

**Asociación Argentina de Críticos de Arte**  
**Association Argentine des Critiques d'Art**  
**Argentine Association of Art Critics**

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**THE THEORY of INSTITUTIONS**

I. Man, a symbolic being

by Jorge Glusberg

The first point in order to correctly approach the problem of art in its productive and reproductive aspects (this metaphor, an economic one, is also, for us, a metaphor in the theoretical sense), consists in having a consistent and systematic view of the aspects constituting the field of culture, the field of human achievements.

The perspective to be adopted depends on the conception which is previously drawn up about society. Here is ours: we suppose that a theory of culture is a theory of cultural objects, that is to say, of semiotic objects, objects furnished with meanings which are produced by man or exist independently of him (natural ones).

But, from the moment that an object enters the social circuit of consumption it inexorably becomes an object with meaning: Roland Barthes called them "function-signs". For example, an umbrella serves for protection from the rain, and on the basis of this use, acquires a meaning. A star, which has not been produced by man, enters the cultural spectrum as soon as it is included in everyday speech, that is, the system of linguistic symbols.

A theory of culture is, therefore, equivalent to a deepening of the conditions on the basis of which man is transformed into a symbolic being, capable of utilizing signs grouped into systems. This approach to cultural events in order to give art its place among them thus turns into a kind of general anthropology, an "archaeology of knowledge", as Michel Foucault proposed.

The culture of a society in a given epoch depends on various factors and corresponds to a social dimension which has been analyzed, but little, from the scientific point of view, as it includes myths, rituals, art, religions, law and all those values which make of man what he is.

It is of interest to delve deeper into the mechanisms which determine the

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production and consumption of these cultural goods which, at the same time as being produced by man, mould him at each moment and in every circumstance. Art, architecture, communication, relationships with the natural or cultural environment, are elements of a totalizing scheme which, lacking a theory of signs, is unapproachable at this point in the development of the knowledge of human sciences.

Culture understood as the set of systems of existing symbols, transcends man and defines him as such; a society without culture is as inconceivable as a culture without society. Although there exists "animal societies" (the word society now takes on a different meaning), these cannot modify their environment except up to a certain point, nor make use of instruments nor utilize other than rudimentary languages.

The basic difference between human and animal societies lies in symbolization, on the basis of which man is organized. Symbolization sets him limits from lawful restrictions to social taboos - and freedoms, among which is the possibility of great achievements, of which art is the loftiest. Man is inserted among the effects of culture, since the latter produces signs, as we know, and man is one of them: his thoughts - conscious and unconscious - his actions, his gestures are signs. Additionally, as a creator of cultural goods he culturalizes himself: thus, man is a sign with a double sense.

Symbolic subject and producer of symbols, man communicates through them; fundamentally, he expresses his ideas and organizes his social relationships. There are supreme values of culture - freedom, justice, democracy - but they are not congenital, but virtualities which are developed: this process is closely related to the work of institutions, which, in different ways, stimulate the development of those values.

To sum up, man is a symbolic being, creator of symbols and susceptible of developing values insofar as institutions allow him to, and the organization of society enables him to.

Within this situation, art is the effect par excellence of what is cultural,



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as we call the set of systems of signs which is established on social or institutional organizations. It is true that there exist differences of symbolic formation, that there exist those who produce art and those who do not produce it, those who can consume it and those who cannot, those who have access to learning and those who are bereft of it; but it is also true that these disparities will be solved or will continue in accordance with the rhythm imposed on the evolution of society. Therefore, art, culture and society demand to be defined within a systematic framework and with the help of disciplines which, like the theory of signs - originating mostly, in linguistics, the most developed social sciences - will allow one to delve into the aspects of production, reproduction and consumption, a circuit which can be positive or negative. Positive, when it incorporates new, creative elements, "images" in the sense of Gaston Bachelard; and negative, when it repeats itself, becomes academic, when it is not adjusted to social conditions and the prospective of a country or a region. However, both what is positive and what is negative and their evaluation, in the ultimate instance, obey the cultural objective which a nation sets itself, because, by virtue of them, institutions will be established with a view to the development of creative capacities and individual and general - that is to say, social fulfillment. Man ultimately constitutes the personal manifestation of what society has patiently created in the vast field of culture.

