

**Protocol and the Unstable Sign:
A Revision of Asignifying Semiotics for the Algorithmic Age**

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Abstract

The problem of ephemerality and the instability of the sign, far from being novel, forms a persistent undercurrent in semiotic and philosophical thought, from Derrida's hauntology to Deleuze and Guattari's asignifying semiotics. This article argues that the advent of autonomous algorithmic protocols necessitates a revised theoretical synthesis to analyse how these critiques are now materially instantiated. We propose an applied framework—the Semiotics of Non-intentional Ephemerality (SNE)—that operationalises concepts of spectrality and asignification to diagnose a new logic of the sign. SNE centres on the non-intentional protocol as

a generative matrix, the ephemere as its spectral output, and tanto-semantics as its logic of verification. The framework is tested through case studies of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's bio-responsive installations, the group *Kuda Begut Sobaki*'s metasemiotic translation of Dante into circuitry, and the socio-economics of flexing culture and cryptocurrency. The article concludes that digital protocols hyperbolise the inherent instability of the sign, producing regimes where ephemerality is not a deficit but a primary, productive condition of meaning and value.

Keywords: ephemerality, asignifying semiotics, protocol, algorithm, spectrality

Introduction: The Spectral and the Algorithmic

The philosophical concept of the ephemeral has long existed at the margins of academic discourse. Gilles Lipovetsky's *The Empire of the Ephemeral* (1994) established a powerful socio-cultural analytics of fashion, yet remained within an anthropocentric paradigm where ephemerality is an attribute of human practices. A more radical, ontological path was offered by the 'non-philosophy' of François Laruelle and Gilles Grelet (Grelet, 2004, 2022; Laruelle, 2013), which seeks to engage with the real beyond representation, framing the ephemeral and aleatory as immanent to the matter of thought itself. However, for semiotics—a discipline concerned with structures of mediation—such a purely ontological leap is difficult to operationalise for analysing concrete sign processes.

Critically, this article acknowledges that the problem of the sign's instability is not new. It constitutes a spectral presence within the tradition itself. Jacques Derrida's work on *hauntology* and *spectrality* deconstructed the metaphysics of presence, revealing meaning as perpetually deferred and inhabited by traces of the absent (Derrida, 1994). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari developed an *asignifying semiotics*, focusing on material flows, ruptures, and "a-signifying particles" that operate beneath stable signification (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Even Saussure's foundation, as reinterpreted by scholars like Patrice Maniglier (2006), shows the differential nature of the sign inherently undermines its own stability. Contemporary scholars like Tyler Bennett (2020) continue to explore these margins.

Yet, a crucial gap persists between this rich theoretical critique and the empirical reality of 21st-century techno-cultural systems. How do Derrida's spectres manifest when their appearance and disappearance are governed by an algorithmic protocol? What form does Guattari's asignifying rupture take when it is hard-coded into a social media platform's recommendation engine? This article argues that while the philosophical critique of the stable sign is venerable, its material instantiation within autonomous, world-shaping technical systems represents a qualitative shift. We propose a synthesis that extends these insights into a new diagnostic tool. Our aim is to construct an operational lens—a Semiotics of Non-intentional Ephemerality (SNE)—that bridges the gap between the critique of signification and the analysis of the algorithmic protocols that now perform this critique mechanically, at scale, and with concrete social and economic consequences.

We proceed from the hypothesis that the ephemerality of a significant number of modern phenomena cannot be explained solely within the framework of human intentionality. It is generated by the logic of protocols, algorithms, and complex hybrid systems where human agency is but one variable among many. SNE shifts the focus from the analysis of stable sign-objects to the analysis of sign regimes and generative rules, where the temporality and finitude of the sign are programmed in advance. To substantiate this thesis, we will first conduct a theoretical critique of the foundations of classical semiotics, then develop the key concepts of SNE, and finally test them on a series of case studies: from large-scale media installations (Rafael Lozano-Hemmer) and meta-semiotic experiments (Kuda Begut Sobaki) to socio-economic practices of the digital age (flexing culture, cryptocurrency). We will show that ephemerality in these cases is not an external attribute, but an internal, constitutive principle of a new type of semiosis.

