

The Meaning of the Image

It is frequently, but erroneously, affirmed that semiotics studies signs as such. Semiotics is, rather, the production and/or realization of the meaning of things considered as signs, their functioning in different contexts, and their mediating capabilities. Semiotics has also been understood as merely the study of signs as a reflection of those theories, reducing the object of semiotics to the signs of doubly articulated languages, either as a science of lexicons (Eco, 1971) or as a "theoretical textology" (Lotman, 1975a: cf. Pjatigorsky, 1978), that is, a modality of considering the "sign in text." As soon as we go from the signs of doubly articulated languages to other sign systems (visual, musical, kinetic, etc.), the first thing we notice is that linguistic meaning processually vanishes and another meaning is established, one that natural language only partially translates (always approximately), but can never substitute. At this level, instead of dealing with an arbitrary sign (usually a dualistic concept), we deal with configurations and sign processes (semioses). Not only do those theories (some based on a rational foundation, others on an irrational, mystical, or other foundation) that consider one language irreducible to another argue against logocracy, but so does the practice of establishing meaning through the different autonomous forms of art or in syncretic forms, such as the ones that have appeared and been developed to such an extent in the last few years.

We shall not list them but only mention that modern art has sharpened the conflict between description and verbal explanation (representation through words, special or not) and aesthetic reality as a distinct form of representation characterized by sense or lack of sense (as a prime aspect of the interpretant iterating from configurations of representamina to object configurations). The word itself has been integrated into new images, taken apart, segmented, cleansed of its language and linguistic meaning, and assimilated into a new semiotic reality. One must proceed from the meaning of the parts to the meaning of the whole and back again in order to understand this process. Frege believed that the meaning of the whole is the synthesis of the meanings of the component elements, a conviction to which art has adhered for a long time and which classicism, for instance, embodies in the most pregnant manner possible. Today, it is known that the meaning of the whole (evaluated linguistically or otherwise) marks the meaning of each language sign in particular (cf. Quine's semantic holism, in Quine, 1960), a conviction to which art also adheres in respect to constitutive configurations. This happens not because art wants to align itself with a theoretical model, but because it "discovered" this truth within itself, in its evolution towards self-consciousness. In fact, I am convinced that meaning comes about through both processes: from component configurations to the whole and from the whole to semiotic components. This intuition, which I want to verify herein, insisting upon the contradictory unity between the representational, communicative, and significative functions of the sign (simple or compound), especially on the last two functions, since I have clarified representation in previous research.

The image forms part of the semiotic field; that is, it appears in a given spatial-temporal context (social, included) and simultaneously generates its own semiotic field. The latter is understood in its quality as a unit between the fields of representation, signification, and communication and can be defined in the terms of information theory, considering the contribution of information of each configuration in particular as well as of the whole. This was explored by information aesthetics, and the results obtained are well known (and described by the terms *aesthetic measure*, *entropy*, *redundancy*, and others characteristic of the syntactic level of art). Unfortunately, while information aesthetics opposes linguistically oriented sign models, it returns to the sign, instead of dealing with configurations (see Bense, *et al*).

The field of signification has been impressively described, but without any analytical method, semiotic or otherwise, having been produced and without any specific standards having been elaborated or adapted, as in the case of the field of communication. When signification was identified with the semantic field, some analytical methods were adapted (Montague, Greimas, Katz and Fodor, Eco, etc.) and representative units declared (*semema*, for example). But their validity corresponds to linguistic reality. Extending the method of generative grammars into the promising frame work of visual (pictorial) grammars succeeded in bringing about some progress. However, a main limitation to this approach is the belief that the structure of doubly articulated languages is universal (Nadin, 1981).

