

The Fugue of the Five Senses and the Semiotics of the Shifting Sensorium

Selected Proceedings

from the 11th International Conference of the Hellenic Semiotics Society



editors:

Evangelos Kourdis
Maria Papadopoulou
Loukia Kostopoulou

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The Fugue of the Five Senses. Semiotics of the Shifting Sensorium

ART



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The senses in language: The function of description

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Abstract

In fiction, the function of sensual description is primarily to create the illusion of realism. However, it is also crucial in establishing thematic continuity. According to A.J. Greimas, both the syntactic and the semantic structures of a text can be understood as a series of transformations from an abstract deep level to a textual surface level. If the link between the surface textual structure – where descriptions are located – and the underlying semantic structure is lacking, the result is a feeling that the text is incoherent. This is also true of the syntactic dimension. An endless series of narrative ‘events’ or episodes that does not appear to lead to any significant change in the narrative, or confer any clear direction on it, results in a growing frustration, a feeling that the text isn’t “going” anywhere. The need for continuity between surface textual structure and underlying syntactico-semantic structure is demonstrated by looking at descriptions of sensations in *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George Martin and its successful audiovisual adaptation as the television series *Game of Thrones*.

Keywords

description

narratology

A.J. Greimas

George R.R. Martin

The representation of sensation

It was Louis Hjelmslev (1943/1961, p. 109) who first pointed out that “in practice, a language is a semiotics into which all other semiotics may be translated – both all other languages and all other conceivable semiotic structures.” In other words, a message in any semiotic system *can* be translated into natural language, although it may well be less effective, less attractive, and a lot more extensive if it has to be expressed in words.¹ Still, with the help of specialised technical vocabulary, it is possible to give a verbal description of a musical melody, of the flavour of a wine, of the feel of a texture, or even of a painting – a description that will allow at least a specialist to understand what the original sensation is like, though of course not to replicate its effect on the actual senses (it is not possible to “taste” a verbal description of the flavour of a wine).

Empirically, verbal statements are in fact very frequently used to “translate” sensations – we say “careful, it’s hot” or “what’s that loud noise?” Literary texts are full of descriptions of sensations of all kinds: not just visual sensations – although the visual is dominant in description as it is in social life in general – but also sensations of hearing, smell, taste, touch, and other more esoteric senses. This is especially evident in narrative fiction, though it also occurs in other literary genres (lyric poetry, for example).

An interesting question for visual adaptations of fiction is how sensations of smell, taste and touch can be conveyed in visual images. This is an issue that has long been debated in adaptation theory; the arguments are clearly presented by Linda Hutcheon, who points out that different media have evolved their own semiotic conventions for coping with this kind of transcoding (Hutcheon 2006, especially the first two chapters). An intriguing example can be found in the recent graphic-novel adaptation, by Stéphane Heuet (2013/2015), of Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The most famous scene in Proust’s work is the one where the narrator eats a piece of madeleine cake dipped in tea, and the taste brings back to him a rush of memories of his childhood stay in the village of Combray. Heuet gives this scene a full three pages (pp. 13-15), starting with the narrator’s reaction and continuing with images of his aunt Léonie, of the village and of the water-lilies in the river, with the steam of the tea superimposed on the whole spread.

We should note, though, that the “meaning” conveyed is not really the taste of the madeleine, but the memories which the taste evokes in the narrator. In other words, it is not really the sensation as such which is described.

The graphic novel also makes use of portions of the verbal text (in Arthur Goldhammer’s translation in the English edition). Partly, textual fragments are used to represent sounds that the narrator remembers – the voices of his aunt, of his parents, of himself as a child.

Elsewhere in the story, Heuet does something similar with music. There is a scene in which one of the central characters in the book, Swann, listens to a piece of music and the music, like the taste of the madeleine, brings back to him memories of the past.

Heuet represents this (pp. 150-51) by superimposing a sequence of musical notes on a series of small images of scenes which have already appeared earlier in the graphic novel. In this case, a trained musician could perhaps “read” the sound of the melody directly from the musical notation – if, indeed, the composition were not an imaginary creation by Proust himself.

The cinema has the advantage – or disadvantage – of using sound as well as images, and is thus obliged to provide an actual piece of music where a verbal text can be content with an imaginary one. So, when Chilean director Raúl Ruiz adapted Proust’s novel for the screen (*Le temps retrouvé*, 1999), his collaborator Jorge Arriagada needed to create real music to represent the “Sonata for piano and violin” by the imaginary composer Vinteuil that Proust had invented. The interesting thing is that, on the basis of Proust’s description, it was possible to do so.² However, in this case also, Proust is not interested in the sound of the music per se, but in its associations for the character who hears it.

