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Toward a Unified Theory of the Arts

Since the great successes of structuralism, semiotics and poststructuralism during the past three decades, the theory of the sign-function and the ideological issues associated with it threaten to dominate the entire realm of aesthetic discourse. This paper presents the essential ingredients of a unified theory of the arts which, while reflecting the very real insights of structuralism and its offspring, seeks to move beyond them to a realm where the aesthetic can once again find its meaningful place. The theory is "unified" in ~~the sense~~ that it is designed to encompass: 1. any and all art forms; 2. the full historical

and ethnological range of artistic expression, non-Western as well as Western, modernist and postmodernist as well as "traditional"; 3. semiotic as well as aesthetic principles.

A complete elucidation of such a theory would be beyond the scope of this paper.[1] For now I would like simply to define and discuss certain fundamental principles and possibilities with respect to two representative art forms: painting and music.

An Analogy

Consider Figure 1 (all illustrations are at the end of the article). From an iconographic point of view, the most we can say is that it is rhomboid, i.e. essentially geometrical and flat.

Adding some lines (Figure 2) we can immediately recognize the sign, however crude, for "house". Our rhombus has become one side of the house. It is, moreover, no longer perceived as flat, but polarized in a particular direction with respect to three dimensional space: rearward to the right.

Consider the variation in Figure 3. The same rhombus is now perceived as polarized in a completely different direction: rearward to the left.

Now let us attempt to combine the two (Figure 4). Something is clearly wrong. The figure contains all the elements of the sign for house, but does not make sense. The difficulty centers on the original rhombus, which can no longer be perceived as having an unambiguous spatial orientation of any kind. The result can only be described as "ungrammatical".

Withholding, for the moment, any attempt at analysis, let us move to what seems an entirely different realm. Imagine listening to a single note in isolation (Figure 5).

Heard in a specific musical context (Figure 6), the same note is now clearly polarized in a particular *tonal* direction. As the *leading tone* of the key of C, it has a characteristically unstable quality.

In Figure 7, we have the same note preceded by a similar passage, but polarized in a completely different direction. As the *mediant* of G major, the B has a very different sound and meaning.

Finally, in Figure 8, preceded by a passage in B flat major, the B natural sounds wrong, ungrammatical. Unrelated to the key of B flat, unsupported by any clarifying harmony, the note cannot be oriented in tonal space. Its meaning is therefore unclear and it sounds out of place.[2]

The Syntactic Field

In the *pictorial* examples, ~~drawn from the visual arts,~~ a particular figure took on a different meaning and a different appearance depending on its apparent orientation within pictorial space. In the musical examples something very similar happened, but this time in the context of what we must call "tonal space". In both cases, instances which could not be understood within the given "spatial" context seemed in some sense to violate a "grammatical" rule and were understood as meaningless.[3]

Similar examples could doubtless be drawn from, say, "color

space", the "space" of musical time ("metric space"), sculptural space, architectural space, cinematic space, cinematic time, etc. What they would all have in common can be summarized in the following, which I call the "first *semio-aesthetic* principle": *any object of perception can signify (take on meaning) only in relation to a controlling field functioning as a syntax.*

The notion of *syntax* is appropriate in this context for more than one reason: it is, of course, associated with the rules of "grammar" to which we have already referred -- in this sense a syntax can be regarded as the ultimate source of a set of rules which express its essence; the term implies a purely formal, structural entity, functioning independently of any possible content; the derivation of the word suggests the useful notion of a structure (*tax*) which brings-together (*syn*) -- in this sense a syntactic field can be understood as having a unifying function.

An example of a syntactic field from the visual arts would be perspective space, which generates rules for signifying depth by placing marks on a flat surface. A musical analogue is the tonal system, which establishes a multidimensional tonal "space" by controlling pitch relationships within the essentially one-dimensional sound spectrum.

A second principle arises naturally from the first: *before any perceptible can function as a sign, it must be apprehended in relation to a gestalt, i.e. a figure perceived against a ground (the syntactic field).*

In the rush to establish semiotics as a theory of

everything, this rather obvious point seems to have been lost. We ought, of course, to concede to semiotics the corollary: every *gestalt* must signify.

In the visual arts, of course, a *gestalt* is equivalent to a form. In music, various kinds of figurations and motives generate *gestalts*, as do points of closure such as cadences.[4]

A third principle is the result of poststructuralist insights: *every syntactic field is a construct with an ideologically determined basis.*

In other words, there is no such thing as a passive or even neutral ground. The fields associated with all signifying processes are the products of culture and reflect ideologically determined value systems enforced by explicit or implicit rules.