Theoretical Prelude: From Philosophical Critique to Operational Protocol

To ground our analysis, we must outline how the key concepts of our interlocutors inform and necessitate the current study. Derrida's *spectrality* provides a powerful metaphor for the contemporary condition of the sign. The spectre—neither present nor absent, always arriving—perfectly describes what we will term the ephemere: a sign-event whose ontology is defined by its programmed coming-and-going, forever haunting the system as a verification of a

past interaction that is no longer there (e.g., a recorded heartbeat, a confirmed transaction). Its meaning is always deferred, reliant on a trace within a protocol.

Deleuze and Guattari's asignifying semiotics offers the most direct precedent for analysing non-intentional, machine-driven processes. Their focus on machinic *assemblages*, *detrterritorialised* flows, and signs that function without "signifying" prefigures our analysis of protocol-driven systems. The non-intentional protocol can be read as a concretisation of their "abstract machine," a set of rules that generates asignifying regimes of pure affect, intensity, and relation. Furthermore, the Saussurean concept of value, reinterpreted through its inherent relational instability, finds its hyper-realised counterpart in the digital realm where a sign's worth (e.g., a cryptocurrency token) is purely differential and contingent on its position within a real-time, verified network.

Our proposed framework, SNE, seeks to operationalise these insights for empirical analysis. It emerges not as a replacement, but as a specific, applied branch of this broader critical tradition, retooled for an age where the machines of ephemerality have been built and deployed. The ephemere is the spectral, asignifying unit produced by the protocol. Tanto-semantics describes its operational logic—a semantics of pure verification and functional relation that aligns with the asignifying break. This synthesis allows us to move from philosophical critique to the analysis of concrete techno-social formations.

3. Foundations of the Semiotics of Non-Intentional Ephemerality (SNE)

The necessity for a semiotics of non-intentional ephemerality stems from a profound shift in the nature of signification itself, a shift that existing frameworks struggle to capture. This new paradigm is not a sudden rupture but the culmination of tendencies latent in the cybernetic turn of the mid-20th century, which have now reached a point of cultural saturation with the advent of ubiquitous computation and network protocols. The SNE does not seek to replace the semiotics of Peirce (1998), Saussure (1959), Eco (1976), Lotman (1990; 2009) or Hoffmeyer (2008); rather, it proposes a necessary expansion, a new branch on the semiotic tree, specifically adapted to analyse the semiosis of autonomous, ephemeral, and protocol-governed systems. Its foundation is built not upon a singular axiom but upon a network of interrelated concepts that reorient our understanding of the sign's ontology, its genesis, and its temporality. At its heart lies

a triadic conceptual core: the primacy of the non-intentional protocol as the generative matrix of meaning, the ephemere as its fundamental unit, and the tanto-semantic mode of signification that characterises its operation. These concepts must be understood as a coherent system, each illuminating the other, and together forming an analytic lens for the phenomena of a post-humanist, process-oriented age.

The first and most radical pillar of SNE is the concept of the non-intentional protocol. In classical semiotics, the source of semiosis—the addresser—is always endowed with a form of intentionality, be it the conscious intent of a speaker, the cultural codes of a society, or the quasi-teleological functions of a biological organism. The non-intentional protocol dismantles this anthropo- and bio-centric assumption. We define a protocol, in the broadest techno-semiotic sense, as a set of formalised, automatically executable, and non-subjective rules that govern the conditions for the generation, modification, interaction, and deletion of signs within a defined system. This definition deliberately extends beyond its technical origins in computer networking (TCP/IP, HTTP) to encompass any rule-based system that operates with causal regularity but without a psychological or biological ‘purpose’. This includes the symbolic language of electrical engineering standards (GOST), the algorithmic logic of social media platforms, the consensus mechanisms of blockchains, the sensor-actuator loops in interactive art, and even the procedural rules of certain artistic or game-like practices. The protocol’s key characteristic is its operational autonomy: once instantiated, it executes its functions based on inputs, indifferent to the ‘meaning’ those inputs might hold for a human observer. It is a machine for producing differences, and these differences become the raw material of signification. In this framework, human agency does not vanish but is reconfigured. The human becomes an operator within the protocol, a source of inputs or a receiver of outputs, whose actions are meaningful only insofar as they are legible and processable by the system’s rules. The artist who designs such a system, like Lozano-Hemmer, is thus not the ‘author’ of the resulting signs in a Romantic sense, but rather the architect of the semiotic machine, the one who defines the initial parameters of a process that will then generate its own ephemeral events. The protocol, therefore, acts as a non-human addresser, a decentralised and distributed source of semiotic potentiality. Its ‘intention’ is nothing more than the relentless execution of its own coded logic, making it a truly a-teleological engine of signification, a concept that pushes semiotics into dialogue with object-oriented ontology and