Visual images and sounds can thus move with some success from written text to cinematic representation. However, taste, smell and touch, not to mention other more exotic sensations such as balance and orientation, are more difficult to convey. The most common solution, in addition to the use of dialogue, is to have the actors mimic the effect of these sensations for the viewer: showing by their facial expressions that they are attracted or repelled by a smell or a flavour, by their costumes that the environment is hot or cold, by their reactions and movements that they feel dizzy or tired, are in pain, or are sexually aroused.

Both graphic image and cinema, unlike verbal texts, have to specify the physical environment of the narrative. This can be an advantage – it makes the message richer – but it is also a constraint. A writer can choose *not* to describe the room where an action takes place, can decide *not* to give details of the landscape or cityscape through which the characters move, can *avoid* indicating what clothes they are wearing and even to some extent what their physical characteristics are. The visual artist has fewer options in this area, and the cinematographer has no choice: the characters of the story have to be represented by physical actors, and the physical environment has to be specified, because it is part of the photographic frame.

Whether we are dealing with verbal language, images, or film, however, the *functions* of description in a text remain largely the same.

The primary function of sensual description is probably to create the illusion of reality, the “*effet du réel*”. I need hardly add that this effect is indeed an illusion. It is entirely possible to give a very realistic description of something that does not and indeed *cannot* exist. This is the standard technique used by writers of fantasy and science fiction to create for the reader that feeling of reality which is necessary for our enjoyment of the story. In fact, the more carefully the writer describes the fantasy world, the more willing we

are to suspend our disbelief and be carried along by the narrative. In Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the author's minute attention to time and space is crucial in making the geography of Middle Earth come alive for the reader.

Inversely, if the description is threadbare or inconsistent, we tend to find it boring and put the book down (or turn off the television), no matter how realistic the story. I recently had occasion to observe this in reading a murder mystery set in Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland. The author provides virtually no descriptions of the landscapes and cityscapes in which the action occurs. The result is that the reader has no sense of place – the story seems to take place in a vacuum.

Description and narrative structure

However, I would argue that to interpret description only in terms of the creation of a “reality effect” is not enough. Description, like action, has to be anchored in the structure of the narrative.

In Proust's novel, the taste of the madeleine dipped in tea is central to the interpretation of the whole five-volume novel, because Proust is writing (among other things) about the associations between present experience and memories of the past, and about how sensations mingle with thought processes in human consciousness. In Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the description of a bourgeois home is not simply about establishing a realistic setting, but also about demonstrating the stifling atmosphere of bourgeois married life.

According to the narrative theory of A.J. Greimas, the structure of a text can be modelled as a series of transformations from an abstract, deep level to a textual surface level (see Fig. 1). The deep level involves basic semantic choices (values) and their potential

Generative process				
Structures	Components		Syntactic	Semantic
	Levels			
Semio-narrative	Deep level		Fundamental syntax	Fundamental semantics
	Narrative level		Narrative syntax	Narrative semantics
Discursive	Level of discourse		Discursive syntax = discursivisation: – actantialisation – temporalisation – spatialisation	Discursive semantics: – thematisation – figurativisation
Textualisation				
Text as realised				

Figure 1. The generative process according to the narratology of Greimas (adapted from Greimas and Courtés, 1979, p. 160 and Hénault, 1983, p. 124)

logical development (the “semiotic square”). The intermediate level is the level of narrative, where the organisation of narrative roles takes place and the value structure of the story is put in place. At the surface or discursive level, actantial roles are matched with characters (actors), the action is situated in time and space, and values are developed into themes (thematization) which can be given further verbal form in a process which he calls figurativisation. Figurativisation is the process by which the fictional world of the text is created and elaborated, largely through descriptions.³

This, for Greimas, is the “generative process” or model that governs the production of narrative texts.⁴ In reverse, it is also a model of interpretation. Reading a story or watching a film, we encounter the text as realised: the figurative, descriptive language (verbal or visual) of the discursive, surface level of narrative discourse, with characters, settings, actions and episodes. We *interpret* this surface by working our way backward (upward, in Figure 1), through the actantial roles and the themes of the narrative level to the fundamental syntax and semantic antitheses which the story sets in motion.

If the link between the surface structure and the underlying semantic structure cannot be perceived by the reader, the result is a feeling that the text is incoherent.

This is also true of the syntactic dimension. An endless series of narrative “events” or episodes that does not appear to lead to any significant change in the narrative, or confer any clear direction on it, results in a growing frustration, a feeling that the text isn’t “going” anywhere.

Narrative coherence in *Game of Thrones*

This necessary relationship between discursive surface structure and underlying syntactico-semantic structure can be amply demonstrated by looking at the plentiful descriptions of sensations of all kinds in the (currently) five books, published in seven volumes, of the series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George Martin and their very successful audiovisual adaptation as the television series *Game of Thrones*.