Principle four: *in the absence of a clearly defined syntactic field, there arises a context of free floating, ambiguous implication which functions ideologically as though a syntactic field were present.*

Thus one cannot defeat the ideological effect of the syntactic field simply by breaking the rules, making random marks or random sounds, etc. While such perceptibles may not signify, they will always imply the existence of a transcendent *context of implication* within which their ambiguities can be resolved and a kind of mystical sign function can arise. This is undoubtedly the source of the special appeal of Surrealism .

Signification vs. Aesthesia

Let us pause for a moment to ponder some issues raised by

the above. The examples with which we began illustrate how pictorial and musical meaning is related to a -ocess of signification within a syntactic field. What is most remarkable and disturbing about this process is the fact that the shifts in *meaning* produced shifts in the way our figure and our note were actually *perceived*: as the sign for "side of a house", our rhombus is not only *understood*, but actually *seen*, as a rectangle "in perspective"; as the sign for "leading tone in C major", our note is not only *understood*, but actually *heard*, as unstable, leaning in the direction of the tonic.

For traditional semiotics this sort of thing reveals a surprisingly intimate connection between signification and perception. For the more radical poststructuralists it leads to a profoundly disturbing metaphysical gap. From this point of view *all* perception is completely dependent upon codes of signification -- we literally cannot see or hear anything that is outside a signifying process.

In terms of the principles we have outlined above, we could say that all perception is dependent upon syntactic fields and, since such fields are controlled by ideologically determined thought processes, we are inherently incapable of perception in any material or objective sense. In more radical terms, not only perception, but reality itself falls away in favor of a purely mental process devoted exclusively to the decoding and encoding of signs.

In the present context we can leave aside the difficult

metaphysical issues raised by this position. We cannot, however,
avoid an obvious question: in view of the total absorbtion of
perception into signification, what is the status of the work of
art or, more particularly, how does the art work differ in kind
from any other coded entity?

Let us recall that the word "aesthetic", derived from the
Greek "aesthesia", originally meant "of or pertainable to things
perceptible by the senses, things material as opposed to things
thinkable or immaterial."[5] Indeed, the Eighteenth Century
philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, in establishing aesthetic for
the first time as an autonomous field of study, specifically
relates the term to "things perceived" as opposed to "things
known".[6] We will be using the word in its original sense
throughout the remainder of this essay. Though its provenance
has broadened considerably since Baumgarten, it would be
difficult to imagine an aesthetic theory in any sense of the word
which had no place whatever for the sensory world.

Signification and its Other

Semiotics, poststructuralism, "deconstruction" etc., in
denying the ultimate validity of sensory experience, remove
thereby any basis for an autonomous theory of the arts. If
perception is reduced to a mode of signification, aesthetic must
simply take its place within a system of essentially linguistic
codes, hardly more than an intensified rhetoric.[7]

While it is not our intention, here, to "deconstruct"
poststructuralism (with which we, for the most part, agree), it

is necessary to put this issue in historical perspective. The
conflict between perception and signification is an old one and,
consciously or unconsciously, has always posed a problem for the
artist. The issue came to a head with the development of
naturalism in late Nineteenth Century Europe, which entertained
the naive hope of a perfectly straightforward, unmediated
representation of the material world.

Naturalism came to grief during a remarkable period when
artists such as the Impressionists, Cezanne, Braque and Picasso
delved progressively farther into the most fundamental problems
of observation and representation. Finally, in the crucible, or
should we say "cyclotron", of Cubist art, aesthetic and semiotic
collided, the atom of cognition was split, and a new sensibility
was born. Structuralism and modern semiotics can trace much of
their ancestry to the Russian Formalist school of linguistics,
born as a response to this sensibility as expressed in Futurism
and Constructivism, direct outgrowths from Cubism.[8]

In our view, the remarkable group of paintings and
constructions produced by Picasso and Braque in the years 1908 to
1914 already encompass the central issues not only of semiotics
but also deconstructionism. As a result, these works, which
became the foundation stones of modernism (and postmodernism),
also provide a key to the functioning of "traditional"
pictorially based sign-systems.

Disruption of the Sign

Space does not permit an adequate analysis of the Cubist

achievement in these pages. I will make do, instead, with a few comments which, if they are so brief as to appear dogmatic, will at least, hopefully, clarify my point of view.

