

changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings

from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS

Eleftheria Deltsou

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Some thoughts on the semiotics of digital art

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the semiotics of the post-modern era as reflected in digital art. Drawing on Peirce's sign theory, we argue that, while underscoring the role of representation through its liaison with virtual environments, digital art fails to stand up to the requirements of the sign-referent-interpretant triangle. In other words, the absence of tangible experience results in loss of the representational pole enabling the sign to determine its meaning. This may lead to a repositioning of things such that the representational pole ('thirdness') becomes the only reality, rather than being the mediator between the 'dream' ('firstness') and its realization ('secondness') (cf. Stjernfelt, 2007, Calfoglou, 2011). It is suggested that 'alienation' from experience, deterritorialisation (Lamprellis, 2013) may lead to fragmentation and the articulation of a discourse failing to meet the requirements of the Habermasean 'public sphere' (cf. Polimeris, 2013).

Keywords

peircean triad , **self-referentiality** , **de-territorialisation** , **immateriality** ,
public sphere , **fragmentation**

Introduction

This paper involves an articulation of some thoughts on the 'texture' of digital art. In formulating and articulating these thoughts, we will assume that digital art is deterritorialised, that is destitute of geographical boundaries (cf. Lamprellis, 2013), and that, as such, it can be anchored to no specific point of reference. We will further pursue the argument of this deterritorialisation being a concomitant of its immateriality, which, in turn, could be argued to result in a disruption of the triadic link between a firstness, a secondness and a thirdness necessary for signification in Peircean terms. On the basis of these assumptions, we will attempt to identify the kind of discourse produced by digital art and explore the degree to which this discourse conforms to the requirements of the Habermasian 'public sphere'. Our aim is to show that digital (or digitalized) art loses its verisimilitude and that in this way, while being global, ecumenical and therefore fulfilling the inclusivity requirement postulated by Habermas, it fails to produce a 'sincere' discourse in Habermasian terms. This, we will suggest, is closely connected to the key characteristics of the postmodern era, of which it is an offspring.

We begin by discussing the attributes of digital art in relation to Peircean semiotics, then go on to discuss the notion of deterritorialisation and finally consider the type of discourse articulated by digital art in the light of Habermas's 'public sphere'.

Digital art and the disruption of the Peircean triad

Virtual worlds, even if claimed to be independent systems,¹ originally developed as an intangible simulation of tangible life. Evidence for this can be sought in the fact that real life objects are animated or in the composition of "the apple logo hanging from a [real] tree, making it an apple-tree" (de Jong, 2010, p. 52). What, then, motivates a discussion of digital art, created within the confines of a virtual world, in the framework of Peircean semiotics is its connection with the notion of similarity, dominant in Peircean thought. If "a feeling is a mere sign, awaiting interpretation in its relation with a subsequent thought or feeling before it can have meaning" (see Hoopes, 1991, p. 10), 'relation' becomes a key term and the notion of association and similarity assumes centrality. In Peirce's sign system, comprised of icons, indices and symbols, iconic signs operate within a similarity universe *par excellence* and are interpreted as such on the basis of their similarity to the object of experience, a similarity which implies non-arbitrariness in meaning-making.

Within this framework it could be argued that digital art, created or embedded in a virtual environment, may bear a similarity, iconic relation to its potential non-virtual counterpart. If, to Peirce, existence is a capacity to enter into relations, then the digital work of art could be said to possess a capacity to enter into a relation with other (digital as well as non-digital) real life works and objects within a similarity perspective. At this point, however, it is important to note that, as explained in Stjernfelt (2007, p. 90), this similarity is a non-trivial one. Echoing Peirce's operational account of the concept, he

states that “the icon is not only the only kind of sign involving a direct presentation of qualities pertaining to its object; it is also the only sign by the contemplation of which more can be learnt than lies in the directions for its construction.” As an iconic sign, then, the digital work of art is revelatory in relation to the properties of the ‘real’ object, and it makes sense to say that it extends it while imprisoning it. This is perhaps the prerequisite for its developing into an independent system, as we saw in endnote 1. A good example comes from virtual reality works, where the artwork imitates, copies the movements of the human body while also leading the viewer-user to immersion in a new space-and-time environment.