new materialist thought, where agency is divorced from consciousness and located in the dynamics of matter and information itself.

From this generative matrix of the protocol emerges the primary unit of analysis for SNE: the ephemere. This term, coined to distinguish it from the more general ‘sign’ or stable ‘symbol’, denotes the minimal, discrete unit of semiosis within a regime of non-intentional ephemerality. An ephemere is not defined by a stable signifier-signified relationship, nor by its place in a cultural langue. Its ontology is fundamentally temporal and processual. It is a sign-event, a singularity in the semiotic flow whose identity is inextricably linked to its programmed lifecycle within the protocol. To analyse an ephemere is to map its trajectory along several constitutive axes: its condition of appearance (the specific trigger within the protocol that causes its instantiation, such as a sensor threshold being crossed, a timer elapsing, or a cryptographic condition being met), its modality of existence (the specific form it takes in the world—a pulse of light, an alphanumeric string on a screen, a sound burst, an entry in a distributed ledger), its temporal algorithm (its inherent ‘lifespan’, which may be a single, instantaneous flash, a loop of predetermined duration, or an existence contingent on the state of other system variables), and, crucially, its point of decay (the predetermined moment or condition of its cessation, which is not an accident but a constitutive part of its definition). The ephemere’s meaning is not external to this lifecycle but immanent within it. For example, the light flash in *Pulse Park* is an ephemere whose meaning is the real-time translation of a heartbeat; its decay is part of its statement, marking the end of that specific biometric contract. The auto-deleting ‘story’ is an ephemere whose meaning is fundamentally tied to its impending disappearance, creating a mode of communication steeped in the present tense. The ephemere thus embodies a paradox: it is a complete yet non-durable sign. It fulfills its semiotic function entirely within its fleeting existence, leaving no permanent trace as a sign-object, though it may leave data as a historical record. This shifts the semiotic focus from hermeneutics (interpreting what a sign *means*) to a kind of processual cartography (mapping *how* a sign-event emerges, behaves, and vanishes according to systemic rules).

The type of meaning produced by the ephemere is what we term tanto-semantics (from the Latin *tantum*, ‘only, merely’). This concept is pivotal for understanding how signification works when divorced from human-centric representation. Tanto-semantics describes a mode of meaning that is performative, verificatory, and self-referential to the protocol. It answers not the

hermeneutic question (“What does this stand for?”) but the operational and existential questions: “Has the event occurred according to the rule?” or “Is the state of the system X?”. The meaning of an ephemere is exhausted by its successful (or failed) execution within the framework of the protocol. Consider a blockchain transaction: its core, tanto-semantic meaning is the network’s consensus that the transaction is valid (signatures correct, no double-spend). The fact that it represents a transfer of ‘value’ from A to B is a secondary, anthropomorphic layer of interpretation grafted onto this primary verification. Similarly, the ‘like’ on a social platform is, for the algorithm, a tanto-semantic signal: an increment in an engagement metric. The user’s feeling of approval is the human interpretant, but the system’s ‘understanding’ is purely operational. Tanto-semantics is therefore a semantics of pure function and relation. It is a signifying regime where signs point primarily to other signs and states within the same closed or semi-closed system, ensuring its operational continuity. This does not imply that human meaning is absent, but that it arises as a secondary effect, a phenomenological experience generated in the interaction with a process whose internal logic is alien to it. Tanto-semantics reveals the deep asymmetry between human and machine semiosis in hybrid systems: we interpret narratives and symbols, while the system verifies conditions and executes functions. The power of SNE lies in its ability to analyse this asymmetry not as a failure of communication, but as the defining characteristic of a new semiotic order.