Martin’s books are bursting with episodes and characters. Consider, for instance, the lists of characters, given as an appendix at the end of each volume. In the first book, this appendix comprises 18 pages. In the next book it has grown to 34 pages. In Book III it covers 50 pages, in Book IV 68 and in Book V 60. It has also acquired several subdivisions. In the first book, only the members of the principal noble houses are given. By the time the story reaches volume 7 (the second volume of Book V), the appendix has been divided into six separate sections, devoted to The Kings and their Courts, Other Houses Great and Small, The Sworn Brothers of the Night’s Watch, The Wildlings or the Free Folk, a section called Beyond the Wall, and a new section on Essos beyond the Narrow Sea, including subdivisions for Braavos, Old Volantis, Slaver’s Bay, The Queen Across the Water, and the Sellswords of the Free Companies. Even considering that Martin is fa-

mous for casually killing off his characters, clearly the narrative has grown enormously in the telling.

His acknowledgements at the end of each volume also make it clear that Martin is increasingly having trouble controlling the different strands of his narrative. Even though the television series has drastically simplified the story, eliminating many secondary characters and dropping whole sequences of episodes, it still has to cover a huge multiplicity of interlacing storylines. In fact, although the television series is known for its impressive settings and costumes, it has the narrative structure of a soap opera: love, hate, sex, murder, marriage, divorce, families, lovers, bastards, dynasties, jealousy, intrigues, vengeance, factions, politics, power...

The multiplication of storylines affects what we usually think of as “character development”. A character in a novel is created both syntactically, through the successive actantial roles they occupy in the narrative (in other words, through their actions in the story), and semantically, through the qualities ascribed to them by the text (from descriptions of what they look like to the feelings and thoughts they are described as having). This is a cumulative process: if character A is described as having blond hair in the first chapter, he should still have blond hair 700 pages later, unless he has explicitly changed the colour of his hair in one of the intervening episodes. More importantly, the *actions* he performs in chapter one of the narrative, and the motives ascribed to him there remain part of his “character” throughout the story.

The multiplication of episodes that results from serialisation, because it involves the same characters in many different situations, means that characters easily accumulate contradictory attributes, which leads to inconsistencies in characterisation. In the case of *Game of Thrones*, for example, Sir Jaime Lannister in the beginning of the story casually throws a child out a window to protect his incestuous love affair with his sister. By the time the narrative reaches Book V, Sir Jaime has become a chivalrous knight, a diplomat and a leader of armies. The reader (or audience of the television series), if he or she has not simply forgotten what the same character did in Book I, will have to find some way of interpreting this change in order to maintain the coherence of the text. We can say that the character has “matured”. Or we can say that the characterisation is incoherent.

Description and thematic structure

A similar problem can be observed in the case of descriptions. Martin’s books are full of sensual descriptions of all kinds, often highly metaphorical. A sword is “alive with moonlight, translucent, a shard of crystal so thin that it seemed almost to vanish when seen edge-on” (Bk I p. 8). Cloth is “so smooth that it seemed to run through her fingers like water” (p. 25). Night air is chilly on bare skin (p. 103), wine is “cool fire” as it trickles down your throat (p. 120), unwashed men have “a sour smell” (p. 114), blood feels “like warm

rain” as it sprays across your face (p. 127). The descriptions continue to be vivid and sensual throughout the series. In Book V (vol. 2, p. 145), a hall rings with

Yunkish laughter, Yunkish songs, Yunkish prayers. Dancers danced; musicians played queer tunes with bells and squeaks and bladders; singers sang ancient love songs... The air was redolent with the scent of saffron, cinnamon, cloves, pepper and other costly spices.

The section where Arya Stark becomes blind involves 14 pages of narrative (Bk V, vol 2, pp. 66-79) based entirely on sound, touch, smell and taste: “the rough feel of the crust beneath her fingers, the slickness of the oil, the sting of the hot pepper” (Bk V, vol 2, p. 67). Martin’s device of allowing some of his characters to temporarily share the consciousness of animals or birds gives him opportunities for vivid descriptions of sound and smell:

Where before there had been silence, now he heard: wind in the trees, Hodor breathing, the elk pawing at the ground in search of fodder. Familiar scents filled his nostrils: wet leaves and dead grass, the rotten carcass of a squirrel decaying in the brush, the sour stink of man-sweat, the musty odor of the elk (Bk. 5, vol 1, pp. 73-74).

There is no doubt that the fictional world of Westeros is vividly brought to life in Martin’s books, and much of this “reality effect” is due to his skilful use of description. But just as the welter of characters and episodes eventually makes the reader lose track of the storyline, so the wealth of descriptions ultimately becomes self-defeating. There seems to be no clear direction to it. The text seems to be assigning semantic characteristics to characters and places almost at random.

