

Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 15, 2023

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



Published by



Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: proceedings@eurosa.org

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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Table of Contents

Sérgio Pinto Amorim <i>The Forms, the Architect, and the Act of Doing Architecture</i>	1
Pedro Borges de Araújo <i>Notes on Aesthetics in Architecture</i>	15
Emanuele Arielli <i>AI-aesthetics and the artificial author</i>	40
Alessandro Bertinotto <i>Habits of Unexpectedness. Expressiveness in Musical Improvisation (and Beyond)</i>	55
Thorstein Botz-Bornstein <i>Guilt and Shame: Ethics and Aesthetic</i>	84
Gregorio Fiori Carones <i>Simmel and the Aesthetics of Luxury</i>	94
Veronika Darida <i>The Aesthetics of Gesture</i>	110
Harry Drummond <i>Pitches and Paintings: A Conferralist Theory of Art</i>	124
Hannah Fasnacht <i>Different Levels of Narrative Pictorial Content</i>	139
Anna Fech <i>What's the "New" in "New Extractivism"? Tracing Postdigital Aesthetics in Vladan Joler's Assemblage</i>	167
Stacie Friend <i>Fiction, Belief and Understanding</i>	185

Pablo Genazzano	<i>General Remarks for a Historical and Systematic Reconstruction of Kant's Analytic of the Sublime</i>	205
Jeffrey Goodman	<i>Should We Accept Fictional Universals?</i>	217
Peter Hajnal	<i>Aesthetic Education and Embodiment: Notes Toward a Cavellian Approach</i>	234
Sarah Hegenbart	<i>Democratic and aesthetic participation as imposition: On the aesthetics of the collective</i>	252
Gizela Horváth	<i>Displaying Participatory Art</i>	271
René Jagnow	<i>Multisensory Experience of Paintings</i>	285
Lev Kreft	<i>Resentment, Artivism and Magic</i>	305
Efi Kyprianidou	<i>Moral disgust and imaginative resistance</i>	316
Federico Lauria	<i>Values in the Air: Musical Contagion, Social Appraisal and Metaphor Experience</i>	328
Leonardo Lenner	<i>From Concept to Image and Vice Versa: the Philosophical Frontispiece</i>	344
Lukáš Makky	<i>Revisiting the concept of the end of art</i>	363
Martino Manca	<i>For the Snark was a Boojum. Towards a Positive Aesthetics of Literary Nonsense</i>	384
Sofia Miguens	<i>The many ways of doing philosophy of architecture (and what they tell us about contemporary philosophy and the place of aesthetics in it)</i>	396
Davide Mogetta	<i>Between Art and Philosophy. Patterns of Baxandall's Criticism</i>	406

Francisca Pérez-Carreño <i>Fiction as Representation. Or the Verbal Icon Revisited</i>	419
Dan Eugen Ratiu <i>Objects at Work: How Do Artefacts Work Aesthetically in Everyday Organizational Life?</i>	431
Matthew Rowe <i>The Implications of Mistakes About Art: Ontological and Epistemological</i>	458
Merel Semeijn <i>Common Belief and Make-believe</i>	471
Thomas Symeonidis <i>On the different meanings of aestheticization</i>	486
Malgorzata A. Szyszkowska <i>The Impression of Music: Edmund Gurney's ideas about music in The Power of Sound</i>	497
Elettra Villani <i>Aesthetic versus functional: overcoming their dichotomy in T. W. Adorno's Functionalism today</i>	511
Andrew Wynn Owen <i>Does a plausible construal of aesthetic value give us reason to emphasize some aesthetic practices over others?</i>	522
Giulia Zerbinati <i>The Truth of Art. A Reflection starting from Hegel and Adorno</i>	533