Finally, these three core concepts must be seen as operating within a specific chronotope of ephemerality. The SNE does not merely add a temporal dimension to the sign; it proposes that in non-intentional systems, temporality is the primary dimension of the sign. The spatial, stable sign-object gives way to the temporal, fleeting sign-event. The chronotope of the ephemere is one of ‘nowhen’—a tightly bound ‘here-and-now’ that is perpetually vanishing. This temporality is not cyclical (like myth) or linear-progressive (like history), but punctuated and discrete. It is a time of ticks, pulses, refreshes, and confirmations—a digital temporality governed by system clocks and real-time processing. This has profound implications for cultural memory, identity, and value. If traditional culture builds itself through the accumulation and preservation of stable texts, the ephemeral culture of protocols builds itself through the orchestration of perishable events. Memory, in such a system, exists not as a library but as a database of past states and transaction logs, a form of storage that is exhaustive yet semantically flat, requiring a protocol to re-animate it. Thus, the SNE provides not just a new vocabulary but a new temporal ontology for

the sign, positioning it firmly within the flow of processes that define our contemporary technological condition, where to be is to process, and to signify is, very often, to disappear.

4. Case Study I: Protocol as Co-Author. Immersive Environments of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

The work of media artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer provides a paradigmatic and aesthetically refined example of how a non-intentional protocol becomes an equal participant in the creative process, generating ephemeral signs whose meaning is born exclusively in the moment of performative interaction. His installations can be analysed not merely as interactive art but as operative diagrams of the SNE theory, materialising the feedback loop between human presence, machine protocol, and environmental transformation. Let us examine this using the example of his large-scale installation *Pulse Park* (2008), while also drawing parallels to his wider corpus to solidify the theoretical argument.

Pulse Park was presented in New York's Madison Square Park. It consisted of several dozen powerful robotic searchlights placed around the perimeter. Each visitor could approach a specially designed sensor, place their hand upon it, and have their heartbeat recorded via photoplethysmography. The individual's unique cardiac rhythm was then algorithmically translated into a dynamic pattern controlling the flickering and sweeping movements of the searchlight beams. The result was a colossal, pulsating 'chandelier' of light in the night sky, a monumental representation of an intimate biometric datum.

A classical phenomenological or relational aesthetic analysis would rightly emphasise the poetic dialogue between the individual and the collective, the scaling of the interior body to an architectural scale, creating a '*telematic embrace*' that connects participants across a shared technological interface (Ascott 2003). However, SNE allows us to reveal a deeper, systemic logic that operates beneath this phenomenological layer. The aesthetic experience is an output, a secondary effect of a primary semiotic process governed by non-intentional rules.

The Hierarchy and Autonomy of Protocols.

The installation's operation is determined by several nested and autonomous protocols, each with its own logic (Berry 2011). First, the biometric protocol: the sensor and software translate the analog, continuous waveform of the heartbeat into a discrete digital data stream, extracting parameters like inter-beat interval. This process is governed by the rules of signal processing, not by an understanding of life or emotion. Second, the translation protocol: a custom algorithm maps this data stream onto control parameters for the lights—intensity, duration of pulse, pan and tilt speed. This mapping is arbitrary from a biological perspective but systematic from a computational one; it is a rule-based translation from one code (cardiac rhythm) to another (DMX lighting commands). Third, the technical control protocol (DMX-512), an industry standard that allows computers to control theatrical lighting, precisely executing the digital commands. Finally, an implicit social protocol emerges: the rule that one person uses the sensor at a time, creating a sequence of individual contributions to a collective visual symphony. The artist's primary creative act lies in designing and coupling these protocols, not in painting with light himself. He becomes a 'metaprogrammer' (Manovich 2001), setting in motion a system that generates its own unique, unrepeatable events. This aligns with what N. Katherine Hayles termed 'unconscious cognition' in cybernetic systems—a form of cognizing carried out by the system as a whole through its feedback loops, independent of human consciousness (Hayles 1999).