On the basis of all this, we would like to postulate the following triadic schema: As in all instances of meaning-making, there is a specific signification process at work in the case of a digital or digitalized work of art: Following Peirce’s conception that “a sign receives its meaning by being interpreted by a subsequent thought or action” (see Hoopes, 1991, p. 7), namely an interpretant, and that, therefore, “the meaning of every thought is established by a triadic relation, an interpretation of the thought as a sign of a determining *object*”, the (actualized) digital work of art awaits interpretation to assume its function as a sign of a determining object, in our case, the material, corporeal experience it is meant to be a ‘copy’ of. This is further complicated by the fact that the medium (the Web) is an inseparable part of digital art, an extreme conception of this being McLuhan’s (1964) statement ‘the medium is the message’: The artist/technology expert has created a piece of work that can be accessed only through this medium.

However, the process of representation has been tampered with. Consider Lyotard’s (1984) skepticism concerning grand narratives in the postmodern world and the substitution of radically different knowledge and culture legitimation criteria. “In a cybernetic society, knowledge is legitimated by how performative it is, if it effectively minimizes the various required inputs for the task and maximizes the desired outputs”. Market laws, use value have taken over. The popularity and success of a work of art is dependent on the number of views registered. In line with Hope (2007), then, could these criteria act as a dynamic interpretant of signs? Or are we left with the “actual effects of signs” alone (Hope 2007, p.29)? And, if this is so, isn’t the signification process seriously disrupted, giving rise to a novel kind of semiotics? In Lyotard’s terms, any such globalised, all-encompassing legitimation criteria are potentially threatening; it could be argued that part of the threat lies in the weakness of sign processes resulting therefrom.

Put in Peircean terms again, on the premise that “firstness is the sheer thisness, or existence, of things, secondness is dyadic, or reactive, relations between things and thirdness is triadic, or representational, relations among things” (Hoopes, 1991, p.10), it would appear that, in the case of the digital artistic product, the sheer thisness of things may go, carrying its secondness correlate along and thus leaving thirdness, the ‘actual effect of signs’ we spoke of earlier, alone, as the sole reality. This, however, warps the

ontological order, the function and structure of signification. For what is the sign without the orchestration of its relata? Commenting on Peirce's sign architecture, Stjernfelt (2007) refers to firstness as "continua of possibilities" (p.13), "qualities (that are) pure possibilities and must necessarily be incarnated in phenomena in order to appear. Secondness is the phenomenological category of incarnation which makes this possible" (Stjernfelt, 2007, p.14): the object that allows thisness to manifest itself. But governing the relationship of the two, coordinating them is thirdness, which represents a continuum of realizations. In the relevant metaphor, the recipe, thirdness, which is general and a continuum in the sense that it can never fully specify the qualities of each individual apple pie, "mediates between the dream of a pie (firstness) and the fulfilment (secondness). If, then, the bonds between the dream, the dream of a work of art, the actualization of this work and the interpreting thought allowing the representation to come alive are broken, 'architectural' problems arise. As a matter of fact, though this might be a bit of a transgression, the digital representation may be said to possess qualities of its own, quite independently of the 'original' realization potential of the work. This is another way of talking about the independence of digital worlds. The digitalized piece can very easily be transformed into a different representation, by becoming, say, a waveform while, at the same time, the contact with the viewer-user is so close that it constitutes a key parameter in the signification process. A good example of this close contact and how it determines the actual work of art is Weinbren's (1993) Sonata (Polimeris 2011, p. 106), a famous example of interactive digital art, where the viewer-user is allowed by sensors on the monitor to create his/her own narrative.

There is yet another very important point to consider in focusing on signs in digital art culture. This is related to the temporality of Peirce's triadic relationship. As Hope (2007, p. 27) argues, "to have an interpretant you already need an object and to have an object you already need a representamen. A representamen is always the interpretant of a prior sign". The statement underlines the temporal, historicist element in the triadic relationship described. Is this the case in digital art, however? If we consider the a-temporality of digital works, their ephemeral character, an extension of the impressive freedom granted to the artist, according to Fifield (1997, in Polimeris 2011, p. 99), with regard to re-arranging and combining pictures, filtering and colouring them without the constraints of natural friction and gravity, then this seems to suggest that we might have an interpretant without an object or a representamen preceding it. "Time comes together in the present" (Konsa, 2010, p. 84). To quote Baudrillard (1998, p.166), "abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. *The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it.* Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - it is the map that engenders the territory and if we

were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself". The age of simulation involves the loss, the liquidation, in Baudrillard's terms, of referentials. And yet, despite the temporal discontinuity element in digital art, the image, even if it cannot be perceived directly, is an 'instant' and, as such, possesses a spatiotemporal dimension, as noted by Polimeris (2011, p. 145).

