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PUBLISHER Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston, Genthiner Straße 13, 10785 Berlin, Germany

JOURNAL MANAGER Esther Markus, De Gruyter, Genthiner Straße 13, 10785 Berlin, Germany, Tel: +49 (0)30 260 05-127, Fax: +49 (0)30 260 05-250, e-mail: esther.markus@degruyter.com

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Remo Gramigna*

Oblique semiotics: the semiotics of the mirror and specular reflections in Lotman and Eco

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Abstract: Novelty, the creation of new information, has been the hallmark of Juri M. Lotman’s thought. This issue resurfaces in the discussion of his now famous article “On the semiosphere,” in which Lotman, drawing on Vernadsky, identifies the principles of symmetry, asymmetry, and enantiomorphism as pivotal aspects of the semiotic mechanism of the semiosphere. Specular phenomena and mirror reflections have not only found a prominent place in contemporary semiotic theories of different scholarly traditions – from general semiotics (Eco, Volli) to cognitive semiotics (Sonesson) and to the semiotics of culture (Lotman, Levin) – but they also nail down a key element of the inner mechanism of Lotman’s concept of the semiosphere. By using the analogy of the *face* reflecting in a *mirror*, Lotman remarks: “It is also like a face, which, wholly reflected in a mirror, is also reflected in any of its fragments, which, in this form, represents the part and yet remains similar to the whole mirror.” By capitalizing on this excerpt, this study unpacks the significance of Lotman’s idea of specular mechanisms as generators of meaning within the semiosphere.

Keywords: semiosphere; mirrors; Juri Lotman; face; reflections

1 Introductory remarks

The year 2022 marked Juri Lotman’s centenary. The centenary has been a unique opportunity to re-think the legacy of this fine scholar to the twenty-first century and to contextualize his thought. It was also a chance to deepen the constellation of Lotman’s ideas and track the ramifications that his work has opened up and inspired throughout his life. In the domain of semiotics, but also in the neighboring disciplines, Lotman’s name, indeed, evokes a plethora of concepts such as “artistic text,” “modelling systems,” “semiotics of culture,” “semiosphere,” “explosion,” and

*Corresponding author: Remo Gramigna, University of Turin, Torino, Italy,
E-mail: remo.gramigna@unito.it

“unpredictability,” to mention but a few.¹ Lotman had many qualities but one was remarkable, namely, a sort of “diagonal thinking,” as it were. This quality gave him a certain proclivity to cross disciplinary boundaries and dialogue with the hard sciences. The model of the semiosphere is a case in point because it illustrates a fruitful interpenetration between different disciplines, such as biochemistry and geochemistry and the semiotics of culture. As is widely acknowledged, in his pivotal article “The Semiosphere,” Lotman indeed paid tribute to Vladimir Vernadsky as the model of the semiosphere was modelled in analogy with the concept of the biosphere (Lotman 1989: 43).²

Almost forty years have passed since the publication of Lotman’s key article and since then the contemporary semiosphere has grown. While in the 1980s the semiosphere comprised “radio satellites, the verses of the poets, and the cries of animals” (Lotman 1989: 54), today it has expanded and it encompasses fast internet, web conferencing, coronavirus, artificial intelligence, ChatGTP, and even virtual universes like the Metaverse. Today, the widespread use of digital media, the rise of the internet culture, and the experience of a global epidemic, make us aware of the fact that Lotman’s vision was, indeed, far-sighted. Perhaps we have not yet fully grasped, nor have we sufficiently capitalized on his perspective, despite the popularity the concept of the semiosphere as well as the semiotic approach to culture gained in recent years (Tamm and Torop 2022).

It should also be remarked that revisiting Lotman’s ideas takes on a quite different aspect when examined from the standpoint of today’s consciousness. This is so because the times in which we live are characterized by tremendous uncertainty, confusion, unpredictability and profound change. Lotman (1994: 19) himself defined these particular historical moments of unpredictability and crisis as “epochs of transition in which the old roads are all traveled, and the new ones have yet to open.” For this reason, reconsidering and recalibrating Lotman’s ideas in the context of contemporary society is pivotal and takes on a new value.

This article is concerned with specular reflections and the semiotics of mirrors. It also engages with Lotman’s concept of the semiosphere,³ where the mechanism of

1 Throughout this paper I will be using the spelling Juri Lotman. On the reason of this choice see, Kull (2011). The spelling of Lotman’s name in the list of references is left as it was in original and has not been changed.

2 All quotes from Lotman’s article “The Semiosphere,” unless otherwise noted, come from the first translation in English (Lotman 1989), published in *Soviet Psychology*. This translation comes with a two pages of commentary from the editors of the journal. A second translation of Lotman’s article was published in *Sign Systems Studies* (Lotman 2005) and entitled “On the Semiosphere” (translated by Wilma Clark).

3 The term “semiosphere” has been used both by Lotman and Hoffmeyer (1997), independently and in different contexts: the semiotics of culture and biosemiotics.

mirror reflection takes on a specific meaning. Indeed, in the context of Lotman's article (1989), specular reflection is conceived from a twofold point of view:

1. As a property of text generation;
2. As an attribute of the structural organization of a semiosphere.

While this article is concerned with the semiosphere, it will thus focus on one particular corner of this subject. As I will contend, the mechanism underlying mirror reflections is embedded in the structure of the semiosphere and it makes up the backbone of the semiosical understanding of dialogue. More layers of analysis will be added up in the course of the discussion, but the two standpoints outlined above remain the kernels of the analysis. However, because the topic of mirror reflections interlocks with self-perception, I will also be dealing with mirrors as interfaces and semiotic devices that not only enable self-reflection, but also operate as doubling devices. Therefore, I will touch upon the relations between mirrors and the perception of the human face.

This article is divided into four parts. It is with regard to the first part that I join a long list of scholars who have been fascinated with the subject of mirrors. The first part begins with a literature review on the subject, paying particular attention to the treatments of mirrors in semiotics and to the conception of mirrors thought of as semiotic mechanisms. In this part, four main perspectives on mirrors are laid out: historical, material, strategic, and semiotic perspectives. The second part is on much more limited ground. From all of those who have discussed this subject, I have selected only a small portion of semiotic studies. This will lead us to a discussion of Eco's and Lotman's treatments of the subject and to a comparison between their positions. While both Eco and Lotman's acknowledged the relevance of mirrors to general semiotics and to the semiotics of culture and, thus, their views converge in some respect, their understandings of mirrors, however, depart. In particular, the question of whether the mirror image is not a sign has been a matter of contention. The third part begins with a discussion of mirror reflections in the context of Lotman's semiotics of culture and zeros in on the understanding of specularity within the model of the semiosphere. As a corollary to this, related concepts such as symmetry, isomorphism, and enantiomorphism are scrutinized, as these set the background for the scenario they led into. The fourth and last part lays out the ramifications of this issue for a semiotic understanding of specularity.

Before I go further, however, a brief note on the title is in order. I took inspiration from two sources for formulating the title of this article. The first is the already mentioned work, "The Semiosphere," where the topic of the mirror and specular reflections resurface in an explicit fashion. The second source is Algirdas Greimas. The term "oblique semiotics," chosen as subtitle of the present article is, indeed, a reference to Greimas' work, from which I borrowed this term. Greimas (1989: 654), used the term "oblique semiotics" in the context of a discussion on "the veridiction

contract.” In the context of this article, however, I will be using the term “oblique” in its literal meaning, for it refers to the mirror-image mechanism, mirror reflections, and the phenomenon of specularity.

2 Theoretical perspectives of mirrors

Mirrors are powerful symbols and have a long pedigree. When treating this subject there are several perspectives to consider. For the sake of convenience, four main standpoints are laid out: historical, material, strategic, and semiotic perspectives. Magical, whimsical, and enigmatic, mirrors have been a source of fascination, curiosity, and superstition. From the legend of Narcissus, whose image was reflected in the water, to the Greek myth of Medusa and Perseus, who cut the head of Medusa using the mirror as a shield, these objects show a tremendous significance to the arts, architecture, mythology, history, and to culture as a whole (Edgerton 2009; Gregory 1997; Melchior-Bonnet 2002). In mythology, cultural anthropology and magic, the mirror is a powerful artefact and a symbol with numerous meanings (Baltrusaitis 1981, 1990). The interpretation of the symbology regarding mirrors, however, is not always straightforward and presents many challenges to the researcher. Mirrors are, at best, puzzling, so much so that Eco referred to them as “embarrassing phenomena.” As we shall see in what follows, even within semiotics, there is no single and unequivocal answers to the issues that specularity poses, as the various interpretations on the semiotic potential and the semiotic status of mirrors vary according to the viewpoints taken each time by the scholars. The significance of mirrors persists today. It suffices to mention the widespread use of mirror-like technology – the selfie – as contemporary digital self-portraits of the subject across media platforms. The admiration of one’s own reflections by teenagers has become a massive phenomenon that has attracted interest and concern from numerous scholars.

The properties of mirrors were known to the Greeks and Plato describes them in his dialogue *Timaeus*. In ancient Rome, Lucretius devotes an entire chapter on mirrors in *De Rerum Natura* (“On the Nature of Things”), where he discusses the nature of simulacra. Augustine tackles the nature of mirrors in his *Soliloquies* and discusses mirror reflections in tandem with the issue of identity and similarity. Mirrors were often treated from the point of view of their illusory nature. The link between mirrors and falsehood or illusion, for instance, is apparent in Augustine’s work, who conceives of mirror reflections as “false faces” or as a pseudo-reality.⁴

⁴ “R. – We also speak of a false which we see in a picture, a false face which is reflected in a mirror, the false motion of towers as seen by those sailing by, a false break in the oar in the water: these are false for no other reason than that they resemble the true” (Sol. II.6.10., *The Soliloquies*, 46).

The twin image reflected in a mirror, is for Augustine, of the same illusory nature of image paintings. Such images are “false” in the sense that, while there is a degree of likeness between the object and its representation, the images are not identical to the object represented. This does not mean, however, that all representations are lies. Yet, it is an indication that these types of images have a particular ontological status. In short, mirror reflections are “false” in the sense in which all representations are illusory or constructed. The mere fact that a mirror reflection bears resemblance to the object reflected in the mirror, while it is different from the object it reflects, has always been a source of interest as well as a feature that takes one aback. This is an aspect that resurfaces in Lotman’s writings as well, namely, the interplay between identity and difference. I will come back to this point.

A source that is wide-encompassing in its scope and is still relevant to the study of mirrors for its breath and depth is Jurgis Baltrusaitis’ *Le miroir: révélations, science-fiction et fallacies* (1981). Baltrusaitis made a synthesis of the various meanings of the mirror, ranging from cathedral museums to celestial, magical, and divine mirrors to artificial and deceptive mirrors. While Baltrusaitis’ work, which abounds in historical data, is a benchmark in the study of the history of mirrors, it needs, however, to be complemented with philosophical, semiotic and cognitive studies.

From a strictly material point of view, a mirror is “any polished surface reflecting incident rays of light” (Eco 1986: 204). There is a great variety and richness of reflecting surfaces. Mirrors vary in form, shape, size and material composition (glass, copper, brass, tin, gold, aluminium, steel, obsidian, etc.). There are plane and curved mirrors. Plane mirrors are usually said to produce a special type of symmetry, termed as, inverted symmetry. I will come back to this point as it was a matter of contention.

From a strategic point of view, the mirror is a device that enables both protection and infiltration, depending on which side of the spectrum one conceives of it. From this standpoint, among the most important functions of mirrors, we may recall the “protective” and the “intrusive” functions. According to the psychologist Karl E. Scheibe (1979: 67), who advocates for including mirrors in the “strategic armamentarium” coupled with lies and masks, protection and intrusion refer to the two fields of strategic intelligence: espionage and counter-espionage. From this perspective, a mirror is conceived of as “any device that registers information about a subject or object and reflects some portion of that information back to the observer” (Scheibe 1979: 55). This is a broad definition of mirrors that is not exclusively limited to reflecting surfaces and includes any device that is able to operate as mirror by registering information and send back a part of this information to the observer. Mirrors separate out selected characteristics of a bundle of stimuli. For this reason, while mirrors generate information, the “selective property” makes mirrors always partial and incomplete (Scheibe 1979: 55) as mirrors have

“the power to add and/or subtract from the object” (Smith 1981: 78). On the contrary, Eco argued that mirrors provide us with an “*absolute double* of the stimulant field” (Eco 1986: 210).

Mirrors can, thus, be used both for protection and for infiltration. For Scheibe (1979: 67), the typical example of the mirror as a protective device is the mirror used as a shield. The mirror used by Perseus in the Greek legend, who used a polished shield as mirror to avoid the petrifying stare of Medusa, is an example of the protective function of mirrors. Mirrored sunglasses, which do not allow one to see the eyes of the subject wearing sunglasses, thus covering or disguising the upper part of the face, is an additional example of the protecting function of mirrors (see Viola 2022). The relation between mirrors and masks therefore seems apparent in that they both operate as devices of protection. The mirror also has the function of infiltration, that is, penetrates the defenses of others to gather information. Some examples that illustrate the function of mirrors as information-gathering devices are the one-way mirror or the rear-view mirror (Scheibe 1979: 56–57). Needless to say, the protective and the intrusive function are complementary rather than exclusive as they feed into each other. The gathering of information is often possible because disguise offers a unique vantage point and, thus, the possibility to gain information by infiltration. As we shall see in what follows, this view of mirrors is interlocked with what Eco (1983: 8) refers to as the “magnifying” and “reduction” functions of mirrors. Indeed, the magnifying function by extending the radius that one can perceive by means of sight enhances the possibility of vision and facilitates gaining access to information.

3 Seeing and being seen

There is a nexus between the face and the mirror in as much as mirrors enable self-reflexivity (see Viola 2022).⁵ The two issues are, thus, interlocked. Before moving to a discussion of the semiotics of mirrors, it is worth dwelling on the relation between the intrusive function and the perception of the human face.

The face has fascinated humankind for millennia. From ancient physiognomics (Magli 1988, 1995) to the obsession with digitalized avatars of the self in contemporary cyber-society, the interest in the face remains a constant. The face is the site of perception, signs, and semiosis. The biological make-up of the *Homo sapiens* condensed in the face four out of five senses. Indeed, sight, hearing, smell, and taste are all grouped in the upper part of the body playing a pivotal role in the perception

⁵ On this, see the special issue of *Semiotica* devoted to reflexivity: *Sign about signs: The semiotics of self-reference* (Babcock 1980).

of the environment. Faces are the cognitive template for enabling recognition by others, distinguishing enemies from foes, and as such are a biological benchmark. Furthermore, faces play a crucial role in socio-cultural settings and are significant because give a sense of identity, individuality and self-awareness. As Lotman pointed out:

Man became man when he realized himself as a man. And this occurred when he noticed that the different members of the human race consisted of different people, different voices and different experiences. The face of the individual, as with individual sexual selection, was probably the first invention of man as a man. (Lotman 2009: 155)

Likewise, Agamben laid out well the social and political significance of the face:

Of course, all living beings show themselves and communicate with each other, but only man makes the face the place of his recognition and his truth, man is the animal that recognizes his own face in the mirror and mirrors and recognizes himself in the face of the other. In this sense, the face is both *similitas*, similitude and *simultas*, the being together of men. A faceless man is necessarily alone. This is why the face is the place of politics. (Agamben 2021)

Tim Ingold remarked the invisible/visible aspect of the face, by stressing the imperceptible side of one's own face and the dialectics between subject and object, the "seer" and the "seen":

As a surface, the face has some very peculiar properties. I can feel my own face, and others can see it. But it remains invisible to me. Where others see my face, I see the world. Thus, the face is a visible appearance, in others' eyes, of my own subjective presence as an agent of perception. It is, if you will, the look of human being. (Ingold 2002: 124)

While the face is the visible core of the individual's identity, it is invisible to the self, up to a certain extent (Gregory 1997; Levin 1997: 134).⁶ While it is visible to others, unless it is masked or disguised, the face is, indeed, not immediately apparent to the subject. This leads to the articulation of the twofold dimension of the face: the face as seer and the face as seen. It is worth noting that this twofold aspect is derived from the etymology of the term itself, where the duplet seeing/being seen permeates the semantic field of the word 'face.' In the Latin tradition, *vultus* was used to refer to the variable and changing aspect of the face, while the word *facies* referred to the fixed and immutable physiognomic traits. It is revealing that Isidore of Seville pointed out that the face (*facies*) is said to be so only because it makes one person recognizable from another and, therefore, allows the identification of a particular individual

6 Massimo Leone argues that the tenet of the invisibility of the face to the subject needs a reappraisal inasmuch as parts of one's face, as for instance the tip of the nose, can be perceived by the subject. On this point, see the public lecture "Semiotica della punta del naso," symposium "Giravolti spaziali: Facce digitali e realtà virtuale," University of Turin, 20 April 2023.

among the crowd (Piras 2010: 48). As the word *aproposon* suggests, slaves in Ancient Greece were indeed faceless (Agamben 2021). In one etymological explanation of the Latin *vultus*, the term is traced back to the root *uel, vedere*. Hence, *vultus* refers both to the ability of the individual to see and to be seen (Piras 2010: 53).⁷

The twofold dimension of the face is as well encapsulated in the German term *Gesicht*, which means both seeing and seen, the sight and the object of vision, the *seer* and the *seen*. Rudolf Kassner (1997) insisted on the etymological meaning of *Gesicht*, a term that brings together in a single word two opposites: ‘that which sees and that which is seen.’ Thus, it is a term that encompasses both the thing seen and the vision, the gaze.

The idea of perceiving one’s own face is an aspect that leads to questioning the role of mirror and self-reflection in the perception of the self. The relation between faces and mirrors is rather commonsensical as it comes from simple everyday life observations. Because the mirror presents us to ourselves as the others see us, encountering and seeing oneself in the mirror for the first time is a pivotal moment. Undoubtedly, self-perception also plays an important role at the level of the ontogeny of human beings. As Lacan (1966) has shown, the stage of development in which one sees oneself as separated from the world, “the stage of the mirror,” is pivotal. In this sense, the mirror is, indeed, a powerful instrument of self-inspection and self-perception. Mirrors provide the subject with the possibility of seeing one’s own face, to penetrate the invisibility of one’s face. As Eco pointed out, “the magic of mirrors lies in that their extensiveness-intrusiveness not only allows us to look closer at the world, but also to look at ourselves as the others see us” (Eco 1983: 8). To sum up, to a certain extent the mirror seems to break the circuit of seer/seen because it collapses these two sides: the seer becomes the seen and it is, at one and the same time, the source of perception and the subject who perceives.

The idea of self-perception through the mirror yields to a vast array of ramifications. From this property of mirrors stems the very possibility of self-dialogue, “self-portrait” or “autocommunication” (Lotman 1990: 20). Indeed, the communication within oneself is based on a mirror mechanism as is mentioned among the semiotic potential of mirrors. As Levin pointed out, the possibility of seeing oneself through the looking glass provides, at the same time, the subject with the pretext for a dialogue with oneself (Levin 1997: 134). This has become a well-known literary *topos* that resurfaces in many variants as, for instance, in the famous theme of the double, which has found a revival in Romanticism and is very old and widespread. There are countless works where the theme of the double is central, from *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide* to *Dorian Gray*.⁸

7 For studies on the semantics of the face, see Leone (2022), Magli (1995), and Piras (2010).

8 For the vast literature in the theme of the double, see Bettini (1992), Grishakova (2012: 218–229), Hall (1978), Keppler (1972), and Tymms (1949).

4 Semiotic approaches to mirrors: Eco and Lotman

As pointed out above, there is a voluminous heritage on mirrors. Mirrors have been a concern not only of art historians and physicists but also semioticians have been interested in the nature of specularity as witnessed by the copious literature on the subject. The works of the scholars affiliated to the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School (TMS) – Levin (1997), Lotman (1997), Toporov (1998) and other members of the group – Eco (1983, 1985), Volli (1983) and Fabbri in Italy, cognitive semioticians like Sonesson (2003, 2015), as well as Nöth (1990) have all made important contributions to the study of this subject.⁹ Why should semiotics be interested in mirrors since this is a matter that optics and catoptrics have dealt with at length? What is the semiotic status of specular reflections? Are these semiotic phenomena? What is their semiotic potential? Whether mirrors and specular reflections are included in the semiotic phenomena is still an open question and a matter of disagreement among experts. In what follows, I will limit myself to the presentation of two seemingly contrasting views: Eco and Lotman.

4.1 The image in a mirror is not a sign: Umberto Eco's phenomenology of the mirror

Before turning to Lotman and the works of the TMS, a discussion of Eco's treatment of specular reflections is relevant. As pointed out earlier, Eco discussed mirrors extensively, devoting a series of *ex professo* treatments to this subject. The issue is taken up first in his treatise on general semiotics (Eco 1975, 1976). Then, it is resumed in an essay entitled "Catottrica versus semiotica" ('Catoptric versus semiotics'; Eco 1983) published in a thematic volume of the journal *Rassegna*, entirely devoted to this topic: *Attraverso lo specchio/Through the mirror*. Two years later, a collective volume entitled *Sugli specchi (On Mirrors)* was published (Eco 1985), in which he takes up and deepens the main theses laid out in his first 1983 essay. The same issue resurfaces in his late writings, such as *Kant e l'ornitorinco* (Eco 1997), in the context of a discussion on iconicity. Eco's approach attracted some important criticisms, especially for what concerns the question of the sign status of specular reflections (Bacchini 1995, 2017; Smith 1981; Sonesson 2003, 2015). His standpoint, however, remains consistent throughout the years: the image formed in a mirror is not a sign.

For Eco, mirrors are channels as well as "protheses" along the same line of dentures, telescopes or a pair of glasses (Eco 1983). As a case of protheses, mirrors

⁹ Recent semiotic accounts on this topic can be found in Bacchini (1995, 2017) and Lobaccaro and Bacaro (2021), Schiller (2023).

extend the array of action of an organ much in the same way in which a pair of glasses is said to extend the field of vision or a stick is said to extend the sense of touch (Eco 1983: 8). As Eco (1983: 8) pointed out, the extension of the sensory field is achieved mainly in two ways: (a) by a magnifying function – as in the example of a lens; (b) by reduction functions – as in the case of a pair of pincers, where you can extend the ability to grab something but the tactile and thermic sensations of the fingers are hampered. As pointed out before, the conception of mirrors as prostheses is important as it dovetails with the two functions of mirrors when examined from the standpoint of the strategic management of information (protection and intrusion) as the two aspects are interlocked.

Eco's point of departure is the discussion of the problem of iconicity and similarity and whether reflections can be included in these phenomena. Research that deals with recognition as a cognitive problem (Eco 1968, 1973, 1997; Volli 1972) suggests that the process of recognition, especially the recognition of iconic signs, implies the prior establishment of cultural norms. Both Eco and Volli note that recognition is not limited to the cognitive and perceptual dimension, but it implies a cultural aspect, too, which should not be underestimated. As Eco (1973: 55) pointed out, the recognition of iconic signs is predicated upon a network of interlocked operations, which can be summarized as follows: (a) a given culture must define recognizable objects on the basis of some emergent features or *traits of recognition*; (2) there must be a convention establishing that certain graphic traits correspond to some of the traits of recognition and that some of these recognition traits of the object must always be present in the reproduction in order to recognize the object; (3) another convention is necessary to establish the modes of production of the correspondence between graphic traits and traits of recognition. Two years later, in his *Trattato di semiotica generale*, Eco refines this argument holding that the recognition of a relationship of similarity between expression and content is predicated upon rules of similarity (Eco 1975: 261).