Ephemere as a Collective Bio-Social Signal

The flickering of the lights is a quintessential ephemere. Its *condition of appearance* is the successful capture and processing of a visitor's heartbeat by the biometric protocol. Its *modality* is immersive, environmental light, transforming public space. Its *temporal algorithm* is strictly isomorphic to the recorded cardiac rhythm of a specific individual, lasting exactly the duration of that recording. Its *point of decay* is the end of the playback cycle, after which the system resets, awaiting the next participant. Crucially, this ephemere is non-reproducible in its full semiotic value. A video recording captures the visual effect but severs the live, causal link between the beating heart of a present body and the sky's response. The meaning is in the real-time verification of that link, not in the image. The installation thus creates a flowing stream of

ephemera, each a monument to a singular moment of human-machine coupling that immediately passes into memory.

Tanto-Semantics of the Bio-Interface and Secondary Aesthetics.

The core meaning of the light flicker is tanto-semantic. For the system, it answers the question: ‘Is the sensor-processionator-actuator loop closed and operational?’ The system verifies the heartbeat not as a sign of life or anxiety but as a valid data key. The profound emotional and aesthetic experience reported by viewers—the feeling of awe, exposure, or connection—is a culturally-shaped interpretant, a human reaction to witnessing this flawless, alien verification process. This creates a layered semiosis: a primary, non-intentional, tanto-semantic process (the protocol’s execution) gives rise to a secondary, human world of rich, metaphorical interpretation. The work’s power derives from this very gap. It stages what Jean Baudrillard might have called a ‘simulation’—not a fake representation, but the generation of a real experience (the light show) from a model (the heartbeat data) that has no original symbolic connection to it (Baudrillard 1994). The heart rhythm becomes a control signal, not a symbol.

This process materialises a Derridean hauntology at the level of protocol. Each pulse of light is a spectre: it makes present (in the sky) a biometric trace (the heartbeat) that is already past, its meaning entirely reliant on this deferred relationship. Simultaneously, the installation operationalises a Guattarian asignifying semiotics. The heartbeat is stripped of its human signification (emotion, vitality) and functions as a raw, a-signifying particle of data to trigger a machinic effect. The system does not interpret the pulse; it executes a correlated light command. The artist, therefore, constructs not a signifying artefact but a machine for the automated production of spectral, asignifying ephemera.

Lozano-Hemmer’s broader practice reinforces this reading. Works like *Body Movies* (2001), where participants’ shadows capture and reveal pre-recorded portraits, or *Voice Array* (2012), which records and plays back voice snippets in an endless chain, are all machines for producing ephemera from participatory input. They are not about the content of the portraits or the words, but about the process of their ephemeral retrieval and re-contextualisation through collective, protocol-governed interaction. They demonstrate the cybernetic model of semiosis at the heart of SNE: a continuous loop of feedback between input (body), processing protocol (algorithm), and

output (environmental change). The sign is born and dies within this loop. The artist is the architect of the loop, and the artwork is the enduring potential of the system to generate these transient sign-events, making it a ‘deep time’ machine in Siegfried Zielinski’s sense—one that orchestrates unique temporal experiences through technology (Zielinski 2006).

5. Case Study II: Metasemiotics and the Entropy of Translation. The Project ‘The Divine Comedy’ by *Kuda Begut Sobaki*

If Lozano-Hemmer’s work illustrates the operation of SNE at the level of a single, elegant human-machine interaction loop, the project of the group *Kuda Begut Sobaki* reveals its power and complexity at the level of *metasemiotic translation*—a deliberate, multi-stage process of migrating meaning between radically heterogeneous semiotic systems, culminating in the birth of a machine whose operation is semantically orphaned from its profound source. This project is a conscious laboratory experiment in non-intentional semiosis, demonstrating how meaning evaporates through translation, leaving behind only the operational logic of the protocol as the new, autonomous signifier.

