

Plastic semiotics: From visuality to all the senses

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Abstract. The article's aim is to present plastic semiotics, one of the most recent branches of the Greimassian School. In his *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method* (1966) Algirdas Julius Greimas stated that sensorial perception was the dimension in which the grasping of meaning takes place, but explicit principles of the analysis of this non-linguistic dimension were published only years later, in his article "Figurative semiotics and plastic semiotics" (1984). Since then, plastic semiotics has been leading independent existence, focused on the effects of sense generated by the form and the substance of expression. Plastic analysis has turned out to be a fruitful approach not only in the field of visual studies, but also in the research into other sensorial expressions.

Keywords: Greimassian school of semiotics; monoplanar semiotics; senses; plastic dimension; aesthetic; non-figurative communication

What is plastic semiotics?

Whenever a story, a film, a performance or a picture is concerned, the major part of analysis in the European schools of semiotics is focused on the process of semiosis as a result of figurativization or a narrative scheme underlying the discourse. But what happens when the figurative level of the signified is absent, and the effects of sense are produced merely by the sensorial dimension of the expression? How to analyse a text of monoplanar semiotics, when both of its planes have the same structure and are related by conformity?¹

¹ Usually the objects of semiotic analysis belong to bi-planar semiotics, where semiosis is a result of reciprocal presupposition between the signifier and the signified, or the plane of expression and the plane of the content, each of them having different paradigmatic articulation and/or syntagmatic division.

Plastic semiotics takes as its starting point the invitation to ignore the referential impression and disregard the figures rather than read the text in an ordinary figurative way. Plastic analysis relates the articulation of the non-figurative or plastic signifier with a deeper level of meaning, thus explaining how the overall impression is created and what meanings are grasped prefiguratively and unconsciously. Plasticity is not one of the hierarchically related levels of meaning, and that is why it is treated as a dimension, not a level. It is an abstract dimension of the text, where the effects of sense are created by the oppositions of certain plastic qualities, such as ‘sharp/smooth,’ ‘empty/full,’ ‘homogenous/heterogeneous,’ ‘encompassing/encompassed,’ etc.

Plastic semiotics is one of the most recent branches of Algirdas Julius Greimas’ school of semiotics aiming at the research into the effects of sense produced by the sensorial dimension of expression. Classic narrative semiotics analyses the form of the content (the figurative level is a part of it), and plastic semiotics focuses on the form and the substance of expression. This semiotics is based on the assumption that the natural world is a kind of language, a certain type of semiotics. Plastic analysis attempts to describe the “grammar” of this language, to recognize the principles of plastic or rhythmical nature that validate the articulation of elementary features or complex figures. In plastic semiotics, the level of expression is entirely the level of the content, so it belongs to monoplanar semiotics.

Plastic semiotics as an autonomous branch of the Paris school can be discerned after Greimas’ work *De l'imperfection* [*On Imperfection*; 1987], where he showed its general character and pointed out the possibilities of analysis of the sensual dimension. Since then, plastic semiotics started to expand into the fields of sound, touch, smell and synaesthesia in general, with an attempt to adapt the instrumentaria provided by visual plastic semiotics to the specific demands of each field (Landowski 2005: 26). This semiotics showed the outlines of the renewal of the problematics of general semiotics-related research into various ways of grasping the meaning or regimes of sense. For example, Jacques Geninasca’s (1997) notion of impressive grasp and Eric Landowski’s (2006) notion of a regime of union are both based on the sensorial relation between the subject and the immanent qualities of the world that are perceived by the senses; the plastic qualities of objects and phenomena play a significant role in Landowski’s socio-semiotic research. However, in the beginning the most important researcher to develop plastic analysis was Jean-Marie Floch.² As the title of his book *Petites mythologies de l'œil et de l'esprit. Pour une sémiotique plastique* [*Little Mythologies of the Eye and the Spirit*; 1985] suggests, he emphasized the analysis of the plastic dimension. Non-figurative communication through different plastic qualities of everyday objects is the focus of

