

# The Art of Beginnings

*Emmanuel Anati*

When we speak of prehistoric art, we think almost instantly of visual art, although we know that even the least technologically developed peoples on earth also expressed themselves by means of music, dance, gesticulation, and poetry; they practised the arts of eloquence, of moving and decorating their bodies, and of awakening social or sexual interest; prehistoric peoples developed any number of other aspects of artistic creativity and of externalization of the self, of which we can for the time being only recover (since archaeology does not reconstruct temporal arts) that which leaves decipherable physical traces.

Even with the graphic or plastic arts, the remains which have reached us represent only a minute part of what was originally produced. But these few remnants (which nevertheless number more than 20 million figures) are of cardinal importance in understanding the cultural matrix of humanity. They enable us to reconstruct the way of seeing, thinking, and believing of thousands of generations all over the world.

The principal material employed, almost everywhere, by stone age man was, indubitably, wood. Besides objects in stone, bone, or ivory, that is, fashioned in materials which have not perished, how many were there in wood, plant fibres, tree bark, animal skins, or other perishable materials which have been destroyed?

We know that palaeolithic man used to leave his marks and trace signs on mud and sand, which he undoubtedly also did on the outside of the cave, just as many tribes do today. In the open air, these works are destroyed by bad weather. Rare are the artistic human creations which survive for thousands of years, and of these only a tiny proportion have been discovered. Who knows how many regions of intensive artisanal production, such as the central Tanzanian plateau, the Tassili of the Algerian Sahara, or the ornate grottoes of the Dordogne, are yet awaiting discovery?

We know nothing at all about the context of the appearance of the oldest evidence, from whence emerge the difficulties in surmising the state of mind, the social fabric, and the atmosphere which prevailed at the creation of the works.

Visual art can be broken up into 'moveable art' – objects – and 'immoveable art', on rocks or caves. This heritage is scattered throughout the world and covers a time-span of 40,000 years.

In 1984 I conducted a study for UNESCO of the state of research in this area. From this came the WARA project (World Archives of Rock Art), an inventory of prehistoric art, which today benefits from the support of ICPHS (International Council of Philosophy and Humanistic Studies) and UNESCO. The idea is to arrive at an overall vision on the basis of the analysis of 20 million images drawn from more than 20,000 sites in 400 regions of 120 countries of the world.

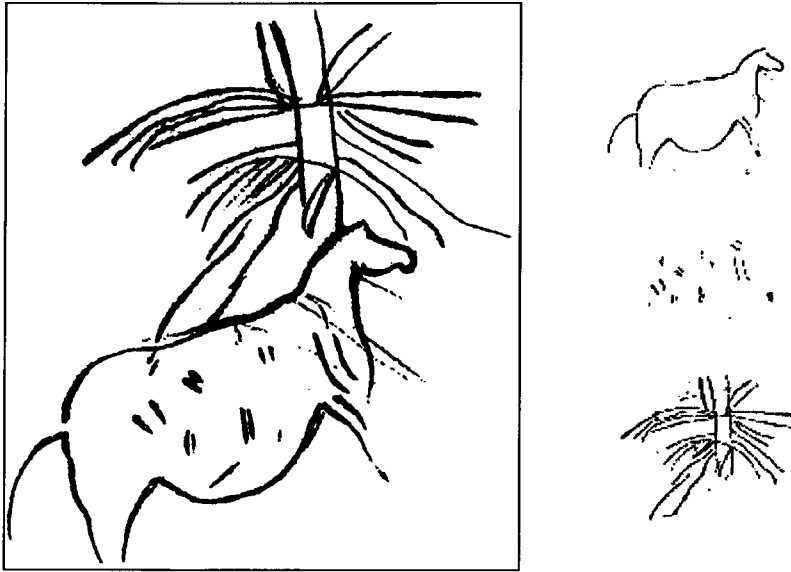


FIG. 1. Elementary grammar of prehistoric art. Pictograms, ideograms, and psychograms from La Pileta, Spain, attributed to the art of 'ancient hunters.' The pictogram is a chestnut horse on the body of which, repeated ten times, is an ideogram consisting of two parallel lines and called 'lips,' to which 'feminine' signification is ascribed. These ideograms were executed at different times with different colour tonalities: red, chestnut, and black. However, the ideogram is the same in each case. Above the horse there is an ideogram in black: a rectangle with stripes issuing from it. Even an apparently simple painting is the accumulation of several hands and several periods.