Eco ruled out specular reflections from the rubric of similarity, arguing that reflections fall into the basket of “congruences,” instead: “specular reflection could be called a sort of congruence, insofar as congruences are a type of equality, thus establishing a bi-univocal relation founded on the properties of being reflexive, symmetrical and transitive. In this sense, specular reflection is equality and not similitude” (Eco 1976: 201). Moreover, Eco maintained that specular reflections cannot be taken as signs. As this is a thorny issue, it is worth citing it in extenso:

But the first thing to make clear is that a specular reflection cannot be taken as a sign if one follows the definition given in this book. Not only can it not be properly called an image (since it is a virtual image, and therefore not a material expression) but even granted the existence of the image it must be admitted that it does not stand *for* something else; on the contrary it stands *in*

front of something else, it exists not instead of but because of the presence of that something; when that something disappears the pseudo-image in the mirror disappears to ... The image in a mirror is not a sign for it and cannot and cannot be used in order to lie (if not by producing a false object to be reflected, but in this case what stands for the supposed object is the false body, not its reflection). (Eco 1976: 202)¹⁰

It is important to point out that that Eco's account is geared towards the use of mirrors in everyday life by adults who are already familiar with its usage, namely, the pragmatics of mirrors. Furthermore, Eco's treatment is limited to plane mirrors, leaving out curved and distorted mirrors. This is an added proviso to bear in mind, especially in light of the counter-arguments that his critics have provided (Smith 1981). Eco's treatment can be summarized as follows:

- (a) The mirror is a "neutral prostheses" that extends the range of action of the sense of sight as well as a "channel," that is, a material medium that allows the passage of information;
- (b) The mirror does not invert the image reflected;
- (c) Specular reflections are congruences;
- (d) Specular reflections are virtual images rather than material expressions;
- (e) Specular reflections postulate the co-presence of the object reflected;
- (f) The image in a mirror is not a sign and it cannot be used in order to lie, although the mirror can induce perceptual deception;
- (g) The mirror gives an absolute double of the stimulating field (Eco 1983: 7–9).

As said before, Eco's treatment has received extensive criticisms for what concerns point (f) (Bacchini 1995, 2017; Smith 1981; Sonesson 2003, 2015), yet his position remained consistent. In what follows, I will compare his view with that of Lotman.

4.2 Lotman on mirrors

The semiotics of mirrors and specularity has provided enduring interest for Lotman and the TMS. An entire special issue of *Sign Systems Studies* was, indeed, devoted to this subject (1988). As compared to Eco's treatment, Lotman and the TMS scholars approached this subject from a different standpoint, as they conceived of the mirror as a phenomenon of the semiotics of culture (Lotman 1997: 128). While Lotman acknowledged the pioneering work of Eco, his approach is different. Eco and Lotman can, thus, be singled out as two different viewpoints to the semiotics of mirrors and specularity.

¹⁰ The definition of sign Eco provided in his *A Theory of Semiotics* is as follows: "everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else" (Eco 1976: 16).

A point that does not overlap in their approaches is whether the mirror inverts the image reflected and why mirrors invert only the left and right and do not invert the bottom-up properties of the image reflected. While Eco denies this point – as we have seen, the mirror does not invert the image reflected – Lotman holds not only that enantiomorphism is in place in specular reflections, but that this property is pivotal to the structure of the semiosphere. As he notes, the problem of the mirror as a semiotic mechanism is posed for the first time in 1896 in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (Lotman 1997: 127). As Alice said, when she peered into the mirror, everything in the room seems to “go the other way,” referring, thus, to the reversal property that mirrors possess, namely, the type of symmetry called *inverted* or *enantiomorphic* or *mirror symmetry*. The image reflected in the mirror is not exactly the same as the object in front of the mirror: “if we fit the mirror image to the original image, it does not correspond with it – the right side has changed into the left side and vice versa” (Lepik 2008: 76). If we look carefully, there are some features that are asymmetric. On the mirror twin all these features are transposed. If you have a scar on your right eyebrow, the mirror twin has it on the left, and similarly with all the other left-right features. In enantiomorphic symmetry, the representation is identical to the original and is, at one and the same time, different, forming a “paradox of equivalence,” ($A = A$) and ($A \neq$; Levin 1997: 134) Not all mirrors, however, have a reversal property as there are mirrors that do not invert the image reflected, as in the case of doubles or bending mirrors (Gardner 1967: 4–5).

Mirror symmetry is not the only type of symmetry as there are many different types (“translative,” “radial,” “bilateral symmetry,” and “antisymmetry”; Lepik 2008: 76–77). Yet, enantiomorphism is central to Lotman. He acknowledges the effects of reversal structure of texts on the human consciousness, as in the example of the Chinese and Russian palindrome, as well as in the esoteric meaning of reversal structures of texts or in the turning upside down of carnival. From the standpoint of the semiotics of culture, enantiomorphism, the swapping of left and right, becomes the indication of a more general cultural regularity. For Lotman, thus, the mirror mechanism takes on a universal meaning that can be found at different levels. As he argues,

The mirror-image mechanism, which forms a symmetric-asymmetric pair, is so widespread in all meaning-generating mechanisms that it may be called universal, embracing the molecular level and the general structures of the universe, on the one hand, and global creations of the human spirit, on the other. It is indisputably universal for phenomena defined by the term *text*. (Lotman 1989: 58)

For Lotman, the simplest form of symmetry is enantiomorphism, which is regarded as a general principle found in different levels of the semiosphere. Thus, mirror symmetry is taken as a universal structural property that cuts across different

phenomena, from the micro-level of molecules to the macro-level of cultures. In this respect, Lotman paid tribute to Vernadsky who, in turn, drew on the Pasteur-Curie principle of symmetry. As Lepik pointed out,

Mirror is not the only means of achieving mirror symmetry. For instance, a butterfly's wings are enantiomorphic, too. Vernadski has emphasized that there exists a deep dissimilarity between the frozen symmetry of crystalline polyhedrons of inanimate nature and the complex (largely unexplained so far) dynamic symmetry of living organisms, one manifestation of which is just the phenomenon of *left* and *right*, meaning the very persistent dominance of enantiomorphic symmetry in the organic environment. (Lepik 2008: 76)

This idea resurfaces on many occasions as Lotman diagonally connects all the dots forming this trajectory. It can be found in the way the human brain operates in reading texts in a reversal mode, which affects consciousness. It is found in the asymmetry of the brain (Ivanov 1978). It is found at the semantic level of texts though *topos* of the double, at the level of plots in the organization of space as in Dante's *Inferno*, as well as in the modes of production of esoteric texts, such as magic formula, on tombs and secret messages (Lotman 1989: 56–59). In the light of what has been said, this proves that Lotman exercised with dexterity the quality of “diagonal thinking” evoked in the introduction. He drew a constellation of ideas that, although perhaps at times incongruent, show a certain unity and waved them together in a coherent whole. The principle of mirror reflection is a good illustration of this point: “the law of mirror symmetry is one of the basic structural principles of the internal organisation of a meaning-generating device” (Lotman 1989: 59)

A key element that emerges throughout Lotman's work is the “duplication” of reality, indeed a recurrent motif in his work. As he writes in a study devoted to dolls in the system of culture:

From the first toy to the theatre stage, man creates with the doll “a second world” in which, by playing, he duplicates his life, makes it his own on an emotional, ethical and cognitive level. In this cultural orientation the stable play elements – the doll, the mask, the theatrical part – play an enormous social and psychological role. (Lotman 1978: 150, my translation from the Italian)

Duplication, thus, is a mechanism that allows for the creation of another, parallel world, similar but not identical to the one reflected in the mirror – that is, its model. In *Universe of the Mind*, the possibility of doubling is the ontological premise for the transformation of the world of objects into the world of signs. At this juncture, Lotman refers to a face reflected in a mirror. By this analogy he is referring to the metaphor of reflection and of the mirror-image, that is, how one can extract from the properties of the mirror, some hallmarks that are particularly indicative for understanding cultural aspects of for texts generation.

He argues that the reflection of a face cannot be touched as the mirror image is lacking the relations that are natural for the human face in flesh and bones (Lotman 1990: 54). Along the same lines, Levin (1997: 134) listed among the “axioms” of specularity, the impenetrability of the mirror and the “impalpability” of the image reflected in it. However, according to Lotman, the mirror image can be able to enter into semiotic relations. For instance, this can be used to harm one person or it can be used in magic operations. As he pointed out:

A face in the mirror does not share the natural associations of a real face – it cannot be touched or caressed, but it can easily be included in semiotic associations – it can be abused or used for magic manipulations. In this respect a mirror-image is typologically the same as a cast or an imprint (for example, foot- or fingerprints). (Lotman 1990: 54)

In connection with the use of face images in magic, Lotman is sharp in pointing out a parallel between mirrors and models (or copies) and between mirrors and imprints (for instance, footprints and fingerprints). Lotman’s typological explanation seems correct and akin to that Eco – mirrors as congruences – but Lotman’s conclusions are different as they are geared towards assigning mirrors a semiotic status and a host of different semiotic functions. The conclusion that Lotman gleaned from observations of the so-called “archaic consciousness,” is that when a sorcerer performed rituals by using footprints left by a person on the ground, he did not distinguish the part from the whole and considered the footprint as identical to the person who produced it. For Lotman, the footprint left on the ground, is an additional example of the interplay of identity and difference, discussed earlier. For Lotman, it is exactly this property, that of being the same while being different, as in the example of the footprint that is, at the same time, identified and not identified with the person who produced it, that renders it fit to enter into a semiotic situation. Another aspect to consider is the functions of the mirror in the context of text generation, that is, as a device within the text itself. In connection with the logic of the “text within the text,” Lotman pointed out the “replication” function of the mirror when it is embedded in a film or in a painting, which operates as a mean for “creating local subtexts with a replicated structure in representational art” (Lotman 1988: 45). In order to illustrate this point, Lotman used examples such as Jan van Eyck’s “The Arnolfini Portrait,” Velasquez’ “Las Meninas,” and Massys’ “The Moneylender and his Wife.” Likewise, Levin recalls that Borges’ four main devices found in fantastic literature were: (1) the text within the text; (2) the contamination of reality and dream; (3) time-travelling; (4) the doppelgänger. As Spassova (2018: 83) correctly noted, all four of these devices are ways to create “an as if world and they use a *double replication* structure in a synchronic and diachronic perspective in order to produce self-referential transformation in art.”

5 Reflection in the semiosphere

I will now move to a discussion of specular reflection in the contexts of Lotman's article "The Semiosphere." This article (Lotman 1989, 2005) represents a new milestone in Lotmanian thought and belongs to the years of his scientific maturity. It represents a new benchmark where insights and hypotheses that were sedimented over a long period of time find concrete and fruitful development (Salvestroni 1985). Lotman's point of departure is a critique of the so-called "atomistic" theory of semiotics that ultimately leads him towards the elaboration of an "holistic" approach (M. Lotman 2002a, 2002b). From sign and communication considered in isolation, Lotman's understanding of signs and semiosis shifted to a conception where there are no longer isolated parts, but rather elements that are enmeshed in a "semiotic continuum" (Lotman 1989: 42–43) that has a certain internal structure and organization. By means of this alternative view, Lotman reverses the starting point, abandoning the atomistic perspective in favor of a holistic approach instead. From this point of view, systems operate in a condition of non-isolation insofar as the prerequisite for their functioning is not to be separate from the rest, but to be part of a "semiotic continuum" that Lotman calls the "semiosphere," in analogy with the concept of the biosphere coined by Vernadsky:

... imagine a museum hall where exhibits from different periods are on display, along with inscriptions in known and unknown languages, and instructions for decoding them; there are also the explanations composed by the museum staff, plans for tours and rules for the behaviour of the visitors. Imagine also in this hall tour-leaders and visitors and imagine all this as a single mechanism (which *in a certain sense it is*). This is an image of the semiosphere. Then we have to remember that all elements of the semiosphere are in dynamic, not static, correlations whose terms are constantly changing. We notice this specially at traditional moments which have come down to us from the past. (Lotman 1990: 126–127)

From this vantage point, culture is seen as a network of interrelated semiotic systems. The features of the semiosphere – boundedness, the principle of the boundary, semiotic unevenness, heterogeneity – are clearly outlined by Lotman and well-known to the scientific community. The definition has often been repeated, and therefore, I feel exempted from going into too much detail and I refer to the copious literature existing on the subject.¹¹ This said, I would like to focus instead on one point.

¹¹ The literature about Lotman's notion of the semiosphere is extensive. For a background on this concept from a semiotic perspective, see Alexandrov (2000), Chang (2003), Clark (2010), Gherlone (2014), Kotov (2002), Lorusso (2015: 88–100), M. Lotman (2002a, 2002b), Mandelker (1995), Markoš (2014), Merrell (2008), Monticelli (2019), Nöth (2015), Patoine and Hope (2015), Portis-Winner (1998), Salvestroni (1985: 7–46), Semenenko (2016), Steiner (2011), and Torop (2003, 2005, 2022).

There is an aspect of the concept of the semiosphere, namely, the quantitative growth of texts, that is generally overlooked. I believe it is worth spelling this out because it has significance for the subject of this paper. Lotman addresses this issue in Section 2 (“semiotic unevenness”) of his 1984 article in tandem with the problem of the relation of the parts to the whole. First, he maintains that the principles of “sameness” and “difference” are key to the semiosphere and that they are the foundations for a semiotic understanding of dialogue. As will be apparent in what follows, on many occasions Lotman used the metaphor of a face reflected in the mirror, probably because it resonated with his own ideas and laid his point out well.

In his article, Lotman discusses the relationship between the parts and the whole within the structure of the semiosphere and argues that “diversity” and “integrity” (sameness) are two complementary aspects of this concept as one presupposes the other (Lotman 1989: 51). He uses several metaphors to convey this point. He writes that the parts enter into the whole “not as the parts of a piece of machinery, but as organs in the body” (Lotman 1989: 51). This means that, for Lotman, within the semiosphere, “each of its parts is itself a whole, closed, and structurally self-sufficient unto itself” (Lotman 1989: 51). He accounts for the relation of the parts to the whole by means of the concept of “isomorphism” and, at this juncture, draws an analogy of the face reflected in a mirror to explain similarity and difference. Let us go immediately in *medias res* by quoting Lotman’s article:

Just as a face that is wholly reflected in a mirror is also reflected in each one of the mirror’s fragments, which thus are both a part of and the likeness of the intact mirror, in an integral semiotic mechanism a particular text is isomorphous in certain respects with the entire textual world, and a distinct parallelism exists among individual consciousness, the text, and the culture as a whole. (Lotman 1989: 51)

In this passage, Lotman mentions the fourteenth-century Czech religious writer Tomáš Štítý.¹² He makes an analogy of the human face reflected in a mirror to convey a host of key ideas: (a) the principle of sameness and difference; (b) the relation of parts to the whole; (c) the existing isomorphism between a text and the semiosphere; (d) the analogy between consciousness, text, and culture. The idea of mirror reflections, asymmetry, and isomorphism are also, as we shall see in what follows, key to the structure of the semiosphere. As a face is reflected in a mirror as a whole and is also reflected in each of the mirror’s fragments, these are both parts of

¹² It is not clear to me what is the source from which Lotman quoted Tomáš Štítý. Elsewhere, Lotman (1973: 44), Lotman quotes an idea of Štítý according to which a part of the communion wafer symbolizes the whole body of Christ. Lotman uses this image to convey the point that the part is homeomorphic to the whole. Thus, in the quoted excerpt from “The Semiosphere,” Lotman is probably repeating a quotation by heart. I thank Pietro Restaneo and Silvi Salupere for this suggestion.

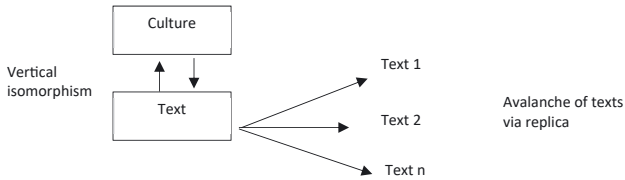


Figure 1: Vertical isomorphism and the growth of texts.

the mirror as well as its likeness. By analogy, a single text is isomorphous to the entire textual world. Lotman points out that “in relation to the whole, the parts exhibit the property of isomorphism since they are in other levels in the structural hierarchy. Thus, they are a part of the whole and its likeness, at one and the same time” (Lotman 1989: 51).

And yet the question remains as to how isomorphism operates within the semiosphere and what this has to do with the quantitative increase of messages. It is worth spelling out different types of isomorphism. One type is termed “vertical isomorphism.” It operates at the quantitative level because it increases the amount of texts in the semiosphere. Vertical isomorphism exists between structures situated at different hierarchical levels. It explains the quantitative growth of messages within the semiosphere and it operates by means of a replica or reproduction. Lotman, one more time, explains this point by the metaphor of mirror’s reflections and its replication as the kernel of the reproduction of texts within the semiosphere. As he writes,

Just as an object reflected in a mirror generates hundreds of reflections in the fragments of the mirror, a message introduced into an integral semiotic structure is multiplied in many copies at lower levels. The system is capable of transforming a text into an avalanche of texts. (Lotman 1989: 51)

Lotman seems to suggest that the concept of the semiosphere includes an understanding of the reproduction of texts once they have filtered through the boundaries of the semiotic space. It is insightful suggestion, although perhaps not fully developed by Lotman and it may pave the way to contemporary theories of information diffusion, memetics, and meme circulation on the Web by means of copying (Figure 1).

6 Concluding remarks

The present study has focused on the semiotics of the mirror and specular reflections by discussing two different approaches to this subject, one pioneered by Eco and the other outlined by Lotman and the TMS semioticians. While both approaches underscored the potential significance of mirror reflections to semiotics, their views

do not overlap. Eco's approach can be seen as markedly limited, because as we have seen his observations were curtailed to a very circumscribed area of investigation: the pragmatic uses of mirrors in everyday life. On the contrary, the perspective stemming from Lotmanian semiotics of cultures, is much broader than that, as it conceives of the mirror mechanism as a universal and as a matrix that permeates numerous manifestations in culture. While Eco's approach is nested in a phenomenology of the mirror taken as an object, the semiotics of the mirror and specular reflections outlined in Lotman's work is geared towards a much broader spectrum: from the mirror as a doubling device in the logic of text within text, to the literary motif of the double, including its manifestations as a structural principle within the semiosphere.

Undoubtedly, weaving together all these aspects of the semiotics of specularity in a coherent whole is not an easy endeavor, as the variations and nuances around the topic of the mirror may seem, at times, incongruent or disjointed. While the various notions of mirrors outlined in this study are interpenetrating, it is hard to pinpoint with enough precision the unity behind these phenomena. As we have seen, there are different ways to grapple with the notions of mirror and specular reflections. There are four, intertwined, aspects that can be singled out: (1) the mirror as an object displaying certain characteristics and material properties as well as practical uses in concrete everyday life settings; (2) the mirror as a cultural symbol, including literary tropes; (3) the mirror as a cognitive and conceptual metaphor (Marras 2013); (4) the production by symmetrical duplication as a logical-conceptual operation. These notions seem to follow a logical progression that goes, by following Cassirer, from substance to function. In this progressive abstraction, the source material (in this case the mirror as a physical object) passes through various levels of culture acquiring different functions, operating as a symbol and catalyst for processes and dynamics that were, however, already inherent to the culture itself as integral to its own functioning.¹³

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¹³ I owe these remarks to the reviewer who read previous versions of this manuscript.

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Silvia Barbotto*

Heterotopias and the facesphere: “Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia”

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Abstract: This exploration of the works of various authors and artists will bring us to a philosophical contemplation of the portrait as a heterotopic space. On one hand, a portrait represents the faces of the self and others, embodying both individuality and collectivity. On the other hand, the space within the conventional frame of a portrait transforms from a mere representation of documented reality to a co-constructed and reified form of expression. The article is divided in three parts. The first part sinks into Lotman’s epistemic groundwork on culture, space, and especially art as a founding philosophical and analytical reference and will also outline the relationship and difference between the semiophere and the facesphere. The second part focuses on establishing a relationship between the facesphere and the heterotopic idea of space and portrait genre. Here the article explores Michael Foucault’s thought in relation to heterotopic space, later proposed in association with the space of the portrait. The third part is devoted to establishing relationships between the theoretical background and the analysis of case studies belonging to the portrait genre selected from photographic works in “Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia,” an exhibition at the National Gallery in Singapore. I will conclude with some brief considerations to summarize the path taken.

Keywords: ethno-visual-semiotic; heterotopy; facesphere; portrait; art

This exploration of the works of various authors and artists will bring us to a philosophical contemplation of the portrait as a heterotopic space. On one hand, a portrait represents the faces of the self and others, embodying both individuality and collectivity. As we recognize these portraits as derived illusions or inverted realities, they simultaneously define themselves as spaces at the boundaries of multiple identities. On the other hand, the space within the conventional frame of a portrait transforms from a mere representation of documented reality to a co-constructed and reified form of expression. Sometimes decorated, integrated or filtered, it thus takes on a new dimension and meaning.

*Corresponding author: Silvia Barbotto, University of Turin, Via S.Ottavio, 10124 Torino, Italy,
E-mail: silvia.barbotto@unito.it

The portrait will be considered here as belonging to the dimension of the facesphere, which in turn is enclosed in the bodysphere and, even further, the semiosphere. Starting with the latter, from which the others are inspired, it belongs to Juri Lotman who, motivated in turn by V. I. Vernadski's concept of the biosphere, refers to that continuum composed of "semiotic formations of various kinds and at different levels of organization" (Lotman 1996: 11). Lotman's teachings are circumscribed within a field of philosophical knowledge and language, which, having developed between two continents and two wars, is emblematic and at the same time fascinating and enlightening. He was confronted with the exercise of freedom of speech and research and had to strategically disarticulate his own thought to express himself freely, seeking the right criteria. Culture, as a thematic and scalar extension, along with space as a semiotic category and art as the supporting paradigm, constitute some of Lotman's central premises and also forms the predominant foundation for this text. His studies and theoretical groundworks, initially employed to understand social, linguistic, and cultural dynamics in his home country (Russia) or his host country (Estonia), offer a valuable interpretive key for comprehending other cultures as well. Among the main characteristics of the semiosphere, we find the profound interrelationship between its individual parts, often organized into core and periphery, its delimited character with respect to extra-semiotic space (in which semiosis would not exist or at any rate would exist differently), the consequent presence of the frontier as an important functional and structural element that propitiates translation and its internal heterogeneity and irregularity. In coining the terms *corposfera* ('bodysphere') and facesphere, respectively, Finol (2015) and Leone (2021) place their respective fields of interest, the body and the face, within those semantic, structural, formal, and methodological features belonging to the semiosphere.

I will delve into this analysis in the first part of the text, where I will sink into Lotman's epistemic groundwork on culture, space, and especially art as a founding philosophical and analytical reference, and will also outline the relationship and difference between the semiophere and the facesphere. The second part focuses on establishing a relationship between the facesphere and the heterotopic idea of space and portraits. Here I will explore Michael Foucault's thought in relation to heterotopic space, later proposed by my analysis as being associated with the space of the portrait. The third part will be devoted to establishing relationships between the theoretical background and the analysis of case studies belonging to the portrait genre selected from photographic works in "Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia," an exhibition at the National Gallery in Singapore. I will conclude with some brief considerations to summarize the path taken.

1 From Lotman's semiotics, the facesphere

The facesphere, as a part of the bodysphere and the semiosphere, is a cultural semiotic instance that both transcribes and is transcribed. Leone (2021) defines the face as a controversial object of study, which has in the past been caught up in the dichotomy between the determinism or measurement of anthropometric disciplines and participant observation or the contextual interpretation of anthropo-cultural and ethnological disciplines. By extending the face to its inclusive sphere and gathering it into the term facesphere, a new perspective is proposed that studies culture, language, and practices related to the face, which is thus a translation device.

The translatability of the face, and therefore its cultural nature, is evident especially in its representations. Paintings, sculptures, and other artifacts representing the face are not actually the body part itself, but just a figment of it. Yet facial representations are as they are not only due to stylistic reasons, but also because they refer to distinct cultures of the somatic face. Moreover, they retroact on actual faces, shaping and influencing their cultures. (Leone 2021: 272)

It is this translatability of the face that makes the portrait an object of study of great interest: as an indexical or artificial representation, the portrait and self-portrait are capable of expressing culture while at the same time retro-emphasizing and co-creating it.

On the surfaces of these represented and translated faces are traced ontological pathways, revealing frames that exemplify epistemic engagement through various modes of reading and writing, participants in different modalities for the construction of a specific semiosphere. In their depths, another level of compositional utterances is articulated, giving birth to content, animating it, and shaping it, developing and reshaping itself within a perpetual portentous magma, a continuous flow of signification: in the physical facesphere, in the *evenemential* one, or in the one narrated in, represented in, inhabiting the matter.