When confronted with the reality of images--which is one of the most complex due to the manner in which meaning is formed and brought about--linguists and mathematicians have appealed to a means of refining visual grammars, i.e., to fuzzy sets. The logic of vagueness implicit in Peirce's semiotic is not taken into account. Of course, certain graphic images, such as contrasting compositions (sometimes cut complementarily, as with Franz Marc or Vaserely) or decorative compositions (geometric stained-glass windows, cf. Maser, 1970), can be described mathematically, and a semiotic level of reference can be realized, that is, the indexical level of the image. But meaning cannot be established only at the indexical level. It is true that in the case of the sign system of doubly articulated languages, due to its self-reflection (a language that can be used to "speak" about itself), the field of signification seems practically identical with the semantic field.

In the case of different semiotic systems, such as signs of the image, things do not stand the same. The move is away from questions centered around--"What?"--to questions referring to modality--"How?". It is understood that this search for initial signs is based on the belief that it leads to the rediscovery of meaning itself. Consequently, that the functioning of the image's sign system is univocally determined, the modification of the syntactic almost mechanically determines the modification of the semantic level. Actually, the reciprocal influence of these two levels is much more complex: meaning does not automatically derive from a certain syntactic structure. The semantic is not ulterior, it is not a "secretion" of the syntactic. The two are simultaneously constituted and influence each other. Thus appears the need to approach the image in its complexity, as the unity of its components, which is a very complicated mission, which I believe can be accomplished only in certain cases.

Let us start our from an elementary truth: The image is more concrete than the word, thus more full in content. Even an abstract image is an immediate reality that we perceive as such. It is governed by precise physical laws (cf. Battro, 1977 and Piaget, 1964). Visual space does not have a constant negative curvature (it is not a Lobacevskian space). That is, it is not a homogenous space. Furthermore, the concrete space of existence (the environment) is Euclidean; but human vision (hence, perception) is not. Any change in the subject's scale (reduction or amplification) produces a change in the perceived geometry. That Euclidean geometry is independent of a scale (a particular case in representation) has been known for a long time. But when it is shown that "a wide variety of experiments and ordinary experience as well testify to the highly contextual character of visual space" (Suppes, 1977), it follows that, although we exist in the reality of Euclidean space, we produce in our representations as meaning a different space that is highly sensitive to context. The images of art, especially modern art, expressed this truth long before science verified it.

The concreteness of the image renders it incapable of attaining the level of self-expression, that is, of making the transition from object-language to meta-language (the self-reflective character of language). The linguistic sign removes itself as far as possible from the object. It is arbitrary in respect to the object, even if the latter often preserves reminiscences of its motivation (especially onomatopoeic, hence iconic). The signs of the image, which in the evolution of modern art follow the same tendency, are more constrained, more directly determined by the reality in which they are reproduced and in which they participate in establishing meanings. *Red* as a word is arbitrary in comparison to the color it designates. We can say that even this designation is approximate, bearing in mind that the eye can distinguish a great variety of nuances, shades and hues, although we do not have names for these. The red in an image is a reality. It can relate to other manifestations of this color (sunset, flag, stoplight, hallucination, blood, flowers, etc.). It can be compared to them or it can propose an arbitrary shade, loading it with a certain meaning (depending on the sign system it forms part of). Culturally determined meaning (e.g., red as in revolution, cardinal red for the Roman Catholic Church) and conventionally accepted meaning (social or otherwise) are forms of the "linguistification" of signs that are not part of the repertory of language.

The second articulation (memory of these signs) no longer corresponds to the connections established in the human brain but to the structure of the social environment, assuming the aspect of collective memory (culturally motivated). Codification can go as far as feasible. But the signs of the image (examples from form and from any type of visual sign can be given) remain in reality and are part of it, which is not the case of the word. The word is imbued with meaning through its material support, not as an entity. A world in which the word *red* or *circle* disappeared would not be a world lacking the color red or circles, but only the means of denoting them. (Obviously, I that we do not share Wittgenstein's attitude.)

On the other hand, the red of an image, or the circles in an image, belongs to existence, not to a representation of it. But they can act as a means of interpretation, including representation of words (in their general sense and abstract acceptance, as in the case of categories). In these cases, the referent is the word, not as a sign but through its meaning.