Fiction as Representation. Or the Verbal Icon Revisited

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I shall argue for the representational character of literary fiction. The aim is not to defend a theory of fiction as representation but to highlight the iconic or experiential nature of literary fiction. Drawing mainly on Beardsley (1981, 1982) and Matravers (2014), I shall outline a notion of representation that helps to make sense of literary fiction as a specific kind of representation or verbal depiction. Literary language gives presence, vitality, and force to the represented world, but verbal representation like visual representation requires the imaginative collaboration of the reader. In addition to grasping the linguistic meaning of the text, the reader must make sense of the actions and attitudes of the characters and consider them, together with situations and events from the author's point of view. Imaginative collaboration involves more than adopting a propositional attitude of make-believe towards the sentences' content. It also encompasses mental activities such as visualising, empathising, responding emotionally, and entertaining expectations and desires in response to the represented content. As it is often defended, it is in the reader's experience that the world of a novel comes into existence. This is not to say that the reader creates the work; rather in understanding a literary work, the reader's experience is closely tied to the mode of presentation and perspective of the work.

1.

To claim that a novel or a poem represents actions, people, thoughts, feelings or a world is not surprising. It is to state that they refer to actions, people, thoughts, and so on. Or that they are about those things. Often, a novel is about other, more abstract themes, such as love, hate, friendship or disappointment. But when we use the term 'representation', we are more likely to be talking about

³⁴² E-mail: fpc@um.es This paper has been possible thanks to the financial support for the research project "Normative aspects of aesthetic appreciation" (PID2019-106351GB-I00) by the Spanish State Investigation Agency - AEI.

singular things.

In any case, representation is an umbrella concept, and in the context of the theory of fiction or the philosophy of literature, representation is often used in the very general sense of sign. In Peircean terms: [a representation] “is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity”. But in a narrower sense, representation is just visual denotation; that is, visual reference (as in Goodman’s theory of symbols). In this sense, the idea of literary fiction as representation sounds odd since literature is not a visual symbolic system.

However, Charles Peirce considered also that symbols (that is, conventional signs like words or sentences) may have iconic interpretants. For instance, the word ‘green’, which is ‘verde’ in Spanish or ‘vert’ in French, refers to the colour of things like grass, or some apples. But beyond its conventional, arbitrary, meaning, the word ‘green’ may produce in a reader or a listener images, sensations, and feelings. Peirce thought that these mental states were also part of the understanding of the word; in his terms, they were interpretants, more precisely, *iconic* interpretants of a symbol. The simple verse “Verde que te quiero verde” (“Green, how I want you green”) by Federico García Lorca owes its aesthetic quality in part to the effect provoked by the repetition and the metaphoric use of the word ‘green’.³⁴³

In their influential 1956 book, *The Verbal Icon*, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley claimed that literary works are icons. The idea is different from Peirce’s, but they were also interested in pointing to the non-entirely conventional – symbolic meaning of literary works. According to them, literary works are aesthetic objects which gain their meaning not entirely by convention. Later on, Beardsley (1981) refers to literature as “verbal depiction”.

Eventually, representation is often also linked to the idea of making something present or bringing something to presence through language or another symbolic medium.³⁴⁴ My talk is in this line of understanding representation linked to the sensorial and emotional experience of what is represented. Thus, a preliminary idea would be that a literary work is a representation and makes the interpreter undergo a certain experience of its content.

2.

³⁴³ The poem is called “Romance Sonámbulo”, and the verse “Green, how I want you green” is repeated throughout the whole poem. ‘Green’ here seems to refer to the colour of a balcony, but also to the reflection of the moonlight on the flesh and hair of a gypsy girl on the balcony.

³⁴⁴ For Arthur Danto this making something present through its representation leads to the idea that artistic representations embody their meaning. The work of art does not literally identify the representation and its content, but metaphorically or symbolically. The work of art is a symbol that embodies its content. See Danto, A., *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Ch.1.

Contemporary accounts of fiction framed by speech act theory claim that fictional sentences are a kind of illocutionary act. With a fictional utterance, the writer of a novel or a poem doesn't seriously assert, ask, promise and so on anything because she does not believe or intend the audience to believe the content of the sentences. Instead, the author prescribes the reader to imagine or make-believe the content of the utterances. That is, imagination or make-believe is considered the adequate propositional attitude towards the content of fictional utterances. Imagination is here characterized negatively in contrast to belief. As a propositional attitude, to imagine or make-believe fictional propositions, whether true or false, consists in entertaining them in the mind without being affirmed or denied.

