

Empathy and Semiotic Narrative Practices concerning Art: A Cognitive Semiotic Approach to Aesthetic Experience and Emotion

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ABSTRACT. This paper proposes a cognitive-semiotic approach to aesthetics to understand aesthetic emotion and its relation to the process of producing and valorizing art. The core argument presented is that the emotional aspects of aesthetic experience are integral to the processes of evaluation and meaning-making and that this interplay significantly influences individuals' engagement with art, highlighting the importance of these dimensions in the overall experience.

Therefore, the initial step in my approach is to illustrate that the process of meaning-making is significantly influenced by our active participation, as well as our interpretation and understanding of our own emotions and those of others. I intend to demonstrate that throughout this process, empathy is a vital component of the reciprocal interaction between the viewer and the artwork. In this regard, I will explore various concepts related to empathy, focusing on aesthetic empathy. Additionally, I will emphasize the correlation between aesthetic experiences and everyday life, explaining how a work of art can effectively mirror the core of daily life through a semiotic narrative practice. I believe that by exploring these narratives more thoroughly, we can achieve a deeper, empathetic understanding of both the artist and the artwork and that this understanding can lead to explicit and implicit responses to the artwork, ultimately shaping our overall attitude toward it. Hence, I will conclude that our aesthetic experiences provide us with opportunities to actively explore aspects of our narrative selves, which might help us understand how these experiences significantly change our relationship with ourselves and the social context we are a part of.

Keywords: *cognitive semiotics, meaning-making, simulation theory, empathy, narratives*

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Introduction: features of cognitive semiotics

How does the mind interact with our body to produce emotions, and what role do these emotions play in aesthetic experiences? How do these aesthetic emotions differ from those involved in other experiences? To address these inquiries, my paper begins with Terry Eagleton's thought-provoking statement that "aesthetics is born as a discourse on the body" (Eagleton, 1988: 327). The focus lies on that aspect of aesthetic ideology that plays a role in reevaluating aesthetics in philosophy and science by presenting it as a sphere wherein meaning is constructed through bodily engagement with the external environment.

The premise from which I started is that current research in aesthetic theories strongly emphasizes the pivotal role of emotion in aesthetic experiences. These theories form the basis of what is currently recognized as sentimentalist aesthetics. Although there is a wide variety of approaches and theories about the role of emotion in the interaction with works of art (see, in this respect, Robinson, 2006; Rolls, 2011), we can also identify a common assumption that the emotional component is fundamental to the aesthetic experience. In this view, every time we experience something aesthetic, this experience is primarily based on complex emotional processes.

My paper explores how we can develop deep emotional and physical connections with art through the use of cognitive semiotics perspective and tools. Although cognitive semiotics is not a unified discipline since it "has been invented many times during the past few decades" (Sonesson, 2012: 208), it has now evolved beyond the status of an emerging discipline. In my perspective, cognitive semiotics should not be regarded merely as another variant of semiotics but rather as an embodiment of semiotics' enduring ambition to function as a genuine bridge between diverse disciplines. Jordan Zlatev offers us an integrative definition of cognitive semiotics, which he sees as a new transdisciplinary field of research into everything to do with the phenomenon of meaning "integrating methods and theories developed in the disciplines of cognitive science with methods and theories developed in semiotics and the humanities, with the ultimate aim of providing new insights into the realm of human signification and its manifestation in cultural practices" (Zlatev, 2015: 1043). In this regard, it is essential to emphasize the connection to cognitive science, specifically concerning the concept of embodiment, which is the focal point of interest in 4E Cognition theories. This entails studying the physical and sensorimotor foundation of phenomena such as meaning, mind, cognition, and language, a turn that has been noticeable in semiotics, particularly over the past twenty years. In short, this recent development in theoretical reflection on signs involves transitioning from conceptualizing signs as abstract relations to analyzing their material and corporeal nature.

