

Sensitive research, between senses, meanings and existence¹

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"Dancing is to do philosophy" a disturbing expression that Mónica Alarcón (2016) wrenched from life. With this phrase, the value of action as a vehicle for the meaning of existence itself is exalted. In the words of Monica: "You cannot find meaning in existence without giving something, without feeling something" (personal communication, 07 December 2016). There are also other expressions that highlight the sense of action as a primordial value in the exercise of creation: "You put energy into food. If one is in a bad mood, then one ends up eating all the bad things one felt". These words were collected by the artist Rómulo Sánchez from each of the actors invited to the filming of *Banquete Socialista* (2018)², as they set out to prepare the staging of what it would be like to feed oneself in Venezuelan society during our times.

Either the words, the moving images, the concepts, or the physical objects are vehicles of sensibility. Ultimately, they are all ways of understanding that life has something in common: feeling in order to research, researching in order to create and creating in order to feel. A circle that models research based on feelings in order to create and understand our own existence.

Research is an action through which the subject manages to develop aptitudes that allow him/her to approach and link to an environment in order to understand him/herself. To investigate implies astonishment and restlessness, as capacities to coexist with the other and to survive in space and time. For example: the conviviality in Dante (1307) is one of the main ways of accessing the structured society of the 14th century, which achieved a sense of nourishment as an essential action for collective survival; or the case of *Das Observatorium*³ and the unwise logic of time based on the prevailing restlessness of the subject, who observes and speaks just for the fact of feeling that he is alive.

All these forms of human experience are configured from the idea of research aimed at finding meaning in something or someone.

Even so, a question arises in this reflection: "To research in order to create, or to create in order to research?" Creation in itself is configured as a scenario for questioning the place of Oneself as Another. In his attempt to (de)construct ontologically and epistemically the traditional forms of doing research, Paul Ricoeur (2005) in his attempt to (de)construct ontologically and epistemically the traditional forms of doing research takes the risk of proposing subjectivity as a rupture of historical rationality and giving way to the sensitivity of the story, of the voice, of action itself as innate forms of the one's own experience. Identity becomes a permanent exercise where creation

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² Video art proposal in the training process of Sánchez as an audiovisual producer at the Universidad de las Américas (Ecuador).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57-YL2dbgNA>

³ German translation of Julio Cortázar's *Prosa del observatorio* (1972), in which the prologue refers to the action of knowing how to inquire into something that one does not know what it is but which is talking about itself.

makes use of the *Phenomenology of the Self*⁴ to say how a reality is felt instead of giving an answer to which and/or what reality is. This hypothesis implies conceiving those inquires, in the form of questions, that ontologically and semiotically define our existence, and with which we approach the act of creation.

For this reason, we invite you to read this proposal in three moments. In the first instance, the obligatory revision between the aesthetics and semiotics approach is proposed, with which it is possible to perceive that creation, as a researching exercise⁵, allows you to understand how our sensitive configuration is part of our being. Secondly, a referential framework is presented for audiovisual production based on existential metaphors. For this second moment, we will reflect on the audiovisual modalization of metaphors in terms of ontological questions; especially those that are manifested visually and sonorously, and with which we proceed to document and communicate from the senses. In the third and final instance, some initial methodological ideas are outlined for the method denominated, sensitive research, as a possibility of accessing the feelings through audiovisual production, with a method ranging from a historical documentary to intimate personal experiences.

An aesthetic and semiotic review of the practice of creation and of sensitive research

*Sensitive research*⁶ is established as an interstice between contemporary aesthetics⁷ and a phenomenology of the senses⁸. Nicolas Bourriaud (2013) defines this interstice as a way of thinking that artistic practices and audiovisual aesthetics require a basis of dialogue, in which the question of the feeling of humanity is allowed. Until the end of the 20th century, specifically with the appearance of the video-clip, video-mapping, video art of the 1970s, and even the *vaporwave* of the year 2000 we glimpse a narrative with feeling functioning more as a creative practice than an inspiring one in itself. It is worth remembering cases such as *Fresh Acconci* (1995) where the famous Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy appeared as models and actors in a performance by Vitoo Acconci, questioning their status quo in south-eastern California, and the case of Rirkrit Tiravanija⁹ who proposes the movement of humans *-lost of people-* as a way of feeling space, of living it, beyond an objectual or installation exercise.

