

A VERBAL SPACE – INTERSECTING THE VISIBLE

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The idea that man is not able to conceive of reality consciously is a very old one. An intermediate stage is necessary. Through this the real world may acquire the face of intermediary, relying on the sense-organs, experience, language, universals, categorisation. Continuity of the outside world needs some points of support. It is easier to comprehend discrete entities than a continuum and the best means for categorisation is language. Counterbalance to this much criticised language-centred viewpoint is idea of the importance of visual experience, phrased in the sentence attributed to Aristotle, "one picture is worth a thousand words."

These two points of view on art clash in two ways: in the reciprocal conditionality of the pictorial and verbal expression, and in art as language.

The two main issues concerning art and language can be formulated as:

- the communicative quality of an artwork, i.e. the problem of the meaning of an artwork and art as language;
- relations of the verbal language and artwork, or the influence of the verbal context on the meaning of an artwork.

1. Plato's paradox

Once, reading Victor Burgin's book *The End of Art Theory*, I found a surprising passage. Debating the main opponent of the theory of postmodern art Clement Greenberg, Burgin writes: "In the *Phaedo*, Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates a doctrine of two worlds: the world of murky imperfection to which our mortal senses have access, and an "upper world" of perfection and light. Discursive speech is the tangled and inept medium to which we are condemned in the former, while in the latter all things are communicated visually as a pure and unmediated intelligibility which has no need for words." (Burgin 1986: 31.)

The idea, that there are two forms of communication: words and images (the second one being more direct), was passed to the Christian tradition with New Platonism. According to Burgin this idea is one of the main points of the supporters of visual communication.

My surprise was transitory. It is generally known that Plato underestimated sense-organs, and in *Phaidon* Socrates claims physical vision and hearing useless for the acquisition of knowledge. Eyes are unable to perceive perfect beauty and goodness; perfection and the absolute are inaccessible to sense-organs (*Phaidon* 65d–65e, 79a–79b).

In the world of perfect forms described by Socrates the beings have hearing and other senses far more perfect than ours. This could correspond with what is described by Burgin. In the world of perfect forms are temples and shrines, where the gods really live and the beings are able to communicate with them; they are able to listen to what the gods have to say. They can also see the moon and stars such as they really are (*Phaidon* 111b, 111c). Plato (or Socrates) does not explain, how a soul becomes a perfect being, or what his sense-organs are exactly like. But it is obvious, that in the world of perfect forms communication with the gods relies on an inner vision rather than on common sight. Nevertheless, in spite of despising the bodily eye, it is characteristic of Plato's writings to rely on figurative forms, that can be seen with the eyes. Let us remember representation of the world of perfect forms in *Phaedo* (110c–111c), description of the Creation in *Timaeus* (29e–30d), comparison of the memory to a chunk of wax, into which knowledge and experience leave traces (*Theaetetus*), let alone the allegory of cave in the *Republic* (514a–521b). Even Plato's *mimesis* and all his epistemology is sometimes associated with perception of the eye (e.g. Melberg 1995: 20–25, Krieger 1992: 23). Lastly, discussing man's sense-organs in *Timaeus*, Plato places sight in the first place among the senses (45b–45c).

I am not the only one to discover¹ that a number of expressions in common language express the nobility of visually acquired information or identify sight with knowledge: *it was clear, a clear explanation, clear memory, clear view, clear as day, clear as mud, make oneself clear, to picture oneself, to give a good picture of, to put*

¹ Among others Martin Jay (1993: 1–3), Anthony Synnott (1993: 207–208), Walter Ong (1967: 74); summary of a net discussion on this theme (Sum: "I see" meaning "I understand" – LINGUIST List 10.415, Thu Mar 18 1999 – <http://www.emich.edu/~linguist/issues/10/10-415.html>).

somebody in the picture, a controversial view, point of view, to see sth as sth, you see that I am right, I see, foresee, for all the world to see, see sb through.

So the picture is clear and true, an idea is clear; we "see" the truth and do not learn about it. It is easy to find analogous expressions in each language. A number of them can be easily translated, being characteristic of universal concepts and constructions. Expressions that combine sight with cognition form one of the clusters of metaphors according to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (Lakoff, Johnson 1980).²

So sight could have been treated as the noblest of senses in the ancient tradition and, for this reason, its vocabulary used metaphorically for expressing processes of the consciousness as something complicated or incomprehensible. But there is another possible reason: the knowledge (truth) and sight were really considered equal, if not identical, and only the development of human thought has split them later. What we can see with our own eyes, is the truth; while everything that is vague and uncertain is concealed from our eyes. But in this case we cannot talk about the metaphor of sight, which emerged later, when sight has not been identified with true knowledge any more.

