics of Arts: A Historical Survey

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Summary. The essay identifies the founding moment of Italian semiotics of the image in Omar Calabrese's book *La macchina della pittura. Pratiche teoriche della rappresentazione figurativa tra Rinascimento e Barocco* [The Painting System. Theoretical Practices of Figurative Representation between Renaissance and Baroque], published in 1985 (Calabrese 1985a). The book is a meeting point between semiotic methodology applied to the visual and studies in the field of French art theory. In our work, the conceptual and thematic axes focused on by the book are explored alongside the most recent developments in the Italian semiotics of art. The theoretical cornerstones underpinning the discipline include Greimas's essay *Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Arts* (1984), the concept of art as a "theoretical object", the concept of visual enunciation and the centrality of the passions in images.

Keywords. Figurative semiotics, plastic semiotics, art theory, passions, visual enunciation

Zusammenfassung. Der Aufsatz identifiziert das Gründungsmoment der italienischen Bildsemiotik in Omar Calabreses Buch *La macchina della pittura. Pratiche teoriche della rappresentazione figurativa tra Rinascimento e Barocco* [Das System der Malerei. Theoretische Praktiken der figurativen Darstellung zwischen Renaissance und Barock], veröffentlicht im Jahr 1985. Das Buch bildet einen Schnittpunkt zwischen der, auf das Visuelle angewandten, semiotischen Methodologie und den Studien auf dem Gebiet der französischen Kunsttheorie. In dieser Arbeit werden die konzeptionellen und thematischen Achsen des Buches zusammen mit den jüngsten Entwicklungen der italienischen Kunstsemiotik untersucht. Zu den theoretischen Eckpfeilern der Disziplin gehören Greimas' Essay *Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Arts* [Figurative Semiotik und die Semiotik der plastischen Künste], das Konzept der Kunst als ‚theoretisches Objekt‘, das Konzept der visuellen Äußerung und die zentrale Rolle der Leidenschaft in den Bildern.

Schlüsselwörter. Figurative Semiotik, plastische Semiotik, Kunsttheorie, Leidenschaften, visuelle Äußerung

1. Introduction

In Italy, the semiotics of the arts saw a key moment in the publication, in 1985, of *La macchina della pittura. Pratiche teoriche della rappresentazione figurativa tra Rinascimento e Barocco* [The Painting System. Theoretical Practices of Figurative Representation between Renaissance and Baroque] by Omar Calabrese (1985a).¹ The book is a meeting point between semiotic methodology applied to the visual and studies in the field of French art theory. The first of these refers to the research carried out within the so-called *School of Paris*, whose main exponent and key point of reference was Algirdas Julien Greimas, in particular the essay *Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Arts* (1984) (cf. chapter 2). The concept of art as a “theoretical object” (cf. chapter 3), as elaborated by French art theory through the studies of Arasse (1992, 2000, 2004), Damisch (1972, 1984, 1987, 1992) and Marin (1977, 1989, 1994), plays a decisive role in outlining one of the theoretical references of the book. Right from the introduction, where the horizon of reference is set out, Calabrese underlines how the book aims to deal with theories of painting expressed through painting itself.

Such an approach was completely innovative in the panorama of studies aimed at the qualification of the arts as a language, which in previous years had marked the main debates concerning the status of the arts with reference to linguistics, the philosophy of language and semiotics itself. In this regard, this book marks a decisive moment as regards the status of images in relation to the theories elaborated in the field of linguistics; this clear choice was then followed by subsequent studies. In other words, by accepting Emile Benveniste’s proposal (1974), the idea that images have a shared *langue* and that it is possible to identify a system of minimum units valid for all works is overcome. On the contrary, each work is thought of as a “system” of itself – a closed system of signifying relationships. This approach solves two problems: on the one hand, it overcomes the long-standing and unproductive question of the specific characteristics of languages that had marked the previous debates; on the other, it preserves and magnifies the uniqueness of each text in order to achieve a *local* reconstruction of the systems of signification, without understanding their meaning as ineffable and unspeakable. All this is valid for a single work, as well as for a *corpus* of works, as defined by semantic and expressive recurrences.

In terms, again, of the continuities and differences with respect to linguistic theories and their effectiveness in the visual field, a key concept is that of enunciation. Calabrese makes a completely innovative proposal, suggesting that it is much more profitable to ask whether the theory of enunciation is not a theory of painting rather than whether the procedures of enunciation are applicable to painting. In the context of Italian research, visual enunciation will constitute one of the most prolific areas of investigation (cf. chapter 4).

Finally, another aspect present in Calabrese's book (1985a) is the role of passions in pictures. The representation of passions in painting opens up numerous paths of meaning. It has to deal both with the problem of the representation of temporality on a static support, and with the possibility that figures, charged with pathos, re-emerge after periods of latency to give rise to a renewed signification (cf. chapter 5).