## II. A two-sided phenomenon

The decade of the '60 saw the expansion of a tendency to consider cultural events as communicational phenomena; that is to say, signs which are produced by emitters and reach their receivers transmitting concrete information. But the development of the theory of signs allows the problem to be appreciated from a different and clearer perspective. This is because it is not only the instruments of communication - those which we call "codes"

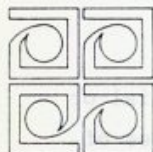


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(for example, natural languages, road signs) - which are important.

In his cultural environment, the subject is determined by communicational systems and others which aren't strictly such, such as fashion, rituals, and involuntary gestures. Although they constitute semiotic systems, in many cases formalized ones - let the degree of progress be remembered which is today achieved in psychiatric research by the formalization of attitudes and gestures - their aim is not to communicate; rather, they are symbolic forms. This is to say, they signify, without for this reason ceasing to exert an influence on the subject as a cultural entity.

Systems of symbols thus present this double aspect of communication and signification. The most important among them, language, serves to communicate and, on the basis of the methods of connotation, to originate significant values. A phrase will allow me to communicate something to somebody, but, also, to signify my states of mind or my tendency to talk too much or to be close-mouthed.

Naturally, art is also a phenomenon of communication and, at the same time, of signification.

We have already indicated that symbolic systems shape the subject and that the latter, additionally, produces the forms of symbolizations, which are to man what water is to fish. The process shows a dialectical interdependence, in the logical sense of two elements which influence and determine each other. However, the fundamental problem in order to understand the systems of signs - especially that of art - is the answer to this question: which is the way in which symbolic structures shape the subject as homo symbolicus in the anthropological sense?

Systems of signs do not appear out of the blue; they have their own history and a permanent self-regulation which turns into a kind of paradigm, that is, into a relatively closed set within any society.

This explains the intercultural differences between developed and non-developed countries, between the culture of American Indians and that of the citizens of huge cities. In the same way, through this overdetermination of structures in a determined period, intracultural differences are perceived

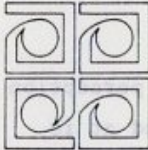


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These latter are difficult to analyse, because certain universalist criteria state that systems of signs are analogous for all denizens of the same cultural environment in the same situation. But, although in an advanced society education may be general, compulsory and free, this is not in itself enough to make individuals culturally uniform, to transform them into identical subjects from the point of view of their utilization of symbols.

Differences exist; otherwise, we would constitute a society of robots fed by one flow alone, without the slightest possibility of divergence and adequation to the various locations of the community. The utopian theorizations about a "directed culture" have failed: the social, political and economic changes which have taken place in various parts of the world in recent years, haven't been enough to alter the symbolization setups, the cultural structures which the individual employs to conceive his reality and to modify it.

The thesis which hold that, altering certain social, political or economic conditions, the cultural framework is renewed suddenly an entirely, is an illusion.

It has also been much insisted that man is determined, before birth, not only in the cultural order but also in the social, political and economic orders. We believe that this fatalistic idea has not been verified historically, since the process of permanent evolution experienced by societies ensures that the general conditions of developing countries do not remain the same at different moments in their life and even from one stage to the next.

How, then, is one to accept this sclerosis which limits man, transforming him into a mere receiver of what is given, who cannot erect his own cultural environment and become homo simbolicus?

It is true that the means of communication - the accelerated progress of which obeys real social needs and the unceasing technical and scientific progress - disseminate culture and, at least in appearance, erase the



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difference between sectors of society. But it is also true that perception by the subjects is always selective: not everything that is looked at is seen, nor is everything heard that is listened to.

The adult and normal human being has a capacity for discernment regarding the formation of his cultural nature, despite the theories which attribute an absolute power of massification to the great press or entertainment media. It doubtlessly makes little sense to treat the problem of culture without referring to such media; but there are other institutions which influence man to the same or a greater degree, deciding his level of symbolization, his place within the creative society.

Hence, according to our criterion, a theory of culture must perforce be correlative of a theory of institutions, of the social organizations on which, as we have said, the set of systems of signs is affixed.

III. The conditioning factor.

Now then: a theory of institutions is a theory of society and, in particular of the centers or nuclei where the general interests are processed and the policies and strategies are drawn up for meeting the needs of man in all areas of his life.