If Plato ever referred to sight as means of gaining knowledge (a lot of his expressions allow different translations), he did not mean a simple, but a "higher" vision, the enlightening of the intellect (the most obvious reference to this is the allegory of cave – *Republic* 518a). It is certainly tempting to associate Plato's ideas (*eidōs*) with visual images (*eidolon*) (e.g. Mitchell 1986: 5), but hardly does the genesis of words give a sufficient reason for this. So, according to Plato's theory of cognition, the eye was not the basis of true knowledge. It is possible that, using the language of his time, a metaphoric association with vision was just the only way of stating his ideas. So Plato, as well as the following philosophical tradition, clearly distinguishes two different kinds of seeing: the sensual, deceptive, imperfect sight; and the true, immediate higher vision.

Strangely enough has Plato's scepticism towards painting, a triple *mimesis*, been turned into its opposite by theoreticians of abstract painting, as well as by

² According to the recent study of metaphors by Lakoff's group, the cluster UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING is part of the class IDEAS ARE PERCEPTIONS (http://cogsci.berkeley.edu/metaphors/Ideas_Are_Perceptions.html 22. V 1999). But this classification does not consider relations between the words *picture-seeing-clear*. The phenomenon obviously makes a certain kind of whole connecting the picture and the visually perceived with the knowledge of truth.

their opponents. The only possible justification for this could be the conviction that, if representation or *mimesis* was given up, the abstract art would become identical with the higher vision.

Imagination and knowing, which are not made transparent by language, are manifested in the higher vision. Imagination is purely conscious, one can imagine anything and have imaginary images. Imagination is directly related with fantasy, not with knowing. Although an imaginary image is fantastic, it can introduce intuitive or recollected truths indirectly (*mental picture, dreamland, dream-world, to dream about, a dream come true, like a dream, beyond one's wildest dreams, dream on*).

For the sake of exactness four, not two, kinds of connection between cognition and sight can be specified:

- sense of sight
- higher vision (conscious eye)
- cognition through metaphor related to sight, caused by expressions in the language (e.g. metaphors of light, clarity and space)
- fantasy related to sight (imaginary image)

The differentiations might seem naive, unless the self-deception of art in the last decade, as well as the philosophical discourse, were occupied with the problem of so-called visual era, or *vice versa* – visual scepticism. The oppositions: written *versus* oral, and pictorial-verbal expression *versus* pictorial expression as a whole, tend to coincide with these differentiations. These two directions are represented most clearly in the works of W.J.T. Mitchell (1974, 1986, 1994) and Martin Jay (1993), which are summaries of the ideas of many others, the tip of the iceberg.

To characterise the contemporary age, Mitchell offers the concept of 'pictorial turn' (Mitchell 1994: 11–12) as a starting point, the paraphrase of Richard Rorty, who discusses history of philosophy by the notion of turn. Today's philosophy is centred on language and this transition is called the 'linguistic turn' by Rorty (Rorty 1967). The linguistic turn expressed the idea, that in philosophy the verbalisation of figurative, visual images are nothing but blurring accessory (Rorty 1979).

Mitchell's pictorial turn should sum up a number of changes and shifts in the contemporary humanities, as well as in other fields of culture. Antedate traces of the pictorial turn can be found according to Mitchell in the works of Charles S.

Peirce, Nelson Goodman's "languages of art," in phenomenology, in the grammarology of Jacques Derrida, that shifts the focus from a phono-centric model of language to its visual traces. The works of the authors of Frankfurt school and Michel Foucault also bear these antedate traces (Mitchell 1994: 12–13). An interesting aspect is the fact, that several of these examples coincide with those used by Jay for illustrating quite opposite statements (Jay 1993: 13–14). Most characteristic of the turn is however considered the "picture theory" of meanings of early Wittgenstein (Mitchell 1994: 12–13). Rorty's linguistic turn, along with the "iconophobia of late Wittgenstein," which expresses a need to protect language from visuality, is "an obvious sign of the pictorial turn taking place" (Mitchell 1994: 13). These directions express fear and self-protection against the temptation and power of pictures. So the linguistic turn in philosophy has, by its occurrence, become proof of the pictorial turn.

Visual expression has obviously gained new domains in the last decades: television, video, advertising. The rapid development of Xerox has certainly impacted on this. The change did not take place so long ago: e.g. until the 1920s there were practically no pictures in Estonian newspapers. Formation of the internet, computer communication and e-mail seemed to announce the opposite – a new era of written communication. Initially, messages on the internet were purely verbal, and a corresponding form of pictorial art came up: the art of ASCII relying on codified signs. In computer communication, like in printing technique, the picture is, to a great extent, a technical problem. The number of bytes appropriate for a normal picture suffices for sending hundreds of pages full of text. This fact seems to make the written word cheaper. But since the reasons are mainly technical here, development of the net constantly increases the usage of pictures.