The breach between the two realities – the depth and the surface – constitutes a questionable contrast: it is fluctuating, often arbitrary, certainly culturally driven, and at times the two realities are so deeply intertwined that they become inseparably entangled with the same inevitably causal substance. Yet, it is possible to analyze them by distinguishing their various levels of meaningful existence (e.g., figurative, plastic or performative), but some meanings are so imbued with connotations that they are “like this,” evidence of a past that happened, an indicative sign of what has occurred. I wonder how many narratives we would like to alter, even though they are already etched in time with an ontologically irrefutable quality, bearing witness to a marked and indelible event. Yet certain of those materials are sometimes taken up and, as a vehicle of passion and a historical document, are charged with epistemic

and *pathemical* weight, both individually and collectively: this phenomenon is evident in certain photographs we will encounter in the third section. We will also see that the role of the artist will open supplementary interpretative angles. On the other hand, some materials become the venue for mythical tales, fictional constructions or ambiguous re-connotations, as is evident in other photographs featured in the same section.

Measurability, appreciation, and contemplation, all of which are fundamentally quantitative in nature, are intrinsic properties and discriminative factors of constructed human cultural systems. In this context, the spatial temperaments in qualitative terms assume an important role: representations of the face, along with associated artefacts, particularly portraits and self-portraits, serve as spatial incarnations that are mediated and co-created through culturally composed visual media and devices, ensuring them the position of *chronotopic* translators.

The energy of a line, encompassing its duration and density, the photonic passing of a piece of life, including all shades of grey, revelation under chemistry, revelation of a mirror turned upside down and distorted, together with the inextricable connection between surface and depth and the sequential juxtaposition of grammatical particles, are among the markers in establishing semantic relationships between interconnected facts, signs within textuality, pertinent processes in the unfolding of events. Lotman would say between space, borders, and points.

Space assumes a precise, dynamic, and eloquent character in this context. Before approaching the Foucauldian idea of heterotopic space and then associating it with portraits, we need first understand them from an artistic point of view. Portraits and self-portraits, when examined through spatial, genealogical, figurative, plastic, and performative lenses, evoke the art discipline to comprehensively understand their structure in both syntactic and paradigmatic dimensions. They operate as conduits for realized narratives which, once documented, can be reformulated, retranslated, and transmitted across local and cross-cultural contexts, influencing interpretations and perceptions through parallel and orthogonal paths. Some affirm established semiospheres within layered time, while others break into new and fertile semiospheres. This holds true for photographs that are resemantized, faces that acquire new meanings despite familiar features, parts of archives that resurface and are revitalized, and stories that, already written, are restored.

The Lotmanian space serves as the pivot around which interdisciplinary and inter-sectorial hermeneutic satellites orbit: in his article “The place of art among other modelling systems” (2011), Lotman provides a concise and schematic (yet comprehensive and insightful) outline of the characteristics of artistic language as a modelling system of the second degree, capable of structuring elements and roles, modelling perceptual processes, functioning as a language and thus systematizing the world of reality and, to some extent, translating our consciousness. There are

other texts from which I will derive the greatest benefit in discovering interpretative and analytical keys. Most of them are grouped in the valuable collection *Semiosfera*, translated by Desiderio Navarro.

Art, space, and culture, therefore, constitute the dimensions that construct a strategic framework, both thematically and technically. To encourage intertextual and hypertextual dialogues and promote dynamic and insightful analysis, I have drawn connections between certain semiotic areas used by Lotman and similar semantic areas employed by other authors, specifically Massimo Leone's facesphere. In the following section, I will relate this latter concept to Michel Foucault and his heterotopic principle. Additionally, the need to cover some theoretical foundations concerning the peculiarity of the world of photography will primarily be covered and illuminated by the approaches of Barthes and Basso Fossali and Dondero.

2 Heterotopia and portraiture

Why heterotopias? The encyclopedia gives various definitions, including use by “designers and theorists of architecture and urbanism ... as capable of revealing the multidimensionality of lived space.”¹ When looking at the etymological root, there is a compound of hetero + topos: ἕτερος (‘different’) and τόπος (‘place’). What are these different places and how do they operate semiotically? Does diversity lie in traveling to a distant land? Or perhaps it resides in the landscapes between one body and another, in the gaps and within mereological relations.

Above all, concerning heterotopia, we must acknowledge an indispensable figure who appears to have first used the term and promoted its examination and dissemination: Michel Foucault. Although he used it in 1966 for radio presentations and Parisian lectures, it was in 1967 that it came out in print in his publication “Of other spaces: Utopias and heterotopias.” Foucault refers to heterotopias as “those real places, found in cultures of all times, structured as defined spaces, but ‘absolutely different’ from all other social spaces, where the latter are ‘at once represented, contested, overthrown’. The function of these special spaces, real ‘situated utopias’ in relation to all other spaces, is to compensate, neutralize or purify them” (Foucault 1984: 4).

Can art be the place for the construction of a reality in which purification and compensation take place? Can we consider photography the technique of reversal par excellence? Is the face a social space of affirmation and contestation, of identity-uniqueness-distinction? Can it be the face, a situated utopia in which to present and at the same time overturn, in a sort of experiential paradox? Can the face synthesize

1 <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ricerca/eterotopia>.

specificity and indefiniteness, intimacy and yet also collectivity, thus be a singular but at the same time collective device? And yet: is the portrait a verisimilar space, traversable but different from reality? I will try – indirectly – to answer these questions through a better understanding of the characteristics of heterotopias as conceived by Foucault, i.e., spaces that exist both in reality and in the realm of myth or fiction, inherently contradictory in nature and animated by the following six principles, among them also co-existing:

1. Heterotopias do not possess a universal form; each society constructs them in its own unique way. However, one can identify at least two main categories: crisis heterotopias, predominantly found in primitive societies and deviant heterotopias.
2. Each heterotopia serves a specific and defined function within a society. Depending on the cultural context in which it manifests, the same heterotopia can have varying functions.
3. Heterotopias can juxtapose multiple spaces, bringing together incompatible sites into a singular physical location.
4. Heterotopias are often associated with specific periods of time, opening what can be referred to as heterochronies, representing distinct temporal strata.
5. Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.
6. Heterotopias have a function, in relation to all the space that remains, that unfolds between two extreme poles (from illusion to compensation).

The final section will present some examples through a case study analysis, but now it is important to recognize that the heterotopic semiosphere is a space that reinvents itself. Unstable at the identity level, it finds its own firmness by being sculpted in relational terms and modelling the reality of which it is a part and which, at the same time, it alienates to represent, expose, denounce, reverse, and co-construct.

The portrait, as a heterotopic facesphere, reveals ideological postures and epistemological roots. However, it deviates; but in a sort of heuristic belonging to the material device of representation, as well as to the chosen interface and format, it diverts linear readings and proposes instead a seesawing interchange of latent virtuality. I work with heterotopia mainly in visual terms. At the heart of the image lies imagination: a background of material and foundational components that, when they intersect, make and give form. Through granular revealed chemistry, or even an enigmatic formula between the surreptitious and the epiphanic, photography becomes a voice, speaking in images, pervading all existence, matter, and evidence. As a questionable truthful document or a projected poeticity, the portrait genre essentially displays one or more faces: known, mirrored, concealed, invented.

Surface and sub-surface amalgamate, making themselves ambiguous, porous, interchangeable. But one has to understand the space of the image and imagination: the s-composition, the relationships, the properties, the codes, the substance, aware that the two domains of connotation and denotation are indivisible. We treat them as semiotically separate, temporarily reducing them and then expanding them again to a synergetic and complementary dimension. There is a triangulation with the third space, the one that goes beyond polarities and introduces the *in-between* summary, the sign of the whole.

This specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time is what is known as “imagination.” It is the precondition for the production and decoding of images. In other words: the ability to encode phenomena into two dimensional symbols and to read these symbols. The significance of images is on the surface. One can take them in at a single glance yet this remains superficial. If one wishes to deepen the significance, i.e., to reconstruct the abstracted dimensions, one has to allow one’s gaze to wander over the surface feeling the way as one goes. (Vilém 1983: 8)

It is within this trajectory that I aim to immerse myself, delving deep beyond the surface permeated by chromatic conjunctions and figural textures. My intention is to decipher, absorb, and savour the photographic images, thereby engaging in the process of signification.

Photography is a confluence of signs of heterotopic dimensionality (at least in its very first physical sense) and the face is the discursive and visual object to be considered: thus, the portrait is the genre that brings together these phenomenal cores. Spatiality envelops photography in its entirety, which is first and foremost a piece of space-time. Roland Barthes discussed it primarily from a receptive standpoint, highlighting the gestures involved in presenting and observing a photograph. He described it as “a perpetual chant of ‘Look’, ‘See’, ‘Here it is’” (Barthes 1980: 792, our translation).

As made clear by Barthes, spatial and visual categories are established based on linguistic criteria of various kinds. One such criterion is natural language modelling, which employs positional prepositions typically combined with personal or demonstrative pronouns (e.g., “over his head”), adverbs of place (such as “this” and “that”), and other grammatical particles and morpho-syntactic labels used to express the relationship between subjects and objects. Barthes, however, primarily focused on the perceptual and receptive act, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship often accompanying the sharing of an image. He prompts us to ponder the finiteness-infiniteness relationship of photography: undoubtedly, there are those who extol photography as a means of capturing the essence of what exists. But there are also those who prefer to disconnect completely from tangible reality, especially in our contemporary e-society. The advent of the digital era has

increased the possibilities of access to an artificial reality and the potential for endless reproduction has been further enhanced (Fontcuberta 2018), reshaping the way we experience and interact with the world. As Barthes states:

Photography reproduces ad infinitum what has only happened once: it repeats mechanically what can never again be repeated existentially. In it, the event never goes beyond itself towards something else: it always brings back the corpus I need to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency ... the Such (such a photo, not the Photo), in short, the *Tuché*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its tireless expression. (Barthes 1980: 792, our translation)

This potentially infinite uniqueness, which forms the nucleus of contemporary philosophical contradiction, must be complemented by a reflection on the sign's ability to detach itself from its original object. In other words, the photograph is no longer solely and exclusively an index in representation of a lived experience; it also functions as a sign representing an imagined, ephemeral, filtered and even false reality – one that is no less real than the previous one.

The work of Basso Fossali and Dondero (2006) makes a revealing journey into the photography through semiotics. Among their main contributions lies an interpretation of photographic textuality that is inclusive of the socio-semiotic practices associated with it, i.e., the “practices of production, cataloguing, and fruition of images” (Basso Fossali and Dondero 2006: 51, our translation).

Particularly relevant are the instantiation and fruition practices of the photographic text, valorising both the value of the text within a given culture and the reception that opens up to the assortment of interpretation. “Photography exists from the practice that encompasses it ... as textuality pertains to the valorization of a practice: photographs do not exist in the abstract, but live within practices of sense experience and communication” (Basso Fossali and Dondero 2006: 54, our translation).

The practice of photographic instantiation necessarily has to do with its production process, its taking shape and reiteration. In addition,

the interpretive practices that give meaning to the photographic image are linked to the production practices. If the occurrence of a practice depends on the situation that we might define as a minimally institutionalized inter-actional scenario, and which is posed as a condition for the practice's exercise, at the same time the practice has the power to re-design the situation. (Basso Fossali and Dondero 2006: 56, our translation)

Conditional on the semiotic levels examined and thus on the relevance indicator used, photographic and imaginative space takes on different features. When drawing on family life stories and access the personal or public archives of our contemporary or past history, we kindle intimate affective veins, whose nerve endings also come

into play and which have to do with emotional fruition. Beyond a basic subjective reading, however, the images that come to light trigger connective networks whose intermediate nodes move epistemic, semantic, and affective fields that go far beyond the intimate and proprioceptive scale, to become instead exteroceptive engines, expanded events, instances of collective resonance. The photographic text, and specifically the portrait, is effectively a *heterotopic space of resonance*.

3 “Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia”

In this section, I combine study of the face as heterotopic textuality with study of the portrait as a specific genre within the language of art and ethnographic methodology. I analyze portraits included in a photographic exhibition I visited during my fieldwork, entitled “Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia,” at the National Gallery in Singapore.²

By examining some of the artists’ work, I explore the cultural nuances and meaning-making processes embedded within the portraits from this geographical area. It is particularly interesting to explore the artistic context of Singapore, which serves as an amalgamation of Southeast Asian cultures: it gets its identity from the inherent hybridity both in its history and, as evident, in its present. Drawing from the information provided by the National Gallery, the first artistic references, as defined in this context, emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century, influenced by the colonial period. The Singapore Art Club has been in existence since 1880, and the first Amateur Drawing Association was founded in 1913, marking significant milestones in the development of the artistic community in Singapore.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, portraits and photography gained popularity. Common subjects included landscapes, typologically exotic figures, and industrial and commercial subjects such as goods and travel routes. In 1938, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts was established by Lim Hak Tai, who believed in the importance of incorporating a sense of localness and Nanyang characteristics (referring to the South Seas) into art.

Under British influence, art education and practice flourished, until the Japanese occupation in 1942. During this period, artists in Singapore also faced the impact of war, though visual and pictorial manifestations of these experiences varied among individuals. Some artists chose to leave Singapore during this time, such as Liu Kang (born in China in 1911, died in Singapore in 2004), who resided in Malaysia from 1942

2 <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/livingpictures> or Instagram profile [nationalgallery.sg/LivingPictures](https://www.instagram.com/nationalgallery.sg/LivingPictures).

to 1945. In 1946, he returned to Singapore and published the book *Chop Suey*, which portrayed the atrocities inflicted upon the people of Malaysia through sketches. During his time in Malaysia, the artist innovates by applying techniques of the studio to outdoor spaces, opening to the naturalness of the characters depicted and to broader views. For instance, in his work *On Guard, Ipoh*, he captures his character in a moment of rest and informality, diverging from deliberate poses often associated with traditional studio portraiture.

I approach the exhibition according to simplified heterotopic criteria, as well as Lotmanian suggestions. I do this through analysis of certain art pieces, which are divided into two categories: “Ethnographic heterotopias revisited (inhabited archives)” and “Performed ludic heterotopias.”

3.1 Ethnographic heterotopias revisited (inhabited archives)

Art can serve to condense, process, and – to some extent – overcome or heal trauma, while retaining the memory and lessons for the future. Originating from personal considerations, this is just one of many definitions of art and its possible functionality, cited here as a useful key to the interpretation of some of the following works.

As Lotman says, historical and collective memory moves and re-presents itself – with the heterotopical functions of being, remembering, and revisiting – in a contemporary key:

Culture, as one form of collective memory, is itself subject to the laws of time but simultaneously sets up mechanisms that resist time and its movement ... It is not simply the last temporal cut that is active here but rather an entire cross section of considerable depth, as certain centers of activity periodically flare up from time past; texts that are separated by centuries are ‘remembered’ and so become contemporary. (Lotman and Uspenskij 2019: 141)

As part of the National Gallery Singapore collection, *The Messenger II* series by Ly Daravuth (Cambodia, 1968), which exemplifies 21 years of research (from 2000 to 2021), includes 30 prints on paper representing 30 children, in impassive, neutral, cold portraits. The originals, which come from the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum archive in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, have their being almost imperceptibly modified. I read these images diachronically, enhancing the static impossibility of language as well as culture, as emphasized by Lotman semiospherical vision.

The Messenger II is perhaps the most eloquent facesphere to exemplify a painful memory, the Cambodian genocide. The face is a child of society and “a society, in the course of its history, can make an existing heterotopia function very differently; because each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within society, and the same heterotopia can, depending on the synchrony of the culture in which it is

found, have one function or another” (Foucault 1984: point 2). In the descriptive signage accompanying the photographs, Ly Daravuth affirms that:

they were in some way complicit in the genocide as messengers, which occurred towards the end of the Vietnam War, a time when the US troops were distancing themselves from their South Vietnamese allies and the Cambodian government of Lon Nol. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge, mostly made up of young men of peasant stock and led by a certain Pol Pot, entered the capital and gave way to the communist regime, propitiating a very harsh purge process that would count with 1,500,000 dead. It was a cultural genocide, and the photos depicted bear witness to this.

To underline the ambiguity between complicity and victimization and to avoid trivial sensationalism, although the artist deals with documentary photos, he has deliberately manipulated them in various ways (from pixelation to degradation, etc.) and aims to circulate them both as works of art and as cultural-historical evidence. Ly states:

After talking to Youk Chhang, the director of DC-Cam,³ I became interested in the strange idea of truth and its documentation. Because of the blurred black and white format and the numbering of each child, we tend to read these photographs first and foremost as images of victims, when in fact they are messengers and therefore people who actively served the Pol Pot regime. The fact that seeing their faces I immediately thought of them as victims made me uncomfortable. My installation wants to question what is a document? What is ‘truth’? What is the relationship between the two?

Photography reveals an engraved, recorded reality, but at the same time becomes a witness as a filtered medium and translator. And the artist reflects on Asian identity by asking himself, also through this series:

What is the so-called Asian paradigm? What kind of discourse does it produce? Is it really an alternative discourse to the global/Western one? Or is it just another version of it? What would be modern or contemporary? We certainly find new artists belonging to the modernity of global art, but perhaps, we need to think critically, without looking too much at external cultural legacies.

This critical and diachronic look at these faces of history therefore also helps us to model contemporary and thus synchronic heterotopias. This case and the following one make explicit two different heterotopic characteristics (points 2 and 3), but they share a similar practice of instantiation of the photographic text: in both cases, the artists reformulate the image into a kind of de-individualization, also seen as an attempt at universalization or homogenization of the represented subjects.

“Heterotopia is able to juxtapose in a single real place different spaces, different sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1984: point 3). In *Block Out the*

³ Documentation Center of Cambodia: <https://dccam.org/home>.

Sun (Figure 1), a series by Stephanie Syjuco, a contemporary artist from the Philippines who migrated to the US, we find two pieces of history, or rather a history revisited (or remixed?), synthesized in a single photographic and heterotopic location. It is a crystallized discriminating event revisited in a critical and contemporary key: Stephanie's hand covers the faces, and on some occasions the bodies, of the subjects.

"How do we continually write and rewrite American history?," wonders Syjuco; "Some stories about the formation of the country have been stitched together to construct political ideas. Stories are not facts, but they are manipulable. America is a mix of icons, images but also immigrants' experiences, incorporating their own ways of being American." Wassan Al-Kudhairi, the curator of the first exhibition of this series, occurring in 2019 in the Luminary and the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, says:

She researched local archives for information relating to the 1904 World's Fair, particularly records of the exposition's Filipino Village, one of the notorious 'living exhibits.' In the various archives Syjuco accessed she came across image after image of the exposition's Filipino Village. This resulted in Syjuco questioning the power of photography and its ability to capture a moment in time that may create long-lasting historical, political, and social narratives. *Block out the Sun* attempts to deny the medium its ability to perpetuate racist narratives by literally blocking a view of the subjects of the photographs – the Filipino inhabitants of the living exhibits.⁴

These were the years of American imperialism and, in 1904, after fighting against the nationalists, the colonization of the Philippines had just begun; in the same year, more than 1,200 Filipinos were transported to the United States to perform during the World's Fair. This movement also went in the opposite direction: many scholars, teachers, and anthropologists from the US travelled to the Philippines.

My work [says Syjuco] is about the slippery spaces between visibility and invisibility, made from the perspective of an American artist born in the Philippines and raised in San Francisco, and takes as its subject broader national questions of belonging, citizenship, and the construction of racial and exclusionary difference.⁵

If looking at other of her works, such as her 2016 series *Headbundle*, we see that the portrait and the self-portrait are central ways of addressing the re-signification of archives, but also of contemporary identity in the context of historical reinterpretation. The characteristics of a heterotopia often overlap. This principle is indeed present in many of the photographic images we have just seen, but it is even more evident in *Presence in Absentia* (2018–2019) by Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn.⁶

4 <https://stephaniesyjuco.com/projects/block-out-the-sun>.

5 <https://stephaniesyjuco.com/projects/block-out-the-sun>.

6 <https://www.jacquelinehoangnguyen.com/filter/2019/Presence-in-Absentia-1>.

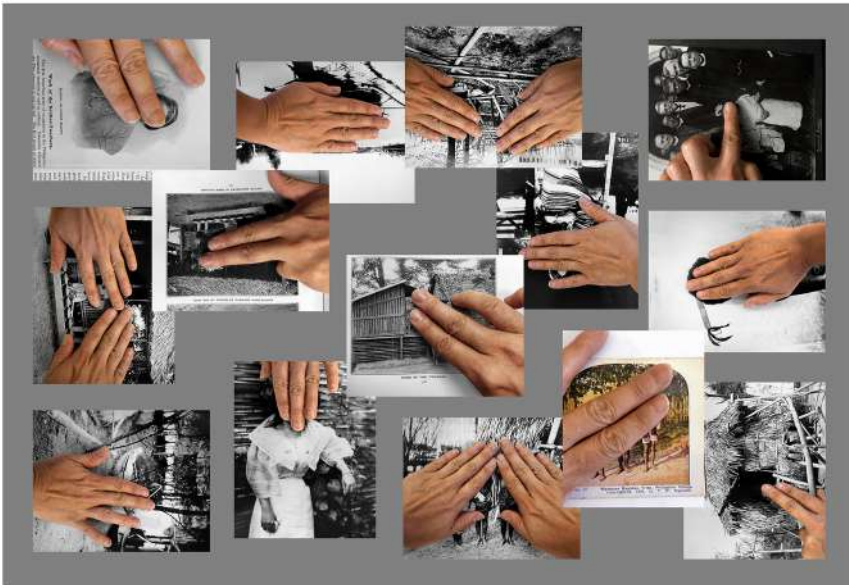


Figure 1: Stephanie Syjuco (2019). *Block Out the Sun*. Photographic intervention in the archives of the Missouri Historical Society. Thirty archival pigment prints, 8" × 10", mounted on aluminium and displayed in custom vitrine. Presented in 2023, National Gallery Singapore. With the kind permission of the artist.

“Heterotopias are often linked to slices, portions of time ... and thus the question of heterocronies arises” (Foucault 1984: point 4). Using archives and family life stories, Nguyễn investigates the history of her own family and country, but also asks herself: “where else can we find similar images?” During a period of research in situ, in Sweden at the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm, Nguyễn searched for similarities and sisterhood, through a visual-syntactic commonality of archive photos, and for the same organizational grammar, to create this new narrative space from the findings.

The images examined are shown and explained within a series of video presentations⁷ linked to the “Living Pictures” exhibition initiative. Here *Presence in Absentia* is also a performance, a virtualized heterotopia become fact:

The sand images come from the artist’s family photo collection, more precisely from his great-grandfather Nguyễn Khương (1894–1974), whom he inherited. Traditional Buddhist mandalas symbolize the entire universe and are laboriously completed only to be destroyed (which is why the artist chooses sand as the predominant element for his work). Similarly, for the artist, family memories and photographs have a similar ephemeral quality. This artwork is meant to be a place where micro-stories meet larger narratives, in a fragile and fleeting way. Therefore, these sand representations exist only for the duration of the exhibition, only to be swept away once it is over. (in *Visual Empire: Translation & Reproduction*)

3.2 Performed ludic heterotopias

“Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable” (Foucault 1984: point 5). The porousness of the face, both metaphorically and physically, as well as the sensoriality of the sensory channels, transforms perception into a bridge of visual iconism. This natural apparatus is manifested through various cultural modes. The synesthesia suggested by the work of seems complementary to this Foucauldian point: the space of the face is the seat of the sensory channels here problematized, occluded, censored. The underlying paradox is indicated by the title, an isotopy with the image, from 2019: “Start here, a Lesson on Looking (Self-portrait with Mandarins).”⁸

Here is the underlying paradox indicated by the title: “Let us begin here, a lesson on looking, on the gaze.” Considered the most frequently used sense, sight is the queen of the gaze: denying it, closing it, occluding it (note in fact the eyes covered by a red membrane), it opens up the invocation to the synesthetic *aspectuality* proper to the human being, in turn accentuated by the presence of a particularly aromatic

7 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOm5QknXNHE> starting from 13:35.

8 <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/magazine/interview-wawi-navarroza>.

gastronomic element by which the second version of the title (“Self-portrait with Mandarins”) was inspired. The image-title isotopy is also propitiated by the reading of photography as a practice: as indicated in Section 2, this work embodies the practice of observation as a co-constructive negotiation of both the subject represented and the cultural subject.