2. Figurative semiotics and plastic semiotics

The essay *Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Arts* (1984), by Greimas, brings together the research carried out within the Paris School, giving scholars a fundamental methodological and analytical point of reference. Among other aspects, the formulation and concomitant sharing of an analytical method allows the comparability of results and therefore constitutes an important starting point for the progressive advancement of research. The studies devoted to image analysis in Italy draw primarily on this inaugural essay, which it is therefore important to review in order to understand its developments and analytical applications.

The essay marks a turning point in the panorama of semiotic studies of the image for a number of reasons; first and foremost, it allows us to move beyond a "theory of codes" in the direction of a semiotics of the visual text. The aim of the latter approach is no longer to reconstruct a universally shared *langue* or to identify an inventory of minimal units, but rather to disentangle the relationship between the relevant and pertinent elements in a work or in a *corpus* of works capable of forming a "system".² The essay also makes a decisive contribution to de-emphasising the supposed hierarchy between verbal language and visual language, which until then had dominated the semio-linguistic landscape, according to which the visual was subordinate to the verbal. Finally, it intervenes to clarify the relationship between representation and the world outside it, unhinging the idea of a *motivation* between the two.

Visual semiotics, Greimas tells us at the outset, is characterised by its *constructed* nature: the operation of imitating the natural world must be understood in terms of its considerable reduction of the qualities of this world: 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 (Greimas [1984] 1989: 631). Thus, while motivation involves a strict continuity between the world and the object represented, imitation, on the other hand, involves the selection of certain traits, mediated by a series of culturally acquired conventions.

The activity of recognition, the human reading of the world, takes place, according to the author, through a historically and culturally variable grid:

It is this grid though 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 interpreter movements as process which are attributable or no attributable to subjects, and so on. This grid is of a semantic nature, not visual, auditive or olfactory (Greimas [1984] 1989: 632).

Such a point of view therefore radically revises the formulation of the icon as a sign motivated by the referent. This is because it eliminates the possibility of a *motivation* between artwork and world. Moreover, if we postulate a similarity with the referent, this *similarity* is placed at the level of meaning, that is, at the level of the semantic and cultural grid through which we read planar objects and the world itself.

2.1 *Figurative semiotics*

According to the point of view introduced above, it is therefore not correct to identify “iconic signs” because of the necessary revision of the concept of sign for the visual arts. Furthermore, figurativity must be understood as gradual, and iconization as an effect of meaning and not as the result of a *motivation* between referent and sign. Iconization, indeed, is the procedure whereby this impression of the referential world is produced and sustained. It is the essential ingredient in the construction of the effect of reality or the illusion of a real world:

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 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 word. 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 this wings the bundles of visual features which vary in their respective densities and which it makes into figurative formants, endows them with meanings (Greimas [1984] 1989: 633).

A very interesting analysis, by Calabrese (1985a), is that of Hans Holbein the Younger’s *The Ambassadors* (1533, Fig. 1). The painting has a plurality of levels of meaning and model readers, who may or may not be able to recognise the many connections to the historical events to which the painting refers.



Fig. 1. Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, 1533, oil on canvas, 2,07 m x 2,1 m, London, National Gallery.

An anamorphic distortion of the skull, recognisable only from an observation point at an acute angle to the plane of the painting, poses, according to Calabrese, a question about the regimes of belief and of veridiction of the image: there is a transition between what is but does not seem (secret), i.e. the elongated and enigmatic figure, and what is and seems (truth), i.e. the figure of the skull. It thus poses a problem concerning the image and its status of veridiction, which brings into play the fiduciary agreement (*contrat de véridiction*) between the enunciator and the enunciatee.

2.2 The plastic signifier

Unnameable elements, not recognisable as figures of the world, also have a signification. This is the presupposition of plastic semiotics, which aims to isolate and describe such elements.

Diderot, in his description of the Salons, alongside a figurative approach, reserved an equally important place for the plastic component of the works, i.e. the colours, shapes and their distribution on the pictorial surface. If these elements also mean something, it is necessary to question, Greimas tells us, their reciprocal relations. Thus, the visual text can be broken down into categories (at the immanent level) and contrasts (at the level of manifestation) of a chromatic, eidetic and topological order.

The topological mechanism is related to the format. This is the old problem of the framework-format of a text, which establishes the closure of the work to be analysed. The topological categories, some rectilinear (such as upper/lower or right/left), some curvilinear (such as peripheral/central or enclosing/enclosed), make it possible to segment the planar surface, to identify continuity and symmetries with respect to the axes of the format. The eidetic categories, relating to form (such as curvilinear/rectilinear, pointed/rounded), and the chromatic categories (such as light/dark, white/black, saturated/unsaturated, and so on) allow the identification of minimal units of signifier: the plastic figures. However, it is not possible to make a complete inventory of such figures, according to the phonology's ideal; on the contrary, following the semantic approach, only those categories relevant to the given micro-universe should be taken into account.