Apologists of pictorial language rely on these phenomena. Aside from Mitchell the visual era has been announced by Marshall McLuhan (1962), E. H. Gombrich (1985), Paul Lester (1994), Robert E. Horn (1998) and many others. We are living in a visual era: especially the fact, that the number of pictures keeps growing quantitatively, affirms this. If we had a methodology for calculating the general increase of the amount of information, and the percentage of pictures in it, we could estimate this relation more precisely. One can notice and admit other circumstances, even without becoming an iconoclast. Either we call this syncretism or synthesis, the blurring of boundaries of art, the exten-

sion of art or the fusion of arts – in any case, it is certain that verbality is present in the situation of an increasing visuality. On the one hand, an undeniable increase of the amount of pictures, and on the other hand, its inevitable fusion with the network of words, is observed. Pictures are accompanied by oral text on television, and by written text in the computer. Press photos have never been free of accompanying captions.

Martin Jay has uttered scepticism against the visual, claiming it to be characteristic of the 20th century (Jay 1993, see also: Kangilaski 1998). Jay mainly focuses on the contemporary French thought and his schemes are highly hypothetical, as he repeatedly admits. Jay departs from the widespread antique Greek sense of sight (visual arts along with it), as opposed to the Hebraic Old Testament logocentrism and iconoclasm. According to Jay, development of the modern culture from Renaissance, relies fully on the priority of sight (so-called ocular-centrism). One of its summits is the time of Louis XIV, the age of Enlightenment and Descartes's philosophy connected with empiricism. In Romanticism the immediate sight shifted to inner vision. In the 20th century different kinds of special assessments of sight and vision can be found in phenomenology as well as in French thought.

Like Mitchell, Jay also tries to connect the development of theoretical thought with the directions in visual culture. But he admits in the introduction, that "It would, in fact, be very hazardous to characterise French culture as a whole as hostile to the visual," because fascination with the latter remains unabated (Jay 1993: 15). Jay admits the difference between the sense of sight and insight, but he does not treat it as essential (Jay 1993: 27, 80–81).

One of the best known examples of the antagonism between the mind's eye and the sense of sight is, beside Plato's, to be found in the work of Descartes. A number of commentators are of the opinion, that he has founded the modern visual paradigm (Rorty 1979: 45, Jay 1993: 69–82). Jay thinks that the innate ideas Descartes posited were most widely interpreted as being seen "clearly and distinctly" by the mind's eye (1993: 80) and the numerous adhered metaphors of light and sight underlie these statements. So we have come across Plato's paradox again. Descartes's *Discourse On The Method* like his other works, are based on 'clear ideas' and 'natural light of reason.' Although he compares true knowledge with clear geometric relations, Descartes does not concede that their source is the sense of sight (e.g. Descartes 1980: 6, 17). Descartes keenly studied optics

and sight (*La Dioptrique* 1637) and it seems, that his aim was the optical model of an ideal fixed eye. But it is problematic, to what extent this research can be equalised with the importance of sight in epistemology.

A more profound interest in sight leads to understanding its limits and imperfection, the drawbacks and falseness of the eye. The next logical step would be the separation of knowledge from sensory sight, the dualism of body and mind. The optical eye of Descartes did not serve for attaining true knowledge; Plato's insight could only be a metaphor of knowledge. It is extremely rational to deny the possibility of reaching true knowledge through the sense of sight.

Neither can we connect sight immediately with representation, as Jay does. Connection between love of pictures and elevating vision in a culture is not so certain. Banishment or scepticism towards vision does not have to concur with iconoclasm. They may concur (like in the cases of classical Greece and Hebrew), but this is not a rule, as the development of visual culture in the 20th century sufficiently demonstrates.

So perception and expression should be kept apart. Connection between them is semiotically important only when we, finding that conscious ideas are above all visual, presume that they can be represented on a picture more closely than in words, as the visible. In the present case, to define the subject clearly, we have to give up the connection between perception and cognition on the one hand, and expression on the other hand. Obviously we see the real world in one way, and express it in another way. Obviously central perspective does not correspond to our actual perception of space. The dependance of presumable sight on the conventions and traditions is hypothetical and is always estimated according to the aspects of visible (beautiful, good, useful). We can only depart from what is given, from the pictorial representation, because it is not connected with vision immediately, and in many ways surpasses the threshold of perception.

Iconoclasm and focusing on art depends on the proportion of verbal and pictorial expression in a culture more than on the theory of sight. Pictures are extruded by belief in the power of word, either spoken or written. Even in Plato's view pictorial representation and painting as means of expression were not completely negative. In *Cratylus* things can be represented either by image or by word (43b). An approval is expressed in other connections too. Human imperfection is the same in the case of verbal and pictorial representation.

In the following the main problem is neither the connection of vision and representation, nor focusing on, or resisting, the eye. It is the question of proportion of the resistance of visual to the preference of verbal.

2. WORD or IMAGE: purity of the method and silent denial of the language of art.

"Socrates: And you agree that the name is an imitation of the thing named?

