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An overview of the field of semiotics

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Abstract

The quantitative increase in recent years of research into semiotics, among other methods of reading works of art, is notable. Since semiotics is the act of reading as based on a meta-language that is constructed and grounded in logic, understanding the methods applied by the field requires time and experience. In addition, the application of models that differ in relation to each other under different schools of thought and under different names makes its yet more difficult to comprehend the field of semiotics. Despite the different models that are available, approaches display certain commonalities as they are born of the same foundations and objectives. This study will aim to pinpoint the common aspects of the intellectual foundations, methods, objectives and research limitations of the different schools of thought and the models that are involved in the study of semiotics.

Keywords: Sign, semiotics, art criticism

1. Introduction

An effective art education for its own sake, in addition to applied studies, requires individuals to gain sufficient knowledge and experience about the critical, cultural and aesthetic realm. The existence of preconceived values and meanings that are compatible with the qualities offered by a work of art is what allows a work of art to engender meaning in the subject's consciousness. The traditional route in providing art students with knowledge and experience about the critical, cultural and aesthetic realm involves exposing them to courses that are theoretically based, such as 'art criticism', 'compositional studies' and 'aesthetics', etc.. Fine Arts Faculties appear to provide theoretical courses that engage students with readings of composition and design and the deconstruction of images. Recent years especially have seen an increase in applied studies that incorporate semiotics – a method rooted in linguistics – when analyzing works of art.

The practice of appropriating linguistics based semiological methods in analyzing works of art firstly raises the question of what unites a work of art and language. The similarities between art and language stem from both of them having a system of signs at their core (Tunalı, 1996: 99). It is not possible to fully divorce works of art from language; because works of art produce myriad meanings and cannot function as such independently of language. To understand this essence is to necessarily revert to the partitioning of language (Barthes, 2005; Erdem, 2010). The communicative function of a work of art is not simply a foundational aesthetic trait, it is also evidence of its function as a sign (Kagan, 2008: 269).

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When entering the field of semiotics, it is important to define the notion of a 'sign'. A 'sign' may be referred to as 'an object, element, etc. of any variety or form that occupies the place of another that signifies something other than itself' (Courtes, 1983: 261). A sign may be a word, a more, a work of art, a text or a collection of different rules that govern societal life. In terms of function, however, it always works to convey meaning. A sign is established through the convergence of an abstract concept (the signified) and a concrete form (the signifier) that can be perceived through the senses.

Semiology, however, embodies a different realm than the sum of its parts – namely 'semeion' (from ancient Greek) and '-logy'. Semiotics is the act of reading that involves a methodology. Semiotics does not simply focus on a scientific reading: it is also regarded as an activity concerned with meaning, signification, and the manufacture of meaning. Semiologists hold that any artifact created by man carries meaning and that this meaning is articulated within itself (Kıran, 2010: 7). Semiotic methods involve the reformation and reconstruction of the structure of meaning through its extraction, subversion and deconstruction. The meta-language of semiotics is used in order to realize this process. This meta-language is a language by which the web of meanings inherent in the subject language (a work of art) can be re-established and exposed; and this is a transition into another language. A meta-language of this nature requires intense conceptualization and formalization (Rıfat, 2007: 29-35). Since methods of semiotic analysis are an act of reading as based on a meta-language, understanding the meta-language being used and the processes being applied requires a certain amount of time and experience. In addition, the presence of many different schools of thought and approaches that utilize the semiotic method results in the confusion of concepts and makes the field difficult to comprehend. Understanding the meta-language used in semiotics requires prior information about the intellectual foundations, methods, objectives and research limitations of the different schools of thought and the models that are involved in the study of semiotics.

2.The Objective

The aim of is this study is to establish prior knowledge of semiotics in order to introduce the subject to the field. To this essential end, answers were sought to the following questions.

1- How does semiotic analysis differ from criticism?
2- What are the intellectual foundations of semiotic analysis?
3- What are the general characteristics of semiotic approaches?

The Method:

Research Model: Descriptive research using a screening model.

Gathering data: Data was gathered using written sources, established literature and internet searching techniques.

2.1. How does semiotic analysis differ from criticism?

Criticism is a method of exposition that is subject to change based on the role of many different forms of art. History has seen the development of different forms of art criticism. For the most part, different types of art criticism have been shaped on the basis of notions of art. The common objective of these different forms of criticism is to explain, interpret, evaluate and, on occasion, judge these works of art. The most taxing aspect of art criticism, which we may define as the act of interpreting works of art, emerges when attempts are made to make use of objective and aesthetic criteria. Would it be correct to say that what emerges during the critical process is what the work of art – now transformed into a text - tells us based on its textual consistency and the underlying system of meaning? Or does it refer to something else that consumers discover based on their system of expectations? To what extent can the subject be in this respect? At this point the method of semiotic analysis differs from criticism.