Digital art as 'deterritorialised'

At the beginning of this paper we referred to the texture of digital art as deterritorialised. Let us now go into this concept in some more detail. This discussion will lead us to the concept of immateriality, a concomitant of Baudrillard's loss of referentials. In wandering among various topoi (loci), Lamprellis (2013, p.139) speaks of "the power of imagination to trans-form the loci of the flora and the fauna into the topos of the dream, the topos of artistic representation". Is this transformation at work when a digital work of art is produced? How oneiric are digital loci? Perhaps retaining the links, following the traces from one topos to the next, those of reterritorialisation, would safeguard the dream element. As things are, however, reterritorialisation is to a topos with no geographical boundaries, a virtual world free of time conventions and dissociated from the pictorial in conventional art. And, moralizing apart, it appears that the possibility of endless processing available in digital art products gives rise to an ever-changing 'landscape', whose ability to mediate between the dream and its realization is to be seriously questioned. If thirdness, as explained earlier, is general and continuous, digital art is subject to constant change and transformation and, as such, we believe, cannot enter into an interpreting relationship with the dream of its realization. Rather, it becomes an elusive topos, self-referential in so far as it agonizingly tries to define itself but its constant transformations undermine this effort. Digital art is a 'trompe-l'oeil' with multiple, endless illusions embedded within one another. In Paul Virilio's words, the spatiotemporal expansion attempted in New Media art resembles an extension into emptiness. In Lamprellis's terms, if no new topos is created, this equals the death of the wandering subject (e.g., p.114).

Deterritorialisation without its potential creativity may be an alternative image of fragmentation in postmodern art, where technology, a factor transforming the loci of human activity and geographical space, creates a new and complex landscape of spaces, involving autonomous loci/spaces of technological reality (Lamprellis, 2013, p. 48). These are the spaces of simulacra, in Baudrillard's terms. For, as we said above, the representational, pictorial function of art has withdrawn and given way to its simulation counterpart. According to the philosopher, unlike representation, which explores the relation between the sign and the real, simulation, an all-engulfing concept in modern

digital art as we see it, is no longer conceived of as a false representation. Instead, it “envelops representation as itself a simulacrum”. One may therefore wonder, along with the philosopher, whether in a world ironically built around the concept of illusion, as is the case with virtual reality immersion, illusion may be possible, if reality is no longer possible. This may be another way of saying that the interpretant, left alone, may find it impossible to perform the signification function.

So, if digital art in the postmodern age is trapped in its self-referentiality, within a never-ending process of simulation, it may make sense to argue that it is also fragmentary. This is an irony, for there has never been a more globally accessible form or art. Continuity is disrupted due to its immateriality, because of the disruption of the sign-making process we talked about earlier. Where the continuum of qualities in firstness is missing and the object actualized (secondness) is fuzzy, indeterminate, the route followed by the interpretant is one of discrete, ‘autonomous’ entities. Intertextuality, hyperlinks *par excellence*, the relations into which the digital work enters within the digital sphere, also referred to earlier in our discussion, could perhaps be seen as a means of pulling the threads together and connecting the discontinuous. Yet, we would tend to see it more as an instance of further disruption, though not ethically, of course. It could act as a representation mediator, as a relata coordinator for the digital work of art, but, being everchanging and elusive, too, it may be too vague to determine its meaning. This, to us, may be the case despite postmodern era artists’ and theoreticians’ view that (on a psychological as well as social niveau) hyperlinks liberate us from those anonymous experts who organize our data bases on our behalf.³

Digital art and the ‘public sphere’

This disruption and fragmentation, as already hinted at earlier in our discussion, has repeatedly been attributed to the postmodern era.⁴ When grand narratives die, the underlying threads connecting the disparate weaken. So, if digital art can tell no grand narrative, what kind of discourse can it articulate? How does the radically modified signification process we referred to earlier, the absence of well-orchestrated relata, affect its public role?

Digital art is technologically determined. But if technological determinism is social determinism, then digital art somehow serves a grander social goal. In what follows, we will explore the extent to which this ‘narrative’, fragmentary as it may be, possesses the discursive properties that would help it qualify as ‘public sphere’ discourse in the Habermasian sense. For “art is not only the object of distribution in the public sphere, because art itself and its power to appear are also parts of the public sphere” (Niemi Pynttari 2010, p. 346).