Cubism begins as an extension of the project of Cezanne, i.e., the *use* of painting as part of a relentless struggle to observe the material world directly, free of any representational scheme (such as perspective). Like Cezanne, the Cubists proceed by breaking up pictorial space to do justice to the unique space generated by each object. The various contending spaces are linked by areas of "passage", a time-honoured device in which painters have traditionally linked foreground and background elements in order to create vague areas of transition that could, among other things, mask spatial discrepancies. As Cezanne learned, extreme use of passage leads to distortion. Seeking to resolve this problem, the Cubists radically fragment space into ever smaller "facets", so that each can absorb some of the distortion.[9]

Extreme fragmentation and passage, coupled with procedures such as reverse perspective, cause forms to disintegrate, details to be emphasized at the expense of the whole. As a result, the syntactic field breaks into its constituent signs and sign-parts. No longer visible as *gestalts*, however, the signs cannot fully signify. At this point Cubism becomes a self-referential meditation on the relation between perception and signification, playing a thousand different games with the now defused signs for spaces and things.

With the disruption of the three dimensional syntactic field, areas such as the rhomboid of figures 1-4, can no longer be "read" as polarized in any direction and begin to reveal themselves simply as patches of color on an intensified surface. A new kind of space begins to emerge from such areas and the areas of passage surrounding and infiltrating them: "negative space", the space between forms.

As Cubism moves into its so-called "synthetic" phase, fragments of negative space resolve into large, flattened areas of solid color or collage, punctuated by forlorn, thoroughly deconstructed sign fragments. As Cubist energies wane, the project is taken up by Mondrian, who methodically eliminates all reference to signification in an effort to *equilibrate* the newly acquired space through control of proportion. The original "realist" ambition has dissolved into the project of determining perception itself.

The Musical Analogue

Parallels with the development of music over a somewhat broader time span are striking. Musical "modulation", a transitional device linking more or less distant keys is, of course, analogous to pictorial passage, which links more or less distant spaces. Modulation is usually characterized by the use of "pivot chords", ambiguous harmonies which have a function in both the old and the new key.

During the Nineteenth Century, as composers seek to incorporate farther ranging tonal relationships, increasing

emphasis is placed on a group of dissonant, inherently ambiguous pivot chords which can afford ready "passage" to distant keys via *enharmonic* relationships: the chord of the diminished seventh, the "French", "Italian" and "German" Sixths and the so-called "Tristan" chord. By the late Nineteenth Century, these and other transitional harmonies are enabling composers to fragment tonal space through frequent, almost routine, modulation. In the process, as with painting, forms begin to disintegrate and details, in the form of a host of new, highly colored dissonant harmonies, increasingly appreciated in and for themselves as *sounds,* begin to assert themselves at the expense of the whole.

Finally, in the work of Arnold Schönberg, the tonal system itself breaks down. With Schönberg's "emancipation of the dissonance", the ambiguous chords which originally functioned as musical "passage" take on a new role as unambiguous, stable landmarks of a new "negative" tonality: *atonality.*

The new musical space, designed to prevent any one note from becoming a stable tonal center, defeats the tendency, illustrated in figures 5-8, above, for every note to be polarized in a particular tonal "direction". Notes and chords begin to be heard, not in terms of a musical "meaning", but as *sounds* with unique and interesting properties of their own.

Atonality, in which the notes *repel* one another, initially functions as a fundamentally disruptive strategy, comparable with analytic Cubism. The systemization of atonality by Schönberg's *twelve tone* method, by analogy with synthetic Cubism and the

later work of Mondrian, *builds* a completely new, multipolar
"space" in which all elements (notes of the series) are in
equilibrium.[10]

Despite his radical break with the tonal system, Schönberg
is reluctant to completely do away with rhythmic and motivic
gestalts. The final break comes in the work of his disciple
Anton Webern, whose opening out of the motive, liberation of
timbre and rhythm, and acceptance of the ephemeral, eventually
inspire the most influential compositional movement of the
Twentieth Century: total serialism.