Nevertheless, even in the context of imagination theories, some authors (Walton, 1990, Stock, 2011) have pointed to the insufficiency of such accounts of fiction. Kendal Walton notices:

Occurrent imagining, as we ordinarily understand it and as we need to understand it in order to explain representation, involves more than just entertaining or considering or having in mind the propositions imagined. Imagining (propositional imagining), like (propositional) believing or desiring, is *doing* something *with* a proposition one has in mind (Walton, 1990, p. 20).³⁴⁵

Walton famously characterizes the kind of imagining involved in the understanding of representational artworks as one of make-believe, in which the work is a prop in a game of make-believe in which the subject is immersed.³⁴⁶ Walton (1990) is mainly devoted to propositional imagining mandated by propositions or propositional content in the case of visual artworks, however, he insists that “the mandated non propositional imaginings are a distinctive and important part of our games of make-believe” (Walton, 1990, p. 43).

3.

From the outset, some authors have challenged these theories, which see fictional utterances as special illocutionary acts, in which the speaker or writer does not seriously utter something and

³⁴⁵ Or in Kathleen Stock's words: “...were this claim, that a prescription to imagining is necessary and sufficient for fictive utterance, devoid of any detail about what is supposed to be involved in the imagining in question, then it would be unattractive” (Stock, 2011, p. 156).

³⁴⁶ The game consists in “imagining *doing* or *experiencing* something (or *being* a certain way)” (Walton, 1990, p. 29).

consequently prescribes her audience to imagine the content of her utterances. Monroe Beardsley claimed that fiction does not consist of the utterance of a special illocutive act, but the representation of illocutive acts. The key idea is that “Fiction, . . ., is the representation, not the performance, of illocutionary actions” (Beardsley, 1981, p. 295).

A novel’s writer is not performing a special kind of speech act, but representing it:

When a text is produced that could be used to perform an illocutionary action of some recognisable kind, and enough of the requisite conditions are present or presupposed to permit the kind to be recognized – but not enough for such an action actually occur – then we have representation, a verbal depiction (Beardsley, 1981, p. 297).

Consequently, the reader understands the sentences, including the illocutionary force they would have if they were used in an ordinary communicative context. Interpretation is logically prior to considering them a performance or a representation of the action. Therefore, the understanding response is basically the same in both artistic and non-artistic contexts. The main difference for Beardsley lies in the relation between author, text and reader. In a literary context, unlike in ordinary contexts, the reader’s interpretation of the text does not consist in grasping the intention of the author. Since the author is not performing any illocutionary act, what she intends to convey is not at stake. The meaning of the literary work is not the author’s meaning, but the representation meaning.³⁴⁷

Besides, the literary institution is different from ordinary communicative institutions: the author works in isolation, writing, correcting, and rewriting, to produce a text. She does not interact with the reader, and the reader does not interact with her. Unlike in ordinary communication, where the utterer or the context can dissolve ambiguities or indeterminacies, a representation is a finished product whose interpretation consists in making it work. Indeed, for Beardsley, this is a reason for the indeterminacy of literary texts: “It is part of what makes fiction appeal to our own imagination, as readers, since it leaves possibilities open – indeterminacies – for us to fill in as we like” (Beardsley, 1981, p. 311)

A consequence of this representational theory of literature is that any literary text presupposes the existence of an implicit utterer. The representation is of illocutionary acts,

³⁴⁷ That is what Beardsley calls “detachment of reference”.

consequently, someone should be supposed to utter them. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* begins with this sentence: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice”. According to Beardsley, Gabriel García Márquez is representing the utterance of a fictional persona who does really perform the illocution. On this point, Beardsley agrees with defenders of those imaginative theories of fiction maintaining that the reader is to imagine someone telling the story, an implicit author. To postulate an implicit author is a necessity of Beardsley’s theory as it is for those who consider that a story needs always a storyteller, or that in order to make truth in the fiction the narrated content it is required to imagine someone actually asserting the content.