Among the specific approaches of the theories included in 4E Cognition, I state that the enactive perspective is crucial for cognitive semiotics as it emphasizes the role of direct and lived experience in cognition. Therefore, the shift in the perspective regarding the construction of meaning entails a departure from viewing it purely as a static and structural phenomenon. Instead, it is now perceived as a *dynamic* process that involves *interaction* and *sense-making*. Furthermore, there is a strong link between the concept of a *semiotic system* (see C. Paolucci, 2021: 2-3) and the core idea of the enactive perspective, known as *enaction*, which is understood as “a history of structural coupling that gives rise to a world through a network comprising multiple levels of interconnected sensorimotor subnetworks” (Varela et al. 1991: 206). In this way, cognition involved in constructing signifying surfaces that mediate our access to the world is no longer primarily concerned with *representation* but with *effective* and *skillful action* in the ongoing interaction with the external world.

The process of creating meaning contributes to the formation of varied interpretations and narratives, which is why, in my paper, I intend to explore how semiotic narrative practices can facilitate our understanding of aesthetic emotion and its correlation with the creation and appreciation of art. Even though enactivist approaches are not uniform, I choose to concentrate on this prevalent perspective among other theories of 4E cognition and its contributions to cognitive semiotics. I firmly believe that this viewpoint can best elucidate the wide range of artistic genres that contribute to an aesthetic experience. However, given the complexity of the artistic phenomenon, we must not forget, as S. Gallagher & Mia Burnett warn us, that each approach has strengths and limitations and that no singular set of principles can universally explain all art across different contexts (Burnett & Gallagher, 2020: 157-176).

The primary goal of my paper is to demonstrate that the emotional aspect of the aesthetic experience involves a process of evaluation and sense-making, which is essential for engaging with art. This sense-making process is shaped through active participation, interpretation, and comprehension of our own and others' emotions. I submit that embracing a cognitive semiotic, which implies assuming an embodied-enactive perspective towards aesthetic experience and emotions, allows for the best realization of these attributes. In this perspective, cognition is intertwined with the body's emotional and empathic states, blurring the line between non-rational and rational aspects. Based on the enactive perspective on cognition, we can assert that cognition involves our ability to act in the world and that emotion is considered a fundamental aspect of perception, acting as a prerequisite for other cognitive processes. Consequently, it can be inferred that emotion represents a cognitive form that enhances our comprehension of the world.

I will revisit this thesis shortly, but it is important to clarify from the outset that this paper does not seek to propose a new theory of aesthetic experience. Even though this concept has generated so much discussion to the point where some philosophers consider it “obsolete” (N. Carroll, 2008), I decided to use it in this paper because it seems appropriate for the situations in which we want to see what kind of emotional experiences people have when they interact with an aesthetic object. My objective here is not to establish the criteria for defining an object or action as aesthetic. I am also not addressing the issue of aesthetic judgment or the art/non-art distinction. As important as these are, they are not investigated in the framework of the interaction between mind and body for the purpose of producing emotions, which is the focus of this research. I am interested, instead, in line with John Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy, in an extension of the scope of aesthetics to include objects and actions that are not traditionally characterized as belonging to aesthetics or which, according to conventional aesthetic theories, should not provoke aesthetic experiences. From this perspective, any object or action can generate an undeniable aesthetic experience. The result is that all our experiences have an aesthetic potential and that the self because it is intrinsically embodied and tied to its environment, can be dramatically influenced by art.

However, while the aesthetic experience is an everyday one, it also has specific features that make it unique among other experiences. This is because the emotions conveyed in art have a profound influence on individuals, engaging them on a subjective and physical level and consequently shaping their attention and aesthetic assessments. I aim to demonstrate that the cognitive semiotics’ perspective does not align with cognitive theories of art, which portray aesthetic emotions as being represented in a cognitive and detached manner. Undoubtedly, cognitive factors play an essential role in comprehending art and significantly influence the emotions evoked by the encounter with works of art; nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that aesthetic experiences are closely connected to the emotional states of the observer. One of the fundamental aspects of the aesthetic experience is its capacity to evoke profound and transformative emotions in the beholders. Consequently, it is often posited that individuals empathize with the artwork during an aesthetic encounter. This is why we can say that to gain a genuine understanding of a work of art, it is imperative to establish a deep emotional and physical connection with it. As a result, the artwork can evoke strong and harmonious emotions in us, the viewers.