On the right, from top to bottom:

Pictogram: horse

Ideogram: two parallel lines called 'lips' are repeated ten times

Psychogram: rectangle from which stripes issue

Art of all periods teaches us about man's conceptions of the world, his thoughts, and his imagination. This inexhaustible patrimony, dating from his very origins, allows us to reconstruct man's lifestyles, economy, preoccupations, customs, and beliefs. Before the birth of writing, art was already a form of writing: a means of memorizing and transmitting messages and ideas. Rock-painting sites are places of initiation, information, and education.

A number of these sites are threatened today. If we want to preserve for generations to come the teachings which they can convey to us, it is imperative to document everything as quickly and as fully as possible.

In the prehistoric period, as in our own time, art was a fundamental element of culture and of the quality of life. What would our life be without the features which have determined artistic creativity? Yet art is a recent invention. According to our present state of knowledge, and despite all the endeavours of researchers to go back earlier than this, art was only born 40,000 years ago.

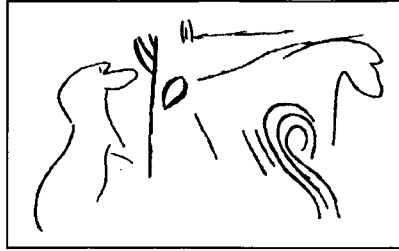


FIG. 2. Two figures of animals, one vertical, the other horizontal, are associated with two ideograms of repetitive type with masculine value (branch) and feminine value (sign made of an eye) in the caves of Altamira, Spain (art of 'ancient hunters'). Beneath one of the animals there is a group of curving lines. Above the two figures is the union of the two ideograms, one masculine (arrow) and the other feminine (lips).

GRAMMATICAL ANALYSIS



Pictograms: two figures of animals:  
one vertical, the other horizontal



Ideograms: two masculine signs  
(‘branch’ and ‘arrow’)



Two feminine signs (‘lips’ and ‘eye’)



Psychogram: band of curving lines

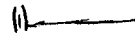
SYNTACTICAL ANALYSIS



Vertical animal with masculine  
ideogram



Horizontal animal with  
feminine ideogram



Union of feminine ideogram (lips)  
with masculine ideogram (arrow)



Psychogram of curving lines,  
exclamation, or omen

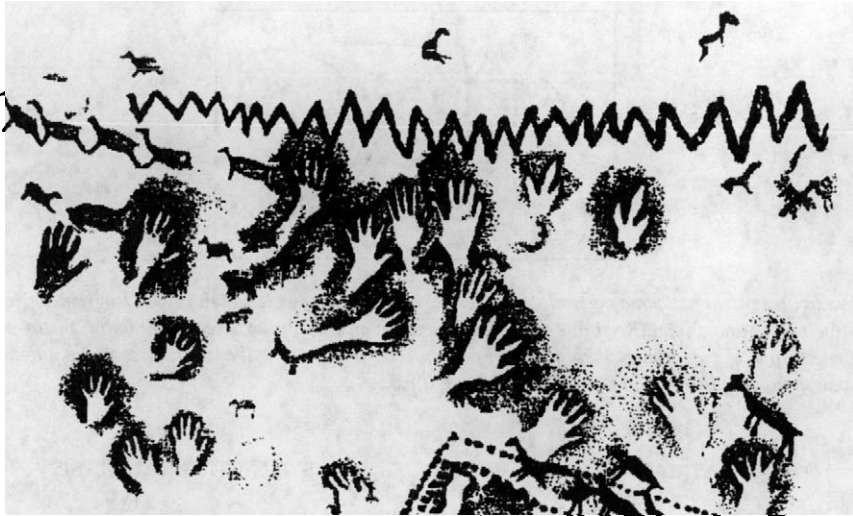


FIG. 3. Cave paintings from Rio Pinturas, at Chubut, Patagonia, Argentina, attributed to the art of 'ancient hunters.' Three distinct phases can be discerned: association of graphemes (handprints, animal prints, object-tools, zig-zag), followed by animals added later, and a line of points added later.



Handprints in positive and negative



Animal prints



Tool-utensil: 'axe'?