Pratt’s notion of representation as a possible use of assertive utterances does not imply these anti-intuitive consequences, even if on many occasions an implicit narrator is also presupposed. Mary Louise Pratt (1977) claims that in storytelling, assertions are not used to inform about some facts, convey a belief, or make the addressee believe it. Assertions are just one kind of representative speech act, which can be used to state the truth of certain facts, in an ordinary communicative context, or to display these states of affairs, in literary contexts. That use is not absent in ordinary context, but is characteristic of the literary context where assertions represent *tellable* state of facts:

In making an assertion whose relevance is *tellability*, a speaker is not only reporting but also verbally displaying a state of affairs, inviting his addressee(s) to join him in contemplating it, evaluating it, and responding to it. (Pratts, 1977)

The relation with truth is set aside, and the relevance of the represented facts presented lies in the unusual, unexpected, that is, the *tellable* character of the content. The content of fiction or storytelling is displayed for contemplation, evaluation and response. Pratts emphasises the genuine status of literary (including fictional) speech acts, as representational speech acts, non-parasitic of other illocutionary acts, and neither representative of other illocutions.

Now, Beardsley and Pratt’s theories do not imply that the readers’ interpretative activity is different from the interpretation of other illocutionary acts. For Beardsley, the represented speech acts are verbal depictions, for Pratt their content demands to be contemplated. Both

authors appeal to a visual vocabulary. But in what sense can be explained or merely described the perceptual character of linguistic or verbal depiction or representation?

4.

The phenomenology of reading has been predominantly considered imaginative, that is, imagination replaces perception, and some authors speak about quasi-perceptual experiences. But eventually, some fiction theories tend to blur the distinction between adopting an epistemic attitude of imagination towards the propositional content of fictional sentences, and the mental state in which understanding the work consists. This is one of Matravers' critiques of theories that link fiction with a specific illocutionary act requiring the reader an attitude of imagining the utterance's content instead of one of believing. He claims that the epistemic attitude of imagining instead of believing does not make the difference between fiction and nonfiction: "...it is independently implausible to think that what goes on when we read fiction is very different than what goes on when we read non-fiction" (Matravers, 2014, p. 47).

Actually, imagination occurs in non-fictional contexts. For instance, some months ago two news stories had Spanish citizens attentive to TV and the press: four Colombian children were lost in the jungle after an aeroplane crash (<https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-06-10/colombias-four-missing-children-found-alive-after-40-days-in-the-jungle.html>).³⁴⁸ The news struck readers and listeners as an adventure story, with a relatively happy ending when the children were found alive. The readers were driven to imagine the supervenience efforts of four siblings, lost in the dark and humid jungle of Colombia, eating herbs and being bitten by mosquitos after the aeroplane crash that killed their mother and the aeroplane pilot. Journalists were committed to the truth, but also to tell a story as astounding as true, and make the readers not only believe but also respond to the extraordinary of the event, admire the big daughter for her smartness, the indigenous communities for their knowledge of the jungle, imagine the panic during the fall, the death of the adults in the plane, etc. For days, people spoke about the news with their colleagues in bars and cafés and were expectant about the outcome. We followed the course of the events and recreated imaginatively the children in the jungle. A dog of the rescuers became a character in the story too. Journalists narrated the story in some way or

³⁴⁸ Sadly, today's news about Hamas' terrorist attack against Israeli civilians and Israel's indiscriminate response against the Palestinian population in Gaza occupy our attention.

another, looking for clarity, veracity, and explanation, but also to arrest the curiosity of the reader. To inform about the facts, they had to arrange the elements temporally and by relevance, select details, and describe local geography and atmosphere. And of course, there were better and worse ways of reporting what was happening and the outcome. Doing it in the best way possible was doing it from a journalistic point of view or a “fictional” point of view? Looking to convey true events (and they were *tellable* if any) or to present the events and their protagonist as vividly as possible?

Matravers (2014) argues that imagination does not distinguish between fiction and non-fiction and that the relevant distinction is between confrontation and representation. Whereas in the case of representations the interpreter does not have the opportunity to interact, in the case of confrontations she has the opportunity to intervene in the events.³⁴⁹ Besides, Matravers argues that there is no radical difference in the way readers interpret texts that are representations, fictional or non-fictional. The events mentioned above were written to prompt imagined mental states, but this does not turn the reports into fiction. Matravers proposes looking at representations, instead of kinds of illocutionary acts prescribing imagination, to solve the problems that a theory of fiction seeks to solve.