A cognitive semiotic concept of aesthetic emotion and experience

A comprehensive, cognitive semiotics explanation of aesthetic experience emphasizes the dynamic and pluralist nature of our engagement with artworks. It indicates that in our experiential engagement with a work of art, we need to be aware of our own situated experiences and emotions and dissociate them from the emotions and experiences of others. I will revisit this specific idea later in my paper, but for now, I want to emphasize that, in this process, our embodied skills play a crucial role. This means that aesthetic experience emerges from bodily and emotional engagement with works of art and that the exercise of our skills in situated and embodied action enables us to respond meaningfully to the work of art. In this context, the reference to abilities emphasizes two critical features of the enactivist approach: (1) the development of my cognitive and emotional skills undoubtedly hinges upon the biological endowment of my organism, and (2) specific environmental circumstances in which works of art may be encountered. Our abilities, primarily those linguistically imaginative and emotional, to interact with art or a cultural artifact enact some *affordances* the environment offers and predispose us to certain actions. In brief, an individual's reaction to a work of art encompasses an embodied know-how that is shaped by the cultural milieu surrounding the artwork. My point is that if we examine these ideas closely, we can see that they are already foreshadowed in the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce. In this regard, he argues that we must differentiate between everyday matters and significant crises in life. In his understanding, relying solely on individual reasoning is considered unreliable in matters of great significance. While reasoning proves to be reasonably effective in routine business affairs, its success is independent of its theoretical underpinning. In this sense, he wrote the following:

“The mental qualities we most admire in all human beings except our several selves are the maiden's delicacy, the mother's devotion, manly courage, and other inheritances that have come to us from the biped who did not yet speak; while the characters that are most contemptible take their origin in reasoning... . It is the instincts, the sentiments, that make the substance of the soul. Cognition is only its surface, its locus of contact with what is external to it... Thus, pure theoretical knowledge, or science, has nothing directly to say concerning practical matters, and nothing even applicable at all to vital crises. Theory is applicable to minor practical affairs; but matters of vital importance must be left to sentiment, that is, to instinct” (Peirce, par: 627).

From this quote, we can see that Peirce supported rational science, but at the same time, he acknowledged deeper modes of inference in practical conduct.

Because encounters with works of art are truly transformative in that they challenge us and take us out of our comfort zone, we tend to say that in an aesthetic experience, we empathize with the work of art. The concept of empathy entails establishing a deep emotional and physical connection with a work of art, enabling it to evoke strong emotions within us. However, we must recognize that there are situations when we engage with various artworks, and we may not always be emotionally moved by them or find them appealing, resulting in a lack of shared connection. In these situations, the enactivist perspective suggests setting aside the need to comprehend the artwork intellectually. Instead, it encourages us to engage with it in a way that fosters feelings, movement, and being emotionally affected by art. Therefore, the primary focus of this paper is to show that the notion of a meaningful appreciation of art is rooted in understanding and connection with others. These abilities are rooted in empathy and in its hermeneutic capacity to comprehend others' experiences and thoughts from their point of view.

This is why, considering the various concepts presented by the enactivist perspective on aesthetic experience, I have chosen to focus my attention specifically on the concept of empathy. I find it especially intriguing to investigate its role in the mutual interaction between the viewer and the artwork and how it influences the process of evaluation and sense-making. Next, I would like to discuss some ideas about empathy, specifically aesthetic empathy. In doing so, I will appeal to the mirror neuron accounts of aesthetics, such as Freedberg and Gallese (2007), and contrast it with D. Hutto and S. Gallagher's concept of *narrative practice* (see Gallagher & Hutto, 2008; Hutto, 2008; Gallagher, 2012). I will then attempt to analyze these perspectives using a semiotic grid that focuses on narratives and representation. Throughout my paper, I also strive to emphasize the correlation between aesthetic experiences and everyday life. My hypothesis suggests that a piece of art tells a powerful story, often capturing the essence of daily life. By examining these narratives, we can gain a deep, empathetic understanding of both the artist and the artwork, influencing our explicit and implicit responses to the artwork and shaping our overall attitude toward it. Thus, I conclude that aesthetic experiences are pathways for engaging with aspects of the narrative self. It becomes clear now that a comprehensive understanding of these experiences can provide valuable insights into their significant impact on our self-perception and the dynamics of our connections within the broader societal framework.