In a famous analysis of Klee's *Blumen Mythos* (1918), Thüerlemann (1982) shows how the plastic segmentation of the work makes it possible to identify a series of plastic categories, which enter into homology with semantic oppositions. For example, curved/straight :: heavenly/earthly; upper/lower :: heavenly/earthly; linear elements/surface elements :: animate/inanimate. At the figurative level, a flower is recognisable in the centre of the work and a bird is moving toward the flower from above.

A simple figurative reading would qualify the flower as an inanimate and earthy element. Thanks to plastic semiotics, the flower changes its status, becoming an element of conjunction between opposite semantic categories (such as animate vs inanimate and heavenly vs earthy). The flower is thus transformed into a myth in the anthropological-structuralist sense of the term (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1964). The myth is also evoked by the title; moreover, in German, the flower is feminine (*die Blume*) and the bird masculine (*der Vogel*). The first is shaped like a receiving sickle of a goblet, the second like a double piercing arrow, and so the myth takes shape: the "bird" joins the woman – "flower", a conjunction that indirectly comes into contact with the cosmos, represented by the "stars".

What has been said so far does not imply that figurative semiotics corresponds to the plane of content and plastic semiotics to the plane of expression (as many say). As Marrone (2013) has well highlighted, these two semiotic forms are two different grids projected onto the image, which segment it according to different logics:

Plastic language does not precede figurative language, it comes after it: it is as if the eye went beyond its own perception, as if sensitivity surfaced again, sailing

around given cultural perceptive grids to found, possibly, locally new ones (Marrone [2013] 2016: 3).

Such a point of view relates figurative and plastic semiotics to the process of “aesthetic grasp” as theorised by Greimas (1987). Marrone (2013) indicates six stages: an initial one in which there is a standardised perception (*figurative dimension*), followed by a breaking up of the perceptive scheme and a setting aside of cognition and discursivity – this level allows the surface of sensitivity to emerge (*plastic dimension*), thus giving access to a new state of things (*aesthetic grasp*). The process is completed by a return to perception and discourse, then to standardised perception, but with a feeling of imperfection and longing, and then, the final stage, to the subject’s acknowledgment of their own transformation.

2.3 The semi-symbolic system

In plastic semiotics, the centrality of the categories is based on the *relational grasping* of the text, which is why it is not simply colours and shapes that are relevant – the contrasts between shapes and colours are also pertinent.

Greimas questions the way plastic semiotics produces meaning and identifies the semi-symbolic system as capable of organising the relationship between categories of expression and categories of content. The author draws mainly on Roman Jakobson’s (1972) study. Starting from comparative studies on different cultures, Jakobson (1972) focused on the connection between the gestural category of /directionality/ (/vertical/ vs /horizontal/) and the semantic category of /affirmativeness/ (/affirmation/ vs /negation/): /yes/ and /no/ become homologous respectively with /verticality/ and /horizontality/, creating effects of motivation inside that specific system. According to Greimas, plastic semiotics is based on a principle analogous to poetic language:

Poetic language as it functions within literary semiotics remains the best way to clarify the secondary nature of plastic language [...]. The secondary poetic organization that is superimposed on the 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 [...]. We are witnessing a process of autodetermination, a birth of a second language (Greimas [1984] 1989: 647).

In the panorama of Italian research, Calabrese’s *La macchina della pittura* (1985a) makes use of the work developed within the framework of Parisian semiotic research, and the chapter “A look at the bridge” is particularly interesting in this regard.

The author theorises the bridge as a pictorial motif, and at the same time redefines, from a semiotic point of view, the qualities of the motif. He then suggests that we should recognise as “bridges” not only what corresponds to such a figure of the world (by the figurative semiotics), but also everything that has the same “syntactic” qualities (by plastic semiotics). Here, then, everything that /joins/ or /disjoins/ two different semantic universes becomes a “bridge”, e.g. /culture/ vs /nature/ (e.g. through the representation of a city and a countryside respectively), or /heavenly/ vs /earthly/, or two different episodes of the same story.

Calabrese’s analysis, by means of plastic semiotics, shows that linear and vectorial features are the most relevant, and therefore that the same function of “bridge” can be achieved by different figures, e.g. roads, paths, flocks, trees placed transversely, etc. The units that the bridge joins or disjoins may correspond to a logical disjunction (antecedent vs consequent), a temporal disjunction (before vs after), a spatial disjunction (in front vs behind, left vs right) or something else. An important continuity is that through the motif of the “bridge” a moment of transition is represented; it is the place where the dynamisations of the narrative and fundamental semantic oppositions take place.³

The semi-symbolic is an important analytical and methodological tool, used transversally for the semiotics of the image and for analyses of tales, as well as in advertising and films.

There are numerous analyses in the field of Italian visual semiotics that have enhanced the ideas proposed in Greimas’s essay *Figurative Semiotics and the Semiotics of the Plastic Arts* (1984), and it would not be possible to mention them all here. We therefore refer to the contributions that have highlighted its founding features, cf. Eugeni (1999), Corrain (1999, 2004), Polidoro (2008). As far as relations with other disciplines are concerned, see Lancioni’s (2012) in-depth study examining the relations between semiotics and theories of “pure visibility”. For the relations between semiotics and iconology/iconography, see Corrain (ed. 1991) and Lancioni (2019). For synergies (and differences) with the so-called *iconic turn*, see Mengoni’s (2019) thorough examination.