Cratylus: Most assuredly.

Socrates: And you agree that paintings also are imitations, though in a different way, of things?

Cratylus: Yes.

Socrates: Well then – for perhaps I do not understand, and you may be right – can both of these imitations, the paintings and the names, be assigned and applied to the things which they imitate, or not?

They can. They can."

(Plato *Cratylus* 430a–b, trans. by Harold N. Fowler)

Searching, and emphasis on, the characteristic, peculiar to visual arts only, is part of the modernist aesthetics. So is the search for something, that cannot be found in other fields, something that differentiates art from literature (contradiction to music was topical, art took only method from the music; the pure form, which was its positive quality (Greenberg 1992b: 557). Clement Greenberg is one of the most outstanding representatives of this direction.

In a way, Greenberg is a symbol of the modernist ideology and Anglo-American art theory has had trouble overcoming its prejudices. Rearranging the old viewpoints in many ways, the postmodern ideas on art are, at the same time, their prisoner. E.g. Rosalind Krauss, Leo Steinberg, Victor Burgin and W.J.T. Mitchell are mediated by the ideas of Greenberg.

A number of the most significant ideas of his later works have been phrased already in "Avant-Garde and Kitch," published in 1939. It is based on simple antagonism: avant-garde versus kitsch, the latter embodied by totalitarianism; Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Russia and Mussolini's Italy. In art this opposition is most clearly represented by the pair Picasso–Repin, writes Greenberg.

Orientation towards medium is a vital criteria that defines avant-garde: "Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miró, Kandinsky, Brancusi; even Klee, Matisse and Cézanne are mainly inspired by means of their work. First and foremost, their art glows with pure creation and the organisation of space, surface, forms, col-

ours etc. eliminating everything that is unnecessary." (Greenberg 1992a: 532.) Emphasise on medium implies, that the subject matter has to be given up (Greenberg differentiates subject matter from the visually grasped content – Greenberg 1992b: 556). While in early abstractionism single elements of the picture were associated with certain meanings, Greenberg denies such "visual language."

Since two-dimensionality is the only quality that is characteristic of painting and no other field in art, abandoning the representation of three-dimensional space is equated to abandoning the narrative aspect (Greenberg 1992c). Greenberg sees the same kind of "purity" and "abstraction" in contemporary poetry (not in prose), the aim of which is not the representation of an experience, but dealing with something, that is characteristic of poetry only: with the word. He admits though, that the word should be open to communication, and that only the most extreme forms of poetry are based on pure sound (He does not see a danger of the boundaries dissolving here, e.g. with the boundaries of music.) (Greenberg 1992c: 532). The ideal of Greenberg's avant-garde is music, like the ideal of poetry is sound. Postmodern movement from the spoken to written word, as well as a return to meaningful depiction, means withdrawal from the sound and music.

Another ideologist of the 20th century art Alfred H. Barr Jr claims, that it only seems that modernism avoids contents and themes, actually they have been included, often as an important factors, to several movements (Barr 1986: 15).

In Estonia, "release from the subject matter" was claimed to be basis of "new art" in the extreme by Märt Laarman: "After a long development art has returned to its main tasks now. First of all, it has liberated itself from the unnecessary literary side-issues, got out of the story-telling content and reproduction of real things." (Laarman 1928: 5.)

Greenberg sees concentration on visuality, similar to that in avant-garde, in mediaeval art. Since the theme of a painting was determined then, the artists were free to concentrate on their medium. In contrast with this, in the pressure of a bourgeois society, artist had to be a thinker and philosopher as well (Greenberg 1992a: 538).

To a certain extent Greenberg's ideal of an artist is Platonic indeed, resembling not Plato's painter, but performer of ecstatic hymns, whose only aim is mediation of the divine spark. Greenberg's artist has to concentrate on his crea-

tion only, because there are others – critics, philosophers, theoreticians – who mediate his creation.

If I may generalise, 'pictorial' and 'verbal expression' are not reconciled in Greenberg's writings, while they are inevitably reconciled in Mitchell's and Burgin's texts (I would not claim, that something else connects these two). This is evidently where the synthetic postmodern approach to art starts, with no sharp difference between the verbal and visual expression. Mitchell, who identifies with ideas after modernism, sees one of the utopias, that were central to modernism, in the idea of pure representation (i.e. purely pictorial or verbal) (Mitchell 1994: 5); so withdrawal from this would consequently be natural.

I would like to point out the known difference of verbal and written expression in Mitchell's work. So, an image genuinely joins the word. But Mitchell's syncretism does not consider this opposition an important one. The form of poststructuralism denies oppositions. Burgin, as well as Mitchell, brings up the third vital force – ideology. According to Mitchell, striving to oppose word to the pictorial expression is an ideological striving.

