

Life practices in the future, semiotic prospecting: how does the past reinscribe itself in the world of today and tomorrow?

Práticas de vida no futuro, prospecção semiótica: como o passado se reinscreve no hoje e no amanhã?

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to show the semiotic discipline as constructed by Algirdas Julien Greimas, focusing on the developments in regimes of interaction and meaning as correlations between principles of narrativity developed by Eric Landowski. Moreover, it explores how this complexification of the interactional model provides a theoretical and methodological framework for elaborating prospects for objects of study through description, analysis, and interpretation. Based on this foundation of the general theory of meaning, the article seeks out ways of life established at the beginning of the 20th century from the perspective of the Futurism artistic movement and it underscores the radical departure from optimism in a world dominated by technological innovation today, which has resulted in a bleak and dysphoric view of contemporary social life, projecting itself into a future marked by uncertainty in life narratives.

Keywords: Semiotics; Regimes of interaction and meaning; Futurism; Technological disenchantment; Life practices.

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RESUMO

O artigo visa mostrar a disciplina semiótica na construção que lhe deu Algirdas Julien Greimas com os desdobramentos dos regimes de interação e sentido como correlações entre princípios de narratividades desenvolvidos por Eric Landowski e como essa complexificação do modelo interacional oferece arcabouço teórico e metodológico para elaborar prospecções dos objetos de estudo com descrição, análise e interpretação. Com esse aporte da teoria geral do sentido, o artigo prospecta as práticas de vida instaladas do início do século XX a partir do ponto de vista do movimento

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artístico do Futurismo e mostra a radical distância do otimismo no mundo regido pela inovação tecnológica que domina o hoje resultando em uma visão desencantada e disfórica da vida social na atualidade que se projeta em um futuro de incertezas nas narrativas de vida.

Palavras-chave: Semiótica; Regimes de interação e sentido; Futurismo, Desencantamento tecnológico, Práticas de vida.

RECOGNIZING THAT THE world is always in constant change reveals that the value that humanity has worked hardest to build — innovation— appears as a continuum that is driven by types of discontinuum. Promoting ruptures in the continuum, the discontinuum is driven by change. Perhaps this is why this sector never stops receiving huge investments to keep it moving forward.

When I titled my plenary speech “Semiotic prospection”, the first question that came up on the thematic stage was how the semiotic discipline can build prospection and how it does so. Prospecting is the first stage of an analysis, which depends on observing the facts, recording and describing them. The semiotic theory of Algirdas Julien Greimas and his group of collaborators, at the end of the 1960s, was born out of prospection in the linguistic field of semantics. It was by investing in this field and taking the structuring of Russian marvelous tales as a manifestation of culture, already systematized by Wladimir Propp, that the Lithuanian master gave visibility to narrativity as a universal in that narrativity is present in manifestations of all fields. It can thus be said that it was around the hypothesis of narrative as a universal form of organization that semiotic theory as a theory of social interaction was built. The iteration of the three tests: “qualifying, decisive, and glorifying” formed the basis of the canonical narrative scheme. The regency of the principle of “intentionality” is what enabled the development of structural, narrative, or discursive semiotics and how it has been qualified to distinguish this disciplinary branch from others. As the systematization of Greimas and Courtés (1979) in the Dictionary of Semiotics I attests:

Discursive activity lies in a discursive know-how, which presupposes a narrative competence if we want to be able to grasp and construct meaning from the speeches that occur, a competence that can be considered as a kind of syntagmatic intelligence. The problem of discursive competence and performance depends on narrative competence, also known as semiotic competence, which are skills described in speeches with a regard to the semiotics of action. (Entry Competence, p. 75)

And concluding “In the semiotic project, narrativity is the organizing principle of every speech. Narrative structures can be defined as constitutive of the deep level” (Entry Narrativity, p. 330).