Up to now, semiology has concerned itself with the institutional aspects of a society from the viewpoint of its internal organization, of its action as a block for the development of human accomplishments, for the purpose of deepening the developments of social psychology, a discipline which has traditionally examined institutions.

We shall attempt to approach the problem not from a strict psycho-sociological theorization but from a cultural and semiotical viewpoint, considering institutions as creators of discourses - of significant practices - which extend to society as a whole and thus influence man's behaviour and representations.

Institution is a notoriously vague name: the family is an institution, the State is a series of institutions. But an institution is also spoken of



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regarding everything that is instituted, that is to say, socially prescribed. It was the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, influenced by the sociologist Emile Durkheim, who maintained that language is a social institution, in the same way that certain elements of our cultural patrimony, such as fashion, are today held to be institutions.

Although there exists an ambiguity in the term institution, it is of primordial importance to recognize that its two meanings are linked and march together. What is instituted, fashion, for example, is furnished with institutions in the most literal sense of the word: physical places in which, via social labour, products are fashioned - cultural or not - which will be instituted.

The mistake must not be fallen into of supposing that institutions oblige the individual to accept determined values: this falls exclusively to the organs of political power, in which society is embodied in order to govern itself, giving itself rights and duties. In any case, what is instituted isn't done so by the decision of specific sectors of society but by the strength and inertia of usage and customs, which end up materialized by the institutions.

To sum up: although the institution is not to be confused with what is instituted, even though both concepts go together, on these bases is erected the cultural edifice of society.

Restricting ourselves now to the analysis of cultural institutions or the cultural apparatus, we meet a wide range which is divided into state and private organizations, autonomous or dependent ones, which establish links of alliance, opposition, antagonism or competition. Also operating are the para-institutions, which carry out tasks of support, aid or complementation. This range logically acquires its own profile in the case of the artistic discourse.

For the artists, the institution is more than a means, group of belonging or useful instruments: it is a conditioning factor of some aspects of his discourse. The social problématique is concretely manifested in the



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institutions and, therefore, in the effects of those institutions, among which are artistic discourses. The notion of the isolated artist, who produces in solitude, in accordance with innate gifts and guided by extra-terrestrial inspirations, has long ago ceased to be applicable.

We hold that the institutions linked to the process of production and consumption of art appear as the materialization, in the midst of complex societies such as those of our era, of the conditions of production of the artistic discourse, as well as of its circulation and appropriation on the part of the public.

We give the name of (subjective) conditions of production to the imaginary representations which are provoked in the author of a work by the social, political and economic circumstances (objective conditions) of the geo-cultural environment in which he finds himself. These representations turn, after a creative stage, into the artistic discourse, in which the rhetorical tracks or marks of those conditions are present.

Returning to the institutions, we shall add that a return of influence often takes place. Experimental artistic discourses, which abandon the terrain of what has been consecrated and institutionalized, in turn influence the cultural apparatus, searching for their place in it until they obtain it, be it through the adaptation of existing organizations, or through the birth of others.

A list of the institutions which promote, support, finance, disseminate, select, advertise and exchange works of art necessarily includes museums, galleries, training schools, academies, university laboratories, cultural centers of all types, local, regional or international encounters (for theoretical debates or the exhibition of output), entities dedicated to criticism (such as the International Association of Art Critics, with chapters in almost every country of the world), sponsoring foundations, private patrons, specialized magazines and artistic journalism, i.e., that of the immediate criticism or review.

A real interplay of interests and tendencies, sometimes reconcilable and

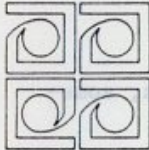


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sometimes incompatible, a number of economic and social, political and situational factors, participate in order to give birth to the artistic output and to determine what is art and separate it from what is not, in an intermittent process which ranges from the author of the work up to the receiver.

Although it may appear repetitive, we shall make it clear that we are guided by a semiological approach to the artistic discourse in order to understand the influence and weight of institutions, and not a psycho-sociological analysis of the latter. However, it should not be forgotten that the rhetorical traces of its conditions of production are perceived in the artistic discourse; therefore, the discourses regarding art drawn up by institutions and para-institutions always will contain the marks or signs of the psycho-sociological processes derived from the global operation of the organizations, in a determined society.