In semiospheric terms the body, and thus the face, can be considered a textual frontier space culturally ascribed: the portrait as facesphere allows us to expand, transit and play with these represented frontiers and with the relational dialogue between the objective world and the representational world, sometimes not so clearly divided, but rather ambiguous and latent:

The border divides the space of continuous culture and encloses a point to a set of points. The semantic interpretation of the model of culture consists in the establishment of correspondences between its elements (space, boundary, units) and phenomena of the objective world. (Lotman 1998: 71)

In the presence of a photographed subject, natural boundaries are intensified through occlusion and reinforcement: certain aspects, especially the organ of sight, are rendered conventional, and the visual boundary is contradicted by the title’s suggestion. The dots are allied and the spaces observed by the viewer form a relational agreement with the figurative spaces, blurring the borders into ambiguous metaphorical connections. This creates a sense of conventionality, arising from the apparent absence of naturalness.

Nap Jamir II’s work (Figure 2) is playful; his idea came about as follows:

I could also make the machine record an image of itself by using a mirror which reflected the portion of the photo booth where its camera was located. This was to show that the photo booth can be a subject as well as the photographer. This series was part of my art process using non-traditional methods in producing photographs. (Interview with the artist, 21 July 2023)

Lotman (2011: 254–256) introduces the play-artistic model and affirms that art is a special form of modelling activity, but he also introduces another similar modelling practice: play. “Play is the realization of a certain kind of behavior, which is different from both practical behaviors and behaviors based on models of cognitive type ... In a play-type model, each of its elements and the model itself as a whole, being identical to itself, is more than just itself.” Although art is not a form of play, there is much similarity and sometimes coincidence between the two Lotmanian models. A playful model, which then according to Lotman would coincide in this case with the artistic model, is conducive to and suitable for the reproduction of a creative act: the face of the author, the face of the collaboration, the face of the contextualised and mirrored space, become the creative elements of the photographic space, a heterotopic self-



Figure 2: Nap Jamir II (1974). *Foto-Me Series*. Print dimensions: 25 × 8.5 cm, 25 × 12 cm, 25 × 16 cm. The Philippines. Presented in 2023, National Gallery Singapore. With the kind permission of the artist.

portrait. Jamir II's picture, a combination of regular and random processes, enhances chance and the moment that emerges, and becomes meaningful.

Play and art, both of them working towards the important goal of getting a grasp of the world, both share the same common trait: the conditional solution of situations ... Play and art (even a bloody spectacle like bullfighting, or tragic art) are not only (gnoseologically) means of perception but also (psychologically) means of recreation. They provide solutions, which are psychologically absolutely necessary for a man. (Lotman 2011: 264)

Nap Jamir II's work has been interpreted from both a Lotmanian and a Foucauldian perspective, and they are related to each other: heterotopias have a function in relation to the whole space that remains. This function takes place between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes all real space, all the places within which human life is divided, as even more illusory or, conversely, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, meticulous, and well-organized as ours is messy, poorly constructed, and confused. The latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation (Foucault 1984: point 6). The mirror element present in Nap Jamir II's work is, par excellence, the most heterotopic artefact: thanks to its reflective power, the ancients made imaginary places real and vice versa; they made the oneiric, the illusion tangible, and our contemporaries perpetuate such practices.

In this essay, I aimed to explore the portrait as a heterotopic space, drawing connections between the work of Juri Lotman and Michel Foucault, specifically Lotman's studies of the semiosphere (including its cultural, spatial, and artistic aspects) and Foucault's work on heterotopias. When addressing the portrait, I incorporated theoretical studies on the concept of the face, with particular reference to Massimo Leone's theories and his concept of the facesphere. Our examination of the portrait also required reference to the realm of art, which I found paradigmatically in Lotman's propositions and specifically in the language of photography as discussed by Barthes and Basso Fossali and Dondero.

In light of this theoretical framework, I then analysed certain portraits from the exhibition "Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia," considering them as heterotopic facespheres capable of juxtaposing several spaces, bringing together incompatible sites in a single physical location and assuming a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable at the same time. From illusion to compensation, I have seen that portraits have the function of mediating, of navigating between opposites, of creating dialogue not only in relation to the occupied space but also to the remaining or missing space.

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Federico Bellentani*

A monument's many faces: the meanings of the face in monuments and memorials

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Abstract: This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the significance and meanings of faces within monuments and memorials. The presence of faces in monuments and memorials transcends cultures and spans throughout history. Faces serve as vital components of public statues, conveying the emotions of depicted characters and establishing communicative connections with observers. Moreover, they are employed within memorials to commemorate the deceased. Memorial museums frequently feature corridors adorned with portraits of those who perished in wars, terrorist attacks or natural disasters. The aim of this paper is twofold: firstly, to develop a theoretical and methodological framework for the analysis of faces in monuments and memorials, drawing upon the cultural semiotics of Juri Lotman as well as theories proposed by Algirdas J. Greimas and Umberto Eco. Secondly, to construct a typology that elucidates the various ways faces are utilized within monuments, memorials, and commemorative practices. A historical roadmap of the facial presence in monuments and memorials is then presented. By achieving these aims, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the meanings of faces within monuments and memorials in particular and memory politics in general.

Keywords: face; monuments; memorials; commemorative practices; semiotics of culture

1 Introduction

Juri Lotman moved to Tartu, Estonia in 1950 and became a professor at the Department of Russian Literature, of which he was the director from 1960 to 1977. During his tenure, he and his colleagues laid the foundation of semiotics of culture and established the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School, merging Estonian and Russian

*Corresponding author: Federico Bellentani, University of Turin, Torino, Italy,
E-mail: federico.bellentani@unito.it



Figure 1: The sculpture-fountain dedicated to Juri Lotman in Tartu. Picture taken by the author, March 2016.

traditions of semiotic and cultural analysis. In 2007, a sculpture-fountain dedicated to Lotman was unveiled in front of the University of Tartu Library (Figure 1): the sculptors Mati Karmin and Andres Lunge crafted the fountain, incorporating four 15-m steel tubes with flowing water presenting a curious perspective game: by standing on a particular point, the arrangements of tubes resemble the face of Juri Lotman as inspired by his numerous self-portraits.

This sculpture-fountain has assumed the characteristics of a monument, i.e., a structure created to honor noteworthy individuals or events. To celebrate Lotman, this monument uses his face, as the primary support for human interactions and social image (Leone 2021b). This fountain-statue embodies three principal themes explored in this paper: monuments and memorials, the representation of faces within them, and Juri Lotman's theory of culture.

The aim of this paper is twofold: to develop a theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing faces in monuments and memorials, drawing from Lotman's theory of culture in conjunction with theories by Greimas and Eco (Section 3); and secondly, to construct a typology of the uses and meanings of faces in monuments, memorials, and commemorative practices (Section 4). Subsequently, a brief historical roadmap of the presence and utilization of faces in monuments and memorials is presented, including face-oriented practices around contested monuments (Section 5). Section 6 concludes by summarizing the findings,

highlighting limitations, and providing suggestions for future research. Prior to that, the following section introduces the research object of monuments and memorials and delves into the cultural conflicts associated with them.

2 Monuments, memorials, and cultural wars

Monuments and memorials come in a plethora of forms worldwide. They exhibit a diverse range of characteristics, encompassing various sizes, construction materials, shapes and colors. At first glance, the primary function of monuments and memorials appears to be the commemoration and remembrance of past events and identities. But the monuments always speak to the present, with an eye to the future: they can emphasize selective historical narratives, influencing specific understandings of the present as well as shape aspirations for the future (Hay et al. 2004). They highlight events and individuals that align with the preferences of the ruling elites that installed them, while disregarding what is uncomfortable or irrelevant for them. As such, they play an important role in the definition of a uniform national memory and identity (Tamm 2013).

For this reason, throughout history and across different cultures, monuments and memorials have served as powerful tools for validating and consolidating the authority of their creators (Bellentani 2021). This phenomenon is driven by the deliberate actions of national elites and their associates, who construct monuments with the purpose of molding and disseminating prevailing ideologies, consolidating political influence, and igniting socio-cultural dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. But in most cases, the meanings of monuments and memorials end up being muffled or forgotten over time. Public statues can turn into neutral landmarks attracting everyday practices, such as inattentive crossing, meeting, eating, playing and so on. Hence the remark by Musil (1987 [1927]) that there is nothing as invisible as a monument. The monuments appear to emerge in glory, only to endure over time through inertia.

However, instead of fading into obscurity, some monuments representing outdated cultural values or reflecting the ideology of bygone regimes face an additional paradox by igniting new controversies regarding their presence in public spaces. Although monuments are initially crafted by the elite to convey prevailing narratives, intended to endure unchanged physically over time, their meanings are never fixed once and for all: instead, they continually evolve reflecting shifts in culture, social dynamics, perceptions of nationhood and interpretations of history. Notably, as the Russian writer Tiuchev said (quoted in Lotman 2013 [1994/2010]: 193): “it is not given to us to know in advance, how our world will be recalled . . .” Lotman’s semiotics of culture offers a valuable framework for understanding the meanings

dynamics of monuments and memorials. His concept of the semiosphere represents the essential condition for languages and cultures to exist and function (Lotman 2005 [1984]). It indicated the semiotic space within which different languages and cultures variously interrelate with each other. At the centre of the semiosphere, there are the “most developed and structurally organized languages, and in first place the natural language of that culture” (Lotman 1990: 127). Central cultures consistently attempt to establish conventional norms for the entire culture. The majority of individuals in a culture embody the norms of the legitimate culture and perceive them as their own reality. Culture, in this perspective, encompasses a symbolic array of meanings that are deemed essential for a society or nation. However, peripheral cultures continually emerge and reshape central norms. In doing so, they play a vital role in defining and developing the central culture itself. Central cultures, being more developed and organized, may be perceived as rigid and resistant to change. Conversely, the more flexible peripheral cultures consistently reshape the more regulated central cultures.

Lotman’s center-periphery hierarchy can be applied to explain the interpretative dynamics of monuments and memorials. Culture is “the non-hereditary memory of the community” (Lotman and Uspenskij 1975 [1971]: 43), but it is far from being a static repository: “culture preserve information and absorb new information in a continuous process of codification and decodification of texts, messages, objects, and practices that comes from other cultures” (Traini 2023: 122). The memory of a culture (Lotman 1990: 13) thus includes various written texts, artefacts, images, buildings, and other objects that can be organized into a text, intentionally created to serve someone’s particular agenda or intentions (Lotman 2009 [1992]; see also Pisanty 2023). National elites use monuments and memorials as instruments to create this text, while legitimizing their political and cultural dominance, promoting ideals they consider central, and desire individuals to aspire to. As such, monumentalization is a deliberate act by the elite to mold the fundamental values and sentiments of national distinctiveness of a particular national community, emphasizing its distinctiveness in comparison to others. However, monuments can elicit various interpretations at the societal level, ranging from those closely aligned with the central culture to those more distant. As a result, the same monument can be a sacred site of commemoration for one community while representing a source of traumatic memories for another, which can call for its removal.

An epistemological clarification is necessary to avoid the creation of semi-symbolic systems in which dominant cultures control the narrative of history while marginalized cultures are relegated to the role of rewriting it. Creating monuments and memorials is already an act of rewriting historical narratives, as they selectively combine past facts, events, and identities. Critics often accuse protesters and activists who seek to dismantle unwanted monuments of attempting to erase or rewrite

history. However, the act of monumentalization itself is originally an act to create a particular discourses of the past, present, and future. Also, the notion of counter monuments needs critique and explanation: in the intention of their authors, counter monuments aim to disrupt top-down historical narratives or offer venues for excluded histories (Baguley et al. 2021), but they actually provide equally valid historical perspectives which in turn can become dominant over time, even if they are now seen as marginalized. Lotman's concept of explosion is crucial in understanding this issue. He explores culture development in terms of predictability and unpredictability, where predictable gradual processes coexist with unpredictable radical ones (Lotman 2009 [1992]). Gradual processes follow established cultural values, while radical ones, fuelled by unexpected shifts and new texts, lead to creative explosions (Clark in Lotman 2009 [1992]). These explosions ensure innovation within the semiosphere but are then normalized through translation into the culture's language and norms (Torop 2002; Traini 2023). Therefore, controversies around monuments and memorials are explosive moments taking form of public debates, societal, ethnic and religious conflicts, even resulting in civil disorder; grassroots movements and political activism have then the potential to evolve and ascend to a more prominent position within society, while new social groups and minorities reclaim their memorial spaces.

3 A theoretical framework to analyze faces in monuments and memorials

This section presents a theoretical and methodological framework to analyze the role of faces in monuments and memorials, drawing from Lotman's cultural semiotics and engaging in dialogue with theories by Greimas and Eco. Five key themes will be explored within this framework: the visual and political dimensions, the interplay between designers and users, the cultural context, the intertextual dimension, and the sacred and secular dimensions.

Faces are an essential nexus in human existence and play a pivotal role in shaping individual identity. They are texts constantly invested in different interpretations and practices (Leone 2021b). The visibility and recognition of the face is intertwined with our self-identity and social positioning (Marino 2021): face-to-face encounters, being them in person or mediated by digital technologies, are primal events of communication and meaning-making, a receptiveness towards the other (Levinas 1961).

3.1 The visual and the political dimensions of monuments

Faces in monuments have a visual and a political dimension. The visual dimension encompasses the tangible aspects of monuments. According to Greimas (1989), the visual text can be divided into two interconnected yet distinct levels: the plastic and the figurative. These levels, both visually perceptible, fall under the visual dimension of monuments. The figurative level is identified through its correlation with real-world objects: monuments serve as stages, representing scenes and embodying characters, objects, actions, and interactions in tangible forms. The plastic level pertains to physical attributes such as shapes, construction materials, colors, topological distribution, and sizes.

The visual design of faces has the potential to convey specific political messages and perpetuate power relations that align with the cultural context in which they are created. Monuments and memorials are designed by institutions who make deliberate choices driven by specific communicative objectives, drawing from a range of available semiotic resources and “meaning potential” (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013: 131). These choices are not arbitrary but motivated and influenced by ideological factors: they determine how events and identities are portrayed and select representations, emphasizing certain aspects while downplaying others.

However, designers do not have complete control over the interpretations of monuments and memorials and thus users interpret them following their opinions, beliefs, and feelings. Therefore, semiotics goes beyond a rigid notion of symbolism in which specific plastic aspects such as material of construction, location, and size are believed to communicate specific meanings. Rather, monuments embody a boundless set of potential meanings, each one being activated by users depending on their knowledge, evaluation, and emotional reactions, as well as on the cultural, social, and political context in which monuments are interpreted. A cultural semiotic analysis of face representation in monuments and memorials needs acknowledging the diverse array of meanings and interpretations that exist within the social and cultural framework.

3.2 The interpretations of monuments between designers and users

The interpretations of monuments exist in an intermediary space between the intentions of the designers and the interpretations of the users. Eco (1984) showed that the study of textual interpretation had generated a dichotomy between those who believed that a text could only be interpreted according to the author’s

intentions and those who argued that a text could support any interpretation from the readers. Later, Eco (1990: 50) proposed that textual interpretation lies in a middle ground between the intentions of the author and the complete arbitrariness of the readers' interpretations. However, texts necessarily impose certain constraints on interpretation and encourage certain readings over others (Eco 1990: 143). Authors employ textual strategies to guide readers towards specific interpretations. Eco classified these textual strategies as the "Model Reader" (Eco 1979: 7–11). According to this model, empirical authors write texts with assumptions about the readers' social background, education, cultural traits, tastes, and needs. Consequently, they anticipate and construct their readership, emphasizing certain interpretations while concealing others (Lotman 1990). Although authors seek to control interpretations, texts do not function solely as "communicative apparatuses" that directly impose meanings on readers (Eco 1984: 25). Instead, they become dialogic spaces where authors and readers continually negotiate their interpretations. As Lotman explains:

A text and its readership are in a relationship of mutual activation: a text strives to make its readers conform to itself, to force on them its own system of codes, and the readers respond in the same way. The text as it were contains an image of its 'own' ideal readership, and the readership one of its 'own' text. (Lotman 1990: 63)

These ideas can be applied to the interpretations of monuments and memorials. Elites design monuments and their faces with the aim of guiding users towards interpretations that align with their intentions. Drawing from Eco's ideas, Marrone (2013) refers to individuals who conform to the designers' intentions and develop behavioral patterns consistent with the envisioned function of monuments as "Model Users." However, users may interpret and use monuments in ways that differ or even oppose the designers' intentions. Consequently, the theoretical framework proposed here recognises the interplay between designers and users as the foundation for understanding the multiple interpretations of monuments and memorials.

3.3 Monuments and the cultural context

Monuments cannot be studied in isolation from their cultural context. Culture plays a significant role in shaping the interpretations of both the designers and the users, as well as influencing actions and interactions within the monuments' space. In turn, monuments convey cultural meanings within space, contributing to the continuous shaping and reshaping of culture. Different cultures differently represent faces in monuments and memorials, as well as in a plethora of different texts. By structuring of a specific "facesphere" within monuments and memorials (Leone 2021a: 276),

designers create specific discourses of identity, ethnicity, nationalism, power, gender and other contingencies related with group identification.

Leone (2021a: 274) explains that “cultural forms of face representations evolve faster than social ways of face presentation, which in turn are faster than changes in the biology of the face.” In addition to addressing cultural representation, the theoretical framework presented here employs the semiotic concept of culture, encompassing diverse levels of organization, characterized by multiple, and at times, contradictory aspects. According to Lotman (1990: 33), culture “can be threatened both as the sum of the messages circulated by various addressers ... and as one message transmitted by the collective ‘I’ of humanity to itself. From this point of view human culture is a vast example of autocommunication.” Therefore, an analysis of culture from a semiotic perspective should consider both the abstract and theoretical complexity of the cultural dimension as a whole, as well as the concrete and diverse aspects of cultural life (Sedda 2012; Stano 2015). Focusing solely on culture as a whole neglects the specific manifestations of culture, while concentrating solely on specific manifested cultures overlooks the mechanisms that hold them together.

Eco (1984) also divides culture into global and local levels. The global level encompasses cultural knowledge as a whole, while the local level defines the routinized ways in which this knowledge is employed. The concept of the Encyclopedia represents the shared signs that interpreters use during their interpretative processes. At the global level, the Encyclopedia contains all potential interpretations circulating within a culture. At the local level, there exists a set of instructions for interpreting specific portions of the socio-cultural space (Eco 1984). Eco refers to this set of instructions as “encyclopedic competence” (Eco 1984: 2–3).

Lotman (2009 [1992]: 137) describes culture as a dynamic entity in “constant transposition of internal and external processes.” New texts and ideas are constantly drawn into culture, whose elements can be either assimilated or expelled. While culture defines its own spatial and design models to convey its symbolic vocabulary in space, the design of monuments can elicit a range of unpredictable interpretations situated at different distances from those defined by the central culture. As such, culture consists of different “interpretative communities” (Yanow 2000), each framing social reality based on specific cultural traits, political perspectives, socio-economic interests, and contingent needs. These interpretative communities interpret monuments differently based on their shared knowledge.

3.4 The intertextual relations of monuments

Monuments cannot be analyzed in isolation from their interactions with the surrounding built environment. Within linguistic and semiotic research, the concept

of intertextuality has been employed to describe how texts establish connections with other texts (e.g., Kourdis 2018). Similarly, in the semiotics of architecture, “intertextuality” has been used to study architecture as part of a broader series of works developed over time (Muntañola 2004: 38). Pellegrino and Jeanneret (2009) explained that spaces are created through a combination of layered and distinct locations, entwined and intersecting, both open and closed to each other. These locations provide virtual positions that are organized through the partition and composition of spaces, defining their connections and disconnections. This perspective emphasizes that spaces are not isolated entities but are shaped by the interplay between various places within the built environment. This is true also for face representations in monuments and memorials: face representations consistently exist within complex relationships woven among other built forms and social practices.

3.5 The sacred and secular dimensions of monuments

Institutional monuments and memorials can have a spiritual dimension, evoking emotional impact on their users. They are often designed by elites to symbolize the embodiment of national mourning, transcending the boundaries of time itself. Throughout history, faces have held a central role in visually representing the divine, serving as a privileged interface between immanence and transcendence (Leone 2020). Christianity boasts a rich tradition of visually representing divinity through the face, also evident in twentieth century commemorative war memorials (Abousnougga and Machin 2013), whereas religions such as Judaism and Islam strictly regulate this practice to prevent blasphemy (Leone 2021b).

However, as time passes, the sacred meanings of memorials can gradually fade, leading them to become integrated into everyday life. Moreover, secular monuments and memorials exist, serving as “signifiers of importance” (Moncur and Kirk 2014: 971) for places or buildings not directly associated with sacred or religious significance.

4 A typology of faces in monuments and memorials

This section introduces a typology of faces and facial representations within monuments, memorials, and commemorative practices (Tables 1 and 2), aiming to identify common themes and practices across cultures. Noticeably, the typology

Tables 1 and 2: The typology of faces and facial representations within monuments, memorials, and commemorative practices.

Faces in monuments	Faces in memorials
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Public statuary: Public statues place significant emphasis on the faces of the depicted characters, serving as tools conveying emotions and establishing specific communicative relations with users. – Facades of monumental buildings: The exteriors of architectures such as cathedrals, churches, and civic buildings can boast face decorations. These facades display visages, embodying religious figures as well as historical personalities. – Temples, such as the famous Bayon Temple in Cambodia, may incorporate stone faces into their architecture. – Obelisks: Bas-reliefs depicting faces can be found on obelisks, such as the Obelisk of Theodosius in Istanbul. These carved faces add artistic and symbolic elements to these structures. – Video Mapping techniques often use faces as projections on monuments or facades. This approach allows for dynamic visual displays, transforming static structures into animated and immersive experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Tombstone: In addition to using the tombstone picture of the deceased's bust, tombstones could incorporate personalised elements such as engraved portraits, keepsakes or artistic representations of the dead. – War memorials: Faces of soldiers are designed to set specific communicative relations with the users. – Cenotaphs: Bas-reliefs or statues on cenotaphs could be designed with faces of the commemorated identities. – Sarcophaguses: Anthropoid coffins were considered an idealised substitute for the deceased in case anything happened to the body. Though not a true portrait, the face on the coffin was primarily symbolic. – Digital memorials: In addition to including faces, digital memorials incorporate multimedia elements such as videos, voice recordings or interactive timelines to create an immersive commemorative experience.
Faces in commemorative practices	Faces for contested monuments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Public rituals and ceremonies: Besides the biological faces of attendees, public rituals and ceremonies can incorporate artistic and symbolic face representations of the deceased. This can be achieved through multimedia displays, banners, projections or installations that showcase photographs, videos or artistic renderings of the deceased. Traditional rituals could also incorporate the creation of masks or face paintings that reflect the unique attributes of the commemorated identities or events. – Digital-native commemorative practices include remote funerals and virtual commemorations online, often representing the face of the dead. Additionally, incorporating features such as digital guestbooks, online memorial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Graffiti: Protesters and activists often use spray paint on unwanted statues' faces to express their dissent. Street artists worldwide have used visual representations of faces to reclaim spaces and commemorate marginalised identities. – Digital projection: one example of this occurred during the US <i>Black Lives Matter</i> protests in 2020, where artist Dustin Klein employed digital projection techniques. By illuminating the pedestals of Confederate monuments, he projected the faces of Afro-American citizens alongside influential individuals who have profoundly influenced American history.