Perspectives on empathy

It is essential to recognize that there is no consensus on understanding empathy and its relationship with aesthetic experience. Upon reviewing the history of philosophy, it becomes evident that the recent introduction of connections between emotion, perception, and bodily sensation regarding aesthetic experience and empathy has become a focal point in philosophical reflection (see Freedberg & Gallese, 2007; Scarinzi, 2015; Shusterman, 2000; Gallagher & Hutto, 2008; Burnett & Gallagher, 2020). Until now, the primary perspective for understanding aesthetic experience has been in the tradition of Kantian philosophy. In this line, aesthetic experience has often been viewed as an intellectual accomplishment, valued for its pure form. This is the most significant aspect of Kant's aesthetic theory, which has sparked the most interest in embodiment research. It also relates to his explanation of judgments of beauty, particularly pure judgments of beauty. Therefore, following Kant's idea that experiencing beauty requires a form of disinterested judgment that suspends practical, ethical, and political commitments and which links aesthetics to a theory of judgment based on feelings that are non-rational, non-conceptual, and non-cognitive, the dominant aesthetic tradition until the late eighties overlooked the emotional, prereflective, and bodily sensations in aesthetic experiences.

Empathy refers to the philosopher and aesthete T. Lipps' concept of *Einfühlung*, by which he understands "feeling one's way into" an artwork or another person. Later, the concept of empathy was exemplified by the appeal to experience, bodily sensations, and emotional receptivity within the aesthetic experience. Discussions about the role of the body and aspects of corporeality in the aesthetic experience are well-established in current art theories. These discussions were first addressed within the framework of J. Dewey's pragmatist philosophy and in the research on perception found in M. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and M. Dufrenne's phenomenology of aesthetic experience. In these conceptual frameworks, the analysis of the nature of the embodied mind was also developed, as Varela, Rosch, and Thompson assumed in their well-known 1991 book. These analyses form the basis of enactive perspectives, which not only ground the mind in sensorimotor features, seeing experiences as outcomes of our interaction with the environment but also hint at the idea of attunement in the features of an embodied affectivity (see Colombetti, 2014).

On the other hand, recent neuroscientific research, which assumes the exploration of the visual processing of works of art by investigating the neural basis of the aesthetic attitude towards works of art, everyday objects, and natural events, has definitively rekindled the perspective that aesthetic experience is firmly rooted

in empathy and encompasses the mental and physical simulation of elements depicted in the artwork. The idea that findings from neuroscience research are crucial for understanding and aesthetic appreciation of works of art is now widely accepted, particularly by enactivist perspectives, which emphasize the interaction and mutual influence between the perceiver and the artwork in creating meaning. However, many philosophers and art theorists raise several questions about whether empirical evidence can serve as a substantial foundation for validating aesthetic judgments. Reflecting on the explanatory potential that cognitive neuroscience can have on the aesthetics and philosophy of art, D. Davies asks what it means for a theory of aesthetics to be based on neurobiology. To this end, he discusses S. Zeki's claim that aesthetics, like all other human activities, is a product of our brains and that it must ultimately obey its laws (see Zeki, 2001). According to Davies, Zeki's statement indicates his exclusive focus on comprehending the production of art without an equal concern for the philosophical aspects of its reception and evaluation. To validate Zeki's argument, Davies supports his remarks with the following statement, which aligns meaningfully with the dynamic and interactionist perspectives proposed by cognitive semiotics and enactivism:

“Aesthetics is concerned with describing and explaining human artistic activity. It is concerned with explaining what goes on in the agent when she exercises artistic creativity or achieves some artistic end, and what is going on in the receiver when she appreciates or responds to an artwork” (Davies, 2014:59).