The artists’ foundational statement—“Any refrigerator or hairdryer carries a text within. Every day we deal with absolutely closed messages. And creating something electromechanical or robotic, we also build texts blindly.”—is a manifesto for a material semiotics of the technical object. It asserts, in the spirit of Friedrich Kittler, that the world of technology constitutes a ‘discourse network’ (*Aufschreibesystem*), a universe of inscriptions and codes that pre-exist and condition human expression (Kittler 1999). The artist’s role, then, is not that of a romantic creator *ex nihilo* but of a decryptor and re-combinator of these existing, opaque ‘texts’—the protocols embedded in hardware and standards.

Decoding the Double Text: From Dante to GOST.

In *The Divine Comedy* project, the source material is a double palimpsest. The first layer is the literary masterpiece of Dante Alighieri, a text dense with theological, poetic, and historical symbolism, itself structured with mathematical precision (terza rima, numerical cosmology). The second layer is the ‘text’ of the Soviet GOST standards—the impersonal, functional graphic

symbols for electronic components (resistor, capacitor, antenna, ground). The artists engage in a rigorous search for structural isomorphisms between these two alien systems. The three-part architecture of the poem (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*) is mapped onto three functional modules of the device. The rhythmic recursion of terza rhyme informs the logic of feedback loops and oscillatory circuits. Poetic imagery is subjected to a drastic reduction to diagram: the tree of knowledge may correlate to the schematic symbol for an antenna; the layered circles of hell to a series of interconnected circuit loops. This process is not one of allegorical illustration but of transduction—converting patterns from one mode of thinking (the poetic-philosophical) into another (the engineer’s systematic). As such, it performs a violent act of decontextualisation, stripping the source text of its hermeneutic depth in the manner of a structuralist analysis pushed to an extreme.

The Translation Chain and the Genesis of the Non-Intentional Object.

The process can be modelled as a irreversible chain: *Literary Text (Dante)* → *Structural/Numerical Matrix* → *Schematic Diagram (GOST)* → *Physical Device (Electromechanical Assembly)* → *Process of Operation*. Each arrow represents an act of translation accompanied by semantic entropy—the irreversible loss of the previous layer’s richness and context. The theological cosmos becomes an abstract diagram; the diagram becomes a set of assembly instructions; the instructions materialise as solder, wires, and chips.

The crucial moment for SNE arrives when the device is powered on. The operational device has no intentional, semantic connection to Dante’s *Commedia*. It does not narrate, illustrate, or interpret the poem. It simply executes the physical processes dictated by its circuitry, which is a fossilised trace of a structural analysis of the poem. The blinking LEDs, humming relays, and moving parts are pure non-intentional ephemera. Their ‘author’ is the GOST protocol, materialised in plastic and metal, and the laws of physics. The system’s tanto-semantic question is merely: ‘Is the circuit closed? Are the voltages correct?’. The grand narrative of salvation and sin is utterly absent from this operational logic.

Ephemere as a Phantom-Trace and the Artwork as Entropic Process.

So, where is the artwork? According to SNE, the artwork is the entire entropic chain of translation itself. It resides in the palpable gap, the vanishing link between the sublime source text and the mundane operation of the machine. The flicker of a specific LED might be an *ephemere-trace*: a sign whose original referent (a specific line from *Paradiso*) is lost, but whose rhythmic pattern eerily echoes a forgotten structural correspondence. The device operates ‘as if’ about Dante, generating a powerful effect of semantic phantom pain—the sensation of a meaning that is missing yet whose absence is structured. This aligns with Luciana Parisi’s concept of ‘abstract reason’ in computation, where thought is not mimetic but generative of new relations and patterns that no longer refer to an original model (Parisi 2013). The project demonstrates that in a world of proliferating codes and systems, the sign becomes a nomadic entity, migrating across ontological boundaries (from literary to graphic to physical to processual), shedding its semantic skin at each border. Its ephemerality is not just temporal but systemic—it is the price of its migration. The ‘message’ is not in the bottle, but in the fact of its transformation and the shipwreck of its original content. This makes *The Divine Comedy* a monumental work of media-archaeological art, digging into the layers of technical codes to show how they shape, distort, and ultimately autonomise meaning (Zielinski 2006). It is a concrete demonstration of how protocol can subsume and repurpose the most iconic human texts, not to explain them, but to set them running on a different, non-human logic.