As regards para-institutions, we shall mention the workshops, in which future artists gather around one or more figures of renown who infuse them with knowledge and craftsmanship. Also, the field of theorization, criticism information, discussion and dissemination of artistic events, a system which differs from that of the institutions themselves by not being constituted, in its majority, by artists.

Critics, theoreticians and art historians participate in the conformation of the discourse from a singular perspective: a "meta-discourse regarding art", whose relations with the works we shall examine further on. Let us take into consideration, for the moment, that these para-institutions carry out a decisive role in the circulation of the works, and that without communication art would continue to be elitist, even if it deals with indigenous or popular subjects: the only way to avoid it is through public information.

Access to the works, if only at the level of news, is impossible without the labour which allows it to be known where and when an artistic event takes place. Written, radio or television news, conferences and lectures,

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treatises and catalogues, and art journalism, carry out this task, sometimes turning from information to malformation.

Both institutions and para-institutions form a whole. It is not, however, an homogeneous, simple or linear whole, since there exist innumerable ways of approaching art. Differences also proliferate between institutions, and these handles multiply since the theory of art and the history of art tend to be seen in a personal and different way in each case, which impedes fluid communications between the author, who additionally work within a certain isolation.

Let us not even talk about art journalism, where the most absolute anarchy reigns, since the spectrum is enormous: from the interview with a creator to discover episodes in his married life, to the article aimed at commenting a work as a function of the commercial demands of the market. The inexorable role of the institutions is translated in two recent episodes:

The setting of the Pompidou Centre, in Paris, recovered for the French capital the character of point of confluence and irradiation of international art, which it had lost at the turn of the '60 to New York, after holding it for over a century. The very building erected to house the operations of the Pompidou Centre fired this discovery with its architectonic design, praised and castigated with equal ardour.

The burning of the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro, in mid 1978, not only destroyed a treasurehouse of the first magnitude: it underlined the fact that the Museum had ended by concentrating the core of all the artistic activity of the old capital of Brazil, putting the spectators in contact with works ranging from the Impressionist and Cubist masters, to the youngest and most questioning local talents, who are already working on the reconstitution of the patrimony lost in the flames.

This is because both Paolo Uccello, with his obsession with the multiplicity of lines and his architectonical problématique of the era of Brunelleschi and Donatello, and the hyperrealists and conceptualists of today, produced

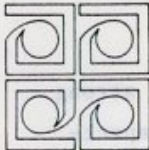


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and produce within this framework of symbolic systems and cultural apparatuses, circulating along the following path: culture → institutions → artistic discourse.

#### IV. Babel of remissions

Nevertheless, we may tackle this varied panorama from a unitary perspective.

We are referring to the method of analysis which we adopted to consider everything referred to the production, circulation, reproduction and consumption of art: it is the point of view of signification, the

examination - on a same level - of the discourses and their contradictions; ultimately, an integrating perspective via the theory of signs.

Art criticism constitutes a linguistic discourse regarding another discourse - artistic output - which may or may not be linguistic. Conceptual art incorporates language, literature is language. But, in any case, we are faced with a real meta-language, the theorization about art, which sometimes drifts away from and sometimes comes near to its language-object: the artistic discourse.

Let us not forget that in the context of certain contemporary works there also exist meta-linguistic legends associated with the works themselves, describing their characteristics or titling them. This leads us to differentiated an internal meta-language (written by the artist) and an external meta-language (developed by the critic, the theoretician or the historian).

The meaning which a work awakens in the receiver depends on the meanings which are deposited in what he reads. And we employ the verb to read, because the images decoded the same as words. In the field of visual arts, this is a fact: certain contemporary structures, the spectrum running from ecological art to conceptual art, passing through every kind of tendency and position, demand a decoding, sometimes an arduous one.

Let us for instance, consider the phenomenon of videoart. In order to

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develop, videographic art has to combat an apparatus regulated by strong interest which have already determined a certain attitude of the spectator vis-a-vis the cathode ray tube. But, at the same time, it makes use of the infrastructure of a means with a low artistic value with the objective of altering the attitude of commercial television and promoting another type of perceptual relationship with the audience.

