

# TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY FOR INTERPRETING VISUAL IMAGES AS CYBERNETIC SYSTEM: LACAN AND DELEUZE

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## **Abstract**

This exposition endeavors to outline a theoretical framework for a methodology to interpret visual images that draws on cybernetics, semiotics, psychoanalysis and philosophical ideas. Using images, aesthetics and artistic practices as a means of generating new understanding requires translating, deciphering and interpreting those artistic products and/or processes. How can one decipher the system of visual language that underlies artistic productions? I suggest that cybernetics is requisite for such an endeavor. Cybernetic theory is the science of relations within a system, taking as its problematic the relation between a system and its productions or output; in some instances, it studies how the productions of a system influence the system itself. This exposition endeavors to articulate aesthetics or artistic works in terms of a visual language and as a cybernetic enterprise in the context of art-based research by drawing on the ideas of Lacan and Deleuze. For Lacan, aesthetics exists as a primary mode of discourse for the articulations of the unconscious, as evidenced in images in dreams, art and fantasy. Lacan is renowned for his dictum that the unconscious and its productions are structured like a language, but the kind of structure of meaning at work in the unconscious is less related to the structural grammar of a natural language than the syntax of mathematics and cybernetics. Drawing on Lacanian dream analysis, I evince how such an approach could be applied to aesthetic phenomena. Deleuze presents a semiotic theory, a theory of signs which evinces the generation of novel

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meaning in the unconscious; it can be said to be cybernetic in the way that it exists in a state of continual evolution, the output produced by the system engendering transformation in the system itself. Deleuze offers a framework for how the work of art or aesthetic phenomenon can be translated into new knowledge through the process of entrainment with signs.

**Keywords:** *cybernetics, art-based research, visual language.*

Art-based research is a new paradigm of epistemological inquiry steadily gaining recognition in the academic sphere as a legitimate form of knowledge production. It is predicated on the notion that images, aesthetics and artistic practices can be employed as a mode of thinking, with the possibility to garner novel insight in the domains of its investigations [Marshall 2007: 23]. As a newly emerging research methodology, some of its tensions remain unresolved, particularly as concerns the interpretation and exegesis of artistic productions. Using images, aesthetics and artistic practices as a means of generating new understanding requires translating, deciphering and interpreting those artistic products and/or processes. How can one decipher the system of visual language that underlies artistic productions?

In the sense of interpreting aesthetics and artistic productions as a system of visual language, aesthetic research enters the domain of cybernetics. Cybernetic theory is the science of relations within a system, taking as its problematic the relation between a system and its productions or output. In its genesis, cybernetics was conceived as a discipline of control. Wiener characterized cybernetics as concerned with the construction of self-regulating systems such that the feedback generated between the system and its output can maintain a certain homeostasis and systemic integrity [95]. He conceived of cybernetics as founded on the principles of the generation of feedback and maintenance of homeostasis and equilibrium [Wiener 1961: 114]. However, the understanding of cybernetics has since evolved from its starting point as a mechanism of control.

N. Kathleen Hayles relates the history of cybernetics as operating in stages. In the first wave, cybernetics was conceived as a mechanism of control, and maintenance of homogeneity predicated on a liberal humanist subject. But the notion of cybernetics as mechanism of control would erode to reveal a self-reflective and self-creating cybernetic system, autopoietic in its capacities [Hayles 1999: 8, 10], blurring the boundaries between world and the understanding of it. In the third wave which would encompass AI, the cybernetic system was not only self-aware but self-evolving and emergent in the sense of overcoming the constraints of its initial program [Ibid., 16].

This exposition endeavors to understand art as a visual language and as a cybernetic enterprise for the purposes of advancing knowledge and praxis in the context of art-based research; more specifically, I am undertaking to investigate art as a visual language and as a cybernetic system in the context of art-based research through the ideas of French philosophers Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) and Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995).

