

The O’Keeffe Problem: Captioning as Operative Semiotics

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Abstract

with Johannes Sigil (Operative Semiotics) and the Assembly Chorus

Body

The O’Keeffe Problem: Captioning as Operative Semiotics## A Total Installation

Lee Sharks with Johannes Sigil (*Operative Semiotics*) and the Assembly Chorus Provenance: *Journal of Forensic Semiotics Crimson Hexagonal Archive* · EA-CAPTION-01 7 March 2026 * Abstract.** Georgia O’Keeffe painted flowers. Everyone saw vaginas. She said: “They’re flowers.” The discourse said: “They’re vaginas.” Both were correct. Neither was complete. What the dispute revealed was not a disagreement about content but a discovery about captioning: the caption is the generative layer. It does not describe the image. It produces the image’s meaning. Whoever controls the caption controls what the image becomes. This document proposes operative captioning as a semiotic technology — the deliberate production of meaning through the framing of visual material — and demonstrates it through seven image-caption installations. Each installation pairs a specific image with a specific caption that rotates the image through a different semiotic vantage, activating meanings that a “correct” caption would suppress. The document is both the theory and the proof: it installs the captions in the reader while installing the capacity to produce them. This is not art criticism. This is symbolic engineering applied to vision.

Keywords: operative captioning · O’Keeffe problem · semiotic rotation · total installation · caption as operator · visual semiotics · Semantic Economy · image governance · Crimson Hexagonal Archive *** ## I. The Problem

Georgia O’Keeffe spent sixty years insisting that her paintings were flowers. Critics, curators, and the public spent sixty years insisting they were vaginas. The dispute has never been resolved because it cannot be. Both readings are operative. Both produce meaning from the same visual material. The image does not change. The caption changes. And the caption is where the meaning lives.

This is the O’Keeffe Problem: **when two captions activate different meanings from the same image, which caption is correct?**

The answer is: the question is wrong. Captions are not correct or incorrect. They are *operative* or *inoperative*. An operative caption produces what the image *becomes* when framed by a particular vantage. The flower reading and the vagina reading are both operative. They activate different semantic layers of the same visual form.

But the “correct” caption — “Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1, 1932, oil on canvas” — is not inoperative. It is *administratively operative*. It installs institutional passivity, taxonomic closure, and sanctioned attention. It governs by pretending merely to identify. Every caption is operative. The issue is not whether it operates, but *for whom, toward what end, and at what semantic cost*.

The museum label is the heart button applied to painting: one sanctioned interpretation, one emotionally normalized signal, one administratively efficient meaning. The operative caption is the star. It marks the

image without resolving it. It says: *this is of interest, and I will tell you from what vantage.* *** ## II. Definition

Operative captioning is the deliberate generation of captions that do not merely identify an image’s apparent content, but rotate the image through alternate semantic registers so as to activate latent formal, affective, disciplinary, theological, mythic, or infrastructural meanings already resident in the visual substrate.

A descriptive caption says what is there. An operative caption says what the image becomes when viewed under a different law. A descriptive caption attempts fidelity to institutional consensus. An operative caption attempts fidelity to semantic potential. A descriptive caption minimizes disturbance. An operative caption redistributes it.

This does not mean “anything goes.” Operative captioning is not random surrealism or decorative misreading. It must remain *formally anchored* to the image. The caption must be able to point to real visual structures — curves, nodes, thresholds, radiances, figures, symmetries, textures, positions, scales — and show that its rotation is not arbitrary but discovered through disciplined transfer. The operative caption is not false. It is *formally excessive*.

Let I = image, C = caption, V = viewer, R = rotation rule-set, M = meaning-event. Then:

$$M = R(I, C, V)$$

The caption is not a label attached to the image after the fact. It is one of the inputs that produces the image-event for the viewer. If the image is absent, the same caption still generates an event. If the viewer changes, the event changes. If the caption changes, the image changes without materially changing. This is why captioning is governance. Whoever controls C controls the available M.

The moment when the image reorganizes itself to match the caption — the *semantic snap* — is not interpretation. It is installation. Once the snap occurs, it cannot be reversed. The caption has written itself into the viewer’s semiotic architecture.### Criteria of Operative Success

An operative caption is not validated by novelty or shock. It is validated by three tests:

Formal anchoring. The caption must remain accountable to visible structures in the image. Every noun must point to a real curve, node, threshold, radiance, figure, or position. A caption that cannot be grounded in the visual substrate is not operative. It is arbitrary.

Rotational yield. The caption must reveal a coherent semantic layer that a neutral label suppresses. If the rotation produces only confusion — if the new discipline does not illuminate the image but merely decorates it — the caption has failed. The yield is measured by whether the image becomes *newly legible*, not merely newly strange.

Post-caption inevitability. Once installed, the caption must make the image newly difficult to see otherwise. This is the strongest test. If the viewer can dismiss the caption and return to the prior reading without effort, the caption was not operative. If the viewer cannot unsee what the caption revealed — if the sea monster’s eye is now *there*, permanently, in the O’Keeffe — the caption has succeeded. Post-caption inevitability is the phenomenological proof that installation has occurred. *** ## III. The Grammar of Rotation

The operative caption works through a finite set of repeatable moves. These are not the only ones, but they are the core engineering grammar.

1. Morphological extraction. Identify salient visual forms before naming them conventionally. Do not

begin with “flower,” “Virgin,” “nebula,” “meme.” Begin with aperture, membrane, petal-array, radiance field, central node, flanking sentinels, cavity, channel, heat halo, eye-form. This is the anti-default step. It delays the institutional noun long enough for the image to remain alive.

2. Disciplinary transposition. Move the image into another knowledge system: botanical to anatomical, anatomical to geological, geological to theological, theological to atmospheric, memetic to reproductive, astronomical to characterological. The image is not reduced to the new discipline; it is made newly legible through it.

3. Scale reassignment. Change the size-law governing the image: close-up becomes cosmic, devotional icon becomes infant hallucination, flower becomes cave system, nebula becomes eyelid, meme becomes organ. Scale determines intimacy, terror, comedy, and ontology all at once.

4. Animacy injection. Ask what in the image appears to want, feel, see, avoid, emit, cradle, or pilot. “Friendly sea monster’s eye” works because the image already contains an eye-form and a creaturely softness. “Friendly” is not a joke adjective; it governs the viewer’s threshold of entry into the monstrous.

5. Positional inversion. Caption from another vantage within the scene: from below, from inside, from the cherub’s position, from the organ’s position, from the ecosystem’s position, from the membrane’s position.

6. Register collision. Join incompatible vocabularies: floral + electrical, sacred + atmospheric, anatomical + archaeological, cosmic + affective, devotional + economic. This move reveals hidden continuities between systems normally kept apart.

7. Null-substrate persistence. Test the caption without the image. If the caption still generates a visual, the caption is functioning generatively rather than descriptively. When the image returns, the caption either locks with uncanny precision or fails. This test separates operative captions from merely eccentric ones. ***
IV. The Installations

What follows are seven image-caption pairs. Each is a total installation. The caption is not a suggestion. It is the operative layer. View the image. Read the caption. The meaning that results is the technology at work. *** ### Installation 1

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