3. Art as “theoretical object”

Another perspective taken as central by the book *La macchina della pittura* (Calabrese 1985a) is that of considering works of art as “theoretical objects”. This means understanding works of art as works that force us to return to the theory that generates them, that bring into discourse, self-reflectively, the theoretical apparatus that makes them possible. Such points of view will have an important continuation in subsequent research in Italy.

The roots of the reflection on the theoretical object can be found mainly in Damisch (1972), who proposed the following definition:

A theoretical object is one that is called on to function according to norms that are not historical. It is not sufficient to write a history of this object. It's what I said before: it's not enough to write a history of a problem for that problem to be resolved. A theoretical object is something that obliges one to do theory; we could start there. Second, it's an object that obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. Thus, if you agree to accept it on theoretical terms, it will produce effects around itself. [...] Third, it's a theoretical object because it forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory. But I never pronounce the word *theory* without also saying the word *history*. Which is to say that for me such an object is always a theoretico-historical object. Yet if theory is produced within history, history can never completely cover theory. That is fundamental for me. The two terms go together but in the sense in which each escapes the other (Bois et al. 1998: 8).

More recently, Careri (2018) has taken stock of reflections on the theoretical object and the analytical practice it has followed, highlighting its main points and showing, through his own contribution, the fruitfulness of this perspective. On this subject, see also Careri (2007, 2020). Among the aspects highlighted is the singularity of each theoretical object: the objectual component (i.e. the specific form and the materiality of the artwork) is resistant to conceptualisation, so the theoretical object is not purely conceptual. It is therefore a theory that cannot abstract itself from the singularity of the object studied. In order to achieve its aim, the theoretical object must offer an enhanced and renewed understanding of the artwork. This marks the difference from a philosophical approach, where, for example, the investigation of certain aesthetic categories is done by abstracting from individual works of art.

The relationship between theory and history is complex; in terms of how theory is grafted onto history, Careri suggests that the time of an artwork is multiple – it is an anachronic time, not a chronological one. The investigation into the time of images opens up an anachronic perspective, in which it is the artwork itself that “produces” the time in which it is inscribed. This is a very different concept from one that sees time as a uni-linear unfolding of events and where the relationship between artworks is understood in terms of influences. Mengoni in *Carte Semiotiche* (2013) raises the urgency of such a perspective, where the way in which theory selects new series and new constellations of images in the succession of objects and practices is central. According to this point of view, the work of art establishes relationships, based on structural traits and activated by the object itself, which connect the work with other objects and times. The author then goes back over some of Benjamin, Warburg and Lotman's theories, showing how the conception of time in these authors is not a chronological but an anachronic one. By the same author, see also Mengoni (2008).

Through an in-depth analysis of Cattelan's *All*, Corrain (2013) highlights how anachronic time has many points of connection with comparative linguistics, a foundational methodology for semiotics. It is again Cor-

rain (2016) who considers the “velum” of the image as a theoretical object, while Corrain and Mosca (2017) deal with anachronic montages in Mat Collishaw’s *Black Mirror*.

Even more recently, Corrain (2019) has analysed market painting, the so-called *Fugger cycle* painted by Vincenzo Campi between 1580 and 1581. Through a rigorous application of the semiotic method and a close look at the works, the author shows how the *Fugger cycle* implies a stratification of meaning that qualifies it as a theoretical object. The prevailing interpretation of this cycle is that of genre painting. The author shows that beyond this dimension there is a second one of a sacred order, a domain that in turn conceals, in line with the culture of the time, that of laughter, the ridiculous and even the obscene. These are works that condense the cultural traits of the time and rework them, articulating them on a multiplicity of levels of meaning.

In Polacci’s interpretation (2020), photographs taken by Brancusi, Rosso and Man Ray of their sculptures solicit a reflection on the status of photography and sculpture, respectively. The photos of sculptures bring out theoretical problems concerning the value of reproducibility, the relationship between original and copy, the montage between elements shown by the photographs and the “off-screen” of the sculpture, which is included in some shots used to show and comment on the sculptures themselves.⁴

4. Visual enunciation

As far as visual enunciation is concerned, the semiotics of the arts first of all drew on the work of Marin (1975, 1977, 1982, 1989, 1994), as well as that of Schapiro (1969, 1996) and Stoichita (1993), and then made a contribution in terms of research and analysis.