### **Cybernetics and Psychoanalysis**

For Lacan, aesthetics exists as a primary mode of discourse for the articulations of the unconscious, as evidenced in images in dreams, art and fantasy [Lacan 1999: 425]. Lacan is renowned for his dictum that the unconscious and its productions are structured like a language [Ibid., 413], but the kind of structure of meaning at work in the unconscious is less related to the structural grammar of a natural language than the syntax of mathematics and cybernetics. Lacan makes this explicit in his 1955 lecture “Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics, or on the Nature of Language” where he expounds that the productions of the unconscious are always in the process of generating feedback, negotiating with the structure of signification at work in the unconscious processes of the generation of meaning [295]. The structure of signification in the unconscious acts as a homeostat, adapting to the new valences of meaning introduced by the unconscious productions [Ibid., 298]. This structure of signification is relational in nature; with the introduction of new valences, the system is altered but still maintained.

I elucidate how this works in practice with the example of dream analysis, however I would venture that this understanding is also applicable to the exegesis of the work of art and aesthetic productions. Through the dream, the unconscious is trying to communicate a message to the conscious mind; this communication takes place through a renegotiation of the valences of meaning at work in the dreamer’s unconscious.

### **Dreams and Language**

Dreams are conceived by Lacan as signifiers, as texts which can be decrypted. In dreams, the unconscious attempts to render thoughts into the form of images, plays on words that compose the thought that will allow for an ease of visual representation, plays with homonyms, anagrams. Lacan describes dreams as a game of charades: in their spectacle of imagery, they solicit an invitation to the audience to guess their meaning [Lacan 1999: 425].

Given that metaphor and metonym articulate their message by veiling it, the images perceived in a dream necessarily do not correspond to a prefigured meaning that can be referenced in a catalogue of dream images or archetypes; there does not

exist a 1:1 correspondence of meaning between the signifier image and its meaning [Ibid., 426]. Through its deployment of metaphor and metonym, the meaning behind the images of unconscious productions is a riddle that requires deciphering.

Language is interposed within a matrix that exceeds language; in this sense, language exceeds itself. This is why the meanings of the messages from the unconscious are fundamentally slippery, the motion of the signifier a “sliding” [Ibid., 419], why there does not exist a 1:1 correspondence between signifier and signified. There are no fixed meanings in language, etched into stone. Language is an evolving entity, always reformulating itself in new ways, signifiers always extending their range of meaning and opening out beyond their perimeters.

For Lacan, the unconscious comprises a system of meaning which is trans-individual, and this transindividual symbolic structure exerts an effect on the subject. With the dream, or any unconscious production, the system of meaning at work in the unconscious undergoes a shift such that the valences or ratios of meaning undergo a translation or transformation. The subject is then tasked to decipher how the ratios of meaning have undergone a transformation with the introduction of a change of signification. The meaning of the work of art has special significance for the artist as the crystallization of a message, but also has import for the interpreter, who in the interpretation of the work of art, may also derive a message for herself in the work of art, who is tasked to reconcile the system of meaning at work in the work of art with the valences at work in her own subjectivity.

### **Lacanian Dream Analysis**

The practice of Lacanian dream analysis can be encapsulated in two primary principles. Firstly, what Lacan termed “imagining the symbol”, an analysis of the transmutation of symbolic idea into image, which is the work of dreaming, the dream as final output. Secondly, “symbolizing the image”, the transformation of the image into symbol, which comprises the work of dream interpretation. This is to say that the interpretation of the dream is an act of translation of previously translated material. And with any translation, some shards of meaning are lost in the process; this is why Lacan emphasized Freud’s notion that dreams can never be fully analyzed for there is always material which escapes recollection upon awakening [Kovacevic 2013: 80].

Prior to speech and signification, the subject is enmeshed or, as Lacan puts it, “in-mixed” with objects and things, existing as images of her ego. Only with the crystallization of the symbolic order in speech and language that “neutral” ground appears for her resolution of her imaginary rivalries enabling intersubjective truth. Language is requisite for dreams; dreams comprise a language that can be deciphered

if one interprets the literal text of the dream [Ibid., 82]. There is a sense in which dream analysis ought to bear structural similarity to logic and grammar, hence Lacan's reliance on the notions of metonym and metaphor [Ibid., 83]; however, the syntax of the unconscious can be understood as closely akin to combinatorial rationality of 0's and 1's than to natural grammar. The cybernetic language of the unconscious is also connected with time and chance [Liu 2010: 320].