Working on these bases, Eric Landowski, from 1994 onwards, went on to retrace the scope of narrativity beyond the principle of intentionality that had been developed by Greimas and his group of researchers in various fields of knowledge, which allowed for the generalization of the “manipulation” procedure. Within a decade, in 2004, Landowski proposed a new procedure, that of “adjustment”, as opposed to manipulation (Landowski, 2004). In addition, in 2005, he published *Risky Interactions*, with the other principles focused on the types of interaction established between subjects, whatever they may be: men, animals, things, or objects, in different types of interactions (Landowski, 2014a). Different actors and their actions are established in terms of regimes. Regimes of interaction that guide the regimes of meaning and take into account the variables of risk that the subjects take with the types of their actions in the social sphere.

Understanding the regimes of interaction and meaning as correlations between the principles of narratives that make up a system allows for a significant advance in the scope of observation, description, and analysis of the processes, in other words, the uses of the system. This is what has made it possible to account for discursive complexity and even to foresee passages between the different narratives, as well as the fact that within each regime (Figure 1) there are passages of ellipsis itself.

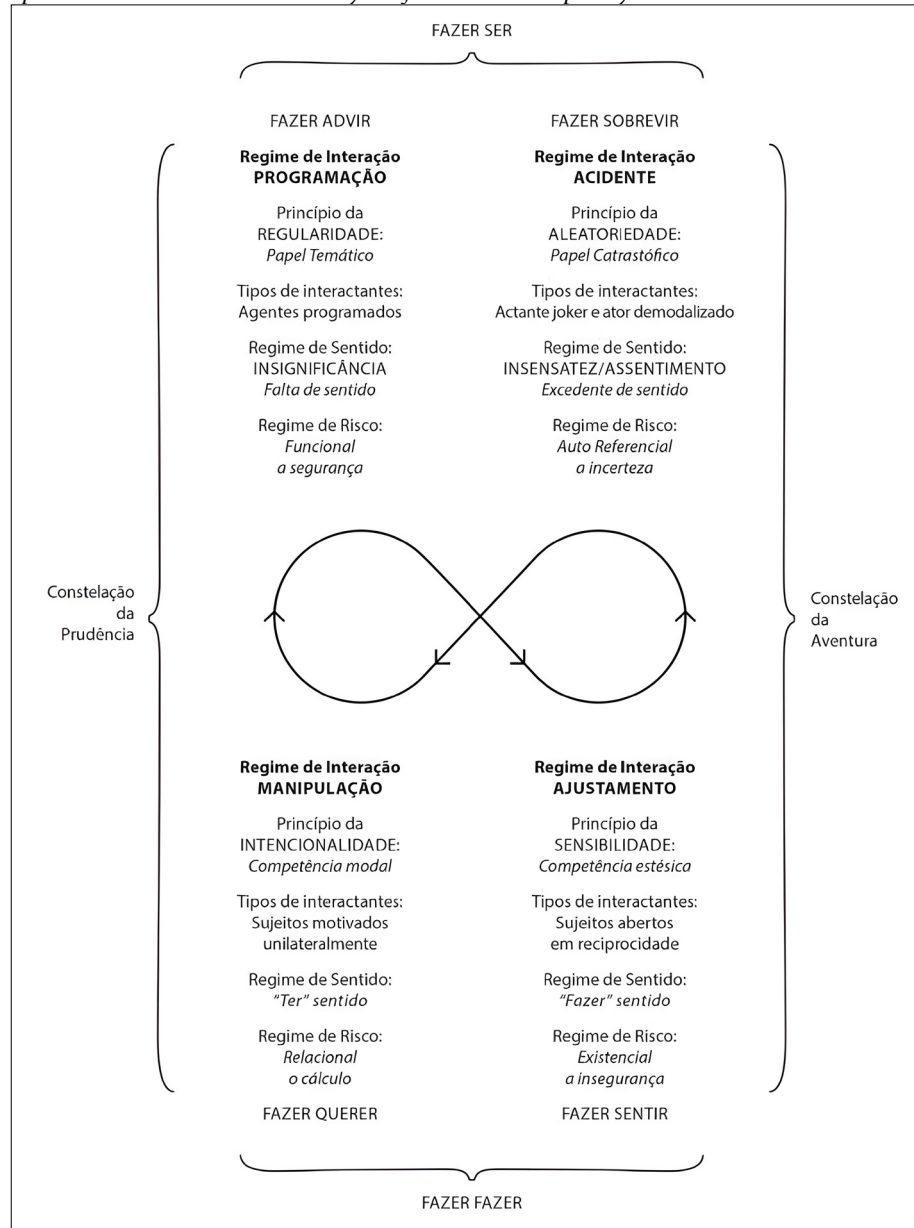
Through a typology of actions that make up narrativities, it is equally important to see how these are constructed through the types of syncretic articulation of languages that make up the plane of expression in order to materialize the concept of content; and thus address how the figurative translation into languages is processed through rhythmic and aesthetic plasticity.