Still, he makes a distinction between thin and thick representations. While the former permit easy access to their content, thick representations require more attention to the mode of presentation, and because of that are harder to interpret. Obviously, there is a continuum between thin and thick representations, but thick representations are closer to what literary or fictional representations are. The news about the Colombian children in the jungle are thin representation, because the interest, even if imagination is called to understand the sequence of events, lies in the information about actual facts, and not in the way in which stories are narrated.

Matravers uses the psychological notion of mental models to describe the operations involved in reading a text. Following Johnson-Laird, he claims that understanding a text involves “(constructing) a mental model”, that is, an iconic map of the world, of a possible world in case we are dealing with a fictional representation. Mental models “...allow language

³⁴⁹ In the case of the plane crash, we were mere spectators, with no possibility of intervening, and I fear that the same is true in the case of the war between Israel and Hamas. But we can speak out or vote for parties that take a certain line in face of the events. When it comes to past historical events, we are inevitably just spectators.

to be used to create representations comparable to those deriving from direct acquaintance with the world” (Johnson-Laird, quoted in Matravers, 2014, p. 397).

Mental models necessary to interpret thin representations are easily constructed. But literary works are or aspire to be thick representations. The mode of presentation itself is relevant, and the construction of mental models is harder. Imagination plays an important role in literature and fiction, but understanding the text/representation precedes adopting an epistemic attitude towards its content. The mental operations involved in understanding fictional and non-fictional texts are the same. Moreover, in the case of thin representations, readers are free to add imaginative details, while imagination is constrained to the text in the case of thick representations.

Matravers (2014) points out the operations involved in reading: the first is “automatic encoding”, as competent readers in a language encode the linguistic meaning of the text automatically. Second is looking for “local coherence”, which means to articulate temporally, spatially and causally the content of the sentences. Third is looking for “global coherence”, which in literary texts demands more effort. Understanding thick representations, such as literature and good fiction, requires a greater effort to find global coherence. The imaginative effort requires the articulation of temporal and spatial elements, the connection between characters, actions and personalities, or the perception of the importance of details, which is not explicit. It requires the exercise of mental operations, independently of the fictional or documentary character of the text. Lately, “participatory responses” are those affective responses of a reader towards the literary content. In any case, thick representations, such as literary text require competent readers and, Matravers states, “...the subsequent mental models are going to be rather vague and sketchy” (Matravers, 2014, p. 73).

Matravers’ proposal underlines the thick nature of literary representation, which is thought of as the difficulty to produce mental models, that is, to interpret the text. Mental models are thought of as iconic. Like Kantian schemas, they act as a mediator between concepts and intuitions, or language and reality, and facilitate the representation of reality as if we had direct acquaintance with it. The difficulty of thick representations comes from their mode of representation, the opacity that characterizes literature.

5.

The distinction between thin and thick representations reveals a conception of understanding as the construction of mental models of represented objects and events, which I would like to resist. It is not that thick representations are opaque with respect to the object, or that the mental models are “vague” and “sketchy”. The problem is that mental models fall too short of the experience of reading a text. Gibson speaks of thick narratives instead of representations in a different sense. According to him, thick representations are “‘thick’ by virtue of possessing an especially rich kind of descriptive content” (Gibson, 2011, p. 75) Moreover, in these narratives, thick concepts, those that convey evaluative together with descriptive content, predominate: “[thick concepts] convey information about the object under scrutiny that is sufficient to situate it at a precise point in the space of value” (Gibson, 2011, p. 76) My point is that thick narratives are those that provide a more complex, richer, deeper experience of the represented object. Not just because of the use of thick concepts, but because the entire mode of presentation – that is, the style and literary writing – and the perspective from which the story is presented enable understanding as experience.

