

## Time and Digital Poetics

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**Abstract:** From a semiotic standpoint, this discussion focuses on the issue of time in digital environments so as to attempt an answer to the question whether temporal awareness undergoes a collapse into presentness or whether narrative structure is dissolved in the unpredictability of links that may be accessed randomly; that is, the hypertext loses exactly the anaphoric reference to a significant preexistence on behalf of a

succession of bits of presentness.

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As an initial word of warning, I should say that I do not intend, in this paper, to describe digital poetics, in the sense of discussing works in this realm or making comments of a qualitative or technical nature on the manifestations of genius – or lack thereof – of this or that artist. My interest is, rather, centered on abstractions. At the risk of becoming arcane and abstruse, I feel inclined to ponder certain general conditions that obtain for any work in digital environments, whether it is artistic, informative, recreational, commercial, persuasive, or even absent-mindedly exploratory. Thus I expect to contribute something to thought on digital poetics – a concept with a very broad semantic spectrum – so as to help this new area of academic endeavor to overcome certain recurring issues which, if not resolved, tend to keep it trapped in a theoretical loop. To put it differently and remembering that very often the important thing is the correct question, and not just any answer, I propose to re-challenge some concepts.

I ask, therefore, a question: to what extent the notion of time as a conventional semiotic construct, linked to a linear sequentializing narrative, is deconstructed in the digital environment, i.e., loses its referentiality (both as cataphor and anaphor)? I unfold the question into specific semiotic terms: to what extent does time lose – if at all – its representativeness in the interpretant and its referentiality to an object?<sup>1</sup>

Such questions find their motivation in ideas stemming from an ongoing discussion, such as typically seen in Paul Virilio, to the effect that the objectless image becomes an object itself, or it loses its representative character in order to become a mere conative phatic object or, even further, it assumes a purely presentative aspect in the digitalized context.

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<sup>1</sup> I assume, naturally, that the reader is somewhat familiar with C.S. Peirce's theoretical architecture.

In his classic approach to the automation of image perception by the so-called new technologies, Virilio (1993:128) touches on the issue of temporality in terms of the image's mental persistence, insofar as such persistence is not merely retinal but it also hinges on the memory of ocular perceptions. As there is no fixed image (from the perspective of the physiology of sight, eye motility and mobility), there is no guarantee of temporal univocality, because "seeing is travelling, it is a perceptive activity that began in the past in order to shed light on the present, to focus on the object of immediate perception" (Virilio 1993:129).

Virilio's argument is that this conative phatic object that captures our eyes is no longer what he calls a *potent image*, but a cliché that seeks, through the gaze of the one who sees it, to gain depth and fill itself with vicarious meaning. In other words, such a potency (= ability to make reference and be interpretable) is emptied and its perception becomes purely present (even though it is possible to assimilate the seduction of this imagetic cliché to a prospection, i.e., a projection into the future).<sup>2</sup> It is not difficult, even, to see a connection with the concept of efficient causation, related, as we know, to the maxim "*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*".

Revisiting the potent image, though, we must remember that the reference it makes to its object gives us the illusion of the remanifestation of that object. However, what we have is the phenomenon Lyotard (1990: 25) calls *inclusive disjunction*: a visual object offers one of its faces to our gaze but it hides the others, so that successive sightings may ultimately even nullify the identification – or, in Peircean terms, the recognition in thirdness – of the visual object.

Such a perceptive recognition, Lyotard stresses, never fulfills the logical requirement of complete description, but it is enough for analogic identification. Thus, Lyotard proceeds:

This is the experience, the subtlety, the uncertainty, the faith in the inexhaustible sensible that we connote when we talk seriously about the analog, [by which we mean] more than only a data transport mode on an inscription surface that did not originally belong to it. (Lyotard 1990: 25)

The analog would be, therefore, the re-identification of an object distorted by the very process of perception, but, at any rate, it depends on an objective preexistence for its realization: at least, this is what the prefix *re-* implies.

Perhaps the analogy suggested above becomes possible, in the sense that an image (at least the conventional one) is a narrative, if we think that a minimal narrative is a reference to a least a *before* and an *after*.<sup>3</sup>

Carrying our analogy a little further, we feel authorized to say that the hypertext would cease to be a potent symbol insofar as its narrativity is dissolved in the unpredictability of links that may be accessed randomly; that is, the hypertext loses exactly the anaphoric reference to a significant preexistence on behalf of a succession of bits of presentness which would eternally tend towards a nebulous future.<sup>4</sup>

The paradox lies in what we will provisionally call *real time* – the apparent synchronicity that underlies our experience of the www, for example – a phenomenon that seems to destroy the very structure of that which purports to be a narrative. I refer here to the fragmentation and apparent loss of narrativity of news stories, or rather the news clips inserted every few seconds in online news pages. There is, as Virilio nostalgically puts it in terms of the image, a superficiality that makes evident the decadence of the Full, the Whole and the Actual in a world of transparency and virtuality (1993: 130).