Semiotic theory, with its method —the generative path of meaning on the axiological, narrative and discursive levels—, makes it possible to account for the interaction and meaning regimes in this type of intertwining, in which the statement and the enunciation configure whole strands of meaning.

By providing an overview of the scope of semiotic theory, the aim is to present the passages between the different syntaxes in their logics, governing both the constellation of prudence and adventure, which make it possible to characterize the presence of the subject, groups, and society in the world. With this methodological approach, semiotics contributes to the analytical-interpretative study of the apprehension and production of the world in which we live.

Figure 1

Diagrammatic synthesis of the regimes of interaction and meaning with the correlations between the types of narrativity with the passages in the semiotic ellipse that Eric Landowski operationalizes to handle the analysis of discursive complexity



Note. From the elaboration in Landowski (2024).

It is with these theoretical-methodological bases that semiotic theory has started to explore the social in different manifestations always bearing in mind that to do semiotics is to assume a point of view, a positioning that defines the angle of the perspective. Positioning to describe the object of study then bears the marks of this position in the interaction, and this is the most laborious part of the task, which is the encounter in the speech of how the object shows itself to the observer in all its structuring. This encounter results from an adjustment with the object under study that favors the construction of the analysis categories. This is why semioticians repeat that there is no application of semiotic theory, but that it is a theoretical framework that aims to illuminate the manifestation being studied and not a conceptual grid that imprisons and categorizes it.

Following on from this presentation, I'll move on to the semiotic study of life practices. Life practices mean the manifestations of practices that are assumed in society. They are acts and actions that are repeated and in this repetition, they gain meaning. The concept of isotopic reiteration is what allows an act, an action to become a life practice. This can become a "rule" when reiterated by the principle of regularity; a "habit" when the acts are carried out with intentionality; or when this practice becomes a means of discovering oneself, a group, a community, a neighborhood, a commercial point, a city, in short, when the encounter between equals enables the freedom to create in reciprocal co-participation.

In the *Dictionary of Semiotics I*, Greimas and Courtés (1979, p. 380) define "semiotic practice": "... as meaningful sequences of organized somatic behaviors, whose realizations range from simple social stereotypes to algorithmic form programming (which eventually allows the use of an automaton)".

And at the end of the "practical" part, the authors specify that "the study of semiotic practices is probably only the beginnings of a semiotics of action" (p. 380).

Taken as a prolegomenon of the life practices concept, practice is understood to be an everyday act that characterizes actions that are repeated, but not in a redundant way, that makes them meaningless. On the contrary, these can be the practices of an individual, a social group, or, on a larger scale, the city's population. The repetition of an action, of a sequence of actions, occurs on the syntagmatic axis at temporal intervals and manifests a mode of presence that is defined by the actional constancy of everyday life. The recurring traits show what remains in the transformational dynamic and these promote the identification of the practice. As a relational network of traits, the practice is decomposable and can be reconstructed when analyzing a place in the city, the practices of real estate residents, for example. The set of statements that structure a practice is the result of a unique enunciation strategy adopted by the enunciator. In the context of a city, the utterances are made by a collective