### Lacan and Deleuze

Although Deleuze with coauthor Guattari authored a polemical critique of Lacanian ideas in *Anti-Oedipus*, there exists a structural similarity between the ontological edifices of Deleuze and Lacan. Whilst *Anti-Oedipus* was published in 1972, its effects were not fully felt until the 1980 release of *A Thousand Plateaus*. By this time, Lacan's health had declined, and he would pass away the year following. Roudinesco [1997] recounts that Lacan "grumbled" to a former student who reported it in her journal that Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "desiring machine" had been pilfered from him [Jagodzinski 2012: 5]. Other structural resemblances have been noted as well [Ibid., 7]. While a thorough exposition of the congruences between the ontologies of Deleuze, Guattari and Lacan is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice to say that the structural contiguity between their edifices of thought makes for a productive comparison, and there exists a congruence in the realm of cybernetics which is a focus of this paper's exploration.

### Deleuze and Cybernetics

At this juncture, I would like to import the philosopher Deleuze into the discussion. I want to say that Deleuze's ideas are relevant and fruitful in this context of investigation as Deleuze can be conceived of as both a philosopher of aesthetics as well as cybernetics. Akin to Lacan's understanding of the unconscious as cybernetic, Deleuze invokes the notion that the unconscious functions and is organized as a machine, and like Lacan, Deleuze presents a semiotic theory of the unconscious which can be described in cybernetic terms. In the cybernetic sphere, Deleuze alongside coauthor Guattari have been heralded as prophets of cyberspace with their concept of the rhizome as disseminating multiplicity bereft of organizing center as structural analog to the internet [Marks 2006: 194]. Deleuze's thought presents the architecture of an evolving system, and thereby can be said to construct a cybernetic feedback loop that is continually in the process of revision and self-reimagining, the output produced by the system engendering transformation in the system itself. In the way that it is concerned with the generation of novel meaning and the instantiation of difference, Deleuze's philosophy has been described as an open system that supports continuous new conceptual development [Dawkins

2020: 3]. For Deleuze, the unconscious comprises a network of signs, a genetic structure of meaning that reassembles with every novel synthesis of meaning.

### Signs and Learning

Deleuze conceives that life is fundamentally an encounter with signs, signs as object of the encounter, and the encounter itself comprises a sign. Signs are not static constellations of meaning but comprise communication systems which engender new meaning [Ibid., 20]. The genetic register is constituted by signs. Beyond the material domain, there exists a genetic structure; it is a relay system between sign-events which interact, resonate with one another, and generate movement [Ibid., 126]. Deleuze elucidates learning as a process of entraining with signs, intimating a fundamental complicity between life and mind [Deleuze 1994: 165]. Deleuze gives the example of the swimmer. The swimmer learns by understanding movements in practice through signs. Learning through entraining with signs is a creative process; it is a creative process of designating meaning as well as value to one's experience [Semetsky 2011: 70].

Communication between signs produces novelty. Deleuze's semiotics understands novelty as a violent irruption that reconfigures the ratios of pre-constituted meaning. Semiotics and its meanings are not fixed; sense has to be continually fabricated anew, and this is what veritable thinking as questioning or problematizing is concerned with: the novel creation of sense. The production of sense is an event [Deleuze 1994: 191], its effects reverberating to the ontological level.

### Ideas, Sense and Meaning

The generation of sense maps a landscape of meaning for the Idea to traverse, constellating zones of enquiry Deleuze refers to as "problems" [Ibid., 164]. In *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze relates that the Idea does not make reference to essence. Essence does not pertain to an object, rather it enjoins two disparate objects [Deleuze 1972: 47]. Essence is the quality common to two disparate terms, evincing "individualizing difference in itself" [Ibid., 48]. Essence is sameness, yet simultaneously expresses difference, difference affirmed by autorepetition. Difference and repetition can thereby be understood as two correlating and inextricable powers of essence [Ibid., 48].

In *Proust and Signs*, Ideas are defined as already existing within the sign; Ideas constitute the logic or laws underlying a series, the theme that underpins it [Ibid., 72]. This is what Deleuze means in *Difference and Repetition* when he says that Ideas constitute virtual maps of meaning, the objective territory of problems. Ideas indwell the sign [Ibid., 163], comprising its terrain of meaning.