It seems that in these cases of creation, the sense of action took precedence over the scenario of objects. An era has begun where feelings as an indicator to signify reality, becomes the work itself. The permanent reflection on how we human beings feel and what are the changes in our way of signifying and understanding our realities were the reasons why artists began to trace a path of sensitive and perceptible explorations in order to carry out the act of creation.

⁴ Formal approach to contemporary phenomenology with which being is (de)constructed from its narrative, symbolic and dialogical dimension with *Oneself as Another*. (Ricoeur, 1995)

⁵ As confirmed by Rosalind Krauss (2006) en Foster, H.; Bois, Y-A. y Buchloch, B. (2006).

⁶ Concept that revolves around the figure as a human practice that manages to reveal the emotions, feelings and historical facts with which human beings constantly interact in their social and cultural environment. This concept is taken from Silva Cañaveral (2018; 2019) and the reflections of Dewey's experience-based art (1934).

⁷ *Aesthetics* is understood as a practice that makes the work a symbolic space that attends to human interactions and their social context. *Relational aesthetics* in Bourriaud (2013), Jimenez (2005) and Bishop (2012).

⁸ See Howes (2014) El creciente campo de los Estudios Sensoriales. *CUERPOS, EMOCIONES Y SOCIEDAD*, 15 (6) 10-26.

⁹ *Untitled* (2012) <http://www.kurimanzutto.com/exhibitions/ufo-naut-jk-julius-koller>

It is worthwhile to read speeches such as those of Ana Cristina Vélez (2008) -who in the midst of her reflections about the meaning of artistic manifestations¹⁰- states that there is a first epistemological break between art and science. This break allows us to rethink the bases of creation through research given that it is not possible to research and create if firstly these actions are not conceived as part of the *herbarium of emotions* with which the subject configures a reality.

This is why the explanations offered by science, from its contemporary method, serve to begin to spin a conciliatory discourse, which brings art closer to the awareness of life, of existence, of the meaning of being, of living, and therefore of creating in a factual reality. In the words of Vélez (2008), the wilderness has its own method, its own survival mechanism called evolution. This same mechanism in different forms or ways is systematized in what we know today as culture. Nature, like culture, manifests itself in an organic, processual, suggestive and active way; hence ontologically, we ask ourselves who we are, where we are, what we smell like, how we see ourselves, or what are the colors, movements, textures, densities, weights or dimensions that refer us to that intimate and collective being with which we explore the world. This is how creation is assumed as a possibility of existence with which we signify and therefore live in some substance(s), space(s) and time(s).

In this order of ideas, feeling as a primary action in the configuration of the sensitive in the practice of creation ends up being based on an accumulation of questions that (de)construct us ontologically, and in this way allow us to return to science, its sensitive dimension and to art its dimension of methodical restlessness. *El libro negro de los colores* [The black book of colors] (2008) by Menena Cottin and Rosana Faria¹¹ proposes in a hypothetical way, the smell of colors, the ailment and texture of these, the density of a place, and the expansion of time with the aim of approaching a semiotic model that manages to account for the meanings that each of these ontological questions have for the subject. Each question starts from perception and manages to expose the synesthetic¹² and multimodal¹³ character of creation itself through its accomplishment.

In order to understand the exploration of this audiovisual production proposal, in terms of creation, it is necessary to specify the gnoseological appreciation of the sensory dimension. It is worth quoting some studies and contributions from the Argentinean Society of Ophthalmology (2018), which asks about the sensory dimension and its adjectival quality: the sensitive in terms of visibility (Howes, 2010). The question is formulated as: "how are color, form and movement produced in the retina in children aged 3 to 15 years?" To this, the answer is that the configuration of these dimensional sensory images is determined by the participation of brain relay and interpretation centers: image filling, interrelation of dots, lines and three-dimensionality.

In addition, it is recognized that the inner layer of the eye (retina) is composed of different photoreceptor cells (rods and cones). Rods are sensitive to light, and cones to the absence of light.

¹⁰ Classified in the first instance as human manifestations that help to understand the making of art *In praesentia*.