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enunciator. These are various instances of the performative realization of subjective activities, which show how interactions are established that lead to analyzing a given practice as a series of linked narrative programs between subjects, between subjects and objects of value. This syntax is more complicated as the practice becomes more and more entangled in its structure with narrative programs of use that presuppose the basic programs of the subjects in action. In this sense, from the analysis of the syntactic and semantic components of a city's life practices, the axiological and narrative levels can be deduced from the speeches that indicate in the different interactions of the subjects how the different actions reiterated as life practices make a city be, at the same time as these types of interactions are constitutive of the making being of its inhabitants. This semiotic method of the generative path of meaning has a two-way traffic, going back and forth, from the surface of the speech to the depths of the axiology with the values in question.

FROM THE SEMIOTIC SCOPE TO THE PROSPECT OF THE PRESENT, FUTURISM AND THE PROMISE OF A NEW WORLD

One of the most striking art movements that shows a changing world is undoubtedly Futurism, which was very proactive about the changes from the 19th to the 20th century. It was by reflecting on some Futurist works that we focused on the prospect of our changing world in the second decade of the 21st century.

On February 20, 1909, the Italian poet Filippo Marinetti published the *Futurist Manifesto* in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. The print media was chosen to announce to the world the 11 items of the project for the realization of art based on a radical break with the past and an association of man with the machines of the new century marked by dynamism. The European avant-garde's break with tradition was driven by a quest to create a future centered on the inventions of the Second Industrial Revolution, which was based on technology that transformed modes of production and made the city the way of life in the modern era.

1. We want to sing about the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.
3. Literature has so far exalted thoughtful immobility, ecstasy and sleep. We want to exalt aggressive movement, feverish insomnia, the running step, the somersault, the slap and the punch.
4. We say that the magnificence of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car with its vault adorned with thick snake-like tubes

of explosive breath... a roaring car that runs on machine gun fire is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*. (Marinetti, 1909)

These postulations placed unparalleled optimism in the future and called on artists to throw themselves into the freedom of creation that resulted in marked renovations of forms with the use of free verse and a change of syntactic order in poetry and in painting the exaltation of movement, action and energy. The break with the art of the past was driven by the creation of the new. But wouldn't the new be a trap for itself, since in every manifestation that are elaborated, a reconfiguration of what already exists is created, but from another point of view, under angles that are experienced from other positions that are tested?

By choosing propaganda as its main means of communication, Futurism was committed at various times to the Fascist movement in Italy, which saw war as the way to sanitize the world. Futurism in art therefore declined after the Second World War. Even with all these caveats, what interests us is how this artistic production enables us to understand the vision of world transformation that was spread at the time.

Later in the *Futurist Manifesto*, Marinetti (1909), in items 8 and 11, proclaims:

8. We are at the extreme peak of the centuries! Why should we look back if we want to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We are already living in the absolute because we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed.

11. We will sing of the great crowds driven by work, pleasure or uprising; we will sing of the multicolored and polyphonic tides of revolutions in modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nocturnal fervor of arsenals and shipyards set ablaze by violent electric moons; of choked stations, devoured by smoking snakes; of workshops hanging from the clouds by the contorted threads of their smoke; the bridges, like giant gymnasts riding the rivers, sparking in the sun with a flash of knives; the adventurous pyroscopes sniffing the horizon, the broad-breasted locomotives, pawing over the rails, like huge steel horses entangled with cars; and the low-flying airplanes, whose propeller flutters in the wind, like a flag, and seems to applaud like an enthusiastic crowd.

Here are some of the works that embodied the proclamations of the Futurist manifesto in the way they were created on canvas. In his search for creative freedom, Boccioni exalted technology and energy, showing them in figurative images of the world's constant mutation. The artist did not paint a moment, but

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the action itself, which we can follow in *The Awakening of the City* (*La città che sale*), from 1910 (Figure 2).

Figure 2

The awakening of the city (La città che sale), 1910, Umberto Boccioni.