Tables 1 and 2: (continued)

Faces in monuments	Faces in memorials
<p>walls or interactive virtual environments can provide opportunities for people to express condolences and engage in collective mourning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="130 392 577 534">– Social network commemorations: Beyond multifaceted online reactions and responses, social network commemorations can integrate virtual spaces dedicated to sharing memories, stories and photographs of the departed. <li data-bbox="130 539 577 795">– Virtual and augmented reality: An example is the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., which introduced a mobile app incorporating augmented reality. This experience enables visitors to delve deeper into the lives of Lithuanian villagers featured in the memorial tower known as the Tower of Faces, thus providing a richer understanding of their stories. 	

serves as an analytical tool to discern prevailing trends and macrocategories rather than being an exhaustive list. In commemorative practices, the biological faces of those honoring the deceased play a central role, whether it is during funerals or public rituals of mourning. This paper focuses on face representations in monuments and memorials. In Western funerary customs, tombstones often feature images or busts of the deceased. In institutional monuments and memorials, the face assumes a pivotal role in public statues, as a tool to communicate emotions and establishes a connection with the users. Moreover, faces are frequently incorporated into the facades of buildings, acting as “discursive spaces” that convey specific meanings through their evolving materiality (Gendelman and Aiello 2011: 256). In commemorative practices, the significance of the face as a tool for remembrance and mourning cannot be overstated, as it facilitates users in their experiences surrounding death. This applies to both offline and online commemorative practices, encompassing institutional as well as vernacular contexts. Finally, faces have become essential tools at both institutional and vernacular levels offering solutions for contested monuments (see Section 2).

5 Faces in monuments and memorials: an historical roadmap

Monuments, memorials, and commemorative practices including faces are common across many cultures and times. This section offers a concise historical roadmap, pinpointing significant moments in the evolution of facial representations in monuments and memorials. The roadmap was built drawing upon the theoretical concepts presented in Section 3 and taking into account the types elucidated in Section 4 above. For the sake of simplicity, the roadmap is divided into prehistory, ancient history, middle age, modern periods, modern history, and contemporary history. Notably, periodization itself has played a crucial role in shaping historical narratives, influenced by national, religious, ethnic, racial, and gendered inclinations, among others (Sato 2015).

5.1 Faces in prehistory

The Makapansgat pebble (Figure 2), dating back approximately three million years, has gained fame as the “cobble of many faces” due to its striking resemblance to a human face. Discovered alongside the remains of *Australopithecus africanus* in a



Figure 2: The Makapansgat pebble.
Licence: Creative Commons.

South African cave at Makapansgat, it remains *uncertain* whether the pebble is a deliberate human creation or merely a result of face pareidolia that the Australopithecus collected and brought it into the cave perceiving facial features on the stone. Nevertheless, this pebble represents one of the earliest example of symbolic and aesthetic thinking within our knowledge.

Figurative shapes and small sculptural carvings of faces, carved out of natural materials, are common in prehistoric sculptures, as exemplified by the female face of the Venus of Brassempouy (25,000 B.C.). The Shigir Sculpture is the oldest known wooden sculpture carved during the Mesolithic period. The top part of it is a head with a face including eyes, nose, and mouth. Its surface is also decorated with geometrical motifs and depictions of human faces and hands. Therefore, several faces are visible along the sculpture. During the bronze age, the Cypriots, based in today's Cyprus, produced several terracotta female figurines with zoomorphic heads, as signs of fertility.

5.2 Faces in ancient history

The Great Sphinx of Giza is Egypt's oldest known monumental sculpture, recognized worldwide. It depicts a reclining sphinx with the head of pharaoh Khafre and the body of a lion. Adjacent to the Sphinx, there are two temples: one from the time of its construction and another built during the New Kingdom. In the New Kingdom era, the Sphinx was worshipped as the deity Hor-em-akhet, "Horus of the Horizon." Today, the Sphinx's face, adorned with its iconic missing nose, stands as a symbol of Ancient Egypt's monuments and culture, inspiring numerous legends and ironic representations in cinema and cartoons. The sculpture demonstrates the crucial role the face has in ancient Egypt, especially in relation to the afterlife beliefs and rituals. Anthropoid coffins were considered the idealized replacements for the deceased in case anything happened to the physical body. The face depicted on these coffins rarely resembled an accurate portrait of the deceased and was often symbolic in nature representing a timeless image for eternity. Faces on sarcophaguses feature elaborate embellishments, inscriptions, and designs: some of them go beyond mere representation and possess added allure, such as inlaid eyes and eyebrows, faces adorned with gold leaf, red pigments, and enhanced by the inclusion of striped wigs.

Greek sculpture revolutionized the portrayal of the human body and face, and its representations proliferated throughout the Hellenistic world. A treatise on the proportions of the human body written by Polykleitos around 450 B.C. – the *Canon* – offered a standard that saw humans as the measure of the universe. This approach blended idealistic ideals with a faithful depiction of nature. It strived for a delicate balance, steering clear of excessive realism or exaggerated emotions. Instead, it

cultivated a formal atmosphere characterized by harmony and equilibrium. Public statuary represents an idealized portrait of the human being and it becomes a powerful tool of civic and aesthetic education, influencing the birth of Aesthetics and later art movements like the Renaissance and Neoclassicism.

Inspired by Greek sculpture, Roman portraiture represents a significant step in the development of face representation in art and sculpture. It showcased a distinct realism and a desire to capture the essence of nature through the representation of someone's face. Surviving examples include marble and bronze statues, with some even exhibiting clinical features (Figure 3).

The realism found in Roman portraiture can be attributed to their evolution from death masks, crafted from materials such as wax, bronze, marble, and terracotta taking molds directly from the deceased. Preserved and displayed on home altars, these masks provided an authentic portrayal of Roman facial features. During the imperial age, public statuary, and portrait sculptures of Roman emperors took on a political role: including the emperor's pose, attire, and accessories, they aim to project a glorious image to the public. While many of them exhibited realistic human anatomy, they also incorporated idealized elements. As a result, Roman imperial portraits sought to emphasize the ruler's authority, power, and divine connection through the face and bust of their leaders, shaping public perception and solidifying their political legitimacy.

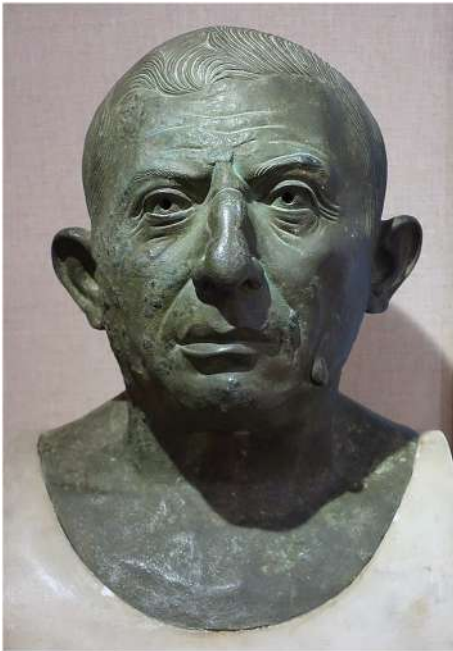


Figure 3: Plaster cast of Roman bronze and marble original representing Lucius Caecilius Lucundus, with a prominent wart on the left cheek. National Archaeological Museum, Naples. Licence: Creative Commons.

5.3 Faces in Middle Age

During the Middle Age, the head held profound symbolic significance within Western culture. It represented not only the intellect and center of power but was also seen as the dwelling place of the soul. The face, in particular, played a central role in both individual identity and the expression of human emotions and character. The Gothic cathedrals of Europe offer a rich tapestry of biblical characters and narratives. In the seventh century, Pope Gregory the Great made a declaration differentiating between adoring images and using them for educating on the Holy Scriptures. He stated that just as Scripture is essential for the educated, images serve a vital role for the uneducated. This declaration led to the overflow of images and sculpture in the Middle Ages: cathedral facades were adorned with bas-reliefs presenting not only religious iconography but also other human figures, animals, and fantastical creatures. Imposing gargoyles protruding out from the facade were used as a tool to impress the worshipper and prevent him/her from sin.

The incorporation of facial representations in monuments and memorials transcends Western cultures, encompassing a diverse array of societies across different regions. For example, the twelfth-century temple Bayon in Cambodia includes towers featuring over 200 serene faces of Buddha. These faces are common in Buddhist temples worldwide, symbolizing his enlightenment and peaceful nature (Figure 4). The symbols on Buddha's face hold specific meanings, like the *ushnisha* representing profound knowledge and the *urna* symbolizing omniscient vision.



Figure 4: Buddha's head at Wat Phra Mahathat, Thailand nestled within the roots of a tree. Licence: Creative Commons.

The Moai statues on Easter Island, Polynesia, carved between 1250 and 1500 by the Rapa Nui people, depict the faces of deified ancestors. These statues have a distinctive large head and smaller body, embodying the sacred nature of the chief head and the enduring connection with the deified dead. Many Moai now rest underground, leaving only their large heads exposed, facing towards the villages as protective guardians.

5.4 Faces in modern periods

The Renaissance delved into a detailed fascination with the division and proportion of bodily and facial features. This captivating exploration of human aesthetics is evident in face drawings of Leonardo da Vinci and the manuscripts of Albrecht Durer's manuscripts. Leonardo's drawing demarcates three equal sections of the face. Similarly, Cennino Cennini's instructional manual divides the face into the same three sections: the forehead, the nose down to the top lip, and the lips and chin. The forehead was a sign of female beauty, well-documented in portraits and poems of the times. Petrarch himself describes Laura's forehead as more serene than the sky. In *Orlando Furioso* (Seventh Tome, XI), Ariosto describes a beauty's forehead as smooth ivory. Portraits of women, particularly those in profile, further reinforce the beauty ideals by removing forelocks to increase the perceived height of the forehead. Beside this, the practice to create bust portraits to celebrate the members of political authorities and *signorie* persisted during the Renaissance.

In this time, civic buildings and their facades could be decorated with faces drawn from popular culture. This is the case of apotropaic mascarons, an architectural ornament representing a face with the function to frighten away spirits from the house or the city (when used on the city walls). During the Baroque period, mascarons were used as mere decorative elements: their mouths served in fountains as the element from which water flowed and in keystones as a lock where to insert the key. Mascarons were common also in ancient Greece and in Italiote colonies, where it also acquired a protective connotation against misfortune.

Expressive faces have been popular throughout history, but the work of the German-Austrian sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt elevated this art form. Between 1770 and 1783, Messerschmidt crafted his iconic *Character Heads* (Figure 5), a collection of busts showcasing faces contorted in an array of extreme facial expressions and grimaces that would be popular in the years to come.



Figure 5: Character head No. 44 (The Laughter Kept Back) by Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, Belvedere Museum, Wien. Licence: Creative Commons.

5.5 Faces in modern history

As nation states emerge and solidify, a first wave of monumentalization occurred. With the democratization of public life, a greater number of individuals were deemed deserving of the honor of having a street named after them or a statue erected in their celebration, leading to a proliferation of facial representations in statues as well as in public rituals and ceremonies. Moreover, by honoring the individuals who founded or safeguarded the nation, the intention was not only to celebrate the individuals themselves, but also to exalt the nation as a whole. In the US, the end of the Civil War ignited a *statuemanía* to celebrate the generals and statesmen who stood out in the conflict, often represented through the classical motive of the equestrian statue (Testi 2023), often a marble, larger-than-life equestrian statue, with the gaze of the general looking straight, on a pedestal surrounded by flower bed that does not facilitate comfortable interactions of the users who need to celebrate the represented subject looking upwards, from an appropriate distance.

War memorials and cenotaphs to the First World War were tools to legitimize the effects of the conflicts on civilians and society and, at the same time, to naturalize and maintain nationalism (Abousnougá and Machin 2013). Soldiers were

represented through design choices that resemble Greek and Roman statues, with perfect physical proportions. Actual war practices were mostly hidden behind the reference to ancient history and an idealized classicism (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013). These memorials contributed to the formation of a specific “facesphere” of society (Leone 2021a: 273), a physiognomic stereotype (Van Leeuwen 2004) shaping the perception of a shared ethnic or racial identity. Abousnnouga and Machin describe the faces of these memorials as such:

Typically, the represented participant soldiers in the memorials share faces of perfect symmetrical proportions, square jaws, long slim noses and almond-shaped eyes, their faces can never be considered either plain or unattractive. Lock of hair are carved consistently. (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013: 111)

Post-Second World War (WWII) memorials tend to be more symbolic and abstract. War become less understandable and thus its representations shift away from design strategies celebrating soldiers, the nation and (a certain) ethnicity (Abousnnouga and Machin 2013). Victims and death enter in the representations. Holocaust memorials generally signify the impossibility to represent the trauma through



Figure 6: *Shalechet – Fallen leaves*, Jewish Museum, Berlin. Licence: Creative Commons.

abstract forms: the concrete slabs in a grid pattern of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin are exemplary in this sense and have been pioneer of following Holocaust memorials in Europe and the world. The face is still central in Holocaust and post-WWII memorials, but the face bears the scars of devastation, often concealed or partially covered by hands, evoking the overwhelming anguish and emotional burden resulting from the war's atrocities. The Holocaust Memorial Monument by the artist Anastasios Kratidis (1998) in Volos, Greece, includes reliefs of devastated human faces. The installation *Shalekhet – Fallen Leaves* by the Israeli artist Menashe Kadishman (Figure 6), in the Jewish Museum Berlin, consists of a vast expanse of thousands of iron faces spread out across the floor. Each face is uniquely crafted and carries a haunting expression that reflects the pain and suffering experienced during the Holocaust.

5.6 Faces in contemporary history

In the twentieth century political regimes, propaganda featured the oversized faces of political leaders, deliberately contrasting them with the anonymous and countless faces of the masses (Soro 2021). The concept of face gigantism also found expression in monumental structures, exemplified by the Mount Rushmore National Memorial. This memorial showcases the colossal 18-m faces of four US presidents, serving as a striking representation of power, particularly in its influence over the nation (Soro 2021).

Digital memorials and digital-native commemorative practices have also evolved significantly since the late 1990s, with the rise of digital technologies and the Internet. These memorials, including websites, social network tribute pages and virtual commemorations, play today a crucial role in commemorations and mourning. Within digital memorials, faces serve as *inter-faces*, providing access to the memories of the deceased (Leone 2021b). As users interact with these faces, they imbue them with diverse interpretations and practices, continually shaping their meanings. Institutional memorials and museums have embraced a seamless integration of physical and digital elements, including interactive touch screens, smart glasses, video mapping, virtual and augmented reality.

Faces today serve also as solutions for contested monuments (see Section 2), both at institutional and vernacular levels, aiming to reassess the meanings of these monuments and envision them as spaces for interaction and active learning, moving away from sources of controversy. An example is seen during the 2020 George Floyd protests when artist Dustin Klein used digital projection to showcase the faces of African-American citizens who fell victim to police violence, alongside influential figures from black history, on the pedestal of the Robert E. Lee monument. Through

his project, named *Reclaiming the Monuments*, Klein sought to transform the Confederate statue into a symbol of black empowerment. This utilization of digital technology addresses the gaps in the memorial landscape, incorporating elements that represent minority or overlooked histories.

Protesters and activists have frequently resorted to *de-facing* unwanted monuments. During the Black Lives Matter protests, activists targeted statues perceived to glorify slavery and racism with lashes of graffiti and lines of spray paint. Early colonials have been targeted, representing the onset of colonialism and Native American genocide. Some statues have faced utter destruction, such as the beheading of Columbus statues (Figure 7) and Confederate monuments.

The destruction of statues is not a recent phenomenon, frequently sparking divisions between those advocating for complete eradication and others opposing such measures. Centuries ago, during the French Revolution, the Commune of Paris issued a decree mandating the destruction of all statues of kings adorning the Cathedral of Notre Dame: regarded as potent symbols of the French monarchy, these sculptures were forcibly dislodged and their heads violently severed. Similarly, in the sixteenth century, Protestant reformers damaged or destroyed sculptures seen as manifestations of religious and political authority. These events illustrate the tremendous influence of monuments and memorials on society and their inherent contentiousness. They often become political battlegrounds, where conflicting perspectives collide.



Figure 7: The statue of Christopher Columbus erected in 1984 in Waterbury, CT. The statue's head was removed on Independence Day 2020. Licence: Creative Commons.

6 Conclusions

Faces hold a ubiquitous presence in monuments and memorials across diverse contexts and time periods. This paper has presented a theoretical and methodological framework for studying the significance of faces in monuments, memorials, and commemorative practices. A typology of the uses and meanings of faces has been offered, shedding light on their function and interaction with users. The historical roadmap provided outlines key moments in the evolution of facial representations in monuments and memorials, including face-oriented practices around contested monuments. It is essential to acknowledge that this roadmap is succinct and selective, focusing primarily on Western perspectives and sparsely including non-Western histories. Future research should strive to delve into the role of the face in various eras and regions, ensuring a broader geographical scope. Furthermore, the absence of faces in certain religious cultures, where the depiction of deities and significant figures is either prohibited or discouraged, must also be considered. Additionally, contemporary digital memorials and digital-native commemorative practices, though briefly mentioned, deserve further exploration to better understand their implications and impact. A more in-depth investigation of these practices will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the evolving significance of faces in monuments and memorials today.

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Baal Delupi*

Activist masks in the Latin American social protest

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Abstract: Masks, balaclavas, eye masks, and various accessories have been consistently used to hide the face, from Greek times through the grotesque of the Middle Ages to the Latin American theatre festivals of the 1980s. In the twenty-first century, technological advances such as facial recognition, which are being used for the biopolitical control of the face, caused activists to start developing different mechanisms to cover their faces in public spaces. In other words, the mask is not used solely as a device that builds unique aesthetic-political senses but is also used to avoid being captured by surveillance cameras. The aim of this paper is to identify some of the masks used by activists in Latin American public protests, generating new signs that circulate widely in the semiosphere such as physiognomy, representation, and evocation. For this, we will return to Juri Lotman's proposal on the semiosphere and the notion of facesphere developed by José Finol, concepts that operate as epistemological and heuristic frameworks that allow understanding the concrete meaning production processes as a global dimension and not only a particular one. What faces are hidden and what physiognomies are shown in the social protest? What borders are established? What political and aesthetic meanings do they build? These are the questions that this paper attempts to answer from a perspective of cultural semiotics.

Keywords: masks; activism; facesphere; politics; Latin America

1 Introduction

Masks have been consistently used around the world to conceal the face, from ancient artistic practices to activist actions in the public space organized to condemn the inequalities caused by the capitalist system. However, in the current digital society, unlike the disciplinary age (Foucault 2000) and control age (Deleuze 2006), radical surveillance and biopolitical regulation of the face characterize our social practices. Our faces are constantly exposed to regulation, hierarchization, and

*Corresponding author: Baal Delupi, University of Turin, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Torino, Italy, E-mail: baal.delupi@unito.it

stratification dictated by a discursive hegemony (Angenot 2010) that places certain faces at the center of discursive fields, while others are cast to the periphery of social discourse.

This inclusion-exclusion dynamic – the acceptable faces and bodies versus the marginalized ones – is integral to the capitalist system, which in its current stage can be distinguished by technological acceleration and the expansion of communication and mobility possibilities, among other features. It is at this stage where the media also occupy a central role in the production of representations with global reach, while fragmenting and standardizing at the same time what is social, under the influx of certain dominant themes, doxas and pathos that build common sense and opinion places.

In this context, activists from all over the world continue to protest in the public space, and in the virtual sphere as well (Fuentes 2020), wearing masks and balaclavas not only to build special aesthetic senses but also not to be identified by security cameras and facial recognition devices; thus, avoiding the risk of retaliation from the armed forces. Consequently, the current semiosphere is also shaped by masks that function as a border – making a face invisible and at the same time showing another face that, in the case of activists, becomes a collective countenance of protest.

The aim of this paper is to identify types of masks that activists use in public protests in Latin America, creating new signs that spread widely in the semiosphere such as physiognomy, representation, and reminiscence. For this purpose, Juri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere and the notion of bodysphere and facesphere developed by José Finol are used. These concepts function as epistemological and heuristic frameworks to understand the specific processes of social creation of meaning as a global rather than a single specific dimension. What faces are hidden and what physiognomies are shown in social protests? What borders are established? What political and aesthetic senses do they build? These are the questions that this paper attempts to answer from the point of view of cultural semiotics.

2 Configuration of masked faces in the semiosphere

Studies about the face are long-established in the field of anthropology, philosophy, art and, in some measure, semiotics. What are we referring to when we discuss faces and countenances? A forethought by Enrique Finol (2021: 19) starts to answer this question with:

When does the transition between face and countenance occur? When does a specific facial orography become “friendly,” “recognizable,” “identifiable”? Let us remember that “the face is

physic, natural; countenance is a human work. The countenance is a construction”... It is in that experiential journey leading from facial sensations to the identification of countenance that the face becomes a recognizable visual construct; i.e., the face becomes part of a visually friendly landscape, linked to relationships and history, a component and constituent part of a situated experience. That facial semiosis occurs due to the co-text – the face, the head, the body – and the contexts – choreography, spectacle, culture, history, etc. (Finol 2021: 19)

The face, then, is a semiotic construction inscribed in the cultural memory of the people and here is where the matter of faces can be linked to Lotman’s theory: faces can be considered texts that have a fundamental role in memory processes, whether it is as a record of information or as the creation of new meanings (Lotman 1984). There are faces that become a bodily story of life through the signification of devices that organize bodies biopolitically and define inclusions and exclusions.

It is possible to remember the face of Christ, Mary Magdalen, Julius Caesar, Margaret Thatcher, and Julian Assange, just to name a few that make up the cultural heritage of our history. If we talk about “revolutionary faces,” for instance, it automatically comes to mind, depending on what part of the world we are, the face of San Martín in Argentina, Túpac Amaru in Peru, Che Guevara in Cuba and Argentina or Zapatistas in Mexico. Every sphere of culture constructs recognizable and readable faces in that given moment, but also through time. As posited by Leone (2021: 58), “faces are also the somatic place where borders are manifested, the ones that exist between emotions and their expressions, certainly, but also the ones that delimit age, health, status, gender, economic and social classes, among other political and religious affiliations.”

This paper intends to focus specifically on those devices that cover the face while they shape a new countenance – the mask. Whether it is a mask, a balaclava or an eye mask, covering one’s face with any kind of material has an early history in the West, more precisely, in Ancient Greece. However, it is not until recent years, together with the rise of facial recognition, that activists from around the world go out to the street to protest with their faces covered. So much so that, in 2011, the cover of Time magazine labelled the “Protester” as *Person of the Year*, showing the masked face of an activist as a symbol of solidarity and resistance against authoritarian powers.

This modality of masked activism shapes new faces in the semiosphere. The mask has the function of hiding an identity – recognizable by the centers of power – to reveal another. In some cases, the masks represent the images of famous people, while in other situations, they resort to ingenuity to create new faces. In both cases, the achieved effect is a form of activism and protest that, in places like Latin America, is already a constant feature. Masked people who fight for their cause, and also activate and question the occasional passer-by, all the while covering from the surveillance and control cameras to which they are exposed in the street.

The mask as a text from a culture is permeated by a memory that begins to be legible due to translation mechanisms. Nowadays, using a balaclava reminds us of the Zapatista resistance, the same way that using a white scarf refers to the fight of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. The mask of V for Vendetta is a multi-accented sign that fights real power, the same as the Joker's make-up insofar as a counterdiscursive device that disputes meaning with the atomization and marginalization system.

The concept of the facesphere comes from Lotman's notion of the semiosphere, a central concept in semiotics. Its theoretical potential has allowed researchers from different sciences of meaning to explain complex phenomena and processes of meaning construction. This notion is defined by Lotman (1984) as the way to access the description of culture at its three levels: the textual system, the subtextual meanings, and the set of functions linked to the texts. From this point of view, the text signals and transmits a message, but it also creates information. Enrique Finol posits that the notion of semiosphere still finds heuristic potential to analyze the diverse phenomena of social meaning production. There are, according to the author, two reasons for this:

The first one is that Lotman's theory of culture, from which the concept is derived, proposes an innovative semiotic orientation that "slips" between the two larger traditional schools – one stemming from Saussure's linguistics and one from Peirce's theories... The second explanation for the academic success of the concept of semiosphere relates to the fact that it retrieves and develops what other authors had ignored when analysing the signification processes; in particular, it retrieves what today we may call the meanings that are produced by the overflow of sign and text, meanings that populate and impregnate the languages of the semiosphere. (Finol 2021: 175–176)

The idea of semiosphere leads to a systemic school of thought, but it is also possible to notice that Lotman's semiotics – especially in relation to culture and explosion – is understood as a highly dynamic and self-creative signification and communication process since the very notion of semiosphere has two unavoidable characteristics: its delimited character and the semiotic irregularity. Here, the notions of memory and border are introduced as two essential components. For Lotman, culture is a collective intelligence and, at the same time, a collective memory where different texts interact as a collective experience. Cultural memory is understood as the semiotic space where the texts and codes that are part of a specific community are stored; it is what an author as Angenot (2010) would call, saving the distance, a state of social discourse.