Marin indicates two dimensions which characterise representation: one transitive (to represent in meaning the substitution of something absent with something present), in which the effect obtained is one of mimetic *transparency*, and an intransitive or ‘presentative’ (in which the etymology of the Latin term *re-præsentatio* is magnified, and therefore the operation of showing, presenting something is valorised) and the effect is one of the *opacity* of representation. In Marin’s words:

Every sign, every representation – and this is the very definition of its opacity – designates itself, signifies itself, reflect itself: the sign and representation present themselves while representing something, and, as a result of this reflexive dimension, all signs, all representations refer to a practical power of expression [...]. Corresponding to the strain put on the representational transparency of the image by its presentational or reflexive opacity is the strain put on the representative transparency of discourse, the text, the sentence, the word, and the sign, all the more transparent in that they are by their very nature conventional and institutional: thus an ‘immediate’ transparency put under pressure by the opaque limits of discourse (Marin 1993: 98).

If the mimetic dimension prevails, the work of art seems to be able to speak by itself, creating an “effect of objectivity”. On the contrary, if the presentative dimension prevails, the work of art shows the mechanism that makes the representation happen and there is an “effect of subjectivity”. These concepts recall the theory of “visual enunciation” that Marin elaborated on the basis of Benveniste’s “written enunciation” (Benveniste 1966, 1974): in language, the effects of objectivity (“narrative enunciation”) and subjectivity (“discursive enunciation”) depend, among others, on the personal forms of the verb “He” (effect of objectivity) as well as “I/ You” (effect of subjectivity) and on the circumstantial demonstrative adverbs linked with them (“that” for “He,” “this” for “I/ You”). Obviously, there is a correspondence between the ‘mimetic (or transitive) dimension of the representation’ and the ‘narrative enunciation’; on the other hand, the ‘reflexive (or presentative) dimension of representation’ corresponds to the ‘discursive enunciation’.

The frame facilitates the mimetic or transitive dimension of representation, at the same time it takes charge of its reflexive dimension. Because every frame completes the picture in its finality, as it is to be seen, shown, and exhibited, it concerns a process of communication or, better, a relation with the beholder: When the viewer’s gaze is substituted for the painter’s eye, a frame is necessary, because the painting considered in the process of its presentation, its spectacularisation, is substituted for the artefact considered in the process of its production (Marin [1994] 2001: 323). So the frame activates a process of presentation and putting on stage the work, indicating what to look at.⁵

The presentative role of the frame could be also played by other elements, very different from a visual point of view, like painted curtains or figures that indicate something in the scene or look at the beholder. They can be inside the space of the narration and not necessarily inside the large space of the painted frame, but their function is the same. These elements are what Marin calls “figures of framing”:

This is also how the frame (by this I mean the processes and procedures of framing, the dynamics and power of positioning) will delegate some of its functions to a particular figure, who, even as he participates in the action, in the story that is “told,” “represented,” will utter by his gestures, his posture, his gaze, not so much what is to be seen, what the viewer *must* see, as *the way to see it*: these are pathetic figures of framing (Marin [1994] 2001: 358).⁶

In the field of semiotics, Greimas and Courtés (1986) incorporated Marin’s important contribution, which then became one of the keystones of Italian semiotics of the arts.

Calabrese (1985a) makes an important contribution in that he reverses the usual point of view: he does not wonder about the applicability of the theory of enunciation to painting, but rather highlights how the theory of enunciation draws on the formulations of pictorial theories, starting from the centrality, among others, of terms such as *deictic*, *focalization*, *observer* and *point of view*.

In a later essay, Calabrese (1987) investigates the presence of enunciation effects even where anthropomorphic figures are not present, as in abstract art.

The relationship between the four spaces that characterise painting, all of which are not necessarily co-present, play a central role. These are: (i) the two-dimensional space of the canvas; (ii) the illusory space beyond the surface; (iii) the illusory space on this side of the surface (e.g. *trompe l'œil*); and (iv) the material space projecting from the canvas. Enunciation effects occur when a gap is created between two types of space, when, for example, the illusory depth is contradicted by a graphic layout that highlights the two-dimensional surface, as happens with the artist's signature.

In this regard, it is fruitful to investigate the relationship between writing and image from a semiotic point of view. In this regard, we recall the work on verbal-visual futurist experimentation by Polacci (2010), Migliore's (2012) on Miro's graphic traces and Manchia's (2017) on Massin's writing. Fabbri's (2017a, 2017b) contribution on this theme is also of considerable interest.

The relationship between the verbal and the visual makes it pertinent to study the translation between different semiotic substances. In this regard, see some exemplary analyses, such as Corrain and Lancioni's contribution (1999) on the translation between a poem by Hölderlin and a painting by Morlotti, an essay by Fabbri (2000), where the focus is on the relationship between Klee's painting *Sphinxartig* (1919) and a poem by the same author, or a contribution by Addis (2011) in which Man Ray's photos and Dali's writings translate Gaudi's architecture.