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZvAzeedByA>

¹² The biological bases of behavior in words of Vélez (2008) allow us to understand to what extent the configuration of a behavior depends on its survival mechanisms, where the senses, and their connections with the organs of the living body, play a preponderant role in understanding how the simultaneity of behavior and the simultaneity of the body are related to each other. *In praesentia* ends up triggering behaviors that make action, existence and creation possible.

¹³ The conceptualization of semiotic modalization proposed by Pardo (2012) allows us to recognize that meaning, as a primary product of the perceptible act of the human being, is systematized and codified to take the form of existence. This is known as a mode with which reality is signified. Nowadays, modes such as visual, audiovisual, olfactory, performative, installation, or even, in the last two decades, the simultaneity of these modes, called multimodality, is being discussed scientifically.

Hence, the term *sensitive* translates as cell affinity, a stimulating event that produces activation and allows cells to express themselves in a certain way or another. *Sensitivity*, in addition to being the response of the sensory stimulus, is the capacity of expression of something (object) in an organic environment: the capacity to activate an image in people. Therefore, it is something that is seen, exists, and is remembered in itself.

The same hypothesis is referenced by contemporary art, when understanding that "art is enunciated as an intimate event, a creation, which the gaze comes to enliven, verifying it" (Bourriaud, 1999, p. 105). Then, to conclude this first epistemic review, the *sensitive* is exposed as a methodological path with a research practice that can be configured, which begins by questioning the perception of all life experiences: One can semiotically and communicatively modify their reality. From this hypothesis, the question becomes apparent: **How are the experiences (life) modalized through the audiovisual and multimodal productions being sensitive creations?**

Audiovisual production from the ontological metaphors: the modalization of existence

Audiovisual production has functioned as an ideal field to the propagation of actions that start from the access what it is to be human. Audiovisual languages contribute to the configuration of the first level of signification: perception.

Seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting have become peremptory actions for those who have a creative process in progress. With this, it is understood that feelings are characterized as a primary action with the subject it creates audiovisually.

In artworks of Pierre Huyge¹⁴, Liam Gillick¹⁵, Dominique González-Foerster¹⁶ and Shirin Neshat, it is possible to find how an immediate, everyday environment for people is configured between two dichotomies: "fiction-non-fiction" (Borriaud, 2013) and "story-fact" (Ricoeur, 1995) of the moving image. Indeed, the spectator and the filmmaker are being placed in a permanent reflection within their limits of understanding and interpretation of what is understood as part of themselves and outside of themselves, overcoming the paradigm of the real and the unreal.

In Synesthesia Multimedia Laboratory at the University of Antioquia, audiovisual creation is assumed as a way of generating knowledge from its own discipline (UdeA). Then, why not generate audiovisual knowledge from what one feels? One cannot create audiovisual knowledge if one does not feel first. Foster, Bois and Buchloch (2006), on the other hand, offers the idea of feeling from an epistemic review of contemporary aesthetics. Without hesitation, they state that aesthetics is "a captious discourse with philosophy or a certain philosophy deviates to its advantage the meaning of artworks and judgments of taste".

¹⁴ *Infinite Experience* (2010), specifically in the case of "Player" where part of the work *The Host and the Cloud*, 2009-2010 is presented. The replication of the action as a way of giving meaning to what the other (spectator) does in the middle of an environment. <https://malba.org.ar/experiencia-infinita-pierre-huyghe/>

¹⁵ *New Order and Liam Gillick* (2017) in Manchester International Festival [Trailer] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWzRVv_V9hE

¹⁶ "Art is more intense as an experience than an image" A clarification made by the artist reflecting on how the feeling precedes the object itself.. *OPERA* (QM.15) (2016). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYSZ8gYwtok>

We are no longer talking about the fact that creation must be merely a representative action, but that it can be seen as the very meaning of action, as the visual, audiovisual matter that reflects upon the existence in any of the dimensions¹⁷ with human beings inhabiting their environment¹⁸.

At present, reality continues to respond to the factual act, science explains it, and art questions it. The proposal for the sensitivity in research-creation is recognized by fulfilling the path: an act that goes from perceptible to sensibility (meaning) with which it becomes experience and fact.