Mitchell's conclusions appear to be a kind of deconstructivist simplifications. Although hierarchies have to be turned and read in different ways, indeterminate meaning and reducing the opposition of image and word say nothing about the pictorial and verbal expression in the end. In the oppositions of structuralism is a substantial truth: when finding something *that it is not*, we can also learn something about *it*, although *it* may include something that *it is not*.

If directness at medium is characteristic of avant-garde as Greenberg writes, it can be stated that differentiation of spoken and written word is based on the medium too. According to Mitchell written word is associated with image by its visual form. So only the idea of means has been shifted and a new metaphysical category created – an all-embracing writing that leaves visual trace.

3. The Linguistic Paradigm

"Everything points to the conclusion that the phrase the "language of art" is more than a loose metaphor." (Gombrich 1960: 87.)

It is complicated to compare the trends in post-World War II developments in visual arts and literature with those in art theory and literary theory. Pre-1960s

postwar art impresses us as a heyday of the visual – abstract expressionism, post-painterly abstractionism, op-art, minimalism – which all seem to refute the word. A literary equivalent was the theory of poetry, on which the New Criticism was largely based. The spread of structuralism in the 1960s modified the relationship of verbal and visual in quite a peculiar way as expressed, for example, in the invasion of linguistic terminology. While in the 1920s–1950s and in New Criticism the technical terms of art were abundant in literary research, in the 1960s the opposite tendency can be observed: pictures were treated as texts, as readable structures. This was induced, no doubt, by the increase of conventional (or coded) messages in the pictorial art in the preceding century: direct and easily understandable narratives had been replaced by more complex images. Another reason could be the comprehensive scope of structuralism and introduction of semiotic methods in art research, using mostly linguistic lexis.

Belief in the linguistic quality of pictures is still evident in the language usage in art theory; expressions like *art language*, *language of the architecture*, *language of forms*, etc. are quite common. It is characteristic that art has been discussed as a language in Estonia practically since the birth of art criticism:

"Music and art can become known abroad more easily than poetry, because they speak the *languages* that are spoken in the cultures of other large nations, so there is no need to find a translator." (Laikmaa 1909);

"They say that the *language* of those artists is incorrect, that their content is poor, that their mind is strange. Actually their *language* is not known – this is all." (Kompus 1917: 154);

"Rules correct emotions and translate them into *a universal language*, into signs, that we all understand in the same way: into colours and forms." (Laarman 1928: 6; my Italics – *V.S.*)

While the approach stemming from semiotics, and partly from art theory, treats both visual and pictorial expression *a priori* as a language, classic language philosophy acknowledges language merely as a linguistic means. Pictorial language is thus rendered impossible, for it is impossible to differentiate the semantic and syntactic structures corresponding to different levels in language, and to its primary elements. "Linguistic theorists categorically assert that since pictures are presentational and not discursive, they have no formal grammar. Without a grammar, images cannot be considered a language. Without a language, pictures cannot be read." (Lester 1994.)

This viewpoint can be called a semiotic iconoclasm and it does not coincide with the disapproval of visuality. The quotation of preference of one or another

means of communication has in the last decades been reduced to standing up for the right of pictorial communication in the 20th century world of linguistic philosophy.

The two main objections to the language of art are: firstly, a picture has no syntax, it is not clearly structured; secondly, it does not have a uniquely understood and given meaning. These two statements are inter-connected in a certain way and concentrate in the agreement: meaning of the picture is not based on the qualities of its structure (Wollheim 1996: 41).

One statement which lends support to the existence of the language of art is the following: if we are ready to say that an artwork has a meaning, we should also admit the presence of signification in it. Signification inevitably refers to *semiosis*, including an artwork in sign processes. The existence of a meaning of an artwork has not been questioned hitherto, and from the semiotic viewpoint the truth-value of meaning is of no importance. Even the non-semiotic aesthetics of Clement Greenberg has inevitably left an artwork with its meaning or content, differentiating it from the subject matter. Further decisions depend on the character of the meaning of the work considered. In simplified terms, one can identify two options here: either meaning can be expressed linguistically – then largely coinciding with the subject matter – or it cannot actually be put into words. The two options, although seemingly contradictory, do not exclude one another in the semiotic sense. The signified can, but need not, be linguistic, or explicit in language terms, which is a quality often expected in semiotic approach (e.g. Mitchell 1994: 87, 99 etc., 348–49; Elkins 1998: xijj, 47). The signified can also be an impression, an emotion, a mood, an age, a sense, a trend, a style or a visual quality. In this kind of an indefinite signification, the next question would be the individual character of the meaning and its dependence on the audience, or, to which degree an artwork can present the author's intention, which cannot be phrased, to different kinds of audience. Postmodern art theory has definitely expressed its opinion that purely visual art is within the power of the critic and the theoretician, depending first and foremost on the alien word supporting and commenting upon it (e.g. Mitchell 1974: 1, Morris 1989, Jay 1993: 160).