Research on enunciation in images makes an important contribution to defining the efficacy of images, a wide-ranging theme that can be developed through a pragmatic approach, i.e. with attention to the agency of images, or with attention to the efficacy of the mechanisms inscribed and activated by the image.⁷

Since it is not possible to list all the works in the field of image semiotics that deal with the enunciative level, we will indicate three of the numerous areas of research in which a reflection in this sense has taken shape.⁸

The portrait, and the self-portrait, has been a central field of investigation here, given that the representation of a subject can produce effects of subjectivity (or the cancellation of these). To mention just a few contributions, see Calabrese's book (2006a) entirely dedicated to the self-portrait; the same author dedicates a chapter of *Come si legge un'opera d'arte* [How to read a work of art] (2006b) to the "gaze in painting: an economy of enunciation". Fabbri's (2007) analysis of Savinio's *Self-portrait* (1936) provides singular insight. Lancioni (2012) retraces the critical-interpretive readings dedicated to Van Eyck's *Double Portrait* (1434) to open a reflection on the iconological method in relation to semiotics, as well as on the criteria of pertinence established by the researcher. The author's reflection on method concludes with a proposal for an original and "impertinent" interpretation of the painting. See also the essay by Corrain and Fabbri (2004), which suggests that a still life can be considered a self-portrait of the artist who creates it.

Second, the motif of the Annunciation has motivated reflection on the enunciative level, starting from a brilliant essay by Arasse (1984). In 15th-Century Tuscan Annunciations, the author points to the recurrence of figures in profile, which achieve an effect of objectivity; in these works, events simply seem to happen and are shown to be happening. The historical enunciation is also achieved thanks to the skilful use of geometric perspective, which had been perfected in that period: the figures represented look at each other and their gazes cross at the vanishing point, allowing the spectator to admire what is represented, but never being included in the representation. On enunciation and Annunciation, see also Marin (1994).

More recently, Annunciations have been the subject of an extensive study by Leone (2014a), which considers not only the Christian Annunciation, but numerous Annunciations, from the perspective of the semiotics of culture and religion.

Corrain (2016) analyses an *unicum* in the history of painting: an Annunciation set in darkness, by night-light, that of Matthias Stomer, painted in the early 17th Century. This Annunciation is atypical, not only because of the absence of daylight, but also because of the absence of almost all the iconographic attributes that typically characterise Annunciations. Corrain shows the function of the candle and of light in the construction of a space “at hand”, haptic, which helps to define the peculiarity of this Annunciation.

Lancioni (2020) in his in-depth analysis of Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Polyptych* (1512–1516) reveals how the enunciative level is pertinent but achieves a significant inversion with respect to what was shown by Arasse. In the *Polyptych*, historical enunciation is transformed into discursive enunciation: in particular, the book at the feet of the Virgin is the place where the vanishing lines converge and is itself in *trompe-l'œil*; it leaves its own space and makes the space of representation coincide with that of the observer.

The third thematic focus concerns the margin of the image, and therefore the framework-format (Greimas 1984) as a significant mechanism for the meanings of the image.

It is primarily Marin's work mentioned above that focuses on the frame of the image as a dense *limen*, one which “shows” the spaces that the frame itself is designed to articulate: With the frame, the painting inscribes its own theory in itself, that is, the fact of presenting itself theoretically so as to represent something. That condition of possibility of “aesthetic” contemplation of representation is thus an element of the metalanguage of pictorial representation (Marin [1994] 2001: 324).

Some recent semiotic research has focused on the centrality of the image margin in different historical periods, e.g. Polacci (2012) analysed it in relation to Picasso's collages and more generally in the period from the late 19th to the early 20th Century (Polacci 2013), when it was the system of the arts itself that was called into question. In such cases, the margin is deprived of its neutral value so that it can be transformed into a place for rewriting the limits of representation. In a later essay, Polacci (2018) again articulates a reflection on the self-reflexive use of the frame in Paolini's artworks.

Corrain (2018) investigates the role of the frame in some significant cases of street art.⁹ Enunciation, frame and street art are again the focus of Pezzini's (2020) work on William Kentridge's *Triumphs and Laments*. Mengoni (2020) shows how the evidence of a portion of the "frame", i.e. the black margin of the image, plays a veridiction process in two photos taken by a *Sonderkommando* member from inside the crematorium of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp.

Moreover, the last two essays mentioned above are published in the two volumes of the conference of the *Italian Association of Semiotics* dedicated, in 2019, to enunciation and images – volumes to which we refer for an overview of the most recent Italian research in this field. See Lancioni and Lorusso (eds. 2020); Addis and Jacoviello (eds. 2020). Further insights on enunciation and images can be found in a recent Italian volume, edited by Tiziana Migliore and Marion Colas-Blaise (2022), exploring the relationships between forms and formats.

5. Passions in images

The study of passions marks an important line of semiotic research¹⁰ and also occupies an important place in the field of images.

An inaugural study that opens up a range of research directions is that of Careri (1990) on Bernini's *bel composto*, where, partly through the notion of "montage", the author investigates the relationship between painting, architecture and sculpture in Bernini's work. It is precisely the relationship between the dimensions of passion and montage, as theorised by Eisenstein (2004), that will be particularly dense with ramifications.

More generally, the representation of the passions can be expressed either by a subject who manifests, through his or her own expression (e.g. admiration), a certain feeling, or it can imply a narrative dimension, thus involving a transformation from one state to another; see also Careri (2005).