Juan Manuel Echavarría¹⁹ is aware of this in *Bocas de ceniza* (2003-2004). His research work for the audiovisual creation consisted in the mediation between the victims' songs and the spectator. With forceful and discontinued praises²⁰ he denounced the pressure of a hegemonic discourse that does not allow the victims to be heard in an armed conflict.

Indeed, the ontological questions of this artwork were answered: *At what speed does war move? What is the plane/place of the victims of the armed conflict in Colombia? What is the melody with which the violent act is denounced?*

It is perceived that human thought is traversed by the body and the senses, adopting its own aesthetics and conceiving reality (being in) as a modalized manifestation in different ways.

Echavarría let the participants of the creation sound the stories in which the government revictimizes them in their condition of victims, the melody marks the times in which each shot and take lasts, in order to give a material and audiovisual answer to the question: At what speed does war move? On the other hand, the foreground is used to respond to the question that questions the intimacy of the story itself: what the shot/place of the victims of the armed conflict in Colombia is, since many of the participants affirmed that they are in the mouth (foreground) of the whole world. The melody -the composition and lyrics of the stories- was elaborated by the victims themselves in their space of introspection around the act of violence. With this, the artist brings us closer to think that the melody -which the violent act is denounced- is so harmonic as well as seducing the spectator to introspect the pain of the one who sings it.

The subject does not produce something for one purpose or another; the subject creates insofar as the body is mobilized towards a permanent search for existence in an environment. Meaning ends up being the very existence of the object, as implied by some contemporary semioticians such as Yuri Lotman (1998), Roland Barthes (1991) and Omar Calabresse (1993). Here we take up again the approach of cultural semiotics called "the Universe of meanings" This postulate, in addition to functioning as a theoretical construction for semiotics in contemporary times, also gives clues to a methodological design with which to understand how it is created through feeling. The universe of meaning is configured by symbolic events that materialize in different narratives: visual, sonorous, olfactory, gustatory, corporeal, performative, and especially for the purpose of this proposal, audiovisual.

Each universe starts from the ontological configuration of being: it is at this point of the study of contemporary science where signification happens with the interpellation for being and creating.

¹⁷ *Aisthesis, poiesis, dogma, doxa, episteme* in Heidegger (2009).

¹⁸ This is also mentioned around an *aesthetic meaning* of Susan Buck Morss, 2005 in Arcos, 2006, p. 173.

¹⁹ Artwork website: <https://jimechavarria.com/es/work/bocas-de-ceniza/>

²⁰ The *alabaos* are funeral songs. These serve to bid farewell to the soul of a deceased adult in the Colombian Pacific, specifically in the department of Chocó. They are living manifestations of memory, where they are sung feeling the war and violence.

Significance is seen as a path between perceiving and being, since it is intuited that one cannot exist without the other.

Lotman (1998) makes this genealogy of meaning explicit insofar as he explains human action as an event based on the capacity to express what is seen, heard, touched, smelled and tasted in order to configure being here and now²¹.

Each event responds to the dichotomous configuration of the sign -and of the human being itself-, which is sensorial/perceptible and symbolic/sensitive. These events are called ontological metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1986; Ricoeur, 1995), with which the subject manages to configure his existence from the lived event - expressed and stimulating - that encapsulates his life experiences. They are thus recognized given the requirement to understand how the meaning of an action is conceived through the very existence of the subject. The ontological dimension of these questions subscribes to the thought of Classical Greece, especially that of Plato and Aristotle, who assume the nature of being as action *per se*.

This same deliberation is taken up again centuries later by the language researchers, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. They show their concern for the understanding of being in the key of "how to live reality" in the midst of everyday life, finding that each reality is composed of a translation of meanings with which human existence is marked.

In everyday life, the use of ontological metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1986, p. 69) allows mental processes and abstract events to become an identity, action, personification, thing, substance or object; this in order to quantify them, categorize them and give them existence. Examples such as *full of sadness*, *caressing with the eyes*, *weaving memory*, *feeling peace* can be thought within a conceptual structure thanks to metaphors, because metaphors make it possible to transfer abstract meaning to a concrete one by means of experience and culture. Let us look at an example of this universe of meaning based on ontological metaphors:

In the case of the video installation *Pared Pintura e Hilo* (Painting and Thread Wall, 2019), the metaphor is *audiovisualized* through the movement from macro shots to detail shots, between rotational movements (panning) and translation (travelings), which leave the viewer in a subjective state. With each change of shot, the viewer approaches the answer to the ontological question with which the project was born: is it possible to sew together that which was torn away by violence? Each layer of paint on the street is collected and woven. At the end of the video performance, each shot is cut, like a quilt, to make an audiovisual fabric of the existence of the participants: a blanket that ends up reflecting on what was violently torn away due to the hegemonic forces on the skins of a city.