The serialists, led by Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz
Stockhausen, continue the process of radical fragmentation,
increasingly emphasizing the ephemeral *part* at the expense of the
transcendent *whole* (as in, for example, "moment form"), the
audible "surface" at the expense of tonal "depth" (e.g., the
"sound object") and, as with Mondrian's treatment of space,
attending carefully to the proportional division of musical
time.[11]

Negative Syntax

The striking parallels between the pictorial and musical
developments outlined above encourage us to draw up a set of
principles which might clarify this new situation:

Principle five: *a syntactic field can be associated with
another, hidden, field, which, by analogy with negative space, we
will call the* negative field.

As demonstrated by Cubism, negative space is more than

simply the space between objects. The latter is only a fragment

of a larger entity, repressed by the syntactic field which it

threatens.

Principle six: *while the syntactic field is fundamentally*

conceptual, the negative field is fundamentally sensory, defined

in terms of what Kant has called "Transcendental Aesthetic", the

"two pure forms of sensuous intuition": space and time.[12]

In painting, the negative field is the two dimensional space

of the canvas itself, which must be suppressed to permit

representation in depth. In this context, negative space, if

noticed at all, is always perceived as part of the material two

dimensional surface, never as part of the virtual three

dimensional space-in-depth.

In music, the negative field is the simple, one-dimensional

pitch "space" of the sound-spectrum (as opposed to the

multidimensional syntactic "space" of the tonal system, with its

functions and class identities) coordinated with the time of

simple duration (as opposed to the multi-leveled time of the

metric system, with its hierarchically structured

periodicities).[13] The "negative times" of music (analogous to

the "negative spaces" of painting) are the actual durations of

sounds or the silences between them as opposed to the "figures"

created by attack-points.[14]

Principle seven: *the negative field disrupts signification*

-- to the extent that sign elements are present in a

predominantly negative field they will be multireferential.

While the value of the negative field to aesthetic
experience should not be minimized, it also has an important role
to play in the opening out of the ideological forces behind the
signifying process. Unlike simple ambiguity, which only tends to
mystify the sign, a negative field can reveal the rich, multiple
play of interconnected, often contradictory, channels of
reference hidden within the apparently straightforward message of
any "text". It should thus be of interest to the
poststructuralists, whose attack on semiotics is based largely on
the latter's neglect of the "polysemic" implications of the sign-
function.

Principle eight: *the negative field, normally suppressed by the
process of signification, can only be liberated by a structural
principle in direct opposition to syntax -- we can refer to this
principle as* negative syntax (or antax).

Initially, negative syntax is a repellant force, working
against the tendency of *positive* syntax to promote gestalt
perception and unify the syntactic (positive) field. Negative
syntax opens the gestalt, promotes the part at the expense of the
whole, perception at the expense of signification, disunifying
the (positive) syntactic field while, at the same time, unifying
the (negative) aesthetic field. Ultimately, after its *analytic*
moment has been supplanted by a *synthetic* moment, negative syntax
is equivalent to what can be called the "aesthetic determination"
of the negative field, a pure sensory play of rhythms and
surfaces.

Ars Analogi Rationis

Strangely enough, the position we have arrived at via the practice of some of the most advanced minds of our century betrays a remarkable affinity with the thought of an obscure Eighteenth Century metaphysician, the aforementioned Alexander Baumgarten. Usually considered the founder of aesthetics as an independent discipline, Baumgarten is nevertheless so rarely read his major work has apparently never been translated from the original Latin.

For Baumgarten, *aesthetica*, the knowledge of the "lower" faculties of cognition (i.e., the senses), cannot be reduced to the categories of logical thought, but must be treated independently, as an *ars analogi rationis* ("art of the analogy of reason"). Reversing the priorities of his rationalistic forbears, he concentrates not on the clarities of the mind, with its distinct, "intensive" categories, but the clarities of the senses, with their potential for apprehension of conceptually confused but vividly observed "extensive" particulars. It is in the "lower" faculty that we can find the "perfect sensate discourse" of "the poetic", analogous but opposed to the "perfect conceptual discourse" of "the rational".[15]

While the greater part of Baumgarten's argument is all too heavily indebted to the rationalism (and artistic taste) of his day, its core remains remarkably fresh, providing us with a valuable clue to the meaning of the very similar analogies we have drawn. Indeed, negative syntax can be understood as in some

sense equivalent to Baumgarten's *aesthetica*. Both seek to balance the cognitive equation.