Oil on canvas, 199,3x301cm



Note. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Nova York.

The Awakening of the City is considered one of the most significant works of Futurism. Created between 1910 and 1911, this monumental painting depicts the frenetic dynamics of an expanding city in the throes of industrial progress. We can see that the automobile, although it already existed, did not yet dominate everyday life in cities and the canvas shows urban development from a blazing horse invested with a colossal force that moves the building materials of the new city. The diagonal gives movement to the scene, but by placing it upward, it takes us out of the upper limits of the painting. The contours of the horse are blurred in a formal creation of its capture from the moment its force of action and the acceleration of its movement are caught.

At the top, the background is high buildings and other equines are at work frantically performing their actions. The equine has a reddish color and, at the neck, a blue spot indicates the harness in a very diffuse way that ambiguously associates it with wings that give the animal supernatural powers. The winged

horse of Greek mythology, Pegasus, acts metaphorically to make the city under construction build itself up and have its awakening.

In the next work, the city awakens as an intense construction site that builds and prepares the city to be inhabited more and more. Boccioni's *the street enters the house* (1911) brings us face-to-face with a new panoramic view of modernity (Figure 3).

Figure 3

The street enters the house (La strada entra nella casa), 1911, Umberto Boccioni. Oil on canvas, 100×100,6cm



Note. Sprengel Museum, Hanôver.

On the balcony with the curved floral arabesques characteristic of *art nouveau*, a woman is leaning over the iron balcony, resting her arms on it and tilting her torso, taken with curiosity and interest by the hustle and bustle of

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the buildings in the street and, more specifically, her head is turned to the left and looking intently at something that is happening below. We see part of her left cheek and a head covered in blue hair. In great movement over blues and greens, the chromaticism of thick white brushstrokes pinks in various directions and a yellow line, from the left side, horizontally crosses the woman's torso and continues further to the right. The movement of the brushstrokes upwards and downwards dresses her torso, indicating an intense dynamism that makes her enter the many construction buildings in the process through her eyes and her lean body. This is the general view of the construction site in front of her, which contemplates the woman at the counter. It highlights the effervescence of the surroundings and the work of many laborers carrying out this transformation which, when completed, will completely change the horizon that can be seen from the balcony. On the right-hand side, the succession of floors already indicates the type of transformation that is taking place.

Figure 4

States of Mind I: The Farewells, 1911, Umberto Boccioni. Oil on canvas, 70,5x96,2cm.



Note. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Nova York.

Farewells is the first in the series of three works that make up *States of Soul* (Figure 4), followed by *Those who leave* and *Those who stay*. The train

is the presence of modernization and machinery. Through a reiteration of geometric shapes in a range of shades of green, the figurative nature of vegetation standardizes society. At the train station, the prevailing mood is the pain of separation between those who love each other and need to be apart.

On the screen, the undulations mark out areas in red tones in the middle of a green landscape with so much movement that two spirals cut through it and draw the letter “V” above which the locomotive advances head-on, carrying the number 6943, which identifies the train that smokes where it passes. Mother and son exchange a farewell hug at the bottom left, a gesture that is repeated several times, as if the hug echoes in the memories of those embracing. At the top left, an electricity tower rises, carrying in its wiring the lighting that has changed human life.