Zig-zag



Animal figures traced above at a later date



Line of points added later

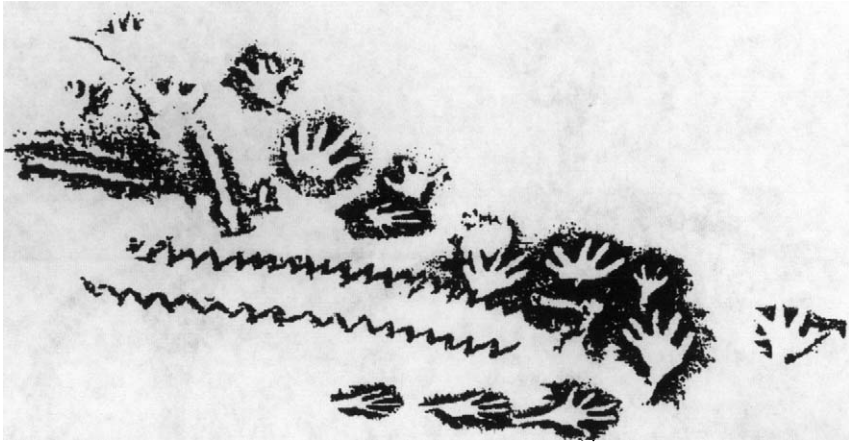
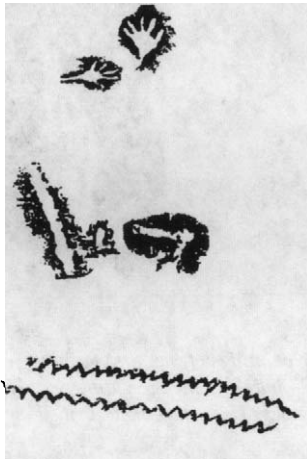


FIG. 4. Rock paintings from Queensland, Australia, with which drawings (not reproduced in the picture) attributed to the art of 'ancient hunters' are associated. Negative handprints are associated with negative animal prints, zig-zag motifs, and tools.



Negative handprints

Objects: 'club' and 'axe'

Zig-zags

But from that moment onwards, it has had an aura of eternity. Artists die, but the art of Lascaux or Altamira is as fresh as that of Picasso, Miró, or Modigliani. It continues to convey emotions and to stimulate the imagination and the intellect. The art of beginnings retains the same freshness as contemporary art: in fact if we recognize the gifts of the art, that means that it speaks to us, and is therefore contemporary.

Although it seems difficult to us today to imagine humanity without art, we should nevertheless remember that the species *Homo* developed in the course of 4 million years, and art, articulated language, religion, and other aspects which we habitually describe as 'human' are only recorded in the last hundredth of the history of evolution: 40,000 years.