The Aesthetic Function

Baumgarten, in associating *aesthetic* with an artifice or construct, not, as did his contemporaries, an inborn faculty for direct, unmediated knowledge a *priori*, places the object of his concern beyond the reach of the perennial debate over the status of the "real". Instead of attempting, as have so many others, to use sensory experience as both an empirical *given* of thought and that which can only be redeemed by thought, he opens for sensory processes a balanced, symmetrical relation to mental processes in which neither is *given*, neither exists as anything more (or less) than a *function*.

Taking our cue from Baumgarten, we must define negative syntax as a *function* analogous to (though also in opposition to) logic. As logic can be said to determine thought, so negative syntax (aesthetic) can be said to determine perception. Thus negative syntax promotes perception by determining it, not valorizing its supposedly privileged position with respect to "reality" or "presence".

Axioms of Perception

Moving deeper into our analogy with an analogy, we are faced with some difficult questions. If negative syntax is, indeed, *ars analogi rationis*, then: 1. what aspects of negative syntax resemble what aspects of logic? 2. how does a "logic" operating *in opposition to* logic work? 3. how can such a "logic" determine

sensory experience? Complete answers to such questions will,

hopefully, be the result of future research. For now, we can

only suggest some paths which seem fruitful.

Of all the visual artists whose work we have thus far

discussed, the only one to make a serious theoretical

contribution was Mondrian. Most interesting, from our point of

view, is his notion of "dynamic equilibrium", "a dynamic rhythm

of determinate mutual relations which excludes the formation of

any particular form".[14] While Mondrian's meanings are often far

from clear, it is possible to distill from his writings, as a key

to *dynamic equilibrium*, the following sequence: neutralization

of representation through abstraction; opening of the form

(which, despite its abstract nature, can still signify) to space;

determination of equilibrated proportions in space (equivalent to

the determination of perceptual space itself).

In terms of formal logic, this could be equivalent to:

abstraction (e.g., dealing with numbers or other abstract symbols

rather than, say, apples); analysis ("opening" of an abstract

problem to logical "space" in the form of, e.g., class

membership, intersection of sets, simplification of equations,

etc.); *ratio* (the traditional term for reason itself, conceived

as a proportioning of logical space).

We must, of course, look for negative syntax in the same

place where Baumgarten found *aesthetica*, not in theoretical or

philosophical writings, but the work of artists. Studying

Mondrian's artistic development, from the earliest influence of

Cubism in 1911 to the period just before his emigration to America in the early Forties, we see his principles at work in a process of reduction and distillation leading to a group of paintings that can, in fact, be characterized as "axiomatic" with respect to perceptual experience.

As a logical axiom is a single thought, self-evident to the mind, an aesthetic axiom must be a single (non-hierarchical) image, "self-evident" to the senses. Aided by his theoretical principles, Mondrian simplifies to the point that he can determine proportions (and, of course, colors) exclusively by eye, with no recourse to logic, representation, geometry or system of any kind. We can compare this to the process with which Euclid arrived at his axioms by a similarly reductive, purely *mental* process, with no need for *empirical* (perceptually confirmable) input.

The musical equivalent of Mondrian's axiomatic paintings would undoubtedly be the highly reductive, extremely brief works of Webern's early, pre-serial period (e.g. the *Five Pieces for Orchestra, Six Bagatelles for String Quartet, Four Pieces for Cello*).

The tone row itself can, in a different sense, also be regarded as a kind of musical axiom. A twelve tone series is an essentially disjunctive, equilibrated arrangement (proportioning) of the twelve pitch classes which, as the basis for an extended composition, *functions* as an axiom. As with a logical proof, the entire construct *inherits* the properties of the axiom(s). Thus

in a well made twelve tone work, the entire piece inherits the
disjunctive tonal space of the row, in addition to any special
motivic/harmonic characteristics a particular row may have.
While in the hands of many composers the row can function
conjunctively as a substitute for *positive* tonal syntax, this is
not the case for Webern, whose treatment of the row always
remains a fundamentally disjunctive "system for the disruption of
system."

Negative Syntax, Art and Signification

From the point of view presented here, contrary to the
conventional wisdom of the "postmodern" era, the "modernism" of
the Cubists, Mondrian, Schönberg, Webern, etc. is more than a
style period to be followed by the next style period.[17] It
represents the founding of a new sensibility, a new mode of
awareness and, like all fundamental paradigm shifts, alters our
view of past and future alike.