In turn, the different memories refer to different memory communities that establish complex and dynamic networks with each other based on power relations – including dominance, dissidence, negotiations, and conflicts – that occur in space-time. Perhaps the question that arises from this definition is how external messages

pass into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice-versa. This passage is made through a translation enabled by a border acting as a mechanism that puts in motion the possibilities on one side and the other of the defined boundaries. The semiotic border is, then, the sum of translators through which a text is translated into other languages that are outside the semiosphere. This clearly shows the closed character of the semiosphere since it cannot be in contact with non-texts that have not been translated into one of the languages of its internal space. Thus understood, inhabiting the border implies the coexistence of two languages in contact with each other, of two experiences of the world.

It is important to emphasize that from the notion of the border itself, what can be derived is that there are areas situated on the margins and others in the center. The territories are delimited and the assigned spaces are relocated, there are displacements. This is relevant because it enables the analysis of speeches that are on the periphery, in permanent tension with the privileged places. Lotman's theory, therefore, enables the analysis of culture as a code or system considering that, as Marafioti explains:

Rebuilding the code of a culture does not mean explaining all the phenomena of that culture, but rather presenting why that culture produced those phenomena. Lotman warned, however, that seeing a text as a message produced based on a linguistic code is not the same as seeing a text – or a culture as a group of texts – as a code. He was aware that no historical period has a unique cultural code, even if the construction of a model code can be a useful abstraction, and that in any culture several codes exist simultaneously. (Marafioti 2021: 32)

The notions of semiosphere, border, and translation are the leading edge that will allow to define the matter of faces in the current digital culture. The next section begins by talking about the configuration of countenances and then it looks at mask as a face that functions as a border and mismatch.

3 The masked face in the Latin American social protest

Once conveyed, the theoretical perspective from which the object mask is understood, there is the need to identify some of the contemporary examples of activism in Latin America that resort to the concealment of the face. For that, it is important to understand that the mask is often used by activists as part of a performance in the public space and, even though it is the most important device, it is not the only

element that is at stake. We could analyze the space, the outfit or other meaningful elements, but following the line of work, here the focus is on the mask.

It is worth noting that Lotman (1994: 19) offers the tools to analyze performances or what could also be known as social theatricality, “In all communities, no matter how primitive they are, there are two types of behavior – a practical one and a signic one. The sphere of signic behavior encompasses parties, games, celebrations, and religious rites.” The theatrical space – as Lotman understands it (1984) using the museum metaphor as an example – is a semiotic space that condenses information. The semiotics that constitutes the scene is the articulatory space of various languages with a high degree of signic saturation. As Ponce states,

From a contemporary perspective on theatre theory, the semiotics of the scene proposed by Lotman gives us the existence of a continuum of memories located in the labile becoming of the historical time, leading to the convergence of textualities of a changing nature. This memory construed upon the basis of multiple memories – oral, bodily, visual and linguistic – defines the ancestral nature of theatre as a party and a ceremony where symbolic, aesthetic and pedestrian interests coincide. Each one of these theatricalities emerges as a living translation of other practices – equally representative – that shape the social meaning realised in actions, that is to say, in presences. (Ponce 2021: 292)

Lotman’s theory allows not only to understand how faces are construed in the semiosphere – as a bodily narrative of life – but also to reflect upon the power of the theatrical scene where masks are represented, as places of a strong symbolic load and as articulators of various languages. This aspect is highlighted mainly because semiotics has had issues in analyzing the performing arts without considering immanent traditions. Lotman (1980) offers a theoretical and analytical framework that is relevant and useful to understand action in movement.

It is difficult to present a systematic typology of the uses of masks in social protests in Latin America. However, this section focuses on two relevant cases from two different countries in 2019 – a year of severe turmoil and social protests (Gutiérrez-Rubí 2020): a) the demonstrators’ hoods in the Chilean social outburst; b) masks of the members of the group *Colectivo Fin de Un Mundo* (FUNO) in Argentina.

Chile is a country that, unlike other Latin American countries, has preserved the economic matrix and part of the politics from the dictatorship period and has undergone several moments of massive social protests. In 2011, thousands of college and high school students rose up all over the country to demand better living conditions. This set an important precedent since it was one of the most relevant demonstrations in the country’s recent history. Years later, the early days of October 2019 were characterized by the increase in the rates of the public transportation system in Santiago. This triggered massive protests that lasted at least five months. This process was known as “the social outburst of Chilean October” (Figure 1) and it



Figure 1: Activist with his face covered in the social outbreak in Chile. Available at <https://latinta.com.ar/2020/10/19/el-fin-de-la-constitucion-plutocratica-en-chile/> (accessed 20 September 2023).

was significant for the South American region and the country itself, which years later celebrated progressive president Gabriel Boric's triumph.

During the demonstrations, we could see significant elements characterizing the protestors, including artefacts and peculiar clothing. One was the hoods that demonstrators used to avoid being captured by surveillance cameras. These hoods later became a symbol of their fight against power. The activists made unique hoods. The most remarkable ones were the red ones of the feminists (Figure 2), which signalled a



Figure 2: The hood as an icon of the feminist movement in the Chilean social outbreak. Available at <https://www.elcolombiano.com/multimedia/imagenes/capuchas-resistencia-feminista-dk12904698> (accessed 20 September 2023).

bodily narrative of life, a way of being and participating in demonstrations and fighting for women's rights.

The group has published several press releases explaining that hoods allow for the resignification of values attacked by society about practices considered feminine. Hoods are means of expression that retrieve their own stories about bodies and gender identities and propose to deconstruct hegemonic imaginaries of what is understood as "others." Basically, the masks were created for questioning the forced individualism reproduced by late capitalism societies, the abusive panoptic surveillance that demands people to identify themselves and, at the same time, does not reveal who exerts violence and subjects bodies.

In this way, hoods were a semiotic device that worked in Chile to question the forced individualism reproduced by current societies: the field of the facesphere was disputed by hoods that construed other faces in the middle of the social outburst. Hoods are thus seen as multi-accentuated signs that disputed meanings with the biological faces modelled by control systems and facial recognition devices.

Another significant example was the FUNO group in Argentina, founded in 2012 and since then, an essential part of street protests, creating strategic alliances with social movements, citizen collectives, assemblies, organizations, and other artists and generating space-times of group expression about social issues. FUNO strategically prepares the previous, the ongoing, and mainly the following moments; that is to say, how a certain action will circulate on social media. The group has albums on its Facebook page with all their actions and their rehearsals. This artistic activism collective has been holding demonstrations in public spaces by using unique masks that generate a new distribution of the sensitive on the symbolic plane. Mortuary faces, festive eye masks and hoods, among other significant devices, are considered for semiotic analysis.

Here, the focus is on an intervention carried out during the march on March 24 – Day of Remembrance of Memory, Truth, and Justice – to commemorate the beginning of the last military dictatorship in Argentina. Figures 3 and 4 belong to the 2018 action. In other research, we have analyzed the impact of 2020 on artistic activism groups, but now we would like to delve into the previous moments.

In the picture, the concealment of the face is a fundamental piece of the intervention. Without covered faces, the action would construct other meanings. Paying attention to the first example, festive colored eye masks that contrast with the mourning black clothes can be seen. There is a game of significations that responds to what that day implies for the collective memory of the Argentine people and the possibilities of facing that tragedy with a performance that does not allow for faces to be seen and that invites them to the carnival. A multiple face is configured, a piece of the biological aspect that is made visible and another piece where the vibrant colored device mask hides the skin. The mouth, part of the nose, and the cheekbones are left



Figure 3: Protest masks on the streets of Buenos Aires. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1719438361446613&set=a.1719432081447241> (accessed 20 September 2023).



Figure 4: Collective performance with white and red masks. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1719440278113088&set=a.1719432081447241> (accessed 20 September 2023).

uncovered and that gives the audience the opportunity to identify the different physiognomies or to make deductions about them.

All the activist artists are covered in a single color: the traditional black of funerals (Figure 4). Furthermore, many of them are lying on the ground representing death and a few are standing without moving. Unlike the previous action, this performance focuses on the pain caused by the military dictatorship. There is no longer a carnivalesque proposal, but quite the opposite, it shows that resisting is remembering in mourning.

In the following image, there are red masks that refer to blood and invoke a memory of the military dictatorship. These characteristics are not only aesthetic, but also political. Semiotic analysis allows explaining how the device that covers one face shows another that configures political meanings – in this case, resistance – in a state of social discourse.

Although in this Argentine example there is no police repression since it is a commemorative event, it is possible to note that the performance takes place in a context of increasing repression and surveillance by the government of Mauricio Macri, in which violence intensified and hundreds of cameras were installed in the city of Buenos Aires, generating controversy over a facial identification device that gave a “false positive” causing a man to be imprisoned for two days for a crime he did not commit. In this framework, the FUNO group decides to cover their faces for a significant event in Argentine history, linking the memory of the dictatorship (in which there was persecution and surveillance) with the current situation. The mask, in this state of social discourse, operates as a questioning of the system.

4 Final comments

Memory, for Lotman, is not an information repository, but a regenerating mechanism of information. On the one hand, the symbols that are preserved in the culture carry themselves information about contexts or languages. On the other hand, for that information to “wake up,” the symbol must be placed in some contemporary context, which inevitably transforms its meaning. Therefore, the reconstructed information is always realized in the context of play between the languages of the past and the present. This helps in analyzing, for example, how masked faces of the analyzed Argentine groups evoke a cultural memory of previous decades. An example of this is the march of the white masks of the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo¹ in 1985 and the internal debates of the *madres* about the use of masks as an

¹ An Argentine association created in 1977 during Jorge Rafael Videla’s dictatorship with the aim of finding the detained-disappeared alive and later determining who were responsible for the crimes against humanity and demanding a trial.

effacement of identities, which replicates the State terrorism procedure. And also the resource of masks that parody or ridicule the political opponents in the performances of the Movimiento Etcétera in the context of the protests carried out by HIJOS² since the mid-1990s – the *milico* ('soldier'), the priest, the appropriating doctor, etc. Other examples are the Chilean hoods in connection with previous demonstrations in Chile or the importance of Zapatistas' balaclavas in Latin American protests.

Which faces circulate around the semiosphere? Which border spaces are configured by concealing faces? How to consider the facesphere taking into account what is hidden and what is shown? These are some of the questions for future research. Regarding this paper, it is important to highlight the power of the Lotmanian theory to consider faces in the current context. What is more, Finol's update helps understand that faces are, undoubtedly, as Leone (2021) states, a bodily narrative of life that configure meanings, whether they are the biological faces or the ones created as concealment devices.

Today facial recognition is being used by different governments and companies around the world. In this context, the question about faces acquires new meaning, especially for the activist collectives that try not to be identified in social protests. Specifically, we analyzed two examples from Latin America – one from Chile and one from Argentina – that allow for understanding the importance of the concealment of the face. However, far from carrying out a thorough analysis, the goal was to show the power of masks in social manifestations.

It must also be clarified that beyond the specificity of contemporary facial recognition software, the practice of concealing the face in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was significant: consider the anarchists at the beginning of the twentieth century or, on the opposite end of the political spectrum, the Ku Klux Klan. Both groups employed the tactic of concealing their faces to advance their respective agendas.

Regarding the presented performances, it is relevant to point out that the possibility of an artistic negotiation between spectators, authors and actors is conditioned by the level of knowledge – of the mastering of this specific language – that the spectators have when attending performances as the ones we have included in the examples. And this language, according to Lotman (1980: 63), is connected to the incomprehensible, to the strange. It is worth noting that at this point the idea of estrangement associated with the Russian formalists re-emerges, since it is in this sense that the specificity of the artistic space of the scene tends to divide, or separate,

2 A human rights organization in Argentina that has branches in different parts of the country. It is mainly made up of the sons and daughters of the people who were disappeared during the country's last dictatorship.

the place of representation from the place of reality that works as an antecedent or counterpart. The condition that distinguishes the poetic message from everyday expressions is created by the effect of deautomatisation, which from the formalist tradition perspective is explained as an emphasis on the durability of perception.

Artistic and political protests in Latin America are increasingly being studied. It is precisely these strange, incomprehensible, or even noteworthy, languages that are the ones that we believe can fight against the dominant power. This is because of their imaginative and creative capacity that transcends the known language and because it operates on the borders and tries to escape to create something new. The notion of the Lotmanian border itself emerges as well from zones placed on the margins and others placed on the center. Territories are delimited and assigned spaces and displacements are relocated. This is relevant for the analysis of discourses placed on the periphery, in permanent tension with the privileged places.

It is also important to mention that the masks analyzed respond to a specific chronotropy of the places where they are located. It is different to think about a mask like the V for Vendetta than about the masks of a March 24 protest in Argentina. Each character is configured according to a spatio-temporal intelligibility of the meaning. Red masks in Argentina have a tradition coming from theatre and have historically served to make various denunciations of existing injustices. The same thing happens with gas masks in the Chilean case since it expresses an epochal hood in which an attempt is made to escape the repression with tear gas by the army.

Finally, there is the need to highlight that Lotman's semiotic theory and its rereading, such as those of Finol, allow us to reflect upon different contemporary research objects. In the case of this research paper, the masks that cover faces while also construing a new face, in the middle of new devices such as social recognition. This countenance circulates around the semiosphere and is placed on the margins of social discourse.

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Francesco Piluso*

Above the heteronormative narrative: looking up the place of Disney's villains

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Abstract: The article proposes a re-examination of the role and position of the so-called “Disney villains” within the narrative framework of animated films and popular culture as a whole. In the first part, the historical evolution in the representation of these villains will be explored according to the practice of “queer coding,” which involves attributing stereotypically queer traits to them without explicitly stating their gender and sexual identity. It will be observed how their non-conforming gender and sexuality, used to mark their moral deviance, challenge and defy dominant gender and narrative norms. It is precisely through their queer performance and camp aesthetic that “evil stepmothers,” “sissy-villains,” and “drag-queen-like” sea witches can emancipate themselves from their traditional roles as antagonists (narrative level) and as social outcasts (discursive level) to seize the spotlight through the screen (manifest surface). This study combines tools of Greimasian text analysis, including the canonical narrative schema and the generative trajectory of meaning, with Lotman’s theory and notion of “semiosphere,” to investigate the centrality and criticality of these “quillains” within the heteronormative narrative framework and the broader cultural context. To capture (or being captured by) the queer aspect of these characters and their stories, the invitation is to look at their *visage* not as a coded symbol of an underlying identity and truth, but as an image that exceeds any defined meaning thanks to its iconic power.

Keywords: queer-coding; Disney’s villains; face versus visage; performance; semiosphere

*Corresponding author: Francesco Piluso, University of Turin, Torino, Italy,
E-mail: francesco.piluso@unito.it

1 Introduction: Lotman's semiotic *strabismus*¹ and the double face of text

The brilliance of Jurij Lotman's perspective, which will serve as a key reference for this essay, lies in its ability to relate the analysis of the text, as the specific object of semiotic discipline, to the cultural context of its production, exchange, and consumption. This enables the scholars to transcend the fixed limits of the text itself, enhancing the study's heuristic potential, without deviating from the parameters of semiotic (textual) epistemology. In fact, a large part of Lotman's semiotic production revolves around concepts such as "text" and "textuality" (1988)² going so far as to consider the entire cultural system as a set of texts, which acquire different role and positions in the so-called *semiosphere* (1990, 2002, 2005). It is important to clarify that, in Lotman's systemic conception, the metonymic relationship between the whole cultural framework and its individual textual units is not given *a priori*, as a theoretical presupposition or postulate; the notion of "isomorphism," through which Lotman describes this relationship implies a dynamization, declined by Lotman himself in terms of reciprocal "functionality" and "dialogue" between the single text and the semiosphere.³ In other words, what is progressively delineated by Lotman's theory is not a simple typology, not even a topology, but a sort of "biology"⁴ of texts and culture, understood respectively in the roles (and functions) of organs and organism (*biosphere*).

Therefore, it is inevitable that the text should not be exclusively regarded as a closed and coherent unit that develops and finds its content solely through levels of a generative path always immanent to the text itself; it is necessary to look at/up the other *face* of the text, the one that *inter-faces* with something external or, at least, the one that does not completely close in on its own prospective depth. It is then a matter of conceiving the text not so much as a form of expression, but rather as an expressive substance, a medium of inscription and interaction with the reader, through which it finds new meaning or, more accurately, new sense (see Fontanille 2008). What Lotman opens up and integrates into his theoretical framework is precisely this aesthetic dimension, linked to the materiality of the text (or, more broadly, to the specificity of the medium), to its manifest surface, along which values

1 The term is taken from the introduction to the recent volume dedicated to Jurij Lotman, edited by Gherlone et al. (2022).

2 Gherlone (2015) provides an extensive account of Lotman's notion of "text."

3 For a deeper investigation on the processes and logics characterizing the semiosphere see Gherlone (2013).

4 On this issue, see Alexandrov (2000), Kull (1999), and Zoylan (2022).

and meanings deposited in the deeper levels become directly visible and interpreted by the reader starting precisely from their sensible emergence.

In this regard, the study of Disney villains proposed in this essay seeks to locate and explore the meaning of these characters at the level of their textual manifestation. The analysis will proceed backward along the generative path of the various film texts and related characters under examination. Specifically, it will delve into their ideological value, narrative role, discursive construction and, *finally*, their aesthetic portrayal through which Disney villains fascinate their audience and emancipate themselves from the *marginal* position to which they had been relegated within the *heteronormative* narrative framework. In this way, we will argue how Disney villains, through their appearance (*visage*), embody a critical and performative *queerness* that subverts the conventional hierarchy between textual levels and the priority of the narrative identity over its figurative representation (*queer-coding*). These villains bring forth, make manifest, and exaggerate, at the limits of *obscenity*, the underlying ideologies of the narrative. In this regard, Lotman's theory allows us to relocate these characters and their fascination more coherently in relation to the hegemonic cultural discourse and logics, revealing their *centrality* and *superficiality* within the semiosphere, in order to grasp both their *normative* status and *explosive* potential (2009, 2013).

2 Queer-coding villains: an overview

The representation of LGBTQ+ subjects within mainstream cultural productions, especially in the context of children's animation, is an issue that has been historically raised various social and cultural controversies. In this regard, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA), under the guidance of the Presbyterian William H. Hays, introduced the so-called "Hays Code," a morality-based set of rules that governed film content from the 1930s to the 1950s by prohibiting the portrayal of "sexual perversion or any inference to it."⁵ To navigate the Hays Code limitation, filmmakers began portraying some characters through stereotypical gay attributes and traits to indirectly convey their implicit nonconforming sexual and gender identity: a practice called *queer coding*. The consolidation of this strategy led to the creation of the stock character known as the "sissy" (Benshoff and Griffin 2006; Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2003): a male figure that is not explicitly stated as homosexual but depicted as effeminate and flamboyant to a ridiculous extent through

5 From *A code to govern the making of motion and talking pictures*, by Motion Picture Association of America, 1930–1949.

physical characteristics, costuming, props, and verbal and body language. Nevertheless, this sissy-character, initially used for humorous relief and comedic purposes, progressively lost its comic and innocent aspect.

In line with the prescription of the Hays's code, children's animated full-length movies and especially Disney's productions started to feature their "queer-coded" characters in the role of antagonists, giving rise to what Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) call the "villain-as-sissy" archetype – or "quillain" as brilliantly renamed by McLeod (2016). The representation of the villain as a sexual deviant had the aim to equate gender transgression with evil (Russo 1987), to the point that "the very *nature* of the villain becomes rooted to their sexuality, and their sexuality becomes rooted to their evil intentions" (Kim 2017: 161).

This pattern exceeds the narrative worlds and the mediasphere to reflect wider assumptions in Western culture and society. West and Zimmerman (1987) affirm that any individual can be assessed according to his or her ability to "do" gender according to the normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity. The two authors highlight that virtually any activity involves some performance of gender that can be used to evaluate a person's femininity or masculinity, which in turn can be used to legitimate or discredit other aspects of that individual. As a result, the concept of "queerness" extends beyond the domain of gender and sexuality, to encompass a broader counter-cultural realm in itself. In this regard, Dyer (2002: 6) points out that "notions and feelings of immorality, deviance, weakness, illness, inadequacy, shame, degeneracy, sordidness, disgust and pathos [are] all part of the notion of Queerdom."

The category of "queer" not only expands to encompass and indicate other characteristics of a subject beyond their sexual and gender identity but also detaches itself from the link with the subject as an essential individual attribute. To this purpose, Doty (2000) relates the possibility for a queer reading of mass media visual products to the necessity to expand the term "queer" over the limits of (gender) identity labels such as "lesbian," "gay," or "bisexual." This perspective is crucial for this paper's purpose, as it encourages the recognition of the queerness within the texts under examination through and beyond the mechanism of queer coding concerning individual characters.

The concept of "heterosexuality" involves an analogous complexity. According to McLeod, what is important to mark about this term is precisely its "unmarked" (2016: 14) aspect of linearity and normality; the author claims that "heterosexuality is often treated as a default category" (2016: 22) and solicits the employment of the term "straightness" (2016: 15) to further explore and deconstruct its (hetero)normative implications. To this purpose, it is meaningful to notice that the heterosexuality of Disney protagonists is (almost) never questioned and (almost) all Disney stories are *naturally* and *straightly* directed toward the heterosexual union between the two main protagonists, as a *prescribed* achievement constituting the *canonical* "happy

ending” (see Propp 1968). This way, Disney’s classic establishes heterosexuality at the core of their (ideological) narrative norms and linear development, as “rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfilment, and success(ion)” (Halberstam 2011: 94).

Due to the parallelism between good/bad and heterosexual/queer, the queer characters are often assigned the role of obstructing the protagonists’ success, happiness, and narrative progression. To this purpose, we agree with McLeod (2016) in proposing that, exactly like heterosexuality, queerness is integrated into the narrative structure itself. This perspective highlights the narratological significance and the disruptive potential of queerness within the Disney films, expanding the debate beyond individual character portrayals and, as we will argument later in this paper, beyond the realm of narration itself.

3 Evil queens, witches, and stepmothers

To grasp the broader implications of queerness at a narrative level, it is essential to initiate the analysis focusing on how Disney villains have historically been queer-coded both discursively and figuratively. In the early Disney feature films, the queer coding of the antagonist deviated from the prototype of the (male) villain-as-sissy character, giving way to characters like evil queens, cruel stepmothers (and stepsisters), and wicked witches, who displayed feminine traits, but not in conformity with traditional gender norms, both in their visual presentation and their narrative and ideological role.

The first Disney’s female villain, *Snow White’s* Evil Queen, is somewhat less overtly queer-coded, as she appears very feminine, but embodies some stereotypes associated with lesbians and trans women. Compared to Snow White’s canonical gentle femininity and tame figure, the Evil Queen is deep-voiced, physically imposing, and in possession of a seat of power usually reserved for a man that makes her character highly intimidating. Her face presents sharp traits and heavy makeup in contrast with the pure naive style chosen for Snow White (Griffin 2011: 73; Wellman 2020: 6). Likewise, Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty* presents a gaunt emaciated face and very dark clothes, in opposition to Aurora’s delicate radiance. Cruella De Vil shares similar physical and facial traits, featuring an extremely slender and segmented silhouette that both accentuate and challenges her femininity. *Cinderella’s* Lady Tremaine keeps a female appearance, even though her facial expressions and behaviors make her both unfeminine as well as unmotherly, even to her daughters. Her face is sharp-edged with large eyes, thin lips, and a pointy chin, in clear divergence from Cinderella’s softened cheeks, nose, and lips. The coloring of her face transforms from grey to dark green according on her mood and actions, revealing her evil nature and intentions: “There was hardly a moment when the

stepmother was not running something through her mind, constantly scheming ... Her penetrating eyes gave a look of intense concentration as she watched Cinderella” (Johnston and Thomas 1993: 100).