And, to carry the argument forward myself, I might add that the dependence on presentness turns this impotent image, which needs to seduce other eyes in order to fill itself with meaning (any similarity with hysterical behaviors?), into something specular, in the same sense that Umberto Eco (1984: 202 ff) gives

<sup>2</sup> A potent image would be, for instance, a photograph taken during vacations: it has a precise reference (= object) to a fact, event, or situation in the past. A photograph taken for advertising purposes, on the other hand, loses much of its strong referentiality to a past in order to refer to the future fulfillment of a wish or desire.

<sup>3</sup> See, in this respect, the discussion in Pinto (1989, ch. I).

<sup>4</sup> The concept of hypertext that informs this statement is in Lévy 1999.

to mirror images in terms of their need of the present (both temporal and spatial). Some people will remark that, in the case of mirrors, the presentness of the image needs the presentness of the object (which is at the same time its cause and its reference), whereas in the case of technical images the object's presentness is not a necessary constituent. Even bearing this objection in mind, we still have a connection in temporal terms: if the digital image is an object, as Virilio and others argue, it is a sign of itself, and, therefore, an object of itself as a sign. All of this is in the present, in that such an image is a cliché and this type of sign belongs to a, let us say, lasting synchrony because it is atemporal. Hence its perception as purely present the discussion of the image in the digital environment would ensue the explicitation of a presentness that seems to destroy that narrativity that lies under (or within) the image in an extradigital context.

In terms of narrative time, it could be said that there are three basic elements on which to base a perception of the unfolding of events. It would be possible to stipulate a time of reference (R), a time of speech (S) and a narrated event (E). Without intending to describe in detail the whole theoretical framework which would lend some solidity to the considerations below<sup>5</sup>, let us propose the following configuration rule:

For the association of R, S, and E, the comma indicates co-temporaneousness and the dash indicates temporal distance in the past, if R is on the left of S, and in the future, if R is on the right of S.

A verb tense like the Simple Past is described as E, R—S, whereas the Pluperfect is E – R – S, the Future is S, R—E, and so forth. Thus, a typical narrative situation would be the one with the configuration E, R—S, from the point of view of the writer, and E—R—S, from the reader's standpoint. The writer thinks of the narrated event as immediately prior to the act of writing, and readers are faced in their *now* with an event that took place before some past reference. Readers operate, however, a temporal ellipsis, insofar as they take the place of the narrator, i.e., they think narrative as previous to *their* present, not the narrator's present, unless the narrator (homo- or intradiegetic) makes it explicit that the narrated fact took place before some other event also in the narrative's past.

At any rate, the narrative (or the unfolding of the story, in the case of moving images) has its R's moving along together with any event narrated or shown, which becomes Reference for the next one. In Caesar's *veni, vidi, vici*, the R of 'I saw' is 'I came', and the R of 'I won' is 'I saw'.

Rephrasing the initial question about the digital context, therefore, we might ask what this R would be and where would E be. Would it be the case of a permanent S, R, E, a perennial co-temporaneousness, especially in the already mentioned case of online journalism? This seems to be a trivial question, insofar as we know that, even if the temporal interval between a fact and its recording as an event is minimal (even if the recording is synchronous with its reception), there is a distance, and, therefore, the narrative is there. Would the same situation occur in the case of the image?

Surely, the case of conventional images corroborates the postulation that they have an embedded narrative in them. Peirce tells us about images that

An Icon is a Representamen whose Representative Quality is a Firstness of it as a First. That is, a quality that it has qua thing renders it fit to be a representamen ... A sign by Firstness is an image of its object and, more strictly speaking, can only be an idea. For it must produce an Interpretant idea; and an external object excites an idea by a reaction upon the brain. But most strictly speaking, even an idea, except in the sense of a possibility, or Firstness, cannot be an Icon. A possibility alone is an Icon purely by virtue of its quality; and its object can only be a Firstness. But a sign may be iconic, that is, may represent its object mainly by its similarity, no matter what its mode of being. If a substantive be wanted, an iconic representamen may be termed a hypoicon. Any material image, as a painting, is

<sup>5</sup> The theory is explained in detail in Pinto (1989).

largely conventional in its mode of representation; but in itself, without legend or label it may be called a hypoicon.<sup>6</sup>

There is much to discuss in this characterization of the sign as a First. Initially, the sentence “an external object excites an idea by a reaction upon the brain” is already implying the temporal aspects of the representation relation. This paragraph of the *Collected Papers* also equates an image to an idea; *id est*, something constituted from something (again, time is implicit). But, more importantly, there is no purely iconic – purely analog – representation, because “any material image ... is largely conventional in its mode of representation”. The term *conventional* is unequivocally used here to refer to that which Peirce calls Thirdness, a register of experience of the order of prediction and, therefore, of the future, akin to the idea of *final causation* (in contrast with the efficient causation in potent images). Forecasting consists in the comparison of previous occurrences of an event so as to produce a projection, with a reasonable degree of certainty, that the event is likely to take place.