Similarly to criticism, semiotic analyses do not lead to interpretations and judgments; because the process of interpreting and judging is susceptible to individualization and subjectivity. The purpose of semiotic analyses is not to proffer a value judgment about the object being observed, but to describe the object from a neutral perspective (Yalçın, 2008:124). Thus, in contrast to different varieties of criticism, it is the method being applied during semiotic analysis that is at the forefront. An effort is made to prevent interpretation and judgment through the use of the method being applied and its inter-regulating stages and limitations. The hypothetico-deductive approach, which was initially applied in logic and later used in semiology by Algirdas Julien Greimas, was instrumental in the organization of semiotics. By adopting the hypothetico-deductive approach, semioticians hope to revise the semiotic method as a theory of signification. In a semiotic analysis, the object of the analysis is considered to be a texture or text that is hypothetically established through the relationships between a range of elements (Rıfat, 2001:44). In relationships between elements that are hypothetically conceived, an attempt is made to successively reveal a set of stages through the use of a meta-language.

The tendency of semiotics to analyze works of art in stages through a meta-language is another way in which it differs from types of criticism that rely on natural language. The greatest difficulty in criticizing works of art arises when one attempts to convey the structural characteristics of a work that has been realized, through the use of specific substances and tools, with reference to another series of signs that utilize different substances and tools (Rıfat, 2001:52). Semiotics makes use of a distinct 'constructed', 'scientific' symbolic meta-language that has been formed independently of the meaning structure of natural language – one which we use daily in order to interact (Rıfat, 2001:32). As semiotics moves toward the production process of a work of art, it becomes mobilized toward the formation of a target text in its reproduction. Also, the transformations that will be applied during the reproduction of the target text creates the universe of meaning in the work and the stages of the production process through a meta-language that is logical, narrative and – in a manner that can equally carry the discursive order – symbolic, using a linguistic processes comprised of a multitude of stages (Rıfat, 2001:55). With the semiotic approach, the importance of logical thought reveals itself when attempting to explain the structure and connections of a work of art through a symbolic meta-language.

2.2. What are the intellectual foundations of semiotic analysis?

While the concept of "signs" has garnered attention since ancient times, semiotics, as an independent field, emerged around the beginning of the 20th century. Some of those who were instrumental in founding and developing the field of semiotics include the Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the philosopher, logician and mathematician Charles Sander Pierce and Algirdas Julien Greimas. Notes on the linguistics lectures given by Saussure at the University of Geneva were published in 1916 under the title "General Linguistics Studies" (F. De Saussure Cours de Linguistique Generale). Following the publication of the book, it transformed the viewpoints on social sciences, impacting especially the field of linguistics, and found application in a host of different scientific areas. Saussure, by referring in his book to the field of semiotics that would be established in the future, conceded its existence. He argued that communication was based on a system of signs and that it was necessary for many systems to be analyzed within the context of semiotics. In 1966, Gerimas published a series of his lecture notes entitled 'Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method'. In terms of method, this work may be considered the starting point for the field of semiotics.

Semiotics is a method of analysis that has been established and developed using the general principles of structuralism as its starting point. Structuralism is an approach that we see applied throughout all types of narratives, from linguistics to cultural studies, that is generally motivated by the notion of 'structure' and its determinism. The most important movements underlying the approach of semiological analysis – which focuses primarily on the work of art – are structuralism and phenomenology – one of the most important philosophical constituents underpinning structuralism. The founder of the phenomenological approach, Edmund Huserl, argues that 'we should cease our preoccupation with the subject in our study of art and its output and rather turn our attention back to the work of art itself' (Tunalı, 1996:47). This is their point of origin from structural approaches. These may be construed as an effort to shift the central focus away from the subject and towards the structure of the language spoken and created.

Structural approaches rejected the subject-centric approaches that shaped the social sciences and philosophies before them and instead focused on analyzing social phenomena based on 'structure', 'rules', and 'codes'. The structuralists held that one product of language within the subject was its creation. They committed to establishing a method of scientific analysis by eliminating the conscious self and the acts of giving. The structuralist movement, which was developed based on the ideas of Saussure, became structural linguistics in the first half of the 20th century. The theories and principles proposed in Saussure's book, 'General Linguistics Studies', led to the birth of a form of linguistics that approached language scientifically and, by taking on different forms, aided the creation of novel fields of research. Theoretical and practical analyses provided by structural linguistics was, for the most part, welcomed by linguists and semioticians in later periods (Yücel, 2005:37). While it may not have accepted into its own field all the semiotic methods and viewpoints touched on in this book, it did, however, made use of some of its specific principles and tendencies. The use of these principles and tendencies was done through the assigning of function, within the general theoretical framework, to concepts - thought to be necessary - that were rooted in another scientific field; because natural languages and narrative forms that are removed from sentence structures display structural differences with regard to the material they use. By meditating on 'The nature of language as a language' and asking 'What is language?', Saussure attempted to extract it from elements other than itself. By objectifying language as something that can be analyzed on its own, he attempts to define language in relation to its differences and oppositions (Yücel, 2005: 28). He held that, before enterprising to examine the history of a specific object, addressing the problems of origin, development and dissemination, and finding explanations for the object's qualities through external influences, it was necessary to circumscribe, define and describe the object (Yücel, 2005: 38). This approach is referred to as 'synchronic' analysis. Where synchronic analysis is concerned, the movement is towards the internal order of the structure and influences that remain outside are construed in the manner in which they are displayed by the structure. This approach was adopted in the same manner as it existed in semiotics. After much criticism around this research limitation imposed by the semiotic approach, the 2000s saw more emphasis being placed on the reciprocal interaction between the infrastructure and the superstructure, thanks, in part, to Umberto Eco efforts.