The modernist attack on the sign-function reveals the
presence, in the words of Mondrian, of "liberated and universal
rhythm distorted and hidden in the individual rhythm of the
limiting form".[18] Thus negative syntax does not produce
something completely new, but liberates that which has always
been present but repressed.[19]

We must think, therefore, of negative syntax (aesthetic) and
positive syntax (logic, representation, signification, semiosis)
as two poles of a dialectic which must pervade any but the most

thoroughly sublimated sign system. In substituting a
dialectical, *semio-aesthetic* process for a monistic, rule-based
semiotics, we may even be able to win back for systematic theory
a portion of the territory now claimed by deconstructionist
bricolage.[20]

A complete elaboration of a semio-aesthetic theory of
expression/communication would, of course, be a major·
undertaking. At the present time, we must be satisfied with the
following somewhat disconnected thoughts:

1. In most cases of more or less traditional expression,
negative and positive syntax may be seen as opposing (or, in
another sense, complementing) one another on many levels. On the
lowest level, negative syntax produces the disruptions that
articulate the field (analogous to, say, the "phonetic" stream).
Positive syntax pulls these articulations together to produce the
next ("phonemic") level. On higher levels, the same process is
repeated, negative syntax opposing the positive field just enough
to make *perceptible* the differences which positive syntax will
bring together to produce *thinkable* (meaningful) gestalts on the
next level.

2. The above dialectic resembles the workings of the
Japanese game of *go*, where each side tries to incorporate space
previously carved out by the other. In all but modernist
discourse, positive syntax always wins. Thus, in traditional
works of art, *all* the space, even that once occupied by the
negative field, ends by belonging to the positive field. The

negative is usually present only in repressed, all but subliminal form.

3. Whenever negative syntax is incorporated into the process of signification by the unification of its disruptions through positive syntax, the portion of the negative field that has been (provisionally) revealed is then "understood" as having some sort of expressive value or adding to the impact, vividness or drama of the result. The stronger the pull of negative syntax, the more dramatic the effect will be. (Of course, negative syntax that has *not* been incorporated by positive syntax will not be understood at all and will convey only the notion that either "something is wrong" or "this is modern art".)

For example, many Futurist paintings incorporate the extreme spatial fragmentations of Cubism, but use geometric structure (positive syntax) to pull the fragments together into an ultimately positive totality. Such paintings, essentially far more conventional than those of the Cubists, have a very exciting, hyperdramatic quality, gained through appropriation of a powerful negative field.

More traditional works are replete with less extreme, but very similar effects, where distortions, spatial disruptions, coloristic anomalies, etc. are understood as "expressive" where and when they are comprehended positively on a higher structural level. Negative syntax also contributes to the degree to which local relationships or particular details hold their own with respect to the whole.

4. Negative syntax must be distinguished from weaker *ad hoc* devices that can have a disruptive function. Negative syntax is a *structure*, albeit a structure which disrupts structure. The key to differentiating a structure from a simple device is that a structure is always associated with a field.

5. Of all expressive means, language alone is not fully grounded in either space or time, hence lacks a true negative field. This is not to say that the sounds of spoken or the marks of written language do not exist in time and space, but that they are not precisely defined therein. As soon as one attempts to be precise with the time of spoken language one begins to turn it into music (chant). As soon as one attempts to be precise with the space of written language it becomes visual art (concrete poetry). The precisions of language exist exclusively within the realm of signification and the logic (positive syntax) which grounds it.

Thus, while a truncated form of negative syntax is certainly present in language and can even manifest itself in an extreme form (e.g. Mallarme, Artaud, Joyce, Stein), language based art forms can never completely resolve themselves onto a negative ground, thus can never move beyond essentially rhetorical devices such as *overcoding* or *code shifting*.[21] This may be the reason why structuralists, semioticians and poststructuralists, trained primarily as linguists or literary scholars, have tended to either explicitly or implicitly place all artistic expression within the realm of rhetoric.

The "limitation" of language with respect to the negative field has consequences for the deconstructionist enterprise, which uses language to negativize the signifying process from within (rather than outside itself, from the realm of the senses, as is the case with, say, Cubism). This essentially ungrounded, self-reflexive strategy can result in a fascinating, if unending, play of paradoxes and witty "openings" of the sign, but can never resolve, as it lacks any ground but that of the logic it seeks to demystify.[22] Postmodernist art operates according to essentially the same model, choosing to ignore or minimize its negative fields in favor of a play of self-negativising positivities.