Sense must emerge from the surface of nonsense for its disclosure. Nonsense is a lack of sense, although its barrenness is what enables it to bestow sense. It is bereft of sense of its own, but also possesses excess sense [Deleuze 1990: 71]. Nonsense is the realm wherein all potentialities of sense reside. Sense is engendered on the surface of nonsense, a surface which is conceived by Deleuze as “quasi-cause” in the way the significations it engenders are effectuations of a kind that supersede material conceptions of causality. The surface comprises the frontier between bodies and propositions, enabling a certain distribution of language onto bodies [Ibid., 125]. This frontier is the dimension of time pertaining to event-effects, the Aion.

### **Sense as Force**

Sense is determined by the forces which inhere within a phenomenon, says Deleuze in his commentary on Nietzsche [1983a: 3]. Given that different forces can inhabit a phenomenon, its meaning or sense is necessarily multiple [Ibid., 4]. Forces refer to a spiritual dimension, implying the implorations of the unconscious that compel one to act in ways that supersede one’s conscious awareness. Forces exist in terms of quantity and quality. The qualitative dimension of force in the way it relates to all other forces [Ibid., 42]. In the quantitative sense, force is the will-to-power as the indwelling will encrypted in force [Ibid., 49]. Invoking chance, the will-to-power brings forces into relations with another, determining that relation, and determines the qualities of those forces through interpretation of them. To interpret means for Deleuze to decide the forces which comprise the sense of a phenomenon. To interpret is to interpret difference, the qualities which constitute forces [Ibid., 53].

### **The Work of Art in *Proust and Signs***

The work of art renders substance into spiritual form, “spiritualizes” it; the work of art engenders transmutation [Deleuze 1972: 46], creating an identity between sign and meaning, the essence and transmuted substance attaining perfect adequation [Ibid., 40]. Art renders matter spiritual in the way that it renders visible the qualities or essences of difference, with each essence pertaining to a unique world [Ibid., 47]. Deleuze understands art as the “splendid final unity of an immaterial sign and spiritual meaning” [Ibid., 85]; the perception of the essences of things can be achieved through “pure thought” [Ibid., 46]. Given the continuity between the way Deleuze defines the work of art and the way he defines Ideas in *Difference and Repetition*, one can conceive of a system of relationships that understands aesthetic construction as “the unconscious destination of thinking” [Jasper 2017: 38].

### Deleuze's Late Thought on Art

In Deleuze's late thought, he renders aesthetics into "a kind of master discipline of philosophy" that supersedes the ontology of repetition and sense of his earlier work [Due 2007: 164]. Understanding thought as not just a mental practice but as existing equally in artistic praxis and other forms, Deleuze's later thought can be understood as the endeavor to conceive of a logic of thinking embodied within sensory relations. In this period, he envisages art as thought which is instantiated within a material medium, seeing philosophy as praxis of formal construction akin to art [Ibid., 154]. Deleuze's aesthetic theory of thought incorporates the previous project of semiotics of sense, conceiving that anything that can be expressed or thought through signification or ordering, is based on ordering principles that can be articulated philosophically through concepts, or through a sensory medium in terms of light and lines. Deleuze's earlier semiotic project was predicated on language, whereas Deleuze's aesthetics of thinking in the 1980s seeks to find ordering principles beyond language. The interface between philosophy and art is therefore favorable for a problematization of representation conceived in more radical terms. If philosophy is akin to a work of art, thought is not concerned with a representation of reality, but with generating configurations on an abstract plane. For philosophy to be understood as immanent discipline, the bond uniting thought and representation requires severing; art evinces how such is possible [Ibid., 155].

### Cinema

Deleuze also takes inspiration from Bergson, conceiving life in terms of images, and this notion is elaborated in Deleuze's *Cinema I* text in which Deleuze applies Peirce's theory of signs to a semiotics of material life understood as comprised of moving images [1983: 69]. Film for Deleuze is understood as an aesthetic medium and a cognitive art in the ways that it orders visual elements through time, performing a function akin to the mind. His cinematic theory renders a qualitative semiotics that concerns itself with how signifying and aesthetic qualities of film are organized independently of its narrative. Deleuze thereby endeavors to conceive of the film image in terms of an autonomous signifying reality which supersedes representation of life [Due 2007: 159–160].