Based on Davies's observation, we can sense the body's significant impact on the aesthetic experience and evaluation of the artwork. In addition to aspects related to corporeality, there are those related to bodily movements, as seen by authors such as Shusterman (2006) and Brink (2018), as an integral part of the aesthetic experience. Taking into consideration Davies's observation, we can enhance the viewpoint presented by neuroscience, which concentrates on the internal and psychological factors occurring in the brain and nervous system during the aesthetic experience, by incorporating the externalist perspective advocated by enactivism, which holds that many of our aesthetic responses are influenced by external factors and by active engagement with the environment. From this perspective, works of art, with their diverse and complex nature, as well as the unique interactions they facilitate, contribute to the shaping of cognition and afford specific types of practices that differ from our everyday experiences.

Freedberg and Gallese's simulation theory on empathy

One of the most exciting discussions about empathy for cognitive semiotics refers to the results of empirical (neuro)aesthetics regarding embodied simulation and motor processing. This research concerns how neural activity can be measured within an engagement with the work of art and what kind of responses can be generated by the receivers involved in such experiential engagements. One research study dedicated to examining physiological responses that occur during our emotional connection with artwork is the well-known article, *Motion, Emotion, and Empathy in Aesthetic Experience*, by the art historian David Freedberg and neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese. The two authors firmly reject a theory of empathic responses to artistic works that is solely “introspective, intuitive, and metaphysical” (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007: 199). They also challenge a cognitive approach in aesthetics that considers the interpretation of an artwork’s meaning as exclusively occurring within the observer’s mind, emphasizing its connection to cultural, historical, social, and even personal influences instead. However, their aim is to demonstrate that viewers possess a precognitive understanding of artworks using the fundamental mechanisms of mirror and canonical neurons, as indicated by their physiological responses to the depicted poses in various figurative works. From the variety of artistic genres facilitated by the aesthetic experience, they chose to focus on the visual ones to explain the involvement of mirror neurons in simulating our actions and emotions within the brain. These neurons (also called ‘canonical neurons’) are in the premotor cortex and are activated, both in the brain of the observer and the agent, whenever we see or contemplate various artifacts or representations of them, when we act following a goal, or when we see explicit or implicit gestures. From their perspective, the neural processes evoked by empathetic access to visual works of art account for two types of relationship:

“(i) the relationship between embodied empathetic feelings in the observer and the representational content of the works in terms of the actions, intentions, objects, emotions, and sensations depicted in a given painting or sculpture; and (ii) the relationship between embodied empathetic feelings in the observer and the quality of the work in terms of the visible traces of the artist’s creative gestures, such as vigorous modeling in clay or paint, fast brushwork and signs of the movement of the hand more generally” (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007: 199).

According to their argument, we can notice an internal resonance with artwork that forms an integral part of the aesthetic experience and that the brain’s simulation or mirroring mechanism facilitates this experience. As we can see, their methodological

approach neglects the artistic aspects of the work in order to prioritize physical responses. One of the examples they offer in this regard refers to the series of prints created by the Spanish painter Francisco Goya, where viewing images of punctured or damaged body parts activates the same brain centers that are usually activated when we feel pain ourselves. This explains why we might feel physical sensations and shock when we see someone else experiencing pressure or injury to their skin and limbs. Another example they provide illustrates the idea that we can experience a sense of exertion, as it triggers the mirror system when we observe Michelangelo's sculpture "*Slave called Atlas*," renowned for the powerful impression it creates of someone struggling to free themselves from a block of stone. It is essential to remember that, in the authors' view, spectators of such works of art develop feelings of empathy, either through an empathetic understanding of the emotions of others or through the internal imitation of the actions of others observed in images or sculptures, in this case.