6. Case Study III: The Political Economy of the Ephemere: Flexing and Cryptocurrency

SNE transcends the realm of artistic experiment, proving to be an essential analytical tool for deciphering the core logics of emerging socio-economic practices in the digital age. It reveals how value, identity, and sociality are being reconfigured through regimes of non-intentional, ephemeral semiosis. The examples of flexing culture and cryptocurrency transactions are not merely about new technologies but about new semio-capitalist formations where the sign’s ephemerality is directly linked to its economic potency. Thus, the meaning of the flex is tanto-semantic for the system: ‘Object/action X correlates with engagement metric spike Y.’ The human body in the frame becomes a bio-semiotic interface, transducing symbolic capital into

machine-legible data capital. This process exemplifies what Mark B.N. Hansen (2015) calls ‘feed-forward’ and constitutes a concrete socio-economic instantiation of the asignifying semiotic regimes theorised by Deleuze and Guattari, where signs function primarily to modulate affective flows within a capitalist assemblage.

Flexing: The Body as Bio-Semiotic Interface for Algorithmic Capital.

Flexing—the performative display of luxury goods (designer items, cash, cars) in short, loopable social media videos—is superficially read as digital-age conspicuous consumption, a status game transferred online. An SNE analysis, however, penetrates to its operational core. Within the ecosystem of TikTok or Instagram Reels, a flex video is not primarily a message to other humans. It is an ephemere engineered for optimal compatibility with the platform’s attention-extraction protocol. The primary ‘addressee’ is the recommendation algorithm, a non-intentional system designed to maximise user engagement (time spent, likes, shares, comments). The algorithm is blind to the symbolic value of a Gucci bag; it ‘sees’ only patterns in the data: high-contrast visuals, quick cuts, sounds that trigger mimicry, and—crucially—the measurable user reactions they provoke. A successful flex is one that generates a sharp, immediate affective spike—envy, desire, admiration, or even outrage—which translates into high engagement metrics.

Thus, the meaning of the flex is tanto-semantic for the system: ‘Object/action X correlates with engagement metric spike Y.’ The human body in the frame becomes a bio-semiotic interface, a living transducer that converts the symbolic capital of branded goods into the machine-legible data-capital of attention. This process exemplifies what Mark B.N. Hansen calls ‘feed-forward’—a future-oriented modulation of the user’s experience based on algorithmic prediction, where the content (the flex) is designed to ‘feed forward’ into the system’s metrics (Hansen 2015). The ephemerality of the flex (its rapid descent in the feed) is functional, not accidental. The protocol is optimised for perpetual novelty and sustained dopamine-driven scrolling; therefore, the ephemere must be vivid, short-lived, and quickly replaced. Its economic value (in terms of potential influencer revenue) is directly tied to the intensity and efficiency of this short-term semiotic transaction. This represents a shift from a semiotics of representation

(the sign standing for wealth) to a semiotics of affect modulation and data extraction, where the sign's value is its measurable impact on a behavioural protocol.

Cryptocurrency: Capital as the Eternal Ephemere of Verification.

A transaction on a blockchain like Bitcoin presents a more profound and pure semiotic paradox for SNE. On one hand, the transaction record is cryptographically eternal and immutable, inscribed forever in the distributed ledger. On the other hand, its semantic and economic agency is radically ephemeral, existing in a fleeting moment of network consensus.