² Jean-Marie Floch (1947–2001), one of the collaborators of Greimas, dedicated his works to the studies of visual languages and visual semiotics; he still is the most important figure in this branch of the Paris School.

almost all his works, notably *Identités visuelles* [*Visual Identities*; 1995] and *Les formes de l’empreinte* [*The Forms of the Imprint*; 1986]. However, before *On Imperfection* issues of the plastic dimension were addressed in Greimas’ seminar and the workshop of visual semiotics initiated by Abraham Zemsz and led by Floch. The seminar was followed by several articles (e.g. Floch 1981; Coquet 1983; Geninasca 1984) that were meant as part of a collective work, but the book was never published. Nevertheless, the foundations of visual semiotics of the Paris School were laid in that seminar and presented in Greimas’ article “Figurative semiotics and plastic semiotics” (1978, published in 1984), which was intended as the closing chapter of the planned collection.

Genesis from visual semiotics

Plastic semiotics emerged in the field of visual semiotics: having renounced the confusion of the visible with the speakable (Floch 1985: 14), visual plastic semiotics started its attempts to describe the sensorial logics of visually perceived objects. The language of description was constructed by aligning the principles and instruments of general semiotics with the principles of the formal analysis of art works.³

The idea of ignoring the referential impression and the figurative level, on which plastic semiotics was based, was not new: while discussing a work of visual art, painters, as well as other artists, were always more interested in the “how” rather than the “what” of what had been done. Instead of trying to recognize the represented objects and interpret them, the compositional choice, the treatment of forms and colours, and the traces of brushwork were scrutinized in order to understand how the painter had achieved “saying” the things they had done. Visual plastic semiotics analyses this “how” in terms of sensorial expression (*how* the composition, forms, colours, etc. “speak” about things other than themselves), aiming to understand the conditions of the production and intentionality of this specific type of relation between the signifier and the signified (Floch 1985: 13). Although the way of constructing meaning by the oppositions of plastic qualities (such as ‘big/small’, ‘contrasted/gradient’ etc.) was not new, the object of plastic semiotics at that time was neither obvious nor granted as, for example, the objects of figurative semiotics were. In his article Greimas formulated the “epistemological minimum” that asserted the status of plastic semiotics as a branch of semiotics and pointed out that this kind of semiotic processes “can be represented only through an ad hoc, constructed language” (Greimas 1989[1984]: 636–637). According to the scholar, analysis might show that another segmentation of the signifier, which is

³ In several of his studies Floch invoked the so-called formalist method of the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin whose ideas he considered to be very close to the semiotic point of view on the relation between the expression and the content.

not based on the figurative reading grid, would “allow us to recognize the existence of the strictly plastic units which ultimately are carriers of significations unknown to us”; and general semiotics here may offer many diversified conceptual and procedural tools, but not any ready-made recipes. Segmentation procedures in large measure are based on the intuitive grasping of the mechanisms, which obey the general rules underlying the principal areas of operation (Greimas 1989[1984]: 637–638).

Thus, the plastic way of reading constructs its language *ad hoc* following the structure of the signifier of the analysed object and produces a new form of content or structures the world anew by the plastic grid (Floch 1986: 130). Although subject to cultural relativism, this grid more often rather tends to be of a personalized and authentic than a universal nature. Description of the plastic dimension of any text requires bracketing the meanings of the figurative level and focusing on the areas of operation: the topological mechanism, plastic categories and contrasts.