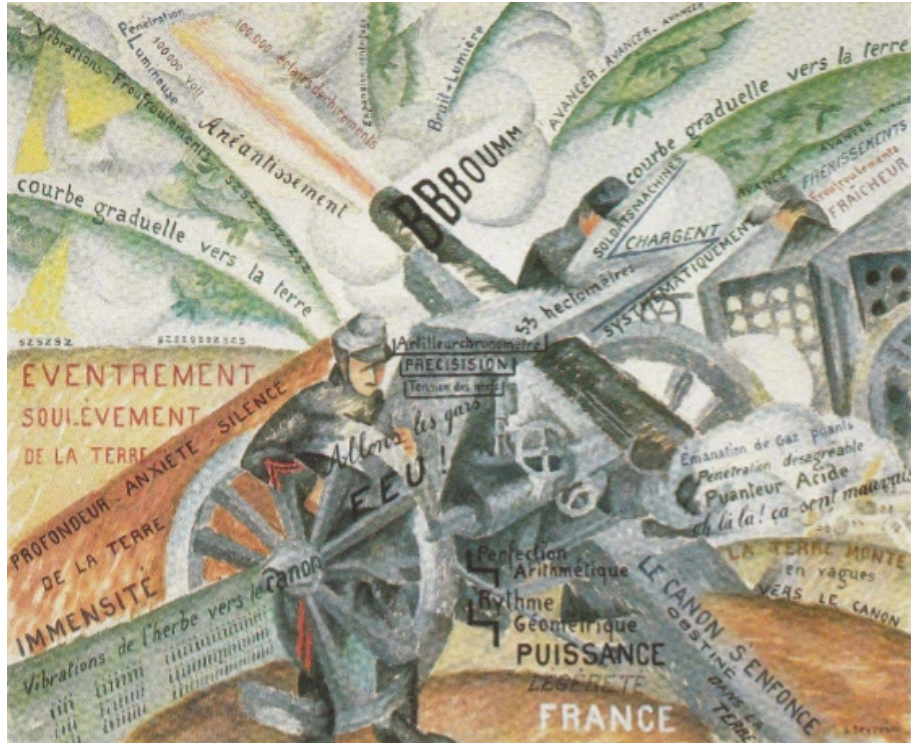
The speed of the automobile is emphasized by a formal construction method based on a sequence of several juxtaposed photographs and geometric shapes that create deformation but convey the feeling of speed (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Automobile speed, light and noise (Velocità d'automobile), 1913, Giacomo Balla.
Oil on canvas, 109x84cm



Note. Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Trento and Rovereto.

Figure 6*Cannon in action (Cannoni in azione), 1915, Gino Severini.**Oil on screen, 115,8x88,5cm*

Note. Museum Ludwig, Köln.

The representation of war, with the main presence of the cannon and all the technology of this weapon that has changed the way we fight, has soldiers and a range of verbal phrases written in French that deal with the very action of destroying the cannon in its attacks on the earth. These include: “the cannon sinks obstinately into the earth”, “the earth rises in waves towards the cannon”, “gradual curve towards the earth”, “precision”, and olfactorily observing “the emanation of stinking gas”, “acid stench that smells bad”, “unpleasant penetration”. Also exploiting the onomatopoeic sound of the booms in “BBOUMM” and its “noise-light”, as well as the commands “Come on guys, FIRE!”, or “ADVANCE – ADVANCE – ADVANCE”, with the admiring adjectives “arithmetic perfection”, “geometric rhythm”, “power”, “lightness”, “strength”, “conquest” and at the center of the action: “France” (Figure 6).

The tank is thus in praise of 20th-century technology. With an optimistic vision, the futurists share values that together carry the syntax of an enunciation of change. An entanglement of statements of doing that has no end since

they never establish a statement of final state. Everything is inscribed in the transformation towards the creation of a “Brave new world” that never materializes and remains in process.

FROM THE FUTURISM OF YESTERDAY TO THE PRESENT AND THE PROSPECT OF THE FUTURE AND OF WHO WE ARE

If futurism means “recognizing that life will change, must change, and has been changing”, then now, in the second decade of the 21st century, are we still futurists?

We are currently facing the *crisis* in every area. Unlike the 20th century, our state of mind is one of pessimism, and we keep asking ourselves in which direction these many crises are taking us. Mental health has never been so badly affected, and the pharmaceutical industry is investing in new drugs that are being tested on an increasingly drug-dependent population. The synchronism of life in so many dimensions turns everything into a continuous flow that seems to steal what is proper to life. It robs us of immediate interaction and hand-to-hand experience with the events of the world.