The statements made by Freedberg and Gallese are of great interest to philosophers and art theorists as they concern the problem of our understanding of works of art and our somatic reactions to the representational content of these works. However, the examples from Jackson Pollock and Lucio Fontana are especially noteworthy because they serve to illustrate that our bodily responses are not limited to figurative or representational art but extend to abstract art as well, encompassing the implicit movements in the works of these artists. The authors explicitly state this from the beginning of their work when they claim that "even when the image contains no overt emotional component, a sense of bodily resonance can arise. These are all instances in which beholders might find themselves automatically simulating the emotional expression, the movement, or even the implied movement within the representation" (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007: 197).

Reviews of simulation theory (ST): Semiotic narrative practices and empathy

Despite the compelling nature of these assertions, it is essential to acknowledge that the reasoning presented by Freedberg and Gallese contains a significant degree of speculation. While there are undeniable and direct bodily reactions associated with the perception of these works of art, the mechanism through which an automatic phenomenal simulation is generated in the perceiver's body remains unclear. Nonetheless, I agree with Brink's observation that the strength of Freedberg and Gallese's simulation theory of intersubjective understanding is that one can naturally infer the directness of experience, given the automatic responses of the brain's receptors (Brink, 2018). This aspect is essential for comprehending

empathy, which is based on the central thesis of philosophical hermeneutics, which entails recognizing the emotions of others as distinct from our own. The underlying concept essentially involves empathizing with another individual by imagining oneself in their position. Subsequently, this process prompts us to contemplate the potential actions and emotions we would experience if we were to inhabit that individual's circumstances. In this instance, empathy is manifested as a form of simulation in accordance with the understanding of the mirror neuron mechanism.

This viewpoint has been the subject of numerous criticisms, mainly because it is perceived in a reductionist way. Given the complexity of aesthetic experiences, it seems to me that it becomes evident that simulation processes cannot succinctly explain their diversity. Instead, a dynamic approach to aesthetic experiences appears more fitting, as they derive their expressive meaning from the interaction between the viewer and the artwork. This statement is not made in the sense of suggesting that empathy-based simulation processes involving mirror neurons are not crucial in shaping aesthetic experiences. On the contrary, I do not question their role in processing the somatic reactions that arise in engagement with a work of art. However, my observation pertains to the necessity for certain conceptual clarifications regarding the specific characteristics of an aesthetic experience and the elements that distinguish it while also establishing connections to everyday experiences. The problem, as mentioned earlier, remains unanswered in Freedberg and Gallese's paper: if the mechanism of production of the two types of experience is the same, if both everyday and aesthetic experiences are embodied and enactive, then how can we identify the specificity of each? Analyzing this issue, Brink (2018) points out that the theory proposed by Freedberg and Gallese has the potential to provide insights into the causal mechanisms underlying the two distinct types of experiences. According to the theory, aesthetic experience is derived from the contemplation of representations in works of art, whereas everyday experience originates from the perception of actual movement. However, the potential ramifications that could influence the production and development of these experiences are not explicitly addressed or examined.

Gallese and Freedberg's theory also faced criticism from a phenomenological perspective. The main accusation was that it reduced empathy to the activation of the visceral and sensorimotor systems. In this regard, Zahavi argues that the process of automatic simulation is more akin to contagion than empathy. (Zahavi, 2014). In his understanding, emotional contagion is a basic automatic affective mechanism by which an agent synchronizes its physiological and mental states with another person's. However, the fact that it is an automatic synchronization process with another person's emotions does not imply the understanding that the emotions felt

are different from the other person's. Because emotional contagion can also be observed in infants, it has been considered a justifiable basis for more complex forms of emotion sharing, such as empathy. However, as Zahavi explains, empathy entails cultivating reflective perspectives to grasp and empathize with others' viewpoints. It is crucial to recognize that this capacity does not manifest spontaneously, signifying that empathy is not universally pervasive in intersubjective interactions.