The relationship between language and art seems to be inverted: the more a picture contains "linguistics," either in the form of "pictorial language" or content which can be put into words, the more it "speaks for itself"; the less it does so, the more the work is under the arbitrary spell of the external word (or at the

best, the power of the author). Art language is characteristically problematic when authors and movements stress the visual qualities of a work.

This mechanical model is, of course, a radical simplification. It would be more correct to say that some spectators do need the support of words and others do not. By admitting the effect of words, we reduce the meaning of visuality. In the abundant, tiring milieu of museum basically two models of viewing are at work: people either read the labels but do not see what can be seen, or they look at the pictures but do not read the labels.

Language aspects of art should therefore be spoken of as functioning at two levels: the **formal** (morphological) level at which the visual techniques of a work can be treated as language, and the **substantive** or content level at which the substance of a work can be worded, and the articulation proper in a language is created by its linguistic equivalent. Here one must include the **functional** notion of art language: art, like language itself, functions as a means of communication, capable of creating and conveying meanings. Of course, these do not determine each other exclusively, rather emphasise different aspects. Let us say that a formal level presumes content and function to it, while the functional and content levels can hold independently of each other as well.

Although the linguistic paradigm was mainly generated by structuralism, it is characteristic that the main structuralists have denied that art could be seen as a language.

Claude Lévi-Strauss has compared music (which, in his view, was structurally close to the myth) with painting and found that abstract art has always turned to music for justification, so one can presume the existence of an independent language based on colours. However, Lévi-Strauss claimed that it is a serious illusion. "Whereas colours are present "naturally" in nature, there are no musical sounds in nature, except in a purely accidental and unstable way." (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 19.)

Lévi-Strauss claimed, that a language must inevitably have a double-level organisation, phonological and grammatical, or double-articulation, and we cannot find such in the painting. However, a lot of attempts have followed since that, to apply the structuralistic linguistic model to the pictorial representation, in believing that the only convincing proof of it is finding a pertinent articulation. The established rules were usually not general and it has been most complicated to explain the tendencies of modern art.

Somewhat paradoxically, the linguistic paradigm in art theory has become a real problem in postmodern thinking about the relation of art and language.

Two levels of language aspect, the formal and content, are of different history. The concept of morphological pictorial language is most conspicuous with the writings of constructivists and Bauhaus disciples. In semiotics the notion of *art language* is characteristic of the Tartu-Moscow school (e.g. Lotman 1967: 131, 144; 1998: 19–43; Uspenski 1995: 221). Both early abstractionists and the Tartu-Moscow school use the notion of art language in direct, not metaphorical sense although their ideas actually do not coincide. One source for the concept in cultural semiotics can be the intuitive art language of early Russian constructivists and in the background of them one can guess the ideas of Russian Formalism. Emphasis, however, has been shifted from the morphological aspect to the functional. As art language has been most thoroughly discussed by Yuri Lotman, his works have been the major point of departure here.

Y. Lotman has used the notion of 'art language' mostly *a priori* as needing no motivation. He does not worry about the proofs of double articulation, that gave trouble to the French structuralists. He regarded it as the passed stage of exact analysis in atomic semiotics (Lotman 1990: 3–4). In another place Lotman still takes the "language of natural visual images" as a basis of the language of art, acknowledging its morphological aspect as well: "The language (of style, tendency) that is realised in an art-model, relates, except for the natural language (Russian, French in literature, the language of natural visual forms in painting), to the language which is to be reconstructed on the grounds of the art-text (model) presented." (Lotman 1967: 144.) So the language of art is based on two components, the second one being possibly a very limited language, working in the scope of one text only.

Yuri Lotman has defined semiotic language "as mechanism of sign communication, the purpose of which is to preserve and transmit information. The basis of every language is the notion of sign." (Lotman 1990: 43) or as "any communication system of signs organised in a specific way" (Lotman 1998: 20). So every semiotic language and hence the language of art has three necessary conditions:

- it should be applicable to communication;
- it should be based on signs;
- the signs should be ordered, or form a system.

The first feature is absolutely obligatory, the system of signs however has remained open and is freely interpreted. So it is possible to treat the whole text as a sign, its presence could be assured by the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations etc. (Lotman 1998: 20, 34). Lotman's concept of art language is primarily based on fictional texts and all his examples of fine arts are of occasional character; affirming, not analysing the statements.

The language of art is a modelling system, regarded as its synonym. In a modelling system, sign-quality is not of determinative quality. Instead, rules of transformation can be the criteria as well. Later, while working out the idea of semiosphere, Lotman admitted that all systems are just theoretical constructions and in reality there are no independent "determinate, functionally monosemantic systems" (Lotman 1992: 11). In this sense Lotman's language is close to Umberto Eco's theory of codes, especially to the principle of *ratio difficilis*. It is possible to claim that the language of art in Lotman's sense is a grant for the possibilities of the communication and signification, not an independent entity.