For example, in Book I, there is a long description of the city of King’s Landing as seen through the eyes of Catelyn Stark (pp. 161-163). The description ascribes a number of semantic attributes to the city: the city is wealthy and luxurious, is a den of vice and corruption, is a hub of commerce bristling with life, is a ruin of its ancient splendour, is the seat of ruthless power. We read it, and are ready to interpret King’s Landing as any of these things. But a few hundred pages later, we have already encountered plenty of other places equally vicious, equally corrupt, equally in ruins, and equally cruel and deceitful: the Eyrie, Castle Black, the Twins, the Dothraki lands. And this is just the beginning. It is impossible for a reader to construct a semiotic geography of Westeros.

The crucial link between deep semantic structure and discursive surface structure are the *themes* of a text. In Greimas’s model, thematisation takes place on the discursive, surface level of the text. Ideally, in other words, the descriptive elements in the text come together to form larger thematic continuities, and we interpret the story in terms of

these recurring themes that we encounter when reading it. But like characters, themes need to be internally coherent and consistent with the narrative semantic structure as a whole. Otherwise, readers will not be able to work out the fundamental semantic oppositions behind the story – in other words, make sense of the text.

Thematic coherence (or lack of it) in *Game of Thrones*

Martin's books have a huge amount of figurative material that could potentially be united into themes, but until he brings the narrative to a conclusion, we do not know which thematic strands, among all the figurative discourses, will turn out to be significant and above all, how they are supposed to interconnect.

Obviously, central to the whole series is the political theme of the struggle for power. This is the theme that Martin must bring to a satisfactory conclusion if the books are to have any coherence at all. It branches off into several subordinate themes: issues of legitimacy and governance, loyalty to lord or to family, the rule of law, what constitutes ethical or chivalrous conduct, even the relationship of church and state. At the moment it is not clear how he is going to bring any of these to a conclusion.

The narrative originally seemed to promise us the story of the Stark family. There isn't much left of the Stark family by now, but clearly Martin will have to do something with the members who are still alive. His attempt to kill off Jon Snow seems to have failed due to general outrage on the part of his fan base. One question is how he will manage to connect the fate of the Stark family with the resolution of the themes of power. But the Stark family is also related to the theme of "winter is coming" and the walking dead who will presumably appear together with winter. We have been promised that in the last two seasons of the television series, winter will indeed have come, but since these seasons are also said to include fewer episodes than the earlier ones, winter is going to have to hurry.

Then there are the skinchanging abilities of Bran Stark. This theme has been carefully developed throughout all seven volumes and presumably is meant to lead to something significant. Part of it are the direwolves (at last count, there were still three direwolves alive).

There is one theme around which we might group many of the sensual descriptions and which forms the basis for much of the feeling of realism created by the books. Martin has a particular fondness for extreme, disgusting sensual descriptions – stink, dirt, decay, burning flesh, festering wounds, rotting corpses, etc. This element could perhaps be organised under a heading like "the horrors of war", but it seems to be equally frequent in peacetime, so probably we are meant to understand it as the horrible nature of life in general.

Finally, there is the thematic result of the soap-opera narrative structure. It could perhaps be summed up as "the chaotic nature of human relations". It is fairly easy to relate

this to the struggle for power, since very nearly all the actors in Martin's books are completely untrustworthy and totally unethical in their conduct.

This is a very brief and incomplete account of *some* of the major themes that Martin has set in motion. At the end of seven substantial volumes, it is not at all clear how they relate to each other or to the numerous strands of the plot – in other words, what the story is ultimately about.

The television series has tightened the narrative structure by drastically reducing both the number of episodes and the number of characters. But the basic problem remains. Thematic coherence has improved only marginally.

The feeling of incoherence is probably at least partly responsible for the impressive amount of internet activity generated by the series, and the enthusiastic speculations on what will happen next. This is not only a desire for closure. We cannot find a satisfactory interpretation of the story until we know how it will end.

Of course, from the point of view of the author and his publisher, as well as all those involved in the production of the television serial, this is an ideal situation. With such passionate audience expectation, they could go on for years producing new episodes (as Martin may very well be doing).

However, the risk is that the readers, or viewers, will eventually tire of being constantly frustrated in their attempts to make sense of the story – and ultimately, decide that it is simply boring.

Endnotes

1. Anne Hénault takes a similar position in Hénault, 1983, pp. 180-90. Umberto Eco argues for a more complex position in his discussion of the relationship between verbal and non-verbal semiotic systems (Eco, 1976, pp. 172-174; for the full discussion, see Eco, 1976, pp. 172-217).
2. At least one other composer, Gonzague Zeno, has created another version of the Vinteuil sonata. Both can be found on YouTube.
3. The elements of this theory, which was developed by Greimas and his students over a period of more than two decades, can be found in Greimas and Courtés 1979 and 1986. For a more accessible presentation of the process, see Hénault (1983) especially pp. 123-144.
4. The same model can also account for the production of non-narrative texts, but this is a subject which does not concern the present paper.

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