Constituents of a plastic text

Topology as the disposition of elements in a certain composition in space has a twofold function: to divide the whole of a text into discrete units and to indicate the possible directions of reading. Topology is the most obvious in visual or spatial texts, where it operates by the categories of ‘upper/lower’, ‘left/right’, ‘peripheral/central’ and ‘enclosing/enclosed’. Nevertheless, such universal topological categories as ‘upper/lower’ or ‘peripheral/central’ can be found in almost any ensemble of meaning irrespective of the means of expression. For example, in a piece of music or any other audial text the opposition of ‘high/low’ sounds is one of the basic ones, and the popular description of the structure of scent in perfumery uses the metaphor of fragrance notes and is based on the same opposition of ‘upper/lower’ that unfolds over time (‘top notes’, ‘middle notes’ and ‘base notes’). Topological segmentation identifies the substructures of the plastic text that consist of more or less complex combinations of “minimal” units of the signifier; these units can be identified by plastic categories (Greimas 1989: 639).

There are two kinds of plastic categories, eidetic and chromatic ones, and the distinction between them is 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 the reader attributes to such and such a term vis-a-vis the other terms. The second states its relational grasping (its phonological level), that is, with the function that 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. (Greimas 1989: 640)

Thus, in visual plastic semiotics eidetic categories are all those pertaining to the form: lines, contours and volume, which perform the function of isolation and help identify diverse units of the signifier as discrete entities. Chromatic categories are grasped as “full surfaces”, so they are all the categories related to the perception of colour and matter, and perform the functions of individuation and integration. In their turn, chromatic categories might be non-gradual (‘yes’ or ‘no’: red, green, blue etc.) or gradual (‘more’ or ‘less’: light, dark, saturated etc.) (Greimas, Courtés 1979: 104; 1983: 42–43, 73). A specific subtype of chromatic categories produces the effects of ‘matter’ or ‘texture’; some figurative aspect is intrinsic to them, as long as every texture is usually recognized as particular (to wood, wool, marble etc.). One more chromatic quality, *facture*, is quite peculiar: the contrasts of *facture* not only produce specific effects of sense on the level of enunciation, but also the nature of *facture* is directly related to the process of enunciation.

The two epistemological postulates of distinction between the two plastic categories mentioned above easily allow seeing the analogy of eidetics and chromatics in the texts produced by different sensorial expressions. For example, in music notes as units of certain tones would be treated as eidetic categories, and the qualities of sound itself “inside” the note, such as timbre, hue or “colour”, would be seen as units making up chromatic categories. By analogy with the best-studied visual plastic categories, the relation of the chromatic categories of sound to its substantial aspects is obvious: the timbre depends on the substance of an instrument and thus shows its “matter”. And the “factual” elements of sound, grasped through such oppositions as ‘even/uneven’ or ‘continuous/ruptured’, are directly related to the process of annunciation, as is the case with visual *factures*. Although much more interrelated and intertwined than visual ones, plastic categories made of other sensorial substances, and perceived by tactility, audition, taste or smell, can be discerned as discrete or integrating and are thus analysed in analogy to eidetic and chromatic ones (Floch 2001a).

The units of the plane of expression that belong to either of the plastic categories make up the plastic formants, certain non-figurative units of the signifier that have their own signifieds and express the meanings of a semantic nature (such as ‘nature/culture’ or ‘alive/dead’) (Floch 1982: 203). The existence of these plastic formants grants the plastic dimension the status of monoplanar semiotics, i.e. a system of meanings with an autonomous structure and articulation:

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. (Greimas 1989: 641)

Another important and specific feature of plastic categories is that they can make up semi-symbolic systems. Unlike symbolic systems that operate with isolated elements of different levels (an isolated element of expression corresponds to an isolated element of content), a semi-symbolic system relates a category from the level of expression (e.g., ‘upper/lower’) to a category from the level of content (e.g., ‘euphoria/dysphoria’). This mode of operation is intrinsic to plastic semiotics:

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). (Greimas 1989: 646)⁴

Semi-symbolism is also an important characteristic of the artistic language: by employing a set of microcodes it permits an artwork, while speaking about particular objects, to tackle issues of universal nature, often involving mythical aspects. Precisely this was shown in the aforementioned analysis of Klee’s and Boubat’s artworks.