A comparison with visual representation may be illuminating. Consider Georgia O’Keeffe’s *New York Street with Moon* (1925). Following Wollheim’s account, to understand the painting is to have a particular perceptual experience of a particular view of New York at night. The experience is one of seeing–in, which is not the same kind of seeing as seeing face to face, nor of seeing an arrangement of colours and shapes. At a basic level, we see certain things in the canvas: buildings, lights, the twilight sky and the moon between the clouds. It represents New York, and we recognise some skyscrapers and the tower of one of the city’s Neogothic churches. Besides, we see them in an unusual vertical format and from an unusual point of view, and we are aware of colours, contrasts, other details of the composition, and O’Keeffe’s style. The experience is twofold, a unique experience with these two aspects: the recognitional and the configurational. The experience of the medium of representation cannot be separated from the object of the representation.³⁵⁰

³⁵⁰ Walton (1990) would consider the experience as one of imagining seeing the objects represented. In the debate between the two authors, Wollheim argued that Walton’s explanation eludes the configurational aspect (what I think is true). The same remark could be made about fiction theories focused on the content of stories and narratives. Walton considers that any case of painting or drawing requires imagination instead of perception, dissolving the difference between fiction and non-fiction in these media.

By considering “seeing-in” as the class of experience that the viewer has in front of a painting, Wollheim underlines the incommensurability of seeing face to face and seeing a painting. To interpret a painting is to undergo such an experience. That is to say, interpreting a painting does not consist in grasping (seeing, imagining or imagining seeing) the visual appearance that the object would have in a real-life experience. It is the experience of the artwork. My point is that understanding a literary work is similar to understanding a painting in its representational character, which amounts to having an adequate experience of the work. Not of the real or a possible world beyond the text, but of the work itself. I would say that in a sense the work is transparent and opaque. Transparent because the world of the work is such as it is presented, there is nothing to discover behind the representation. Opaque because the representation is always from a particular point of view and in a particular way of writing and ordering the elements of the story.

6.

In conclusion, the content of literary works is not linguistic meaning but experiential (iconic) meaning. That is, literary works are not communicative artefacts, designed to convey information about facts existing behind them. Understanding and appreciating novels or poems involves experiencing the things represented as they are represented. We take on the things to be interpreted: characters, actions, motives, the sense of the narrative or the value of the details such as they are presented to us by the text.

Besides, in comparison with pictorial representation, something like Beardsley’s anti-intentionalism can be assumed: intentionality cannot be understood in the Gricean sense of a speaker’s reflexive intention. Even if intentional, the creation of a literary work may lack the kind of reflexivity that linguistic meaning requires according to Grice. That is, grasping the content of the work is not identical to recognising the author’s intention through the sentences of the text. The work succeeds when it provides the reader with material to have an experience of the world of representation. Since the content is not linguistic meaning, there may be different interpretations, i.e., different experiences of the same work, which will give rise to different worlds. Issues of correction concern criteria for discriminating the adequacy of experiences according to intentionality - understood from different approaches as the actual cause of the work, hypothetical intention, aesthetic value, etc.

Understanding a literary work requires the articulation of different voices, perspectives, and times represented, in search of global coherence, in a complete experience. The mere juxtaposition of details, descriptions, or the rhythm of the language, can all be relevant to the reconstruction of the world of the work. Understanding is not only about doing something with the propositions of fictional sentences, but also with the scenarios, characters, or atmospheres that are the content of those sentences. The collaboration of the reader is therefore inevitable. Mental operations such as articulating and constructing global coherence, putting things together and making sense, together with automatic sensory or emotional responses give unity and integrity to the text:

The literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. This virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination. (Iser, 1971, p. 284)

In addition to the linguistic meaning of the text, perlocutionary effects such as simple iconic interpretants of words and phrases, and more complex iconic interpretants - perceptual or emotional – produced by metaphors and symbols characterise literary understanding. Finally, Beardsley was right that some illocutions are represented and not performed; for instance, those of the quoted dialogues and monologues. When characters talk to each other, or themselves aloud or in their heads, we hear their thoughts as we act them out in reading. For literary language can be the representation of both spoken and unspoken sentences. And, more interestingly, some representations are of “unspeakable sentences” (Banfield, 1982), as those of the narrator expressing the character’s thoughts or their mental states. This is because literary sentences are not just representations of illocutionary acts. They are representational illocutionary acts that enlarge the realm of what can be represented.

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