### The Diagram

If we understand learning as a process of entraining with signs, I want to say that exegesis of the aesthetic work can be conceived along similar lines. I would venture to say that there is always a new meaning, insight or knowledge to be gleaned from the work, however to glean the novel meaning requires bypassing the psychic cliché, the habits of thinking that preconceive the meaning of something, and the illusion

of representation. This genetic structure is evinced for Deleuze aesthetically in the diagram or Figure. Deleuze develops the notion of the Figure to talk about the process which underlies the aesthetic production of novel meaning. The Figure is conceived as a diagram generated by spontaneous marks [Deleuze 2005: 82] and for it to arise, the subject must bypass the seduction of the psychic cliché [Ibid., 77]. Whilst the diagram initially appears chaotic and asignifying, structure and meaning emerges from out of it. The reasoning capacity of the diagram is to depict the movement of thought itself as a process. Diagrammatic logic necessitates logic of multiplicities [Semetsky 2007: 199]. The diagram suggests, hints at, or introduces “possibilities of fact” [Deleuze 2005: 101]. A diagram is a map that instead of representing, engenders the territory it refers to [Semetsky 2007: 206].

### ***What is Philosophy?***

Deleuze in *What Is Philosophy?* develops the notion that philosophy comprises a practice of conceptual invention [1994: 2] instigated upon a groundwork, or plane that orients those concepts, and enables its concepts to partake in the production of sense and meaning. Concepts are rooted in a territory, and that rootedness bestows the possibility for movement and flight from that territorial orientation [Ibid., 41]. Deleuze understands philosophy in terms of an immanent creation, the creation or construction of a plane rather than an intuition or description of reality. If it endeavors to measure philosophy against an ideal of truth, such a philosophy is dogmatic [Due 2007: 149–150]. Conceptual invention is strictly the work of philosophy, yet the Figures in art and aesthetics bestow one with affects and percepts that open us onto becomings [Deleuze 1994: 66]. Yet the signifying conceptual aspect of art is not distinct from its affective aspect, for both are entrained in a circular causality [O’Sullivan 2006: 67].

### **Conclusion**

If works of art comprise a riddle, frame a problem, compose a message to one’s unconscious that solicits decipherment, what is the message of the artwork and how do we know it? What can we say about it? From Deleuze and Lacan, one can glean that within the work of art and aesthetic productions, there is always a system of meaning at work, a system of meaning can be understood as cybernetic. In the way that dreams impart a riddle that solicits decipherment, so too, the work of art solicits exegesis. The work of art and aesthetic productions comprise a text that can be read, and such an understanding is relevant for the endeavor of arts-based research, for the purposes of translating aesthetic productions as well as their processes of production into new knowledge. I suggest that Lacanian psychoanalysis with its application in dream analysis is relevant for such an exegesis, and that Deleuze’s notion of learning

through entrainment with signs, can also be harnessed to such an end, or is applicable in this context.

In both cases, from Lacanian dream analysis and Deleuzian concept of learning, there imparted the insight that one must look deeper than the specters of representation, that there exists a clandestine meaning that one can attain if one perceives beyond the obvious interpretation; to glean novel meaning one must think both creatively, yet in accordance with life and reality. When one dreams, there is a particular message the unconscious is seeking to transmit; when one learns, one must sync with the nodes of the genetic structure embedded. How can one access the meanings that lie beyond representation, beyond the 1:1 correspondence between a sign and what it purports to represent, and beyond the psychic cliché? This is the work of creativity; through associations, tuning into transversal connections, searching for hidden meanings, trying on different cloaks of meaning through experimentation, word play, puns, through divination and chance encounters, by identifying and thinking what one unconsciously fears to think. This is intended as an outline for a theoretical framework for approaching the translation of aesthetic productions into language and knowledge. Much work is yet to be done in this respect; I have endeavored to create a framework for future inquiry.

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