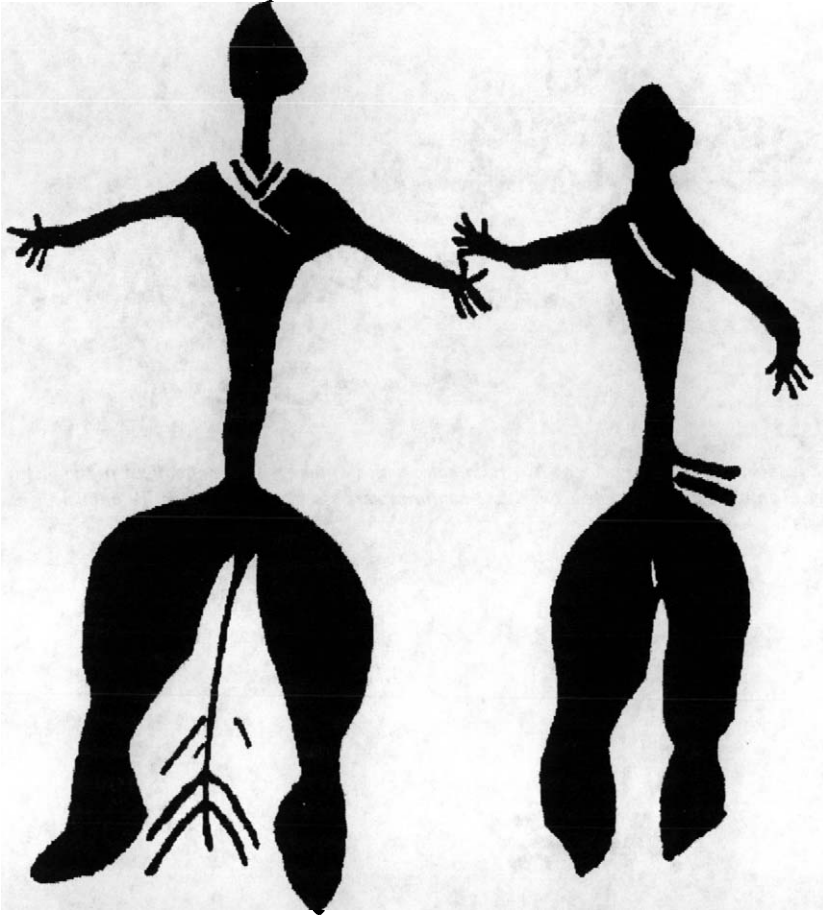


FIG. 5. Symbols of the masculine and the feminine in cave paintings of the 'first farmers' from Gobustan, Azerbaijan (Neolithic, c.5000 BC). The symbol of the arbolet or 'branch' indicates the masculine sex, while the two parallel strokes, or 'lips,' appearing on the woman's hip indicate the feminine sex. This image may furnish an indication of the names given by these peoples to the sexual organs.

For *Homo intellectualis* to become capable of producing art, he had therefore to have an articulated language, philosophical thoughts, ideology, and probably a religion. We may, however, justifiably surmise that man had learnt to play well before: and the play practised by other mammals, from cats to monkeys, is an essential element on the road to art. Those who do not know how to play will never arrive there.

As for the complex economy which the appearance of agriculture presupposes, it only developed 10,000 years ago. The last peoples who continue to live as hunter-gatherers are today relegated to a few marginal corners of the world, in the forests of Congo and the Amazon, in the far north of Canada, and in the deserts of central Australia. They are the



FIG. 6. Art of the Australian aborigines, scene of copulation. Note the image of a child outlined on the woman's thigh. Arnhem Land, Northern Territory; (WARA Archives: E. Anati, *L'art rupestre dans le monde*, 1997).

last depositories of the feelings, the messages, and the essential and primordial truths of our species. Their way of life will disappear for ever in the course of a generation. Their thought and the memory of their precious experience will only survive if their artistic creations are inventoried, studied, and preserved. Art alone makes this possible, for today, throughout the world, there is no people that does not produce art.

The analysis of the data which we have gathered in the WARA project has enabled us to construct a global vision of the phenomenon of 'art.' We have thus been able to identify three types of signs characteristic of elementary artistic structures: pictograms, ideograms, and psychograms. These structures accommodate nuances, differences between one geographical zone and another, one period and another, but the base is the same everywhere. We can even assert that there is a universal base common to the visual arts and to dance