The plastic categories provide the terms for the paradigmatic axis of this plastic language, while the syntagmatic axis is formed by plastic contrasts. A plastic contrast is a syntagmatic term that denominates co-existence of two terms of the same plastic category in the text. By relating terms between themselves, plastic contrasts found plastic “syntax” and permit to treat plastic objects as meaningful texts. The plastic contrasts that are formed by repeating the terms of the same category produce rhythm and rhyme. These principles of plastic articulation are very important: they bring out

⁴ Greimas refers to Thürlemann’s analysis of Paul Klee’s painting *Blumenmythos* and Floch’s analysis of Edouard Boubat’s photograph *Nu*.

the correlations between the elements of meaning on different levels of a text, show analogies or the identity of certain signifieds and thus orient interpretation.

Rhythm can be seen as the most important constituent of a plastic text, because it forms the basis for the overall structure and validates the principles of plastic communication. Perceived very sensorially, conforming or confronting somatic rhythms of a perceiver – both temporal, as in music and speech, or spatial, as in visual or spatial texts – are the structural media of both figuratively or non-figuratively rendered meanings. This is also why Greimas paid much attention to the role of rhythm in the sensorial grasp of meaning, or aesthesis (Greimas 1987).

New horizons

According to Floch, plastic semiotics is a search for sensorial logics that lies in photography, paintings, posters or even in clothes; this search refuses to see these things reduced to their meaning, to what can be recognized and named (Floch 1986: 22). Thus, plastic semiotics is focused on the non-figurative dimension of all kinds of discourses or communication, based on the non-rational grasp of meaning. Visual, tactile, audial, olfactive and gustative phenomena produce their texts, and these texts, irrespectively of their substance, can be analysed using the same specific set of instruments offered by plastic semiotics. Plastic semiotics brings out the universal nature of the categories of sensorial perception and their synaesthetic use in language, as, for example, the tactile categories 'soft/hard', 'round/sharp', 'warm/cold' are habitual terms to describe the qualities of audial, visual and olfactive phenomena: a soft light, a warm voice or colour, or a sharp smell.

One can say that plastic semiotics developed in a trajectory inverse to general semiotics: the latter started out from linguistics and was disseminated in other fields of humanitarian and social sciences. Plastic semiotics, on the contrary, was born in the field of semiotic studies of visual phenomena and from there expanded to all the other fields. The fact that the difference between the figurative and the non-figurative, or abstract, was the most obvious and maybe most discussed in the field of art history was probably not the only reason why plastic semiotics burst into blossom in that field. It seems that Floch's personal interest in and even passion for turning research into non-figurative communication were factors of the same importance. His analysis encompassed plastic dimension of a vast range of objects; thus, covering all the senses except audiality, he laid the basis for plastic semiotics as an independent branch in the Greimas school. Besides plentiful analysis of visual discourses (Floch 1985: 21–38, 43–81, 2001b: 33–62), he offered excellent models of plastic analysis of spatial discourses (Floch 1985: 124–139, 2001c: 13–39, 138–164), everyday objects (Floch 2001b: 9–32,

85–115, 145–171), verbal plasticity (Floch 1979, 1989) and gastronomy (Floch 2001a). As plastic semiotics is oriented to the semiotic description of sensorial experience, Floch's work and his reflections on the method demonstrate the phenomenological basis of Greimassian semiotics.

This short introduction to the genesis of plastic semiotics would be incomplete without at least a glimpse at the laboratory of social semiotics directed by Eric Landowski, a close colleague and collaborator of Greimas and Floch. His phenomenology-based research of the regimes of interaction that include presence, sensoriality and aesthetics expanded the scope of the analysis of sense in the Paris School. Landowski (2004) uses the term 'aesthetic competence' of a 'subject' to name the ability of sensorial perception of the perceiver, and 'aesthetic consistency' to indicate the plastic and rhythmic qualities of a material entity of the perceived; the interaction between them is based on union or contagion rather than junction. Always attentive to the plastic dimension of the object of analysis (whether a thing or a process), in his research into sensorial experience Landowski uses a synonymous term 'aesthetic', which better indicates his perspective of research and the equivalence of both participants of sensorial communication⁵.