There is a certain advantage to be gained from such "endless" play, which need never fear reaching a "dead end". But it is unfair and, indeed, repressive of the deconstructionists, on the basis of the limitations of language, to insist that logic (ideology) can be attacked only from within itself, a policy which leads to mystifications as disturbing as any they seek to overcome.

6. While positive syntax always reflects culturally accepted and controlled procedures and values (ideology), negative syntax seems to work against them, toward a universal experience which is *not* culture bound. Initially, of course, negative syntax opposes positive syntax and, in so doing, becomes a kind of image (albeit a *negative* image) of that which it has engaged. Ultimately, however, negative syntax disrupts the ideologically controlled signifying process in favor of a liberated sensory

play. The extent to which this "play" will reflect socially determined value systems can, of course, only be decided by examination of its function in a variety of cultural settings.

If, as it would seem, negative syntax *is* resistant to such local variation, it would be extremely valuable as a tool for isolating universals in cross-cultural studies of the arts and communication. Negative syntax may, indeed, have something to do with the fact that all art forms with the exception of those that are language-based may be appreciated, if not understood, transculturally. In fact, the crucial difference between the *appreciation* and *understanding* of a work of art may derive from the distinction between negative and positive syntax.

7. The discourse of the traditional Western arts, with their elaborate hierarchical structures, would seem to be far more heavily positivized than that of non-Western or "folk" cultures. Would careful study of the arts of these "simpler" societies reveal a compensatory development of the negative?

Summary

Semiotic and poststructuralist theory argues that all aesthetic experience must take its place within the essentially language-based, ideologically controlled codes of the signifying process. While acknowledging the validity of much of this argument, we have taken exception to the notion that the world of the senses cannot be independently grounded. Determining that any signifying process must be based on what we have called a "syntactic field", we found, in certain modernist paintings and

musical compositions, a structural principle which disrupts this field to promote sensory experience and multireferentiality: *negative syntax*.

Following the lead of Alexander Baumgarten, for whom *aesthetic* is the basis of perception, we have attempted to understand negative syntax as, in his words describing aesthetic, *"ars analogi rationis"*. Indeed, certain paintings of Mondrian seem to function as "axioms of perception", and certain examples of twelve tone music operate, like (anti)logical proofs.

While negative syntax was first revealed in, and can help us to analyze, modernist art, it also clearly plays an important role in traditional art, if not all forms of expression and/or communication. In this regard, we have attempted to speculate on the manner in which negative and positive syntax operate dialectically within "normal" communication and the meaning such a dialectic might have cross-culturally.

These speculations are intended to stimulate further thought and should, of course, be regarded as provisional. Sorting out the role of *aesthesis* vis a vis *semiosis* in traditional, non-modernist art and discourse, not to speak of the traditional arts of non-Western cultures, is bound to be a technically difficult, intellectually challenging and time consuming task. Hopefully, this paper will convince some readers that such a task would be worthwhile.

Notes

1. An extensive treatment of certain aspects of the theory, with an emphasis on cinema, can be found in Victor Grauer, *Montage, Realism and the Act of Vision*, (unpublished monograph).

2. By adding an appropriate harmony, one could, of course, provide a meaningful function for the B -- as part of a V of ii chord, for example.

3. The so-called "abstract" nature of music should not confuse the reader into thinking that because musical notes or passages cannot be translated into words they cannot have meaning. We need not look for lexical meanings in music any more than we would look for musical meanings in language. To say, for example, that a certain note at a certain time functions as a leading tone or as the resolution of a dissonance is already a perfectly sufficient statement about its sign-function with respect to musical discourse.

4. For a thorough treatment of the role of the *gestalt* in music, see Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (University of Chicago Press, 1956).

5. The *Oxford Dictionary*.

6. Alexander Baumgarten, *Meditationis philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinintibus* (1735), translated by K. Aschenbrenner and W. B. Holther (University of California Press, 1954), p. 78.

7. Such is the impression given by the discussion of art in Umberto Eco's, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press,1979), pp. 261-276. Eco treats the "aesthetic text" as a means of "overcoding" and/or "code-changing", categories that appear as part of the more extensive discussion of rhetoric which follows (pp. 276-298).

Even Julia Kristeva, in an attempt to carve an independent place for the "poetic language" of modernism in a spirit very close to our own, nevertheless concludes that it must posit "its own process as an undecidable process between sense and nonsense, between language and rhythm . . ., between the symbolic and" that which is prior to symbolization. Essentially, her notion of poetic language involves a process of continual mutation within signification, a function hardly distinguishable from that of rhetoric. See "From One Identity to Another", in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 134-139.