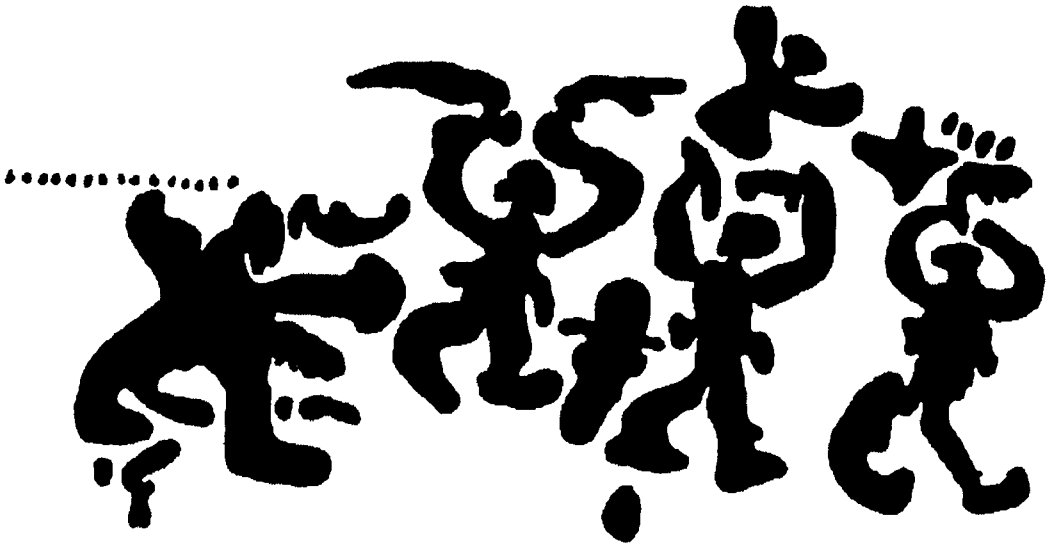


FIG. 7. Rock painting done by groups with a complex economy, Val Camonica, Italy. A man and three women dance producing sounds and rhythms, evoked by the ideograms.

and music. These last are also composed of the interaction between pictograms, ideograms, and psychograms.

In the visual art, *Homo sapiens* has always expressed himself metaphorically. This reflects a way of thought and of co-ordinating the associative mental process which still persists today. When one says of a person: 'he's a lion,' or, indeed, 'that's an ass,' or 'he's a pig' or 'a snake,' we instantly understand these significations. In prehistoric art, some animal images have a metaphorical signification. They are associated with signs which often recur in the category of ideograms or in that of psychograms.

The paintings in black of bison which are found in the cliffs of the great plains of northern America represent the great Apache chief, 'Black Bison;' the drawing of an eagle in our society represents the Empire, an empire, whether that of Rome, Berlin, or Vienna.

Some paradigms do not change: a distinction must be made between universal paradigms, categorical paradigms, and vernacular paradigms. Universal paradigms are distributed throughout the world at all periods. Thus more than 85 per cent of prehistoric art is concerned with only five subjects: anthropomorphs, zoomorphs, structures, objects, signs. Categorical paradigms are those which distinguish one of the four principal categories of societies producing art: ancient hunters, developed hunters, herder-rearers, and societies with a complex economy. Finally, vernacular paradigms are in the different styles which characterize particular regions or particular periods: in modern art, stylistic variations such as baroque or art nouveau in Europe, or that of Ming paintings in China, would be called 'vernacular.'

In other words, the very structure of art is to be read in the grammar which its typology reveals, and in the syntax reflected by the association of signs: simple association, complex association, sequence, scene.





FIG. 8. Rock paintings of the first food producers, which are the expression of one of the first phases of groups with mixed economy. Toto Muerto, Peru. Scene of dance and music, where the sounds and rhythms are graphically represented by points and lines around the dancers. Each dancer has a different mask, which serves to identify or make recognizable the entity they represent in the context of the dance.

Visual art reveals the character of the society which created it, the personality of the artist, his concerns, his way of seeing the world which surrounds him, his existential relation with nature. It is a proto-writing: we could even say, it is a writing before writing.

And it is writing in a primary language, because in the very oldest stages, we find the same modes of expression, the same associations, the same sequences, and the same themes throughout the world. Regional characteristics were to become increasingly marked as men adapted to the different geographical zones.

The perspective of 40,000 years of artistic creativity sanctions comparative studies at global level on the universal constants of cerebral functioning, on the basic process of the association of ideas, which reveal to us fundamental factors concerning the nature of man. As *Homo sapiens* became more vernacular, more specialized in each region, art also acquired local characteristics. Undoubtedly there was an analogous process for language.

The principal themes of 40,000 years of prehistoric and tribal art are always the same: sex, food, territory. These are man's perennial preoccupations. This is all revealed by means of graphic narrations which often evoke myths: there are myths of origin, myths of universal genesis of peoples without writing, in a poetic spirit pregnant with conceptualization, imagination, and aesthetic meaning.

New generations should show greater concern for this heritage which is both ours and theirs, for greater awareness would reward them with enrichment, regenerated and inspired by the immensity, the beauty, and the wonder of the human spirit.

From a technological point of view, humanity develops. The material existence of man has advanced, but we discover that his emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual capacities could have been just as elevated 40,000 years ago as they are today.