Compared to simulation theory, the phenomenological perspective emphasizes the significance of intentionality by highlighting the context and situation of the other person rather than focusing exclusively on their internal emotional state. Despite Simulation Theory emerging as the primary challenger to the Theory Theory, or Theory of Mind (ToM), that relies on our mental states and those of others to interpret, predict, and explain our intentions, beliefs, and desires, thus implying a third-person perspective on social cognition, certain parallels can be identified between the two perspectives. First and foremost, compared to enactivism, they seem to be more reflective approaches: while proponents of Theory of Theory (TT) advanced the idea of *mindreading* as a prerequisite for social cognition, meaning that in our daily activities, we make sense of others' behavior by deducing their mental states, supporters of the simulation theory (ST) also propose an internal model to understand others' minds. The difference lies in the fact that in this process, one uses one's own experiences and mind to deduce how others will react through simulation. In both scenarios, empathy appears to result from an internal process akin to understanding the thoughts of others.

On the other hand, the enactivist perspective advocates for the practical and embodied nature of our social interactions, setting aside the concept of mindreading. In interpersonal engagements, individuals depend on social skills, which are facilitated by the exchange of experiences with others. As articulated by the developmental psychologist Colwyn Trevarthen, these skills commence their development at an early stage in a child's ontogenetic progression. He refers to these skills as emerging during "primary intersubjectivity" in infants aged 1-9 months and "secondary intersubjectivity" in infants aged 9-18 months (Trevarthen, 1979). Based on his research, Trevarthen has established that a 2-month-old infant possesses the ability to distinguish between people and objects and is capable of forming intricate and substantial interactions with its caregivers. The primary intersubjectivity is explained by Trevarthen by the fact that the child's social skills are intuitive and therefore innate, the child being from the start a human being who seeks an "understanding of what to do with body and mind in a world of invented possibilities" (Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2017:17). These social skills can be understood in terms of "intercorporeal dimension" described by M. Merleau-Ponty, which is already apparent in the mimetic nature of primary intersubjectivity (see also on this topic Zlatev, 2008).

According to Gallagher and Hutto (2008), Trevarthen's concept of primary intersubjectivity is a suitable theoretical framework that can account for young children's abilities to implicitly understand the mental states and intentions of others through the perception of bodily movements, gestures, and facial expressions. These nonconceptual skills that we develop early in life, potentially from birth, demonstrate that our ability to understand and empathize with others is not merely a process of *mentalizing* or mindreading. Instead, these skills represent a direct, pragmatic approach to comprehending the experiences and perspectives of others. Through social interactions and bodily practices like mimicry, intuiting intention, and gaze tracking, we can develop meaningful connections with others. This connection can be described as basic empathy, though it does not capture the entire range of ways we can understand others. According to Bruner and Kalmar (1998), this approach can be understood as a '*hermeneutic mass background*,' which plays a crucial role in fostering more advanced forms of social understanding.

The importance of socialization skills in human development and the need to explain a higher level of empathy led to the introduction of the concepts of *narrative competency* and the *Narrative Practice Hypothesis* (or NPH). These concepts are an integral part of an "Interaction Theory" of social cognition proposed by Shaun Gallagher and Daniel Hutto (Gallagher & Hutto, 2008; Hutto, 2008; Gallagher, 2012), which is very much in line with the enactive perspective in the sense that it advocates for an externalist view that considers intentional states and behaviors of others from a second-person and interactive perspective. It is through these encounters with others that we can identify those distinctive types of *narratives* that are the "normal route through which children acquire an understanding of the forms and norms that enable them to make sense of actions in terms of reasons" (Gallagher & Hutto, 2008: 17). The cultivation of narrative competency significantly enhances our ability to understand others in a nuanced and context-sensitive manner. We can accomplish this by tapping into a rich and diverse array of narratives, encompassing our own limited personal experiences and drawing from various cultural sources, such as art, films, theater, television, bedtime stories, fairy tales, novels, and more.