From the SNE perspective, a cryptocurrency transaction is the ultimate performative ephemere. Its *condition of appearance* is the cryptographic signing by a private key, proving ownership. Its *modality* is an alphanumeric entry in a chain of blocks. Its *temporal algorithm* has two distinct phases: a brief, intense period of propagation and consensus verification (the 'now' of execution, taking minutes or seconds), followed by an indefinite state of archival storage. Its point of decay as an active semiotic agent is precisely the moment it receives sufficient confirmations, after which it becomes a spent, historical fact—a 'has-been' in the active flow of value.

The transaction's meaning is pure tanto-semantics. It answers the protocol's questions: 'Are the digital signatures valid? Is there no double-spend? Does the transaction follow the consensus rules?'. The system verifies the form of the procedure, not the purpose of the action. The human narrative behind the transaction (paying for a service, sending money to family, speculating) is irrelevant to the protocol. This decoupling of execution from human meaning is what Ian Bogost might call an example of 'alien phenomenology'—the utterly strange, non-human perspective of the unit operation, in this case, the blockchain's consensus mechanism (Bogost 2012). After confirmation, the transaction as an *act* disappears from the active semiotic sphere of the network, giving way to a new global state.

This process transmutes the nature of capital. Capital becomes a pure, real-time flow of verified ephemeral acts. The value of a bitcoin is not in a physical token or a line in a bank's ledger, but in the continuous, non-intentional consensus of the network regarding the legitimate history of these acts. Here, the sign is the contract, and the contract is the value. This is the apotheosis of SNE's logic: meaning and value collapse entirely into the correctness of the

protocol's execution. It creates a new form of 'protocol power' (Galloway 2004), where control is exercised not through repression of meaning but through the absolute, impersonal enforcement of technical rules. The blockchain is thus a semiotic machine for producing trust through transparency of procedure, not through interpretation of intent, presenting a radical new model where social and economic reality is built exclusively from self-verifying, ephemeral sign-acts.

7. Conclusions and Horizons: Semiotics After the Ephemeral Turn

The analysis conducted through the prism of the semiotics of non-intentional ephemerality allows us to draw several fundamental conclusions about the nature of the sign in the contemporary techno-cultural landscape.

First, we are witnessing a paradigm shift from semiotics of objects to semiotics of processes and protocols. The central element of analysis is no longer the stable correlation of the signifier and the signified, but the algorithm of the sign's life cycle, inscribed in the rules of the system. The 'author' recedes into the background, giving way to the 'architect of the protocol' or the 'operator of the system'.

Second, ephemerality ceases to be an accidental or negative characteristic. It becomes a positive, functional attribute of the sign, a way of existing in systems oriented towards constant renewal, real-time processing, and the optimisation of flows (whether information, attention, or capital). The ephemere is not a defective sign; it is a sign adequate to the logic of networked digital culture.

Third, this forces a rethinking of classical semiotic categories. The concept of text must be supplemented by the concept of stream or signal packet. Interpretation gives way to verification (tanto-semantics). The addresser-addressee model is complicated by the introduction of a non-intentional agent-protocol that mediates and often redefines the communication process.

Fourth, SNE has significant interdisciplinary potential. It provides a unified conceptual framework for analysing phenomena in Media Studies and Art History: for understanding processual, algorithmic, and participatory art; in Social Sciences and Economics: for analysing new forms of labour in the attention economy, the dynamics of financial markets driven by algorithms, and digital sociality; in Science and Technology Studies (STS) (Winner 1993; Hoffmeyer 2008): for studying the production and obsolescence of scientific data, the ethics of

autonomous systems; in *Biosemiotics and Ecology* (Kull 2018): for modelling sign processes in complex, self-regulating systems where ‘intention’ is distributed among a multitude of agents.

The empire of the ephemeral, of which Lipovetsky wrote, has indeed arrived. But its laws are not only the laws of the market and fashion. They are also the laws of code, protocol, and algorithmic logic. The semiotics of non-intentional ephemerality is an attempt to decipher these new laws, to understand how signs are born, live, and die when their ruler is not a human sovereign, but an impersonal and inexorable protocol. In this new kingdom, the most enduring thing may be the very principle of fleetingness.

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