Gombrich has a quite similar idea of the language-quality of art: "The way the language of art refers to visible world is both so obvious and so mysterious that it is still largely unknown except to artists themselves who can use it as we use all languages – without needing to know its grammar and semantics." (Gombrich 1960: 9.)

Many artists have spoken about the morphological level of language, it has been used in the literature of design and has, influenced by two sources (Tartu semiotics and the school of design with a strong Bauhaus orientation) become a natural part of the Estonian writings on art, design and architecture (e.g. Kodres 1999).

Practitioners have not tried to prove the language quality of art. Understanding of the language of art relies on a naive morphology, mainly stemming from Gestalt-psychology forms. Certain elements, shapes and colours have meanings, so they are used as the elements of natural language. Belief in a universal force of such visual elements is symptomatic. It has a functional aspect, which is not primary.

Behind the morphological language of art can be the viewpoint, that we perceive familiar objects easier and that perception is relative, depending on the conventions, experience and habits in a culture. From this point of view, cognition is filtered through perception. What reaches consciousness, is not unorgan-

ised sensory data, because we rely on the "catalogue" of experience, that consists of known objects, shapes, qualities etc. We abstract the data subconsciously and, based on this, can talk about a visual, or more exactly, perceptive language analogous to the language of art.

From the point of view of the morphological language of art, a preverbal level of a sign must exist which conveys unique coded information and transmits it to a given number of people who are familiar with this code. There are two possible approaches to such signification: 1. the existence of abstract oppositions: right–left, up–down, light–dark, spatial–flat, which are comparable with the semantic markers or features, 2. the basic forms and shapes that form certain categories, comparable with the theory of natural categories, and with the ideal shapes of Gestalt-psychology.

Comparison of the relations of these possibilities is no longer a theme to be considered in the current paper, since the problem concerns more visual perception. If such markers or categories exist, they are common both to visual perception and visual arts. From the semiotic angle, another aspect is important – such analysis is done after the signification only, on the basis of existing texts. It is obviously important from the point of view of the sense of sight. If some semantically relevant forms of perception or attributes of space exist, they are common to the perception of pictorial images as well as to the rest of the environment.

Abstract art is largely based on the familiar idea that we perceive known objects rather than unrecognisable sense-data. It can be compared to private language, and such a parallel is supported by the fact that a lot of abstract shapes and forms have meanings, even stories, known and given only by the artists themselves. Behind the morphological language of art there is an unconscious desire for ideograms: one sign = one concept, and so it is a language in the most straightforward sense.

The third connection between art and language is made outside semiotics by the philosophers and is based only on the analogous functions. Art is language as a signification practice, because it is possible to transmit meanings by means of art. We understand such analogy intuitively without argumentation. As G. L. Hagberg puts it: "if one conceives of language in mentalistic terms, whereby meaning is a mental phenomenon only contingently associated with a particular physical sign or specific utterance, one is then led, through the fundamentally influential analogy between language and art" (Hagberg 1995: 2).

However, for Hagberg art starts there, where natural language stops expressing fundamental differences between them. Compared with the opinion of cultural semiotics and practitioners ("art is language") the philosophical notion of language of art is based on analogy – "art is as language" (or as R. G. Collingwood puts it "art must be language" – Collingwood 1938: 273). Such understanding is derived from the dualistic meaning of the work of art – both linguistic and artistic expressions are translations of mental ideas or imaginations of material forms. So we have a two-staged process – imagination and expression.

Although the expression "language of art" has been in use for several centuries at least, it must be admitted that no exhaustive motivation has been given to it either in semiotics or in philosophy. Art is language, it is as language, it should be a language – the approach is intuitive, metaphoric, aprioric or phenomenological. Most of all however this metaphor has been disseminated by the ideas of E.H. Gombrich and by Nelson Goodman's *The Languages of Art* in spite of the figurativeness of the title of the book and of the Goodman's adjustable position, that though art is a symbol system it is not a language (Goodman 1976: xi–xii, 226–229).

A verbal text is syntactic and discrete. Internal agents of the language determine its discreteness. A picture is more of a continuum, the differentiation of any kind of syntax is a free, flexible interpretation and cannot be fixed.

At the first glance the simplest solution seems to be its reduction to the level of a terminological problem. The natural language, linguistic has double articulation and pertinent semantic and syntactic structure, in art we can talk about symbol-systems (as Goodman does), about different codes (Eco), modelling systems or sign systems (terms synonymous with language in Lotman's works). However, speaking of different means of signification in art, such solution is an illusion. It does not matter, how we differentiate natural language from the signification systems used in visual arts on the conceptual level. It certainly will not bring us closer to understanding *semiosis* in art.