This skill fosters deeper connections and promotes empathy within diverse interactions, which is why Gallagher states that narrative competence intervenes in the development of narrative imagination. The latter does not depend on "a resonance-simulation mechanism but requires a way to narratively frame the other person's experience" (Gallagher, 2012: 370). This issue becomes even more evident when we consider what Gallagher called the *diversity problem*. This concept illustrates that imagination is crucial in enhancing our ability to empathize with others. By allowing us to envision ourselves in different situations, it enables us to understand

better the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of those around us. This capacity to imagine diverse perspectives fosters deeper connections and encourages a more compassionate response to the challenges faced by others. However, it is essential to recognize that this understanding does not necessarily reflect the true feelings or experiences of the other individual. The essential point is that when I limit my understanding to my own perspective by imagining myself in another person's situation, I risk narrowing my viewpoint to the extent that I may overlook the true significance of their experience. While this method allows me to consider how I might respond in a similar situation, it does not necessarily provide a comprehensive understanding of the other person's actions. At this point, narratives become significant because they help us grasp various contexts, extending our understanding beyond our immediate experiences. Narratives open doors to a wide range of situations, enabling us to explore and appreciate the richness of diverse perspectives. This is why narratives seem necessary for empathy, as Gallagher argues. Since narratives are always *situated* within specific *contexts*, they must be interpreted through the lens of particular discourses. As a result, narratives offer a hermeneutical framework for understanding, which encompasses learned skills and practical knowledge about others' expectations and effective ways to engage with them. In this way, narratives inspire us to take action and connect with others, an idea that aligns beautifully with Greimas's semiotic narrative program, which emphasizes that narrative embodies action. However, narratives do more than just convey information about specific contexts. They must be understood within a meaningful framework, which involves a coding process that assigns significance to the actions depicted. This process allows us to see how events are interconnected and how they fit together. As a result, narratives "give us a form or structure that we can use in understanding others" (Gallagher, 2012: 371), and this narrative structure is primarily shaped by movement and action.

In the semiotic tradition, the analysis of narrative structures and models holds significant importance. This analysis mainly focuses on examining the interdependent relationship between two main elements: (1) narratives, which may be regarded as specific types of representational artifacts or as representations of events that exist independently of those portrayals, and (2) narrativity, or the capacity to convey those events or narratives effectively. Paolucci also emphasizes the need to distinguish narrativity from narratives, explaining that narrativity represents "the deep cognitive structure that shapes narratives" (Paolucci, 2021:111). Therefore, enhancing the framing and definition of narratives within the NPH perspective would provide greater clarity regarding the concept of narrativity and its shared elements with semiotic inquiry. This refinement could foster a more comprehensive understanding of these interrelated areas.

Considering the points mentioned earlier, we can now revisit our initial inquiry: What does empathizing with artwork during an aesthetic experience mean? The research findings suggest that empathy is expressed through action and movement. It involves a deep understanding of the contextual narrative of the artwork, which includes a range of actions, expressions, words, and emotions. From an embodied-enactive perspective, the process of understanding transcends a merely representational explanation of the external world. Rather, knowledge of the world emerges from active engagement and sensemaking activities, indicating a dynamic interaction with our environment. This perspective differs from the idea presented in the Theory of Mind (ToM), which often confines empathy to a mental simulation or theoretical inference. A key point regarding the hermeneutic dimension of the narrative is the importance of being open to other people's stories because by engaging with different narratives, we can become more willing to understand others' life experiences and the unique contexts in which they arise. Our capacity to develop narrative frameworks in relation to works of art can be extended and applied to our daily activities, underscoring the relationship between aesthetic experiences and everyday interactions. This connection enriches our understanding of both realms and enhances our overall engagement with the world around us.

Conclusion

My paper delves into the topics of empathy and the narrative phenomenon from the vantage point of cognitive approaches, which have undergone notable advancements, particularly over the past decade. This period has also been linked to the development of cognitive semiotics. Throughout my paper, I have posited that the cognitive semiotic development of our minds underscores the dynamic nature of the interaction of signs. These signs are perceived not as inherently linked to objects but rather as interconnected constructs within structured relations. In my paper, I have opted against deepening general empirical aesthetic theory. This decision stems from its excessive focus on internal responses to art, centered around our subjective preferences while disregarding the discursive contexts that delineate the methodologies employed in our actual engagement with art. It also contributes to an embodied and enactive understanding of artworks, emphasizing the physical properties of art objects and the specific bodily engagements resulting from this interaction.

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