Inspired by the works of Floch and infected with Landowski's interest in aesthetics, the ideas of plastic semiotics are taking root in Vilnius. The plastic approach has gained attention in the works by Kęstutis Nastopka (2010, 2016) and Saulius Žukas (2010). The possibilities of plastic analysis of different discourses are the main field of interest of the author of this article,⁶ and the importance of the plastic dimension is obvious in the research carried out by Paulius Jevsejevas.⁷ Several Master's theses have been based on successful attempts to approach the plastic dimension of cartographic discourse and music,⁸ and plastic analysis has been fruitfully integrated into artistic research.⁹

⁵ By 'plastic' one can refer only to 'objects' or 'objectified' sensorial qualities (e.g., 'soft voice' draws attention to the plastic qualities of somebody's voice), while 'aesthetic competence' and 'aesthetic consistency' bring out the sensorial dimension shared by 'subjects' and 'objects'. Thus, 'plastic dimension' and 'aesthetic dimension' are synonyms with emphasis on different aspects of the same phenomenon – the sensorial dimension.

⁶ The role of aesthetics in the discourse of advertising was analysed in my doctoral thesis *The Aesthetics of Life-Style Advertising: Visual and Verbal Text* (Vilnius Academy of Arts, 2007); articles on the ways of analysis of verbal plasticity (Žemaitytė 2011) and plastic features of an interior (Žemaitytė 2014).

⁷ For example, Jevsejevas addresses plastic qualities of space in an article from 2013 and the plastic aspects are important in his research on the poetic idiolect of the Lithuanian poet Sigita Geda.

⁸ Results of some of them have been presented in Bružienė 2013 and Gecevičiūtė 2016.

⁹ For example, the analysis of aesthetic qualities of communication plays an important role in Rūta Mickienė's doctoral thesis *The Open Work of Visual Design: The Model of Psycho-Emotional Self-Development* that is based on design research.

Plastic semiotics, today far from being understood purely as a part of visual semiotics, offers possibilities of description and analysis of non-figurative meanings in our everyday experience, as well as new ways of understanding the sensorial aspects of communication (Tsala Effa 2013).

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Пластическая семиотика: от визуальности до всех органов чувств

Статья знакомит с одной из наиболее молодых ветвей греймасовской семиотики – пластической. В книге Греймаса «Структурная семантика: поиск метода» (1966) чувственное восприятие было определено как измерение, в котором осуществляется схватывание смысла/значения. Основы анализа этого неязыкового измерения были изложены им позднее в статье «Фигуративная семиотика и пластическая семиотика» (1984). С тех пор пластическая семиотика превратилась в самостоятельную дисциплину, которая фокусируется на сенсорных эффектах смысла, произведенных формой и сущностью выражения. Пластический анализ оказался плодотворным подходом не только в области визуальных исследований, но и в исследованиях других сенсорных выражений.

Plastiline semiootika: visuaalsusest kõigi meelten

Artikli eesmärgiks on tutvustada plastilist semiootikat, üht Greimase koolkonna uemat haru. Greimase teoses “Struktuuraalne semantika: meetodi otsingul” (1966) nimetati meeletaju selleks mõõtmeks, milles leiab aset tähenduse tabamine. Selle mittekeelelise mõõtme analüüsi sõnaselged põhimõtted ilmusid aga aastaid hiljem Greimase artiklis “Figuratiivne semiootika ja plastiline semiootika”. Sestsaadik on plastiline semiootika muutunud iseseisvaks distsipliiniks, keskendudes meeleliste tagajärgedele, mida tekitavad väljenduse vorm ja sisu. Plastiline analüüs on osutunud viljakandvaks lähenemiseks mitte üksnes visuaaluuringute vallas, vaid ka teiste meeleliste väljenduste uurimisel.