Apart from that, wars that are transformed by new weapons resources, which are guided by satellites, result of uninterrupted advances in technology that guarantee precision in obtaining targets with drones and long-range missiles, crucial in today’s conflicts, there are still other equally damaging wars, such as drug trafficking, now with powerful destructive drugs developed by the laboratories of the mafia drug barons, with multiplied addictive effects that dope users without the possibility of returning to a state before addiction.

Even today, there is extreme social inequality across the globe and the fight against hunger is a no-win battle. Not to mention climate change and global warming, which has already been shown to cause everything from extreme droughts and their impact on food production to floods like the one that devastated Rio Grande do Sul in July of 2024.

In all of these few examples from our present, the narrative that dominates is the one ruled by the strategy regime, under the principle of intentionality with transitions to the programming regime under the principle of operative regularity.

There are many oppressive recipients, including a multitude of populist recipients with their siren songs, which seduce and enchant voters who are led to adhere to them. This generates a very tense polemical climate centered on dualities that affect moods and states of mind and reconfigures society into many subgroups.

With these few points highlighted it is possible to analyze, in the socio-economic and cultural context, the lack of a direction towards the future. The

lack of something new that could project itself onto the present and retrace its collision course. This lack lies in a subject who is competent for this new time. A subject who is inventive in their performance, who is able, through their cognitive and performative competency, to let themselves be guided by their sensitivity in order to become a creative subject (Landowski, 2017)..

If it is the inventions of a few that impose themselves on the population as a whole, how can we have a time that reforms our century and its values that shape the future by breaking with the present and the past? How can we free ourselves from the constraints of intentional practices with their manipulative calculations and intentions that become regulatory practices?

Future time needs to understand the rules and intentions of its narratives and the meanings they produce so that it can go further and develop them, playing with, taking advantage of, and using them to arrive at new forms.

Semiotic prospecting indicates that we have to constitute ourselves as free and creative subjects who, starting from the existing social and playing with it, take advantage of it to reinvent interaction in a new way, which gives rise to new meanings.

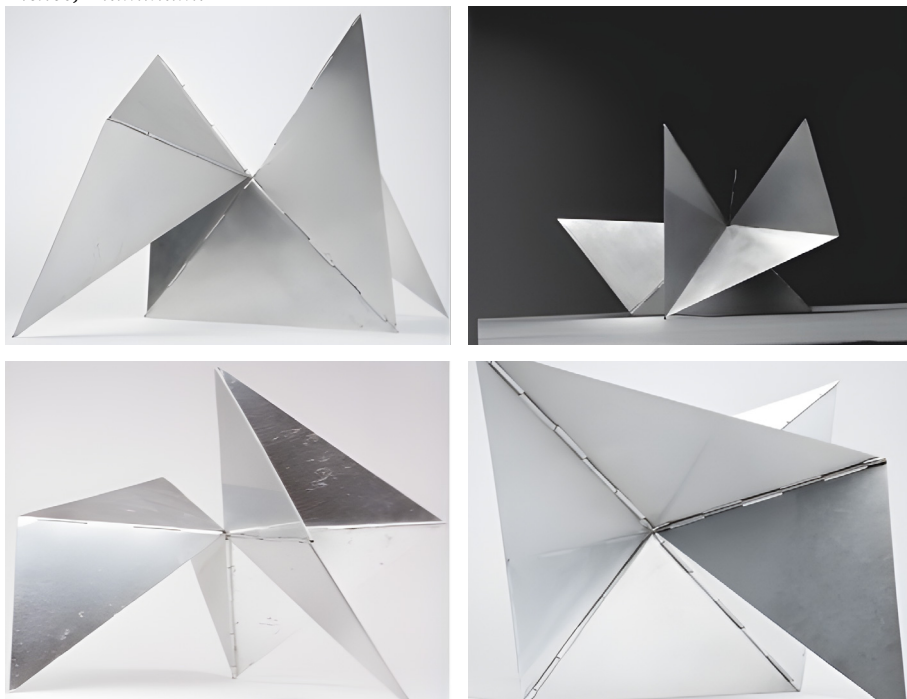
One way of making this case for a new position for the subject in and through their experience can be seen in a visit I invite you to make in these days of July 2024 to the Pinacoteca of São Paulo, in the Bom Retiro district. I invite you to sit in front of Lygia Clark's works *Os bichos* (*The animals*) (Figure 7), which can be seen in the topologies of their forms, in the coldness of the metallic material of the geometric shapes, in the possibilities of combinatorial arrangement of the pieces by the subject in reciprocal interaction with the exchanges of skills in experimentation. The *Os bichos* series can, one by one, by getting us to play with them, assume that reassembling the assembly comes from understanding the rules, articulating, and re-articulating the elements into a whole in which they act together, making it possible to grasp the meaning they have and how to put them together into a meaningful whole. Only this apprehension develops new forms and, at the same time, redefines the subject's interaction with the work, predisposing them to expose themselves by creating in sharing.