Although it programmatically rejects symbolism, modern art practices it, but not at the level of the outer symbol where the object of reference is "recollected." The symbol is, in the broadest acceptance of the term, half of something that recalls the other half, synthetically representing the whole. In Peirce's semiotic, a symbol is "a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object" (CP 2.249). This is a question of a certain type of representation whose *necessity* is implicitly expressed. Purely pictorial representations are not necessary. Such a representation maintains the image alongside the thing and imposes the criterion of similarity (iconicity), although the physical laws of visual perception are different from the physical laws of the human being's spatial existence. Symbolic representation must be necessary or it declines into the arbitrary and no longer keeps its representational value. It is more abstract than pictorial representation and thus more formal. Within its framework, means of reference to reality (in its broadest sense) are continuously made relative, with the exception of those that function in iconic representations (naturalistic or illusionist) and which have a tendency towards the absolute.

Analytical (descriptive) representation presupposes a perception governed by a logic functioning as language. In addition, the representation itself is governed by this logic. Its articulation is of the type shown by any linguistic description. Synthetic global representation is not descriptive. It rejects language and functions more as a logical calculus whose intentionality is directed towards understanding and verifying than towards feeling and acceptance or recognition. It is learned. We find ourselves before an ideatic system in which the interrelationship of art and reality is expressed in the terms of art.

Reference to reality is made through the intermediary of signs generating one sense or another in proportion to the level at which their rule of functioning is mastered. Representation no longer refers to what was learned about the subject (the cognitive background, broadly), but to what is known about the means of representation. The convention of modern representation is one of logical calculus, not of logical discourse. The signs of the image are not imitations of the signs of the represented universe. They are invented in order to bear no sediment of meaning, to function not vocatively but constitutively. To define meaning means to "solve" the image, to establish its degree of complex necessity. The disappearance of perspective, imposition of modes of illumination other than illusionist, the implication of heterogeneous means of expression are the result of calculus.

Thus we near the problematic of artificial art, an expression that extends the concept of artificial intelligence. Artificial art presupposes extending the concept of formal artificial language and defining a corresponding semiotics, in which traditional and new values are axiomatically defined. Meaning must be sought not in verbal language, but through reference to what visual language tends to express. Obviously, this is a matter of the way in which the human subject realizes the meaning of these images and their degree of necessity.

Meaning is impossible to define without defining context. In the case of verbal language, defining the context leads almost automatically to defining classes of distribution, since language is a relatively determined, quasi-closed system. The study of language begins with the definition of distributional classes. The study of the image ends with them (c f. Albers, 1969 and Itten, 1961).

In the case of the image, relations among constituent signs are complicated. We no longer operate with the aid of strict notions. We must refer to *vague* representations. We must solve the transition from sequence and linear development to development in 2- or 3-dimensional space. We must solve the transition from relatively determined relations to vague, imprecise relations, which is possible by producing pictorial grammars that approach neighborhoods (right/left, up/down, etc.) that they cross sequentially and then unite.

Given the individual character of any image, the equivalent of a distributional class is hard to

imagine. The question posed concerns the relation of interdependence among the signs of an image. The answer (intuitive) is that this relation can be expressed through function, in the sense introduced by the logic of possible worlds. Hintikka (1975) started from Frege's classical definition of meaning and showed that the semantics of possible worlds appears once it is realized that the way in which a reference is given is functional. In the case of modern art, one can no longer speak of recognition--the representational level--not even in those instances in which the object is almost photographically rendered (pop art, hyperrealism), because meaning is determined precisely in the nullification of what is known or thought, of what is perceived critically and realized as critical meaning. Representation transcended the sole imperative of resemblance (description) and won the liberty to use conventional means in a system of signs that the viewer generally does not master but which he can learn (the communication function), after which he also discovers the nature of necessity, the method of the image (its signification). Of course, to judge it from the perspective of the aesthetics of description means to condemn it as lacking meaning.