Following Habermas’s definition, whereby the ‘public sphere’ mediates between private and public interest, it appears that the globalised Web determinism that characterizes our era lends itself most readily for consideration in public sphere terms. The private discourse of the millions of private viewers worldwide may converge over the

WWW, the most obviously public and ecumenical medium of all. Especially considering the fact that, according to Habermas (1991), the public sphere may involve a diffusion of information and arguments beyond the restrictions of space, the relevance becomes most distinct. It seems that we are presented with the restrictions of the present moment alone. So, what kind of public sphere do digital works of art create or constitute?

In addressing this question, one needs to consider the requirements for Habermas's public sphere. Universality is met, as is democracy in the sense of the absence of ranking and exclusion. Yet, how autonomous are the viewers-users or the artists who are called upon to observe the specifications of the New Media? And, how manipulative is the specific medium for the articulation of the discourse (see Pasquinelli, 1996)? Most importantly, to what extent is there consensus over rational discourse? And how honest and sincere, how committed is this discourse? Transferred to our discussion, this means talking art along with talking about art (that is the metalanguage exchanged over the Web or in relation to it). But then, how can one fixate the 'effects of signs' discursively?

Talking about the change of the medium in the new public sphere, Habermas (1991) refers to the shift from mediating rational debate to creating a spectacle and a culture industry limiting rational debate (see Hope, 2007, p. 144) and urges for the media changing into a transmitter of critical debate again. Polimeris (2011) refers to the absence of ethical rules and commitment due to the non-semantically classified chaos of the Web as well as the lack of empathy and involvement with the work of art. In the absence of principles, it is particularly difficult to reach 'consensus' within a framework of relationships 'in absentia.' Similarly, the viewer-user who is immersed in the digital work of art, often incapable of distancing him/herself, may find it particularly difficult to act co-operatively in a public sphere. Habermas himself (1998) points out that, unlike the expanded public consciousness one might expect in the global age, one may get publics closed off from one another. And, in terms of power relations, the Web may not flatten them but may instead help create small valleys in the mountains of power, in Hope's (2007) experience.⁵

Overall, the debate rages between those who believe in increased democratization resulting from the New Media and those who argue that the inevitable result will be further fragmentation as well as trivialization (see discussion in Bērziņš, 2010).⁶ Polimeris (2013) suggests that the language articulated is an incomplete, fragmentary idiolect, which isolates the individual rather than uniting him with others in a public sphere, as might arguably be the case with non-digital art, though, of course, status issues like the ones raised in Bourdieu (2002) would also need to be seriously considered. On the other hand, an alternative might be to consider our era in the light of its very fragmentation, not in contradistinction to a past or in pursuit of a unified, idealized speech (see Cubitt 2005, p. 93). Following, rather than contra Dahlberg (2007, 2011) this time, we could pursue contestation rather than consensus, reconceptualising the public sphere. In any case, it appears that we would need to invent a new signification system.

Concluding remarks

In this paper we have tried to show that digital art entails a different semiosis and poses a number of interpretation problems. On the public sphere level, it might be seen as operating along less global lines than might be expected. We would like to suggest that we may after all be past the postmodern era, since we seem to have developed a met-language for it, and may have started building a new narrative, which may eventually have an impact on digital art, too, acting as its interpretant.

Endnotes

1. Consider, for instance, Konsa's (2010, pp.79-80) emphatic statement concerning fictional environment cultures to the effect that "Artificial cultures are not models or clones of existing cultures; they are independent systems in dynamic development." We would suggest that artificial cultures, which could subsume digital art environments, may have developed into independent systems but that the notion of imitation, 'mimesis', the re-enactment of real life perhaps in different terms is inherent in them.
2. Just as the "stop sign at the street corner (...) is first perceived as an octagonal shape bearing the letters S-T-O-P (and) it is only in relation to a subsequent thought – what Peirce called an interpretant – that (it) attains its meaning. (In other words), the meaning lies not in the perception but in the interpretation of the perception as a signal to stop or, better still, in the act of stopping" (Hoopes, 1991, p.7).
3. Don't hyperlinks form part of these data bases after all?
4. A diametrically opposed view is Dahlberg's (2007, 2011). Dahlberg speaks of fragments in terms of 'respect for difference in democracy'.
5. What Dahlberg (2011) may refer to as 'digital democracy'.
6. Froomkin (2004, p.8; in Bērziņš, 2010, p. 101), for instance, talks about "the Internet draw(ing) power back into the public sphere, mak(ing) it possible, as never before, to create as many spaces and new institutional forms as one desires".

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