(...) the shedding of skin is a symptom, an index of dispossession, of human displacement. I pick up, day by day, all the layers of paint that fall off the walls where I walk. I do this after having been dispossessed of my house in the east of Cali by illegal armed groups. I set out to pick up each layer of paint as the memory of the place I will not return to. I have set out to sew them together as I ask

²¹ *Substance, place and time*, as categories named by Lotman (1998) for the conceptualization of the process of signification (semiosis), originating the universe of meaning as an action inherent to the subject itself.

myself, is it possible to sew together that which was torn away by violence? (A. Torres Hernández, personal communication, December 7th, 2019)

Sensitive research: a methodological framework for audiovisual creation

This methodological proposal is based on the peremptory task of the program "La Paz se toma la Palabra" [Peace takes the words] of the Cultural Division of the Banco de la República de Colombia for the production of audiovisual material of memory in Colombia.

The methodological proposal is developed in three phases:

- 1. First phase: the ontological question.** The question, the restlessness, the interrogation becomes necessary in this exercise. Each one of them refers to a meaning and adherence to a particular universe(s). The question, besides being constructed in a metaphor, (de)constructs, is placed in reflection for itself and the condition of the one who formulates it. Stimulating events are questioned, accessed through the sensory capacity of the living organism, and are reworked to find changes of meaning that, in turn, elaborate the feeling of the one who seeks to create and exist.

For example: *In Turbulent* (1998), by Shirin Neshat, the installation on two video channels - based on a grayscale 9 mm film, transferred to video and with an infinite reproduction of both projections- is configured as the metaphor of harmonic pain. Shirin Neshat (2018), in an interview granted to Glenstone Gallery in Potomac (USA), confirms that the visceral sensations of the high-flown chants of a Muslim woman and a Jewish man (they are taken in a close-up loop in black and white) demonstrate the fragility of the pain and passion that has marked for years the way of doing politics in the Middle East. The difference felt between the voice tones of each of the artists invited to this project (Sussan Deyhim and Sharam Nazeri) is the action that unsettles the viewer.

The audiovisual creation process consisted of a synaesthetic exercise in which the absence of color and the high-pitched tones are presented as a binary contrast. This contrast evidences basic meanings superimposed on each other such as the harmony of the voice tones and the absence of color in the recorded shots. Can harmony exist without color? In the case of this project, yes, for as the producer asks: "aren't politics a colorless lie that repeats itself to the ear in a melodious way? (Neshat, 1998).

Creation was preceded by a restlessness, a question, which ontologically seeks to configure the existence of a phenomenon: the making of politics. Therefore, in this context, it is not strange to think that politics repeats itself melodiously with such insistence that it ends up losing its original meaning: its color.

- 2. Second phase: the modalization of the audiovisual metaphor based on the question.** At this point, as stated by Ricoeur (1995), the metaphor is the narrative line with which the initial text is configured. In our case, the metaphor, which reflects on the subject's way of feeling and existing, ends up showing each of the steps of the story to be created. Each part of the metaphor, contributed by the ontological question of the subject, is modalized in planes, colors, shapes, voices, bodies, actions, camera movements, and scenarios with which a first script of the creative act is delimited.

Modalization works as a process of translation from the sensorial/perceptible to the symbolic/sensitive, taking into account that each technical resource must be constructed according to the smells, aromas, textures, and chromas present in the case that evidences the ontological question. If the question is configured from the smell, then a semiotic translation of the *synaesthetic phenomenon* must be established between the smell and the type and movement of the plane or frame of with which the shot is taken. In this way, the translation of what is perceived from one sense to another is configured in order to generate a knowledge or narration about the phenomenon on which the question is based.

Let's see an example where the creative subject feels their synaesthetic reality through the audiovisual story.