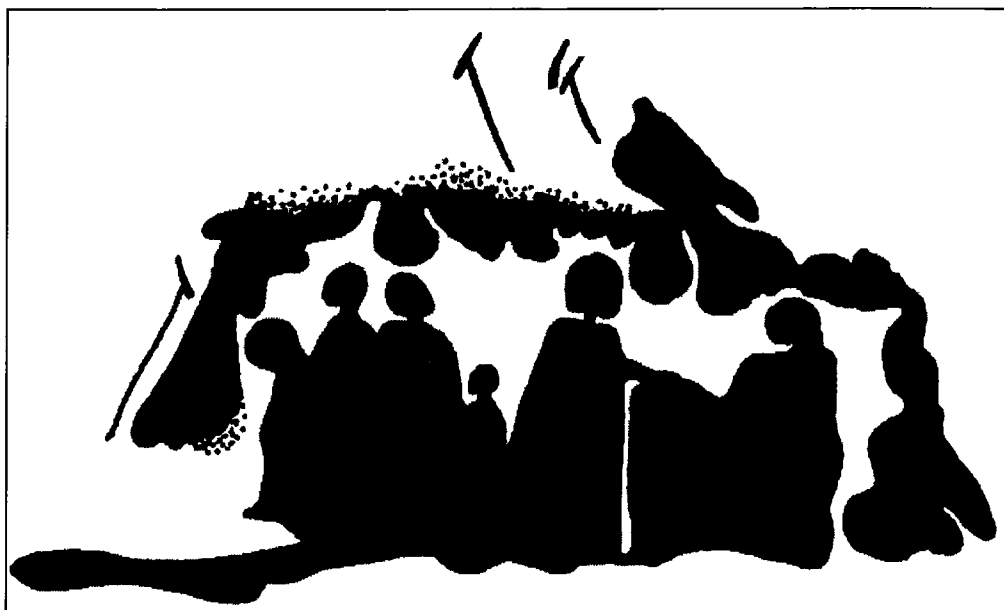


FIG. 9. Relief of a rock painting, red in colour, from Cedarberg, a province of the South-West Cape, South Africa, which reveals the social life of 'developed hunters.' Six people are sheltering under a rock. Above them, purses, gourds, and other objects are suspended from the ceiling. A sort of 'arm' connects the figure with the biggest head (probably the chief) with the foremost female figure (with bosom) to his right. Left and above, three ideograms have been drawn, one for each of the human figures. The three ideograms seem to indicate the sexual relationship between two of the persons represented. From left to right, they are: small stick with closed lips, small stick with closed lips, and small stick with open lips.

The art of beginnings has much to teach us about culture, education, the interior life of man, and society's ethical and aesthetic equilibrium.

Art implies a consciousness of reality and of the imagination, of our senses and of our eyes. It is a window onto the spirit of man, the eternal spirit of *Homo sapiens* since the first artistic creation. Awareness of the forms of nature, the sky and the earth, rocks, landscapes, animals, and men, is the foundation of intelligence.

To read the forms of nature, to imitate and complete them, and raise them to abstraction is the start not only of art but also of scientific research. It is the eternal spirit of *Homo sapiens* at work, for he has always been a seeker and a scholar.

Research today is involved with the reading of signs. Prehistoric art is a language which can be deciphered. Each year sees fresh advances in this area, and the reading of this body of evidence prepares the ground for a universal history. A true universal history should also integrate the peoples without writing of the last 40,000 years. The moment art existed, history was possible. But it should not be confined to urban and literate populations. The contribution to world history made by the art, imagination, and creativity of

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### GRAMMATICAL ANALYSIS

#### Pictograms:

*Embrasure, probably a shelter beneath a rock*



*Group of six persons*



#### Ideograms:

*Three pairs of signs joining the vertical line to horizontal 'lips'*



### SYNTACTICAL ANALYSIS

*An embrasure, probably a shelter beneath a rock, with hanging objects; its name is indicated by an ideogram in the form of a bird above.*



*Six persons form three couples. The individuals turn their faces towards their partners; in each couple one of the partners is taller than the other.*

*First couple: the individuals are attached. The ideogram indicates 'lips closed' (there are no full personal relations).*



*Second couple: the individuals are attached. The ideogram indicates 'lips closed.'*



*Third couple: the individuals are more distant from each other. The ideogram indicates 'lips open.'*



peoples without writing is fundamental: it is the source of all that came later. That is why understanding the art of beginnings can open new horizons not only for culture but also for our awareness of the fullness, depth, and existential value of the human intellect.

Emmanuel Anati  
Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici/University of Lecce  
(translated from the French by Juliet Vale)