At this point, it is necessary to return to the unity between the semiotic functions of representation, communication, and signification reflected by the dynamics of the semiotic field. The semiotic field is the field in which a system of signs is identified, in itself (as a consistently articulated unit characterized by a certain structure of the relation of its constituent signs) and in relation to other signs. It is therefore the context of axiological determinations, because value derives from *identification* and is the *expression of the identity* of a given relation. The value of communication is established in relation to the content of the identity of a given relation. The value of communication is established in relation to the content of the identity (as information theory expresses precisely). The value of aesthetic communication continuously declines in time (although surprises are possible).

In order to understand what this is all about, let us point out that it refers to such contents regarding

- 1) the relation between the sign and the object it represents, hence the content of aesthetic representation (e.g., information concerning a landscape, a person or group, a natural phenomenon, or a historic event);
- 2) the relation of constituent signs, that is, the value of novelty in relating them (through technique, aesthetic vision, experiment, etc);
- 3) the relation of the work's sign to other sign systems.

Of course, the surprise of the late comprehension of intuitions concerning socio-historical and natural phenomena can arise from the manner in which these are expressed in a certain artistic image. The same goes for representations using new artistic techniques. But, *information per se* is transmitted and produced from the very moment an image begins to exist. Sometimes, information precedes the image (narration of mythological themes, evocation of certain events, etc.). Communication diminishes and is stabilized in several possible interpretations, frequently resumed through specifying the context of reference (as in the example of portraits).

On the other hand, the value of signification grows. In this case too, a certain relativity is preserved: We bear in mind the direct aesthetic experience that has confirmed cases of decreased signification when value criteria are altered or in the case of axiological accidents. Let me point out here that signification refers to meanings resulting from three relations

- 1) the relation between the meaning of the image and the meaning of the reference object (e.g., the romantic image of a landscape and the meaning newly acquired by integrating the landscape into a new context--such as industrialization--a process determined in very complicated dynamics);
- 2) the relation between the meaning of each sign and of the whole, progressively constituted and reflected onto the meaning of the constituent signs--hence the novelty of the meaning of the global supersign in relation to partial meanings;
- 3) the relation between the meaning of the whole and of the other sign systems that constitute its context, i.e., continuous modification in time and space (more precisely, in the semiotic field) of the image's meaning under the influence of the context and the influence of the given image on the context in which meaning is produced.

I shall even propose a law regarding the relationship between the semiotic functions of representation, communication, and signification: As a significative reality, aesthetic reality is defined through the continuous decrease of transmitted information (decrease of the functions of communication

and representation) and the growth of signification. In the case of accidental forms (experiments that are unsuccessful in an aesthetic sense), the phenomenon takes place inversely. The new meaning dominates at the beginning, then becomes banal and remains the object of historical interest that still exists at the information level (as an example in the history of art) or at the level of representation.

Context, defined in a broad sense, include the closeness of signs of the same nature (images in the context of images, as in museums) and of a different nature (the signs of other forms of expression, the signs of theories of philosophy, ideology, politics, economy, sociology, etc.). The exact level at which inter-influence is exercised is difficult to establish, but not the fact that, to a certain degree, an image generates a "family" of images, reproductions, descriptions, commentaries, etc., whose meaning is realized in the generalized semiotic field of human existence and praxis. Semiotics has to dismantle the myth of art as a form of communication so that a better understanding of the meaning of the visual be perceived dynamically, as a function, an understanding that semiotics already provides.

Note: References mentioned in the text were not included in the original print publication of this digitized text.

(Hintikka, 1975:235-236): "...the only reasonable way of understanding Frege's statement in the final analysis is to interpret the sense or Sinn as the function which gives us the reference, by means of which we can ... find this reference [...]The meaning function which gives us the reference...may depend on this or that aspect of the situation or world in which the reference is located, but it can not depend on anything more than the whole world itself"