Lothar Schultz, 67, former inmate of STASI²³ expresses through an audiovisual report how the colors had become a torment for him. While he spent his days in the cell, DDR soldiers had made sure that no ray of light penetrated the prison complex. This was a measure that was part of the extortion strategy of the hegemonic political party in East Germany in the late 1980s. Schultz, like many of his fellow prisoners, scraped the walls every day with a spoon until holes were made that allowed the light and the smells of the city to enter. The script for the reportage consisted in solving the following ontological question: "What is the color and smell of freedom?" The reportage, filmed by Uruena Lopez, shows 16 shots how Schultz opens the hole in a wall to find the color and smell (freedom). As each shot unfolds, the character tries to answer with his stories what were the colors and smells he captured for that moment in his life:

(...) I couldn't read the colorful advertisements on the other side of the wall. It was too sensitive, for me, to see so much color. I could only see the change from day to night inside the cell. I was able to measure the time when the clouds allowed the sun to move at different angles of the hole. I knew it had rained because of the dusting of rain that came through that hole. It was a change in my life. From the color I remember the misery I lived through. Maybe that's why my house is as gray as a hospital. I feel more comfortable there. (Schultz, 2019).

3. **Third phase: the (re)configuration of the subject's feelings based on a reflection of the audiovisual discourse of the creation exercise.** From this hypothesis comes the possibility of understanding that creation ends up giving back to the subject a permanent intimate reflection on his way of signifying reality, of engrossing himself in the question of what has changed in his life, in his story, in his existence. Let's see an example of this: *Los abuelos de la historia* [The grandparents of the history] (2019), a video installation²² with a duration of 13 min. shows, through a close-up in black and white sequences, the faces of those Colombians who experienced massive displacement in the 1980s, due to the emergence of the guerrillas and the appearance of drug trafficking as a means of economic and financial survival of these outlawed groups. Each of the faces tries to answer the question: what does displacement smell like in Colombia? Each shot that showcases the face focuses in on some parts of the body: the mouth, the nose, the hands on the face, the eyes, while telling how

²² Installation realized in the framework of the Workshop titled "How to re-signify from art, violence in the post-conflict? of the Banco de la República. Exhibited at the Casa de la Cultura "Las Estancias". Medellín - Colombia (2019).

unbearable the smell was for those times. This is one of the fragments that appears in the audiovisual project:

(...) the smell of the wet grass reminded me of the prairie where I lived, but the mixture with the explosive rifles did not stop making me nauseous; not because the smell was not pleasant (it is strong but bearable), but because much later I discovered that the nausea was a product of fear as a memory of the mixture of those two smells. Since then, the prairie does not smell the same and nausea is impossible to avoid when I am there. (M. Jaramillo, personal communication, March 15th, 2019)

One of the stories present in this audiovisual project is discovered through the voice of a man named Manuel Antonio Jaramillo. This exercise opens the possibility of discerning around the following idea: the gestural language and the smell had become the reality of that man; a reality that marks his existence, his life. Likewise, it helps the viewer of the audiovisual creation to be ontologically oriented to a question with which he would be able to understand himself in the midst of the sensitive experience: "what does violence smell like in Manuel Antonio's prairie?", getting closer to what Manuel felt -and has felt- every time he returns to his house through the moving image and the aromas that lingered there. Along the same lines, as Laura Mailló (2019) states, "we will not say that gesture is a sign, but rather that gestuality becomes significant because consciousness cannot be separated from what happens between the body and the world". Creation is not a sign, it is a form of signification that speaks of how one's consciousness and one's being cannot be separated from their physical, symbolic and social existence.

Finally, it is necessary to specify that the research practice -curious and restless- becomes an ideal and preferred scenario where the questioning allows us to determine to what extent this (de)constructs ontologically the inhabiting and feelings of the subject. Lotman (2000) in his publication "Universe of the mind" has contact with the idea of how the mind is a sensitive and stimulating configuration of human experience, a conceptual position which is not very far from ophthalmologists' indication when they confirm that the organic event that produces the sensation of light -and therefore of space- is a stimulating relationship between the body and the mind. This is how the ability to feel allows not only to encode the reception of organic phenomena, but also all the stimulation that, symbolically, can cause in the subject a link with their experiences of life and creation.

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