The piece is made up of seven acute triangles in an aluminum sheet that are joined by hinges. The pieces are cold, and it is almost impossible to sit next to them and face them without playing a game of assembly and reassembly. The hands make the eyes focus on the piece, which shimmers in the greater or lesser light of the environment and thus makes us feel its parts that seek to change. Theirs or ours? It turns out that we change together with and from the changes in the parts. The pieces shine, and we give them more and more space to interact in a never-ending tinkering of triangles. As soon as the sculpture is assembled, we,

looking at it, are driven by it to continue folding it and refolding it and standing still to observe the whole of the sculpture. What is the source that drives our interaction? How is it that about the seven parts, we make several joints and do not want to stop handling them? We are invaded by a feeling that leads us to discover in this continuous act that everything is change that reinvents us. We glimpse that what is created, makes itself created in the same way that the creator itself, who is in the piece, is also in the handling of it. This construction of oneself involves the re-signification of normalities, which promotes the reinvention of oneself and the reinvention of meaning.

Figure 7

Articulated/Monument to Descartes/Crab, 1959, Lygia Clark. Neoconcrete sculptures Bichos, Aluminum.



Note. Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection.

As difficult as it may seem, it is urgent and necessary to reinvent the subject and its active role in the world. For the future to exist, the need is to redefine the subject's competency, to encourage their openness and willingness to absorb both the rules with which they play, the intentions that guide them in society and affect them all the time and, also, the unpredictability that may arise and unexpectedly erupt in the course of their life, as well as the various encounters

that sharpen their freedom of creation and make them discover themselves and find paths in and through the sensitive interactions of the adjustment regime (Landowski, 2014a, 2022).

It was through these directions that this article argued that the semiotic theory developed by A. J. Greimas —and continued in the line of the regimes of interaction and meaning formulated by E. Landowski—, as a general theory of meaning (Landowski, 2014b), is a prospecting apparatus that can describe, analyze and interpret social life with its practices. It also showed the results of the succession of discontinuities that affected the continuum, taking as a focus, at the beginning of the 20th century, Futurism, worshipped with exaggerated optimism for the modernization of life and the break with tradition, fascination with technological innovation and changes in social practices that brought about the social, machines, speed, war. It was precisely this whole set of measures that banished the very proclamations of a new world. We emphasize the discouraging dominance that the systematized world imposed on life under rules and guidelines that made the possibilities of choices unfeasible. Under dominant pessimism and anxiety, human life began to be increasingly covered by mediations that only led the living to isolation. We advocate that the return to immediate contact and to the hand-to-hand experience is what can restore man to a meaningful life and to this power to once again dispose of his freedom as a creator. Thus, we indicate that it is urgent to reinsert a subject freed from the bonds of control, from the regularity arising from technologies and from mediated interactions in order to rediscover his freedom of invention and, by playing with the social, take advantage of it to be able to invent new meanings originating from his rediscovery of the strength of his direct experience in the world (Oliveira, 2024; Oliveira & Landowski, 2022). ■

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