Language, text and other concepts, characteristic of the linguistic paradigm, always remain, to some extent, metaphorical. The idea of language simply refers to the semiotic unity of the picture with other human instruments of expression. It is never a real language in the meaning of a natural language, just a way of

marking it, and can be called a language on the grounds of analogy. Language should be distinguished from other semiotic systems for one very simple reason. When we mean e.g. the Estonian language, we should always specify: the natural language. Possible alternatives for replacement are the 'semiotic system,' 'sign system' and Goodman's 'symbol system.' All these expressions are awkward and the 'sign system,' indicating the possibility of atomic level, even misleading. For this reason we shall talk about codes and coding: language is a code, but not all modes of codification are languages. Although we are, and will be, discussing the language and text of art and reading artwork, all these metaphors implying similarity with verbal texts are commonplace. At the same time they admit that there is an eternal, influential difference involved.

A language as well as a code presume the possibility of iterability, e.g. the reproduction of the sign and the existence of a *type* of signs. Groupe μ (Groupe μ 1995a) is convinced in this and Goodman's 'man-pictures' and 'unicorn-pictures,' which can be signified with labels, refer to this (Goodman 1976: 21–31, 57–67). But pictorial representation and expression do not remain within the frames of a *type* only. With the same means, techniques, formats and style we can depict a horse, zebra, unicorn or a non-existent, completely impossible creature. The pictorial representation gives us an ability to depict the face of a familiar man, to give a surrealist hint of a face, to place details of a face chaotically or to give a number of incomprehensible lines and traces. Where is here the line between a *type* and a *token* or an invariant and a variant?

Verbal presentation could in the first, second and third case use single words – general names, but further we need a long and thorough description. The non-depictive marks, traces and lines are very common in pictorial representation, but their verbal presentation needs a lot of energy.

There are two possible objections. Firstly, in verbal language the class and iteration exist only on the level of word. Ideas, sentences, messages and texts do not recur, a text does not have to be reproducible.

Secondly, a kind of iteration can be found in pictorial depiction after all, e.g. in the manners of style, in the way of depicting man, nature or interior in a certain era. Semantic categorisation, the same kind for creating environment and images, has a prerequisite for *type*. When drawing a non-existent creature or a surrealist face, we depart from some existing classes (horns, legs, tail) and our

own knowledge. For this reason Biblical characters have always been depicted as contemporaries in the history of art, the Estonian national hero Kalevipoeg as a peasant, and the unicorn as a horse. A pictorial *type* is hardly determinable and scalar, but we cannot maintain, that it does not exist.

Leaving aside countless attempts to interpret some elements of picture as signs, we have to stay with this kind of semiotic approach, that acknowledges the practice of signifying only on the level of text. Sign-quality on the sub-level is a single case open to interpretation. It can be applied to a limited class of pictures. In this sense there is no universal language of art. A pictorial image is a classical example of the use of a subcode: we can see signification and understand some of its elements without knowing the code as a whole. We derive the meaning on the basis of some connections which we know before.

Codes cannot be derived from a single text in art, but from a whole of texts made up of the works of a school or of one author. Key to the code is found by comparing it with other wholes, which are all connected with each other. This can only be reached by comparison, negation, juxtaposition and search of common features. So the cognition of code is a contextual process in depth and to be able to do it, one even has to know things that are not subjected to this particular code.

There is no unified or universal code for all pictorial art. And yet it remains possible to specify a few clearly delineated rules. Even though some of these rules are broken at the turning points of art history, some are quite definitely preserved. Art, however changeable it may be in its various avant-garde modes, has to preserve at least some correspondence to expectations – in general, the notion of art cannot change totally. So the codes are replaced permanently and sporadically, while the paradigm does not change. The art code is not compulsory, anticipatory codes cannot be abstracted: doing this would only prepare their decay. A registered code immediately becomes a dead code. Living or functional codes, even the most rational ones, are always partly intuitive and unrecognised, and in this respect pre-semiotic. A code still unrecognised, corresponds to the expectation and inability to see beyond the limits of code. So the metalinguistic function of art code is limited. It is not analogous to the grammatical function of language which gives a set of rules that enable to generate texts. No art code is obligatory in creating a text and could be excluded in principle. For example, a school that acknowledges only the depiction of full figures can, for some reason,

accept also cut figures at a certain point. Although an art code does not establish fundamentals for new texts, it includes fruitful potential for generating new codes for another hierarchy, which can parasitically annihilate the codes that have fed them.

Four principally different ways of coding, which manifest themselves at the level of expression or of content, can be identified. These ways are inevitably dependant on, and determined by, one another:

Content level	<p><i>I Thematic (subject matter appreciated and excluded in during given epoch, etc.)</i></p> <p><i>II Iconographic (objects of depiction and certain meaning they have in a given iconographic system)</i></p>
Expression level	<p><i>III Organising transformation ("shot selection," composition, perspective)</i></p> <p><i>IV Methods of depiction, technical means and appreciated skills (e.g. plastic academic nudes which, in numerous schools, are devoid of meaning)</i></p>

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