If we add that the greater part of videographic experiences are not realistic but make use of the technical possibilities of the medium as from the use of computers and synthesizers of a high technological level, we will understand that the work poses real problems for the receiver: it does not deal with the customary subjects and it is not sufficiently disseminated to allow an identification of the receiver with the artist's codes. A contradiction thus arises between what is ritualistic and everyday in commercial television and the new artistic values proposed by video.

The interrelations between work of art, comment - meta-discursive effect - history and theory are complex. A clear example of how the various institutions and artistic or meta-artistic discourses complement each other is constituted by the fact of medium taking another medium as subject, an ever more frequent phenomenon in recent years (one example: the Japanese theatre taken as subject by the Korean Nam June Paik, videoart author, in Global Groove).

Thus is established a Babel of remissions from one medium to another, and this network presents useful elements for analysis. The interplay of institutions, or, better still, of what is instituted, is in the ultimate analysis an interplay of discourses. Commercial advertising can adopt artistic values in the same way that art adopted the cartoon strip in the pop period.

Initially, new would have to distinguish the linguistic discourse which refer to other artistic discourses, and the non-linguistic meta-discourses

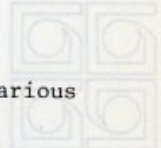


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which refer to art. Among the former is criticism, in all its various (erudite, journalistic, etc.); among the latter, a meta-language employed by some artists, as when Christo, simultaneously with this large works, exhibits small-scale drawings of them. At the same time that the set constitutes the work and not the larger ones, by a meta-linguistic mechanism the smaller ones allude to those of a large volume; the drawing behaves as a non-linguistic commentary on the works.

Another point of interest is the fact that, insofar as the institutions linked with art increase their social status, in the same way will the discourses on them acquire increased status for the consumer. A complicated network of discourses, linguistic or not, envelops the consumer who is interested in esthetic problems or the simple occasional spectator at museums and galleries.

But we cannot avoid taking into consideration that the artistic discourses emanating from this institutional network were an integral part of other social discourses. This is the case of the professor of literature who in his treatises quotes a determined work, or of the metaphorical use of images of famous artists or architects to exemplify a theoretical development.

It so happens that discourse are not mutually exclusive and that the artistic discourse in particular - in the form of work, commentary, criticism or exegesis - is mixed with the didactic, the familiar and all those which depend from the diverse cultural apparatuses.

From the semiological perspective, intersemiosis (the relation existing between the diverse discourses) is a complex subject which is only now beginning to be studied. We know, nevertheless, that the discourses of the media exist, that there are works which take the media as subjects, media which take works as subjects, and discourses which take the media and the works as subjects, such as the discourse of the media regarding the works of art.

This is the criticism, so common in the polemics in which two or more specialists do not agree on the value of a work, or when the judgements

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of art historians, bibliographies or sources of reference are debated. The concrete possibilities, in the economic field, of each of the institutions which effect the artistic discourse, constitute one of the decisive factors of circulation. We must not, however, confuse this with the relative value of discourse, which does not depend on economic possibilities but, fundamentally, on the active practice or exercise of criticism, on elements which are conditioned by what we call the relation between the artistic discourse and other social discourses.

There were epochs in which art could not be analyzed outside the institutions, such as in the Middle Ages, when it was inseparable from the Church or the nobility. Today, this determination is less rigid, although it has not for this reason disappeared. Cultural institutions retain an intimate dependence regarding the rest of the institutions of society. To pretend to analyze the artistic discourse exclusively - a possible attitude, if we remember that our approach is a necessary abstraction to establish the limits of a rhetorical field and not to extend themselves to the examination of the entire universe - is to reduce or simplify the problem theoretically.

This small plumbing of the artistic discourse and its institutional relations induces a series of conclusions which we shall hereunder enunciate:

- I. The discourse of art is always accompanied by other (meta-artistic) discourses of diverse kinds.
2. These other discourses depend on more encompassing social structural conditions, and it is not possible to analyze them without taking that institutional operation into consideration.
3. The relationship between institutions and their effects, the resultant discourses, is complex but not unapproachable, and a theory of culture in the sense of an examination of the artistic vector which is found in it, demands the investigation of that relationship.