These unconventional and marked features capture the attention of the audience while offering a more interesting and compelling image of femininity than do princesses. According to Bell et al. (1995), Disney’s female villains are typically drawn as caricatured *femmes fatales* (‘deadly females’): “they are treacherous, sexually potent, and powerful personifications of the terrifying nature of unchecked femininity” (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2003: 95). Their craving for power, aggressive conduct, and predatory tendencies set them apart from Disney princesses, who typically exhibit mild personalities, virtuous roles, and soft physical features: a thematic and figurative contrast that reinforce the correlation between the villainesses’ gender deviance and their role as antagonists.

At a discursive level, these “mean ladies” (Putnam 2013) are assigned with specific thematic roles: as “queens,” they reveal their attitude to power and the contrast with the younger princesses; as witches, they are assigned with manipulative capabilities and deceiving skills; but probably as “stepmothers,” Disney’s female villains employ their unconventional femininity as a disruptive force throughout and beyond the narration.

In her study on motherhood in Disney films, Footit (2013: 14) observes that “sterile,” “barren” or “post-menopausal” are the most adopted terms to describe these evil women, “who produce nothing in a society that fetishizes production” and reproduction as well. They are considered as a wicked replacement of the maternal figure, transgressive and excessive in both her gender appearance and behavior. Their mature femininity and (hyper)sexuality are dissociated from male desire, constituting a threat to *reproductive futurism* (Edelman 2004); such negative features serve to mark the contrast to the sexually maturing, but still virginal, princesses who are charged with the continuation of the royal lineage and destined to become true natural mothers and queens without the necessity to *drag* these roles.

Despite their inability to *generate* in favor of the continuation of the *human* species, they demonstrate an extremely *creative* ability to transform themselves into monstrous or *inhuman* beings in order to deviate and subvert the dominant heterosexual romance (Davis 2006). As such, these women dissociate the notion of change from the supposed “natural” and immutable forms of family and inheritance (Halberstam 2011: 70), positioning their transgressive femininity above and beyond the narration that promotes heterosexuality as the assumed order of things, in what Footit (2013: 15) defines “the realm and temporality of queerness itself.” For these reasons, Disney’s villainesses are destined to be rejected and destroyed – but they don’t really care. With their magisterial pose, elegant presence, and deliberate

indifference to the vulgar and tedious elements of ordinary life, these *divas* command the attention of the viewer and “unarguably dominate their respective films, outshining the Princesses” (Footit 2013: 10).

4 Gay showmen

During the so-called “Disney Renaissance” (1989–1999), the production company departed from the prototype of the mean lady that had characterized much of its early heyday, to introduce the villain-as-sissy character (of which 1953 *Peter Pan*’s Captain Hook had been an exceptional precursor). As previously highlighted, this specific queer-coding practice involves imbuing the villains with physical and behavioral characteristics that are reminiscent of traditionally feminine qualities.

One of the hallmarks of the sissy villain is the emphasis on delicate and refined facial features that both align with and comically deviate from conventional feminine beauty. These include finer bone structures, narrow jawlines, high cheeks, slender bodies, plucked and arched eyebrows, and features subtly or highly touched by makeup, which contributes to their androgynous appearance. The costuming and props chosen for male villains also emphasize their effeminacy or serve to mark a sort of a dandy-style, often featuring elaborate and ornate details, vibrant colors, and luxurious materials. They embody a theatrical sensibility through both manner of speech and flamboyant body language. Indeed, nonverbal cues also play a significant role in coding and conveying the alleged homosexuality of these characters; they may sit with their legs closely crossed, adopt elegant postures, and walk with a distinctively feminine gait. Hand gestures are exaggerated and often mimic those traditionally associated with womanly affectations. They are often depicted engaging in grooming behaviors that exceed typical masculine norms, including fussing over appearances, and showing meticulous attention to details as part of their pimping routines or of their exceptional show numbers. Here some examples.

In *The Lion King*, the vengeful Scar presents a slim face and a pointed chin that emerge in stark contrast with Mufasa’s broad face and heavy jaw. Scar’s sharp facial features are smoothed by his loose and flowing mane, unlike the heroic Mufasa’s and Simba’s manes, sitting on their heads in the guise of a helmet. As noticed by Griffin (2011: 211), Scar represents a male weak figure, whose elegant movements signify a departure from traditional masculinity and a challenge to the heterosexual familiar bonds upon which the royal lineage and the overall narration is structured; in Li-Vollmer and LaPointe’s (2003: 101) description, “[He] walks in mincing steps, frequently crossing his legs in front of one another, swaying his hips in a sashay-like motion, with his tail swishing behind him,” giving the idea of a seducing and deceptive cat rather than a true lion king.

In *Pocahontas*, Governor Ratcliffe is mainly characterized by his lavish aristocratic dress, including a suit in fuchsia with a lavender collar, ruffled cuffs, a jewelled pendant, red ribbon bows to decorate his plumed hat and tie his braids and, occasionally, a pink feathered boa for his singing and dancing performances. Ratcliffe's purple-pink theme and feminine vibe is echoed by his luxurious living space, enriched with carved furniture, rose vases, vanity mirrors, and velvet cushions. Also, his body language and movements explicitly allude to his homosexuality: he drinks tea with his finger up and walks on the balls of his feet due to his high heels, contrasting with the masculine swagger of John Smith and of Kocoum.

Similarly, Captain Hook wears a flowing cape, a pink shirt, and a bushy feather in his hat covering his loose long hair. His foppish and feminine dress, attention to appearances and details, and verbal and bodily mannerism portray a warped version of masculinity, especially if compared to the character of Father. This latter appears worried about his missing cufflinks, but his goofy research is exactly what preserve and restores his masculinity, in contrast to Hook's impeccable style and taste. On the other hand, Hook's clumsy and comedic traits emerge in his attempt to assume more masculine roles, such as being a sort of father figure for Nderland's children.⁶ In this regard, Griffin (2011: 73) argues that "how theatrically [Hook performs his] gender roles [suggests that] the naturalness of [his] gender can be called into question."

Another illustrative as illustrious mention is for Jafar, the evil grand vizier in *Aladdin*. Jafar stands out with his regal stature and exaggerated height, towering over other characters. His gothic attire, consisting in a long gown with a nipped waist and billowing sleeves, emphasizes his tall silhouette but exposes slender feminine lower arms and wrists; the elaborate shoulder ornamentation on his gown directs more attention to the artifice of broad and squared chest, "not the true broad physique of a real man" (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2003: 100). His sharp facial features, such as arched eyebrows, thick eyelashes, painted eyes, and a "neatly curled goateed beard" (Mallan and McGillis 2005: 12) can be easily associated to femininity and homosexuality, especially when compared to Aladdin's humbler and manly appearance. Moreover, Jafar's bitchy lisping speech, elegant gestures, and theatrical mannerism constantly reveal and *re-veil* the performative and transformist nature of his gender and narrative role(s), as he "moves effortlessly between simpering sycophant and conniving usurper" (Mallan and McGillis 2005: 12).

Disney villains' performative skills and manipulatory attitude are likely mostly expressed through their hands. For villains, long hands, fingers and nails are not primarily used for practical tasks but serve as physical and visual expression of their

⁶ Hook's fixation on luring Peter Pan serves to reinforce the longstanding trope that associates pedophilia and homosexuality.

intents. It is not a coincidence that they engage in excessive hand gesturing to reinforce the efficacy of their performative acts. While male protagonists showcase their physical abilities and a natural inclination for action, especially when called upon to perform their heroic deeds, villains are less accustomed to activities that involves manual labor. They instead prefer to direct the course of actions and events in a more subtle manner, or alternatively, through the persuasive nature of their most dramatic and spectacular shows – like Scar, who “makes up for his lack of strength with catty remarks and invidious plotting, fairly swishing in his attempt to usurp the throne” (Griffin 2011: 211). For these reasons, male villains are frequently viewed and condemned as social ousters, particularly in contrast to their rival heroes and their humbler image and position. The protagonist’s heroism and humility work together to contrast the vanity of the villain, often focused on maintaining and exhibiting his artificial look, through opulence of signs, traits, and objects, as a strategic weapon of seduction and manipulation in his constant *performance*.

By this term, we refer to the folding, or even the merging, of action (and identity) into appearance, which contributes to defining the narrative and semiotic specificity of Disney’s villains. Their gender and narrative performance does not oppose to the heroes’ *performanza*, that is the protagonist’s action(s) within the canonical narrative schema (Greimas 1966). While the protagonist’s *performanza* aims for the union with the object of value, usually the cherished woman, and thus for the fulfilment of the heteronormative narrative program, the villain’s queer performative act seeks to create the *plot* by deviating from the narrative and gender *straightness*. In this sense, the moment within the canonical narrative framework that is associated with the *performance* is that of *manipulation*. In fact, if the *performanza* stands as reflection and actualization in terms of narrative action of predetermined identities and ideological values, the *manipulation* represents the preceding moment of establishment and definition of the system of values, which cannot predate its own staging, its own performance at the discursive and aesthetic levels.⁷

There is never a true heterosexual competition between the protagonist and the antagonist within the same narrative level. For example, Jafar’s conquest of Princess Jasmine is not driven by passion or love, but by his thirst for power: he seeks to overturn the dynastic (linear) lineage to deceitfully ascend to the throne. Thus, Jafar’s “queerness” and “evilness” are not primarily rooted in his presumed homosexuality (as opposed to Aladdin’s heterosexuality within the same narrative and gender framework), but in the performative and strategic adoption of various gender roles

7 In this regard, Cruella de Vil is an extraordinary example; her electrifying and caricatural performance of the typical fashion mean lady serves as the driving force behind the narrative. In fact, the entire story is based on Cruella’s desire for the Dalmatian fur, as the main object of value in her constant attempt to perform a glamorous femininity.

(including heterosexual) and narrative positions, detached from a true, underlying, natural identity and serving alternative narrative purposes to dominant heterosexuality.⁸

In their performative gestures and manipulative attitude, the male villains act “very much *in the manner* of the classic villainesses” (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2003: 104), with the merit to introduce or emphasize the specific *comedic* component associated to the sissy character. This contributes to creating an effect of excessive theatricality and dramatics that borders on the parody. Beyond the resulting amusement, the aspect of comedy that interests us most for our reasoning is precisely the “genre” aspect, meaning that in the sissy villains’ mannerism emerges a sort of parodic reflection on the performative nature of their narrative, thematic, and, consequently, gender roles. The spatial and temporal borders of their stunning show numbers are highly marked, constituting a queer world that partially deviates or completely dissociates from the heteronormative narration. Even more than female villains’, the male villains’ performances precede and exceed any given position of narrative marginality or antagonism they have been relegated to. With their high-pitched and paced voices, solemn strides, and grandiose music offering a magnificent stage entrance, “the characters with evil intent supply the strongest of contests throughout the performance” (Putnam 2013: 159).

5 Towards a camp aesthetic: Ursula’s iconic visage

In their excessive display of femininity (and masculinity) and exaggerated gender mannerism, both female and male villains take on some elements of what can be defined as *camp aesthetics*. Actually, as stated by Medhurst (1994: 323), “Trying to define camp is like attempting to sit in the corner of a circular room. It can’t be done, which only adds to the quixotic appeal of the attempt.” Indeed, camp does not respond to strict rules or fixed analytical categories in order to convey precise meanings and values; it is more like a sensibility that brings to light contrasting sense, strongly marked images, yet with a vague identity: a “to-be-looked-at-ness” that elicits the viewer’s fetishistic gaze. Its generation hovers between the *mise-en-scène* of a “ready-made imaginary” (Mallan and McGillis 2005: 8) and its reception by the spectator. On this regard, Lumby (1998: 81) suggests that “the sensibility of camp acknowledges that perception itself is a creative act, [to the point that] it is literally in the eye of the beholder.” Indeed, the essence of camp is its love for the unnatural,

⁸ *Hercules*’s villain Hades is involved in a similar gender role playing, as he takes on the peculiar role of Megara’s gay best friend, advising her on her romantic relationship with Hercules to manipulate her for his own interests.

artifice, and exaggeration (Sontag 2000: 288), fostering the viewer's attention to contrived (gendered) features, pushing them simultaneously to the brink of conventionality and unconventionality.

Precisely these aspects are what relate the notion of "camp" to the issue of gender as discussed in this paper. Camp challenges traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity by highlighting gender as an intentional construct, emerging through a process of stylization and overexposure of its recurring traits. Generally, camp plays with these typical male and female traits, involving both their harsh contrast and incongruous mix and manifesting through androgyny, cross-dressing, transvestism, and drag queening. Based primarily on the analysis of drag queens' camp shows, Butler builds and develops her theory of *gender performativity*, which serves as a fundamental reference in this essay. According to the author, "Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (Butler 2004: 127).

The historical connection of camp with drag culture underscores the concept's status as a queer discourse that counters the heterosexual order and its ideological assumptions. Camp operates both within and outside dominant culture, acknowledging the performers marginalized status, while also providing the means for their celebration or even emancipation through "social visibility" (Meyer 1994: 5). Camp's affinity for exaggeration and eccentricity positions it as a unique border queer phenomenon, still drawing its efficacy from theatrical re-enactment of hegemonic cultural and gender norms. Parody and irony are indeed essential components of camp and drag performances, reducing gender conventions to a "laughing matter" (Mallan and McGillis 2005: 4). To quote from Medhurst (1994: 323) again, "Camp is [a] way of poking fun at the whole cosmology of restrictive sex roles and sexual identifications which our society uses to oppress its women and repress its men."

Disney's villains, in their eccentric and transgressive gender performances resembles some features of camp discourse and aesthetics, but no one does it bigger and better than the *Little Mermaid's* sea witch, Ursula:

Bejewelled and lip-pouting like an overweight, over-rich, overpampered, over-the-top society hostess gone mad, she is all flair, flamboyance, and theatricality mixed with a touch of con-artistry. Except when her wrath – the only genuine emotion she seems capable of expressing – bursts through, her every movement is a deceitful artifice, as if she's performing for an audience.⁹

9 From Disney's official website.

She presents very distinctive facial features like heavy makeup, high-arched eyebrows, vivid eyeshadows, bold colored sharp lip liner, and a beauty mark mole on her right cheek. Besides her face, everything about Ursula results excessive and grotesque. Her gestures, speech, and overall behavior are, at the same time, very sensual and flamboyant, subtly and overtly sexualized. She seduces and deceives her victims with intriguing wordplay and malicious movements. Ursula is a half-human and half-octopus, a hybrid creature and captivating figure that contributes to exalt her transformative and performative skills. She is aware of her voluptuous body and boasts about it as she shakes her large hips and breasts, wiggles her figure in a skin-tight black gown, while reminding Ariel to “not underestimate the importance of body language!”

While she manages to give a convincing interpretation of a true woman, the impressive and extravagant set of camp elements, imbued with a sarcastic tone, highlights the fraudulence of her feminine sexual talents, and the constructed nature of gender. As stated by (Mallan and McGillis 2005: 15), “this scene of an octopus in drag as a woman instructing a mermaid (with a pre-Madonna sea shell bra) on the art of come-hither moves and heterosexual romance, invites the audience to look at the world queerly.” The burlesque performances enacted by Ursula are indeed heavily informed by drag culture; actually, her character is modelled off of the real drag queen Divine. Likewise Divine, in her hyper-feminine appearance and behavior, Ursula balances on the edge of being perceived as almost masculine. Her feminine traits are so exaggerated and exhibited that, together with her deep voice and imposing presence, provide clear indexes of her gender transgression and reinforce her deviant nature: a “comic pseudo-female villain” (Putnam 2013: 154), appearing both *femme (fatale)* and (sissy) male simultaneously.

Ursula’s drag performance unfolds on different levels. Indeed, as a witch, she is able to transform herself into various forms, even assuming the identity of Vanessa, a classically beautiful maiden – very similar in appearance to Ariel – who tries to marry Prince Eric in order to break the mermaid’s romantic dream and gain King Triton’s powers. Throughout the movie, Ursula strategically employs gender playing and diverse sexual identities to deceive her potential victims and further her own goals. Her gender deviance and constant transformations at a figurative level are strictly connected to her role as antagonist in the heteronormative narrative; in particular, the wedding scene emphasizes Ursula’s corruption of the heterosexual union:

She laughs maniacally as she transforms, emphasizing the villainy of dressing up as a feminine woman. When her disguise dissolves at the wedding, she turns back into her masculine self, with rolls of fat bursting out of the wedding dress. A bigger, masculine character emerging from a feminine dress resembles a negative perception of drag queens, and the dark lighting and horrified reactions portray the behavior as evil. (Brown 2021: 7)

Despite the possibility of appearing more beautiful and embodying a more conventional femininity, Ursula exploits this potential only on rare occasions. In fact, she is extremely confident in her image, displaying a remarkable self-esteem. According to Footit (2013: 23) “Ursula not only fails to fit within the normative boundaries of ideal beauty, she shatters them, making a mockery of the very notion of beautiful by overtly displaying the false nature of her appearance, as opposed to attempting to hide it.” The fake beauty mark on her face, as an ironic metonymy of her entire bursting and grotesque body, is “a dramatic display of stage makeup” (Footit 2013: 23), part of a rich scenic repertoire performed by Ursula to parody and subvert any canon of natural beauty and true femininity. Her face serves as a malleable and adaptable material for all her performances; it showcases distinctive traits of various gender identities, which she magnifies, actualizes, and further exaggerates depending on the circumstances. It is from this manifest potentiality that Ursula derives her iconic power.

Ursula’s face or, more precisely, her *visage* is liberated from the burden of expressing an inner gender identity, as a *codified symbol* of something else, but stands forth from the surface of its own aesthetic expression and visibility, as a *pure icon*. While every performance Ursula gives reveals itself as an illusion, at the same time, she is nothing more than what she appears and presents. It is through her *monstrous visage* (from the Latin *monstrare*, ‘to show’), that Ursula stages her true self. In a key scene of the film, while grooming herself in Vanessa’s guise, Ursula is neither able nor willing to conceal her real image, as she beholds her true diabolically smiling face reflected in the mirror.

In the movie structure, Ursula’s *visage* is thematically opposed to Ariel’s voice; this latter, as something coming from inside, is a trademark of the mermaid’s true, deep, inner gender identity and narrative role. Due to its key subjective and identity value, Ariel’s voice cannot be simulated by Ursula, but it can be easily obtained through deception: the precious pledge is captured in the magical seashell Ursula wears around her neck and activated by the same villain, disguised as Vanessa, to enchant and deceive Prince Eric. In this process, Ariel’s voice is externalized and transformed in a pure medium without a message: a kind of reverberation that serves as ambient background for Ursula’s manipulative performance. Therefore, even the voice becomes another scenic element in the villain’s repertoire, interchangeable with her *true* masculine, drag-queen-like voice, and, at the same time, associable with any of her performative *visage*. In this artificial and constant reassembling of elements, and subsequent subversion of their original, fixed, naturalized meanings, Ursula breaks free from the necessity of anchoring her appearance, her *visage*, to an authentic gender identity. She emancipates herself from the negative ideological and narrative role assigned to her due to her nonconformity to such heteronormative textual canon. Once again, she proves to be much more than a Disney’s gay villain, emerging as a true queer icon.

6 *Grotto-esque*: from the background to the spotlights

There exists a close yet ambivalent relationship between the explosive figure of Ursula and the space in which she is confined within the narrative universe. Her grotesque body gradually unfolds as Ursula emerges from her refuge: a sort of giant shell in the shape of a vulva. To this purpose, it is interesting to notice how the English and French term “grotesque” originally comes from the Italian *grottesco*, literally ‘of a cave,’ or ‘of a *grotto*,’ and broadly referring to a reclusive way of living in a state of darkness and isolation (Russo 1994). Furthermore, Footit (2013: 31) highlights the sexual connotation of the term as a metaphor for the “cavernous anatomical female body.” According to the same author, “the vaginal, womblike setting that serves as the site of Ursula’s excommunication works to further sexualize her character, while simultaneously, albeit subconsciously, reminding the viewer of her ultimate status as non-maternal, sexual perversion of the moral order and society” (Footit 2013: 31).¹⁰

Drawing from Julia Kristeva’s theory (1982), it is possible to state that Ursula is a representation of the “abject,” understood as the state of being cast off due to the nonconformity to social and cultural norms. Abjection is strictly related to the feminine domain since it exists in opposition to the paternal symbolic order, governed by rules and laws. This is exactly the case and the place of Ursula, banished from patriarch Triton’s royal palace and quarantined to the deepest and darkest underwater *grottos*. While on one hand, Ursula’s excessive and grotesque femininity is what condemns her to abjection and segregation, this same condition as a social pariah is what allows her to express herself prominently outside of hetero-patriarchal rules. As stated by Footit (2013: 26) “Her grotesque nature further marks her as other, while also offering her the unique potential to relish in her exiled status, far from the forces that wish to police, control and contain her body.” In this way, Ursula’s marginality and eccentricity can become, for the character herself, a reason to take the centre stage.

This ambiguous trajectory can be tracked through a semiotic and topological approach, by critically dissecting the levels constituting the textual structure of the movie and investigating the pertinence and the relevance of the same text within the broader *semiosphere* (Lotman 1990, 2002, 2005). According to this relationship, each text contributes to informing and is in turn informed by the cultural context in which it is functionally embedded. Disney products are no exception; the heteronormative

¹⁰ Ursula’s vaginal shelter stands as a visual and ideological antithesis of King Triton’s palace and its phallic towers.

framework of most of its stories, which has progressively become a canonical narrative scheme, certainly both reflects and reinforces Disney's central position in the media and broader cultural landscape. Relegating queer characters to the role of antagonists or to the sideline of the scene is a direct consequence of such a choice of side. The practice of "queer-coding," as part of this textual and cultural strategy, makes the segregation of queer characters somewhat more coward, by depriving them of a *true*, or at least explicit, gender and sexual identity.

However, the omission of a queer gender identity, even if pertaining only to the antagonist's side, challenges the balance of the entire heteronormative system upon which the Disney canon is built. The queer characters are forced to an overtly emphasized staging of their non-existent gender identity, which can emerge only after its *performance*. Consequently, the villain's performance does not find a true valid opposition in the representation of protagonists, which is too flat because it merely reflects a presumed heterosexual gender and narrative identity.

What the villain expresses through their "queerness" is not an alternative or subordinate identity to the heterosexual one, but rather an exaggerated and critical staging of the sexual and gender code through which heterosexual identities are constructed and normalized. The traits of the villains, before even being considered stereotypical of a queer identity, are nothing more than the same traits of heterosexual characters, those that constitute the binary opposition of gender normative structure, but in a state of *positivization* (Baudrillard 1990), freed from their structural negation, accentuated to the excess, or hybridized. This gender over-performance questions the very nature of compulsory heterosexuality, destabilizing the foundations of the heteronormative narrative.

Staying within Lotman's theoretical framework (2009, 2013), the criticality of queer villains, even before their role as antagonists along the syntagmatic axis of narration, aimed at deviating from its *straightness*, lies precisely in the exposure and deconstruction of the entire heteronormative narrative apparatus. However, this moment of critical exposure of its own structure and logic doesn't necessarily constitute a negative factor leading to what Lotman (2009, 2013) defines the "explosive" moment. Instead, it provides the cultural system with a mode of "self-description" (Lotman 1990) that allows the system itself to maintain a high level of internal cohesion in the face of a crisis that does not appear as an external force but rather emanates from its very core constituents.

This leads us to read the trajectory taken by Disney villains from another perspective. In fact, the lateral movement from the margin to the centre of the stage is supported by a longitudinal movement from depth to surface, both concerning the levels of the generative path of each text and, overall, the position and functionality of texts within the semiosphere. As we have seen, the role of antagonists (narrative level) and abject characters (discursive level) assigned to these characters due to their

non-conforming gender is entirely subverted by their over-the-top, grotesque, and somewhat obscene performance. In this case, “obscene” is used in the literal sense of being outside the scene, which means that they exceed textual and gender norms with significant visual and aesthetic impact. At the same time, the villains’ performance brings to the surface not only their own characters and figures, but first of all the heterosexual gender and textual codes that constitute the core of the semiosphere.