2.3. What are the general characteristics of semiotic approaches?

It should be noted that there are linguistic and semiotic approaches and models being practiced under very different schools and circles that are involved in semiotics and linguistics research (To name just a few: The Geneva School of Linguistics, The Prague School, The Copenhagen School of Linguistics, The French School of Functional Linguistics and the Paris School of Linguistics, etc.). The central focus of these schools and approaches when analyzing signs differ from one another. Whereas some approaches aim to analyze the structure of the superficial realization of works, some concentrate on only the structures of deep meaning. Others redefine the formative structure of establishing meaning as it extends from the depths to the surface (Rıfat 2001: 21).

While one applies itself to studying the structural characteristics of the realm of the language that is directly revelatory, the other focuses on the articulation of definitive strata. While different schools and models in the area of semiotics converge on distinct areas in their analysis, there are commonalities between their approaches. These commonalities can be defined separately to demonstrate the general characteristics of semiotic methods:

- Semioticians view objects of analysis as a structure. Their primary objective is to explain the conditions of meaning perception and production within a conceptual framework (Courtes, 1995: 4). The object of analysis, which is construed as a structure, is viewed as a texture, a text that is hypothetically established through relationships between various elements. Semioticians work towards restructuring a given structure that is assumed to exist within the object of analysis by systematically re-establishing it with specific methods through deconstruction and subversion.

- Methods of semiotic analysis limit themselves only to the content of the object under analysis by centralizing the work of art being studied. While information that is external to the text (work of art) is collected, these are only utilized if they appear in the text (Rıfat, 2007: 31).

- The semiotic method uses a scientific meta-language. Its goal is to determine the layers of meaning that make up a meaningful whole, a painting, written or scientific discourse, an image, an architectural edifice, a theater performance, a musical composition etc. and to relate it by systemizing it through the use of a meta-language. A meta-language and symbolic narratives are used to analyze the data within a text (work of art). The purpose of approaching the work of art through symbolic processes and the meta-language is to avoid going outside the text and to be able to control all the stages. The meta-language they utilize consists of stages that contain, define and oversee each other. The connections that constitute the structure are analyzed by logically examining relations of opposition, conflict and inclusion (Rıfar, 2001: 32).

- Semiotic approaches concentrate on the articulation of meaning rather than the meanings themselves. They attempt to expose the processes of meaning production. Thus, they are theories of signification that are focused on the form of the content.

- They believe that comprehending the meaning of a work of art resides in the observation of divergences occurring within the content. They believe that the content of a work of art is distinguished on the basis of the divergences between meaningful elements and that such divergences are instrumental in determining the value of elements in relation to one another (Rıfat, 2001: 31).

- When developing models and tools of analysis, practical semioticians they also research advances that develop their reading models through applications of analysis. They attempt to develop a new model, depending on the emerging situation as they carry out an analysis based on a given model.

- The semiotic method approaches the content plane of a work of art by proceeding from its depth to its surface. Roughly speaking, the processes used are as follows:

   Firstly, the object under analysis – construed as a structure – is divided into different sections (fragments) in order to carry out an analysis and make comparisons. The method of division varies depending on the structure of the language being used (images, video…). The elements that make up the object and the figures comprising the work of art are singled out when determining the material used to create the work of art.

   Once the division (fragmenting) process is concluded, the signs that make up the work of art can be determined. Signs are divided into their regular and peripheral meanings. After determining the object, person, space and time elements present on the plane of the work the question of how the discourse stage was achieve can be researched. The analysis of the discursive plane is followed by efforts to uncover the motifs involved.

   Then, the functions of the signs and how they are arranged and the articulation of the narrative are examined. With works of art that are prone to change during the process (video, environmental art…), the stages and the transformations acting on the narrative in revealing its final form are examined. A determination is made as to whether the motifs have been transformed into themes.

   The final stage of the analysis involves revealing the potent fundamental structures at the most abstract, logical and deep level – as determined in the deep structure, in the initial stages of the work of art - where the universe of meaning is based. The deep structure is built on the fundamental oppositions in the world.

Finally, relationships are determined between texts based on the assumption that works of art garner traces of other works of art that precede them when connecting with life and the societal arena.

3. Conclusion

While there are many approaches that underlie the various schools and models in the field of semiotics, this was an attempt to lay out the main commonalities between their approaches. No approach in the field of semiotics is superior to another. The superiority of analysis is determined, not by inherent methodological differences, but by the consistency of the method. Regardless of which methodical approach is adopted, a work of art will always, by its very nature, include additional elements. Owing to their uniqueness, works of art are a closed organic whole; but they also embody an open structure due to their susceptibility to be perceived and interpreted in a variety of ways. No analysis, therefore, can be considered flawless or complete.

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