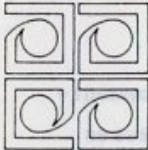


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4. To limit oneself to a classificatory approach, according to which the artistic discourse and only the latter defines art, while the others are secondary or aleatory, and to fix the placement or predetermine the relative value of each, entails a reductionism leading nowhere.

5. Artistic and para-artistic discourses as well as meta-artistic ones are necessarily related to the other social discourses, in relation which be of alliance, antagonism, opposition, identity, mutual strengthening, etc.

6. Mean of communication may take other means as subject matter as well as their own institutional conditions of production. In this fashion the dynamics of the artistic discourse in its relation with the institutions or other discourses can be the "subject" of a work.

Thus, paraphrasing Claude Lévi-Strauss, we can say that there exist diverse variations of the artistic discourse, which are demonstrated on the basis of a "deep articulation". With the proviso that, for our examination, applied to art and not to myths, we must judge the external (objective) conditions or production of the discourses.

V. Prospective models.

The above summary of provisional conclusions is only the beginning of what we shall call the "socio-semiotic prospective of art".

It so happens that, to draw up models capable of enabling us to understand the speedy development of contemporary manifestations in the fields of artistic discourses, the schools which succeed and complement one another, the new events - due in part to the technological and scientific advances of our days - it is necessary, from the viewpoint of a theory of institutions, to approach the subject in a semiotic form, that is, to conceive art as a significant system, as we have been doing.

The key to this approach resides in a change of perspective regarding the contribution which the theory of signs can offer to the understanding of esthetic phenomena and para-meta-artistic discourses.

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Sección Argentina de la Asociación Internacional de Críticos de Arte (AICA)  
Personería Jurídica C 5795

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To understand that what we are carrying out is not criticism nor commentaries nor art but theory; but not a theory of art but of the processes of approach to the relations between art, discourse and society. The sciences with which this approximation can be carried out are new: ethnolinguistics, semiotics, futurologies, the sociology of institutions, the study of the mass communication media.

An obstacle appears in these cases, and it must be mentioned: the employment of new tools of a theoretical type for the observation of a concrete phenomenon, brings with it methodological problems which it is necessary to overcome along the way. The first essays, though establishing precedents, are often provisional and subject to revision; in this sense, they are the most vulnerable ones, though they dare touch subjects which have been little examined.

Thus, our proposal, which encompasses institutions, society, its culture, the place which is occupied in it by the discourse of art and its relations with other discourses, may turn out to be ambitious. Nevertheless, only on the basis of a general and abstract approach such as that of the theory of culture as a condition of the production of art, and the theory of institutions, will be able to arrive at an examination of the discourse of art.

Henceforward, we will be able to investigate its objective and subjective conditions of production, its languages and the central problem: the rhetoric of art. This road leads us to fashion prospective models to illustrate the development of artistic discourses, accepting that this is only viable on the basis of the knowledge of the many variables and of a thorough research into past and present sociological and psychological mechanisms. The probabilities that something may happen and of being able to take an active part in carrying it out, depend on the frequency with which we observe what has already happened and on the knowledge of what is happening today.

Rhetoric mixes here with the general conclusions of what we have set

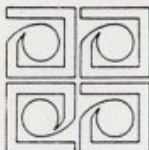


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forth. But, if attention is paid to the change, it will be seen that the analysis of the objective conditions has already been undertaken. It would only still be necessary to say a few words regarding the subjective or internal conditions.

If we turn now to the rhetoric of the artistic discourse and of para-meta-artistic ones, it is because at this point, rethoric -style - shows itself to be inseparable from external conditions of production and from what we call the "theory of culture".

Style is the discursive manifestation of the conditions of production. Consequently, to analyze a style is to analyze at the same time the signs of such conditions. We have already made mention of it, but it is now necessary to carry out a more direct approach to the relations between stylistic acrobatics and their conditions of generation. We know that every stylistic change - at least in language - is a semantical change, that it is not possible to alter the form of a message without altering the content.

In the field of the artistic discourse and its correlatives (artistic para-meta-languages), there exist as many styles as works or classes of works, and as many rethorics as commentaries, criticisms, histories or theories about art. This essay does not imply an exception: the scientific description of a social phenomenon such as art motivates the utilization of a particular rethoric.

The examination of this rethoric should take place in the corresponding level of its conditions of production and with the place which it occupies in the set of institutions which define a culture at a certain moment.