In light of what has *emerged*, it is possible to advance a critical reevaluation of the concept of “queer-coding” from which we started our argument, with the aim, in conclusion, of solving some of its ambiguities. Much of the literature on this topic emphasizes how queer-coding operates as a subtext, suggesting the queerness of characters without ever explicitly stating it. However, precisely because of this lack of explicitness, the practice of queer-coding is based on a *supratextual* level – what, in more proper semiotic terms, can be defined as the “manifest surface” of the text. According to Doty (1993: 16) there is no need to read “too much into things” in order to catch the queerness present in most mainstream products. To this purpose, Footit (2013: 6) states that, even “the ‘cohesive’ narratives Disney creates and visualizes can actually be said to weaken and, at points, fall apart completely, allowing for narrative and visual ‘holes’ that reveal anti-normative, often highly revolutionary readings.” Despite (or *by*) their position against or outside the dominant narrative and culture, Disney’s villains are extraordinary powerful and impressive in their visuality, responding to the images’ desire to express and be looked at on their own terms. According to Mitchell (2005: 34), images become “models of the subaltern,” whose strong desires make up for the power they lack in their silence, demanding “equal rights with language” (2005: 47). In Disney’s movies, the negative face of the queer-coded villain is overturned by their hyper-positive, eccentric, and obscene visages, which come into spotlight and drive the audience to gaze *upon* them.

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Daria Arkhipova* and Auli Viidalepp

Lotman's semiotics of culture in the age of AI: analyzing the cultural dynamics of AI-generated video art in the semiosphere

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Abstract: The use of AI-generated videos centered on the face raises various concerns among professionals and audiences due to the difficulty of providing coherent descriptive tools of their cultural significance. At the same time, the focus of artists and their audiences shifts from the art as a text to the collaboration process between artificial intelligence (AI) and the involved social actors. This raises significant concerns between policymakers and other social actors looking for guidelines for the appropriate use of AI as a tool, collaborator or substitute for creative workers, which can have immediate and long-term impacts on society and culture. Semiotics of culture provides descriptive tools for understanding and evaluating artistic texts and their role in semiotic space, the semiosphere. This article addresses how Lotman's theory can contribute to the methodology for analyzing AI-generated texts as dynamic models. The theoretical framework developed by Lotman in his research on artistic text, dynamic systems and culture can be applied to the studies of current shifts related to AI-generated arts. This paper looks at the reception of AI-generated videos focused on face representations. In doing so, it analyses the dynamic processes in the creation process of AI-generated videos through their reception in related texts. The findings of this article highlight how Lotman's theoretical framework can contribute to the methodology to analyze the cultural dynamics evoked by AI-generated artistic texts.

Keywords: generative AI; AI-generated video art; Lotman; digital face representation; cultural dynamics

1 Introduction

Using AI-generated audio-visual content has ignited a spectrum of concerns within both professional circles and the public. These concerns stem from the inherent challenge of formulating comprehensive descriptive tools to elucidate the cultural

*Corresponding author: Daria Arkhipova, University of Turin, Torino, Italy,

E-mail: daria.arkhipova@unito.it, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2776-0918>

Auli Viidalepp, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia, E-mail: auli.viidalepp@gmail.com

significance of AI-generated videos for entertaining purposes, that some may identify as AI-generated art. Furthermore, there has been a discernible shift in the attention of artists and their audiences; the focal point has transitioned from the art itself, treated as a standalone text, to a broader exploration of the collaborative processes involving AI and the associated social actors. This transformation has given rise to the need for regulations on AI applications, whether as a tool, collaborator or even as a surrogate for creative human agents. The implications of these regulations have the potential to have immediate or far-reaching influence on society and culture, changing how creative industries work and how audiences interact with them, identifying themselves through these interactions.

Several pieces of AI art generated using tools like ChatGPT3, Dall-E, and Midjourney gained significant attention from audiences worldwide, becoming viral. The use of AI tools for art creation poses new challenges for artists, creators, designers and all sorts of production industries. Besides being used strictly for commercial purposes, like advertisements, there are various examples of AI-generated visualizations used to create illustrations for books, movie introductions, and other previously considered uniquely artistic fields. It raises multiple concerns in artistic communities concerning the ethics of AI-mediated artistic creative processes and their reception among audiences.

All of these raise the question about drawing the line between whether AI is a tool augmenting the capacities of the authors or rather can shift the values in audiences' entertainment. This research delves into the reception and interpretation of AI-generated videos that predominantly represent fictional characters' facial features as pivotal identity components. The analysis dissects the dynamic processes that unfold while creating AI-generated videos and tracks their reception within interconnected textual contexts. The conclusions drawn from this study underscore the invaluable contribution of Lotman's theoretical framework to the methodology that can be used to intricate cultural dynamics inherent in AI-generated texts.

The main research question addressed in this research is how Lotman's theoretical findings can contribute to creating the methodology to analyze AI-generated video art. To effectively address the research question, this work develops a methodological approach based on the results of Juri Lotman that can provide descriptive tools to analyze AI-generated texts like videos, where users' agency is involved at all stages. Nevertheless, the role of AI is identified as primary through the reception practices. Therefore, this work investigates a description of AI-generated art videos as a text and as a dynamic system within cultural processes.

This article explores how Lotman's theoretical insights can enrich the methodology employed in analyzing AI-generated texts, focusing on online videos centered on the human face, functioning as dynamic systems. Lotman's theoretical framework, crafted through extensive studies of artistic texts, dynamic systems and

culture, can be meaningfully applied to investigate the contemporary shifts associated with AI-generated art. A case study in this research concerns AI-generated videos manipulating the identities of world-famous fictional stories about Harry Potter, written by J. K. Rowling, with a film adaptation by Warner Bros. The case study video depicting Harry Potter characters as protagonists of Balenciaga's campaign in the late 1980s¹ or early 1990s raises a somewhat different concern: how AI-generated art becomes central to our culture. This video and "Harry Potter but in Italy"² were analyzed alongside this research article, produced by Berlin-based photographer and AI content creator known under the username Demon Flying Fox. On YouTube, he explains, "I want to show what is possible with AI." Moreover, the main interest among professionals and regular consumers in these videos lay less with the final product and more on how these arts were created to be central to audiences' entertainment, drawing attention worldwide.

The paper first presents a theoretical framework (Section 2) rooted in Lotman's works on cybernetics and artificial intelligence. It then develops a methodology (Section 3) to address the main research question on how AI-generated art as a dynamic model interpreted on individual and social levels. Later it elaborates a comparative analysis (Section 4) between case studies of two videos "Harry Potter by Balenciaga" and "Harry Potter in Italy," focusing on AI-generated face representations and key elements in their reception among the audiences. Finally, it discusses the findings on descriptive tools based on the applications of Lotman's to study AI-generated arts and their reception among audiences (Sections 5 and 6).

2 Theoretical framework: if Lotman would talk about AI-generated text

A significant part of Lotman's research is dedicated to analyses of artistic text and its role in cultural dynamics. Artistic texts that Lotman analyzed were created by humans within a given culture. Moreover, Lotman (1979, 1990) was interested in how artificial intelligence can contribute to understanding human creative processes. Therefore, considering the rise of AI as a tool and a co-creator of artistic texts today, can the theoretical framework proposed by Lotman be applicable to elaborate effective descriptive methodologies?

In 1969, in the article "People and Signs," Lotman (2001) portrays semiotics as a complex science – formulating it as an ordinary science that aims "to discover the

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iE39q-IKOzA> (accessed 20 September 2023).

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AN8FnohbJcw> (accessed 20 September 2023).

incomprehensible and complex aspects of clear and simple things” (Torop 2010: 11). This is the beginning of Lotman’s discussion concerning aspects of artificial intelligence. In this article, Lotman defines semiotics as a science dealing with the communication systems and signs used by humans, non-human animals and machines (Torop 2010: 11). This seemingly equal status that Lotman ascribes to creatures and machines alike does not, however, necessarily mean that he saw machines as possible sign users. In several of his later works, he explicitly outlines the dangers of the computalisation of culture. The non-discriminating metalanguage is more reasonably attributed to that background of cybernetics and the importance of cybernetic metalanguage for Lotman’s theory in general.

In her analysis of the complexity of Lotman’s thinking, Merit Rickberg argues that researchers often overlook the cybernetic context of Lotman, perhaps due to

the fact that the notion of ‘cybernetics’ is associated primarily with machines, computers, and technology and thus seems less relevant for Lotman’s later thought where culture is often described as a living system. While the cybernetic language was strongly influenced by mechanical vocabulary, its interests were not limited to studying machines. Still, they encompassed all systems with feedback and self-regulation capacity, including living organisms, society, and culture. (Rickberg 2023: 21)

Despite the fascination with cybernetics, Lotman remained reserved about the potential of information theory to explain the complexity of culture – even while “works of art are extremely economical, powerful, efficiently organized ways of storing and transmitting information” (Torop 2010: 11). However, Lotman proposed ways to integrate the cybernetic metalanguage in the research of culture and art, potentially leading to technological advancements:

He repeatedly discussed the idea that art as the most complex system known to humankind could serve as a model for developing artificial intelligence and even proposed that new branches of research could emerge: culturionics as cybernetics of culture and artonics as cybernetics of art, which both could open new ways of developing intelligent technology ... (Rickberg 2023: 24–25)

In the 1970s, Lotman’s encounters with cybernetics and especially the idea of artificial intelligence became more explicit. The Soviet Union was developing robotics for the moon and initially semioticians were commissioned to work on “robot language” (Rickberg 2023: 24; Torop 2010). While the collaboration between Soviet robotics and semiotics remained short-lived for various sociopolitical reasons, the topic of AI remained present in Lotman’s later works, mainly “as a heuristic figure, with the help of which to delineate the characteristics of thinking systems more broadly” (Rickberg 2023: 24). The failed collaboration nevertheless resulted in a joint article *Искусственный интеллект как механизм культуры* (‘Artificial intelligence and

the workings of culture') with Boris Jegorov and Mihail Ignatiev, which was not published until much later in 1995. One of the primary arguments in this work implies the significance of technological innovation in the double directions, *"Каждое техническое новшество может быть осмыслено в двойной перспективе: по его месту в тех нологическом ряду и по месту в системе культуры"* ('Each technical innovation can be understood in a double perspective: according to its place in the technological series and according to its place in the cultural system'; Jegorov et al. 1995: 278), referring to duality of the potential capacities of the technical tools like AI, in their place in technological development and their reception within the culture.

In 1973, Lotman proposed a cultural universal typology: the need for self-description as a means for culture's self-referential. "This need is realized at the meta-cultural level in the creation of self-descriptive texts, which can be considered as grammars that culture creates to describe itself" (Lotman 1973: 5).

Later, Lotman also came to see the work of art as an ideal "cultural device/mechanism," which resulted in the statement that a work of art is the ideal form of "artificial intelligence" in his 1981 article "Brain-Text-Culture-Artificial Intelligence" (1990). In this article, Lotman's criticism concerning Alan Turing's definition of artificial intelligence delineates an anthropocentric view through the psychological lens of an individual. Lotman posits that Turing's description lacks a comprehensive consideration of the distinctiveness between human and alternative forms of intelligence; thus, he advocates for an approach rooted in complementarity rather than mere similarity. This is exemplified in Lotman's communication model, wherein converging the "language space of speaker and hearer" (Lotman 1979: 87) is imperative for successful communication. Lotman argues that this convergence should not be total, as a complete overlap would make transmitting novel information between interlocutors impossible.

3 Methodological framework: towards AI-generated text analysis

Lotman's approach to artificial intelligence and cybernetics primarily comes from his culture studies, mainly artistic text and dynamic systems. Lotman (1988a) describes the notion of text as any meaningful message or communication that conveys information through a system of signs. He emphasizes that texts are not limited to written or verbal forms but encompass a wide range of semiotic expressions, including visual, auditory, and gestural elements. Texts are thus not isolated entities but exist within a cultural and semiotic context, interacting with other texts and

contributing to creating meanings. In this sense, Lotman's definition of a text is expansive and inclusive, recognizing the multifaceted nature of communication in human culture (see Lotman and Uspensky 1978). Lotman defines an artistic text as a broader text concept, a specific type of text characterized by its structure and based on at least two languages, primary or secondary modeling systems. He emphasizes that artistic texts often possess more complexity, ambiguity, and symbolism than everyday communication. They are not solely about conveying information but are also concerned with eliciting emotional and esthetic responses from the audience. Lotman (1977) recognizes the role of artistic text in shaping cultural meaning and its capacity to transform into models of models, presumably modeling systems, by creating signs that can become part of primary or secondary modeling systems. It can lead to a presumption that the generated output of AI-generated texts can function as an artistic text and part of a modeling system.

Analyzing AI-generated texts, like videos, from Lotman's perspective on artistic texts and semiosphere (Lotman 2005 [1984]) involves understanding how AI-generated texts can be considered as AI-generated art, if recognized as such and fit into the broader cultural and semiotic context. AI-generated art is regarded as a form of text within Lotman's framework. Just like traditional artistic texts, it can communicate meaning through a system of signs. These signs can include visual, auditory or other sensory elements generated by AI algorithms based on given datasets, e.g., the selected fragments of elements within semiosphere. Therefore, AI-generated text exists within a specific cultural context or semiosphere.

Lotman's concept of semiosphere (2005 [1984]) emphasizes that texts are situated within a larger cultural and semiotic space, where they interact with other signs and texts. Analyzing AI-generated art involves considering its role within this cultural context. Semiotic analysis of AI-generated art involves examining its structure as an artistic text.

AI algorithms utilize predefined codes and patterns to generate texts. Understanding how these codes are used and interpreted by both the AI system and social actors is essential for semiotic analysis. In the case of AI-generated text, questions arise about the role of human creators (programmers, designers) in shaping the AI's creative output. Analyzing AI-generated art should thus involve several levels, deciphering structural, textual, and contextual elements to understand the intended or perceived meanings elicited by the artistic text. It is challenging to draw the threshold between these three levels, which involve analyzing intra- and extra-textual elements working together through re-coding (Lotman 1988b) of existing texts introduced through AI algorithms and how they interact with other texts (Kristeva 1980) and cultural elements. The notion of re-coding, as proposed by Lotman to the process of artistic texts, obtains necessary descriptive capacities for AI-generated art.

Applying Juri Lotman's semiotic framework to AI-generated art involves examining the art as a type of text within a cultural context, understanding its creation process, decoding its signs and codes, and considering its role in shaping and reflecting cultural meaning within semiosphere. It highlights the dynamic interplay between human and machine creativity in contemporary culture, expressed in AI-generated arts as dynamic models. As such, they introduce a re-coding process within semiosphere through their structural, textual, and contextual elements at pre-creation, co-creation, and post-creation between AI and social actors.

Therefore, AI-generated texts are rather models, dynamic systems situated within semiosphere with the center on the AI and designer-user co-creation process. This includes:

1. Pre-creation, AI generative models and shells created by groups of IT professionals (DALL-E, Midjourney, ChatGPT3, 4, and 5, etc.) and data sets available for the algorithmic processing, preselected by a designer-user based on their individual preferences;
2. Co-creation, the decision-making between the designer and AI output through a prompt, a natural language command designer gives a generated text as a modeling system to receive the most optimal output and then chooses one based on the designer-user's reasoning;
3. Post-creation, where the AI-generated text, as in the case of our analysis video, is used to generate new texts as a model or deconstructed to understand the underlying algorithmic process and technical, social and cultural potential of these texts. The datasets, the prompts and generative models can be reused by multiple creators, implying infinite possibilities for various outputs. Therefore, AI-generated texts can be received differently by audiences, forcing changes in the dynamics of culture.

AI-generated texts are dynamic elements within the culture that can be used as modeling systems to bridge various elements within semiosphere, allowing interpretation and new meanings through their reception.

4 Case study analysis

Faces were generated using Midjourney and voices using ElevenLabs AI. The faces were animated using D-ID. But only the faces are animated. The bodies are rigid and lifeless; the voices, staccato and flat.

—(Joshi 2023: 24), in “Harry Potter by Balenciaga”

This section analyses two videos AI-generated videos like “Harry Potter by Balenciaga” and “Harry Potter but in Italy” focusing on the use of faces within them. To do

so, the first part (4.1) uses three theoretical tools described above: creation and meaning-making process, modeling system, and cultural dynamics. The second part (4.2) focuses on textual element analysis and face representation.

4.1 Different levels of analysis of AI-generated videos “Harry Potter by Balenciaga” and “Harry Potter but in Italy”

The analyzed AI-generated videos unfold within the intricate web of signs, cultural codes, and AI capacities. This section delves into the complex process using the terminology and framework laid out by Lotman. AI generative models and designer-users rely on central to semiosphere signs that indicate the relation between characters and their surroundings. In this way, the videos represent recognizable traits of facial features and expressions commonly represented in high/fashion stillness and mafia-themed movies to stereotypical South Italian architecture and landscape.

4.1.1 Text within the text: the creation process and meaning-making process

Within Lotman’s theoretical framework, users as participants of the communication process represent active agents who formulate and interpret texts within semiosphere. These users are not passive recipients of meaning but dynamic contributors to the semiotic process. In crafting the videos, users encompass a spectrum ranging from AI programmers and designers to the receptive audience that engages with these videos. Lotman’s theoretical framework acknowledges the dynamic nature of semiotic systems, as in the case of crafting AI-generated videos, an array of signs and codes that are harnessed to give rise to a semiotic entity. This creative process entails deliberate choices by the creators, encompassing decisions concerning character selection, representation techniques and the fusion of the Harry Potter universe with the world of Balenciaga fashion or within the stereotypical South Italian context expressed in used linguistic components.

4.1.2 AI-generated videos as modeling systems

AI-generated videos stand as distinctive signifiers within semiosphere. Crafted by AI algorithms, these videos combine visual and auditory elements to create texts as modeling systems through contents that are not unique but available to AI processing texts within semiosphere, as presented in Jiang et al. (2023). Rapidly growing AI-generated art integrates into the culture, reinforcing already central elements of semiosphere. The cases of “Harry Potter by Balenciaga” and “Harry Potter but in Italy” likely embody the AI-generated reimagining or reinterpretation of the Harry

Potter franchise, imbued with central elements of the selected language system. The title becomes a noteworthy sign within semiosphere, implying cultural significance and intertextuality, hinting at the video's profound cultural resonance and semiotic complexity for their audiences through reception practices.

4.1.3 Contribution to cultural dynamics

Lotman's semiotic theory strongly emphasizes the role of text in the dynamic processes within semiosphere. The analyzed AI-generated videos can become integral participants in the cultural dynamics through users sharing, dissecting and interpreting them. Their impact may reverberate through how individuals perceive the Harry Potter narrative within different recognizable contexts, as well as how they perceive the role of AI as a dynamic model and social actor, creating new texts.

4.2 Textual elements analysis: why AI focuses on face and location

The key element used in most AI-generated videos aiming to convey particular meanings to their audiences is based on face generation. AI can generate human face representations, which, on the one hand, look very realistic and convincing and, on the other hand, are the faces of individuals that does not exist. A similar effect is produced by deepfake videos where a person's audiovisual likeness can be "hijacked" by a concealed other, who delivers their message using the "trusted channel" of the apparent visual (Viidalepp 2022: 121). One of the first viral examples of such persona hijacking was a video by Jordan Peele titled "You Won't Believe What Obama Says In This Video!"³ The typical dangers of deepfake technology are believed to be related to this type of hijacking of the persona of an existing person.

However, the two cases analyzed in this article differ from the Obama deepfake. One difference is at the level of the author's intentionality. Although the videos use the likeness of the Harry Potter actors, they do not seek to impersonate these actors (or characters) fully. Another difference works at the level of evoking two socio-communicative functions of a text (Lotman 1988a): the context and the cultural tradition. The faces are perceivable as uncanny and funny because they parody the movie's characters, merging them with the stereotypical runway model who is very thin, has hollow cheeks and a severe and unemotional gaze, as in the case of "Harry Potter by Balenciaga." The video maker has chosen to use images resembling face close-ups rather than a full-height model, but presumably, either type can be

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQ54GDm1eL0> (accessed 20 September 2023).

generated by adjusting the prompt. Every character is shown briefly, without names, so the viewer is expected to recognize the likenesses.

The likenesses of the characters are displayed at various “mimetic distances.” Some faces are very similar to the characters portrayed by actors in Warner Brothers movies (such as Harry Potter and Prof. McGonagall). In contrast, others are barely recognizable (such as Hermione) or quite distinct (Ron, Draco). Here, the video maker’s choice is critical. According to the reception within tutorials, generating the result for each character frame takes a few times. Then, the author picks one among many according to their preference.

The contextual surprise of “Harry Potter by Balenciaga” also works because two cultural traditions are brought together that were not linked before runway models and children’s movies. Tutorials and many other videos mimicking the video’s structure or “story type” have since been posted on various YouTube profiles. Notably, Demon Flying Fox has posted earlier videos on the channel, for example, reimagining various famous series as 1980s Yakuza films – mixing different styles or genres but in the same context – a regular movie genre. However, the new, unexpected combination of the runway model and the Harry Potter franchise has gained 10 million views (at the time of writing).

In “Harry Potter but in Italy,” additional layers of cultural context are added – such as the Italian mafia representation used in Hollywood cinematography language and scenic background views with mountains, narrow streets and architecture typical of a stereotypical Italian landscape. Additionally, the faces in this video are generated as merged with yet another actor’s likeness, so the mimetic distance from Harry Potter characters is greater. Overall, all the generated videos display and evoke various intertexts, activating cultural codes at many levels.

5 Discussion: AI-generated text or a dynamic model

The concept of the explosion, discussed by Lotman (1990), can be applied to AI-generated art to examine the recent reception among audiences’ rising concerns about whether AI will replace creative professionals (Joshi 2023). Although a significant part of this question lies in the dimension of ethics, Lotman’s theoretical framework explaining explosive processes within semiosphere can give possible answers. The principles of AI generative models used in AI art creation are specific as a self-referential system based on semiotics analysis of computational systems (Andersen 2002). AI is less sensitive to the elements that can be called explosive, based on Lotman’s terminology. AI is rather sensitive to the elements that form the

center of the semiosphere, repetitive elements that may indicate patterns and correlations, lying in the center rather than the periphery. Indeed, any AI dataset primarily analyses repetitive elements that form groups and can be united based on some logical or mathematical regressions. This is also one reason why AI is incapable of innovative or creative *per se* operations. It generates new texts using already existing texts within an operative dataset. Dataset is often pre-selected by designers and found within semiosphere of a given culture, the culture of a designer-user, for example. AI as an agency introduces a higher probability of highlighting repetitive elements within these selected sets, selected elements of semiosphere and producing an output that promotes already pre-set bias, which later can be confirmed by designers and audiences.

Based on these premises, analyses of “Harry Potter by Balenciaga” and “Harry Potter but in Italy,” AI-generated videos highlight the prevalence of the dominant cultural codes, which can also be considered stereotypical from users’ cultural perspectives and therefore easily recognized. Creating new AI-generated videos dwells on alteration within the semiosphere’s center, which is reinforced by algorithmic models and crystallized by the audiences’ reception.

6 Conclusions and future research

This paper offers a perspective on how the cultural significance of AI-generated art, particularly AI-generated videos, can be analyzed with the tools of Lotman’s framework concerning artistic text and dynamics of culture. The collaborative creative process between AI generative models and human designers or users, marked by the seamless integration of textual elements, plays a pivotal role in driving dynamic processes within the semiosphere. This collaboration yields dynamic models that are imposed by textual elements, including facial representations, motion articulation, and contextual settings, which are accessible to AI through datasets carefully chosen by the human designer.

The analysis of the case study confirms a human agency as a primary agency in decision-making for AI-generated art, which involves composing the prompt (defining the task for algorithmic models), selecting the output to be included in the final version presented to audiences and exerting a significant influence on the structural aspects of the artistic text. However, most texts commonly referred to as AI-generated art exhibit algorithmic biases, particularly those that have garnered substantial audience reception (going viral, being widely shared and serving as models for generating other AI-based artistic texts). These biases are inherent from the algorithmic perspective and embraced as central characteristics valued by both the original author and subsequent recipients of such art.

These conclusions lead to presumptions that can be explored in future research regarding algorithmic reinforcement of the central elements of semiosphere, which is most likely to result in an algorithmic output that can be recognized within the culture as stereotypes that are accepted as central values. This connection between biased AI-generated artistic text and their reception among users as a dynamic model is conveyed through several levels of AI-generated arts (pre-creation, co-creation, and post-creation) and textual elements, such as identity cues, like facial representations.

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