Now, what is a digital image but a numerical interpretant designed to create future occurrences of the same image? The digital image is, in this light, a convention and it would thus constitute a prediction, inasmuch as it is also inscribed in Thirdness, just as any other technical image produced by any other media. As a matter of fact, it is, in a certain sense, much more predictable than analog images in terms of their manifestation and perhaps also in terms of their interpretation, because, as Virilio himself puts it, they are clichés.

But images are signs of Firstness. This means that other signs are Seconds and Thirds. Temporally, signs in Secondness (the famous trichotomy *icon, index, and symbol*) are those considered in terms of their reference to an object, some *it* previous to them. In other words, they are signs to (and of) a past. As they produce interpretants, these signs change categories to become Thirds, appearing as rhemes, dicisigns, and arguments. The interpretation experience throws the past towards the future in a predictive operation. Signs of Firstness are seen merely as signs without any reference or any interpretation and they may be, for this reason, thought of as signs of pure presentness which, we may infer, do not seem to exist in actuality (as there are no pure icons, if we accept CP 2.276).

Have we reached an aporia here? In accordance with the prophets of computerized Armageddon, digital images are purely clichés (and, therefore, a totalizing prediction of interpretation) and, in semiotic terms, conventional Thirdness. But, as they say, they are also images of the Eternal Present and, because of that, pre-reflexive Firstness in semiotic terms. First or Third?

The beginning of an answer announces itself: it would be altogether impossible to think of any sequencing in terms of *pre-* and *-post* without touching the *now*. It is necessary to remember Aristotle in Book 4 of the *Physics*: what would be the difference between the *proteron* (the former, the previous) and the *husteron* (the latter) if the flow is not positioned vis-à-vis a *now*? But it is also impossible to grab this *Now*, which is constantly dragged along by what we might call the *stream of consciousness*. The *Now* vanishes constantly. As Lyotard reminds us, “it is never too early or too late at the same time so that anything such as a ‘now’ may be apprehended in some identifiable manner” (1990: 33-34). Such a question may be turned inside out: without a past and a future, is there a *Now*?

Firstness or Thirdness? Semiotically, both. Narratively, both. In a hypertext, would there not be the same continuous movement of R, so that the previous E always becomes the R of the next E, as in any fairy tale or bedtime story (in which the most widely used conjunctions are undoubtedly “and so” and “and then”)? Or is there really the effect of unpredictability, actually making each node in the web an absolute present?

We know, nevertheless, that there cannot be an absolute present because any node is a link from and is going to refer immediately to the previous node as its R, constituting at least an indexical relationship (enough to make up a narrative, since what are the *before* and the *after* but indices of each other, even in advertisements for miraculous diets?)

<sup>6</sup> CP 2.276 (in accordance with the traditional citation format in Peircean studies, in which CP refers to *Collected Papers*, followed by the volume and paragraph numbers).

May we, then, discard this *total presentness* as a trick, an artifice of a digitality that wants, more than anything, to be more and more mimetic, and more and more recognizable? Would we not be talking only of syntactic changes when we talk about new digital poetics on the basis of a doubtful ontology of the device?

In other words, remembering Husserl with Derrida (1994) in a discussion about the *Bedeutung* (meaning): are we merely responding to the need to describe the objectivity of the object (*Gegenstand*) and the presence of the present (*Gegenwart*), i.e., objectivity in presence, on the basis of an interiority which is not a mere *inside*, but the intimate possibility of a relationship with the *there*, the *outside*; that is, that which is already given, which is there already?<sup>7</sup>

Finally, establishing an analogic reference to Arlindo Machado in his study of Flusser and *The Philosophy of the Black Box*, we might even ask whether this new impression of absolute presentness is the result of a temporal crossover because of a new syntax, a new non-clerical syntax, rather than the creation of a new regime of temporality.<sup>8</sup>

Well, as announced, more questions than answers.

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<sup>7</sup> This topic is also discussed minutely in Pinto (2002).

<sup>8</sup> This is a free reading of what is proposed in Machado (2001: 34-54). Roughly speaking, Flusser equates the mastery of a technology to clerical, bureaucratic work, whereas artistry would lie not in the mastery of technique, but in the non-clerical use of it.