The representation of an action in painting is a complex process. Being a still medium, painting concerns spatial but not temporal dimensions; for instance, to correlate events happening in different times, the categories "before" and "after" are inferred by the beholder thanks to the logical relations between the places where static signs are arranged by the painter. But the artist who wants to represent a single action knows that it contains different phases, which can be schematised as "beginning," "climax" and "the end". Climax is the moment of maximum tension – an instant infinitely short – and, concentrating on it, the artist summarises the two extremities of the action, "before" and "after" (Calabrese 2006b). It is an excellent expedient to introduce the passing of time in the still medium of painting (Corrain ed. 1987).

For instance, the representation of death is a problem of passions because it involves a certain aspectuality of suffering (inchoateness of agony, punctuality of the act of dying, durativeness of

being dead). These linguistic categories, adopted by generative semiotics for the visual arts, could be used to refine the three phases of the action (“beginning,” “climax” and “the end”).¹¹ The iconography of *Crucifixion* is one of the most vivid examples of the challenge of representing the infinitely short instant of passing away. In different ages artists have tried to approach the final act (the climax), emphasising some important signs of suffering, such as tension, contortion of the body and pale skin-tone (Calabrese 2006b).

In the wound motif too, investigated in detail by Mengoni (2012b) and Corrain (2016), the aspectualisation of passions is central.

Much of the Italian research on the representation of the passions has been marked by the ideas of Aby Warburg. One of Warburg’s principal lines of thought consists of investigating the *Nachleben* (that is, the “after-life”) of certain figurative motifs (not necessarily conventionalised in terms of iconographic motifs) and isolating in the moment of their re-emergence a process of intensification. This is what Warburg (1932) called the “superlatives of expression,” in which a *formula* of the past is subjected to a process of intensification, giving rise to what he calls *pathos formulae*. Warburg’s investigation takes shape through his *Atlas Mnemosyne* project, in which such *pathos formulae* are investigated according to a model of anachronistic time and by moving transversally between images of the artistic tradition and those produced by mass culture. Warburg’s proposal in the field of semiotics was also fruitful with regard to the construction of *corpora* of images, in which figurative recurrences can lead to the interpretation of images distant in time and space.

Richter’s *Atlas*, which summarises the problem of traumatic memory and the possibility of giving it form through contemporary art, is the focus of an in-depth examination by Mengoni (2012a). In Mengoni’s work, Richter’s boards are analysed as a form of visual montage in which the memory of post-war Germany is at the centre.

In *Shrouds and Footprints in Robert Morris*, Corrain (2020) adopts the Warburgian perspective to show resonances between *Moltingsexoskeletonsshrouds* (2015), *Boustrophedons* (2017) and *Out of the Past* (2016) and some works from the past, the latter re-actualised in the work of the American artist.

Vedere ad Arte. Iconico e icastico collects the main writings of Fabbri (2020b) on contemporary art. There are essays on some central contemporary artists, including Barbara Kruger, Matthew Barney, Luigi Ghirri, Maurizio Cattelan, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Christian Boltanski, Alberto Savinio and Bill Viola, as well as many others. The *fil rouge* is the semiologist’s point of view, attentive to systems of signification as well as to the sphere of the passions. The gaze proposed is always an “intra-vision”, capable of seeing the works, but also of seeing through them and grasping the profound meaning that structures them.

Another important area of Italian research is the relationship between semiotics and aesthetics, which has been studied mainly by Calabrese (1985b) and Marrone (1995). The first highlights the relationships between

semiotics and pragmatism, formalism and structuralism, the second outlines continuities and differences not only with the linguistic tradition but also with the philosophical one, and then focuses on the most recent developments of semiotics in relation to aesthetics, with reference also to the concept of “aesthetic grasp”. Both show how, thanks to Eco’s theories (1975, 1979, 1990), the contribution of semiotics has been enhanced, even going beyond Croce’s aesthetics.

A strong impetus to increase the relations between semiotics and aesthetics has been given more recently by Montani’s work (2007, 2014, 2020), which focuses on the concepts of bioaesthetics, imagination and the technologies of sensibility. A work consistent with this perspective and dedicated to the words of the new aesthetics is that of Finocchi and Guastini (eds. 2011). In this regard, the monographic issue *Appearance Screens. Technologies, Imagination, Forms of Life between Semiotics and Aesthetics*, edited by Finocchi and Pezzini (eds. 2017) is of crucial interest. This issue is dedicated to the concept of imagination in relation to the arts and digital technologies, in which the relationship between creativity and automatism in artistic creation and contemporary forms of life is also examined.¹² Also in the area of the relations between semiotics and aesthetics, see Migliore’s monograph (2018) investigating the relationship between image, meaning and artwork.