See also Paul de Man, "Semiology and Rhetoric", in *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué Harari (Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 121-140.


8. For documentation of the links between the artists and poets of the Futurist/Constructivist school and the linguists of the Russian Formalist group, as well as the latter's influence on the development of structuralism and semiotics, see Peter Steiner, *Russian Formalism* (Cornell University Press, 1984).

9. This strategy can be compared to that of Buckminster Fuller's "Dymaxion Map", which avoids the distortions of projection maps through a technique of fragmentation.

10. Additional, equally relevant developments should also be mentioned: Stravinsky's tonal bipolarities and rhythmic fragmentations disrupt the tonal/metric *gestalt* as effectively as atonality; Schönberg's ironic, self-referential treatments of traditional musical materials in, for example, *Pierrot Lunaire* or the *Serenade*, mirror the "semiotic" playfullness of Cubism; likewise Stravinsky's *Le Histoire du Soldat* and, of course, all his subsequent neoclassical work.

11. Interest in sound for its own sake drew Boulez to the concept of the "sound object" (see André Hodier, *Since Debussy* (Grove Press, 1961), pp. 136-142). For a discussion of moment form and its role in the proportional determination of time in the work of Stravinsky, Messiaen and Stockhausen, see Jonathan Kramer, "Moment Form in Twentieth Century Music" in *Musical Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 2, April 1978.

12. ▄▄▄ *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Max Müller (Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1966), pp. 22,23.

13. See Kramer, op. cit. pp. 181-183 for a convincing analysis of temporal "flattening" in certain modernist compositions.

14. Note how effectively a piano arrangement of any traditional
Western art music conveys its essential "logic" or "meaning"
despite the instrument's very limited ability to sustain. The
greater part of Twentieth Century music, which places more
emphasis on "negative time", where the release is as important
as the attack, ~~would~~ is ~~not~~ ~~be~~ well served by piano arrangements,
~~and is fact they are rare.~~

15. See Alexander Baumgarten, *Meditationes philosophicae . . .*,
op. cit., especially propositions 3, 9, 14, 15, 17, 19, 22, 112,
113. My summary of Baumgarten owes a good deal to Leonard P.
Wessel's essay, "Alexander Baumgarten's Contribution to the
Development of Aesthetics", in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art
Criticism*, vol. 30 no. 3, Spring 1972, pp. 333-342.

16. Piet Mondrian, "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art"(1937) in
Mondrian, *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art* (Wittenborn, 1945), p.
58.

17. For an extended discussion of the meaning of postmodernism
with respect to some of the issues raised in this paper, see
Victor Grauer, "Modernism/Postmodernism/Neomodernism", in
Downtown Review, vol. 3 nos. 1 & 2, Fall/Winter/Spring 1981/82,
pp. 3-7.

18. "Pure Plastic Art"(1942) in *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art*,
op. cit. p. 31.

19. A remarkably similar point of view is revealed in Julia Kristeva's notion of the *chora*. See, for example, "From One Identity to Another", op. cit., pp. 133-137.

20. The paradoxes of a purely semiotic (i.e. logic-based) attack on the ideology of the signifying process are discussed in Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"(1966) in Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by A. Bass (Chicago University Press, 1978), pp. 278-293. Derrida argues that ideology can only be "deconstructed" by an informal, anti-systematic process of disruption-from-within which he calls *bricolage*.

21. See Eco, op. cit., pp. 261-275.

22. See Derrida, op. cit., pp. 278-281, for the classic statement of this founding paradox of deconstructionism.
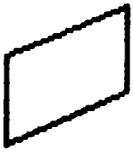
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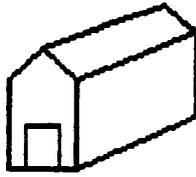
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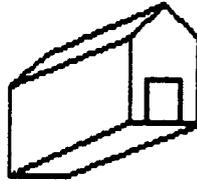
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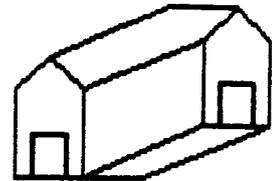
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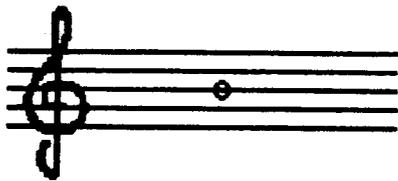
Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8