The representation of suffering then runs through the research of numerous authors. Photographs of humanitarian organisations have been investigated by the TraMe Centre at the University of Bologna (<https://dfc.unibo.it/it/ricerca/centri-di-ricerca/trame>, last accessed on April 30, 2021). These are photos of suffering, in which the pathematic dimension is foregrounded. In these photos, the cognitive dimension (letting people know) is joined by the sphere of the passions (making people feel). The images in question are aimed at moving the spectator, thus moving him or her to indignation and so to action (cf. Violi 2011).¹³

Similar issues are the focus of Zucconi’s monograph *Displacing Caravaggio* (2018), in which the author isolates “humanitarian visual culture” as an object of investigation. The author explores a problem that ties together art history and humanitarian communications, making use of an extensive theoretical apparatus. Among the tools used are the concept of montage and Warburg’s *Atlas*, through which Zucconi highlights the synchronous relationships between contemporary images and those of the past. The survival of images in cinema is also the focus of Zucconi’s previous monograph (2013). An analytical look at images depicting migrants is provided by Coviello and Tagliani (2018, 2019), who investigate the implications for media and film.

Finally, we would like to mention an important project *FACETS – Face Aesthetics in Contemporary E-Technological Societies* (<http://www.facets-erc.eu/>, last accessed on April 30, 2021), the result of a European Research Council Consolidator Grant (main referee: Massimo Leone). The project focuses on the sphere of passion in the representation of the face

in social media, and therefore investigates, through an interdisciplinary approach, the increasingly widespread practice of displaying the face in social networks, as well as in practices of political activism or artistic provocation.

Notes

- 1 The text was then republished in 2012. For the new edition, see the introduction by Corrain and Lancioni (2012). For the activities carried out by *CROSS* (*Omar Calabrese Research Centre for Semiotics and Image Science*), see <https://www.semio-cross.it>, last accessed on May 20, 2021, which also has information about the journal *Carte Semiotiche. International Journal of Semiotics and Image Theory*, published by the centre.
- 2 For the establishment of the corpus, see Greimas (1966).
- 3 On the subject of the semi-symbolic, see also Calabrese (1999), as well as the monographic issue of the journal *Carte Semiotiche*, cf. Leone (ed. 2004).
- 4 We will not examine, for reasons of space, the semiotics of photography; however, formulations concerning the theoretical object have converged in two important publications – see Del Marco and Pezzini (eds. 2011) and Brucculeri et al. (eds. 2011). Recently, for an interesting examination regarding theoretical issues in a semiotics of photography, see Mangano (2018).
- 5 See also the introduction to the new Italian edition of *On Representation*, cf. Corrain and Fabbri (2013) and cf. Fabbri (2020a).
- 6 Marin ([1994] 2001) also reminds us of some of Alberti's precepts concerning the figures placed in the position of commentator, *admonitor* and *advocator* of the work of art. Inside the visual narration, Alberti appreciates figures which suggest the emotional reaction or the beholder's moral response: "*E piacemi sia nella storia chi ammonisca e insegni a noi quello che ivi si facci, o chiami con la mano a vedere, o con viso crucciato e con gli occhi turbati minacci che gnuno verso loro vada, o dimostri qualche pericolo o cosa ivi meravigliosa, o te inviti a piagnere con loro insieme o a ridere*" (Alberti 1436: 72).
- 7 One of the main reference texts is that of Freedberg (1989). In the semiotic field we point out Calabrese's monograph devoted to *trompe l'œil* (cf. Calabrese 2010); more recently, there has been the monographic issue of *Lexia* dedicated to efficacious images, cf. Leone (ed. 2014b).
- 8 In the Italian context, for an in-depth study of enunciation, cf. Manetti (2008). In the field of the semiotics of the arts, cf. Polacci (ed. 2011).
- 9 Street art has been investigated in the field of semiotics. See Leone (ed. 2009); Calabrese (2013); Mastroianni (ed. 2013).
- 10 See Greimas and Fontanille (1991); with reference to Italian work, the main studies are Pezzini (ed. 1991) and Pezzini (2008).
- 11 "The term *aspectualization* refers to the process whereby the implied presence of an observer is established in the discourse. It involves the spatial, temporal and actorial co-ordinates set up by the utterance which characterize and position the observation. In spatial terms, for example, reference to objects placed on the left

or on the right is only meaningful in relation to an implied point of observation. Temporal *aspectualization* makes itself felt in the stopping and starting of enunciative (or discursive) events; or in the duration of a process on the syntagmatic axis or the punctuality (lack of duration) of a process on the paradigmatic axis of the discourse" (*Aspectualization ad vocem* in Greimas and Courtés 1979: 21–22).

- 12 Previously, Pezzini (2013) analysed digital technologies in their ability to reproduce works of art, with particular reference to *Google Art Project* and *Google Art & Culture*. On this same topic, see also Del Marco and Pezzini (2017) and Corrain and Macaudo (2016).
- 13 In this regard, see also the essays devoted to the photograph of Aylan Kurdi on the Turkish beach; see Migliore (2017) and Lorusso and Violi (2020).

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Image sources

Fig. 1. Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, 1533, oil on oak wood, 209, 5 x 207 cm, London, National Gallery. Public Domain.

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