

Katarzyna Rosner

**THE INFLUENCE OF TWENTIETH CENTURY
SEMIOTICS UPON THE PARADIGM CHANGE IN
AESTHETICS**

Originally published as "Udział semiotyki dwudziestowiecznej w przemianie paradygmatu pojęć estetycznych," *Studia Semiotyczne* 14–15 (1986), 335–341. Translated by Kinga Bulsiewicz.

During the last twenty years it has become obvious that the basic categories of traditional aesthetic philosophy are in crisis, or may be considered inadequate. One of the most prominent symptoms of the said crisis is the change in the analysis method of what traditional aesthetics call "aesthetic experience." The above mentioned change consists in gradual divergence from the theoretical approach that placed the reception of a work of art within the scope of epistemological issues (the analysis of aesthetic experience used to begin with the process of individual perception of an artistic object, understood as a finished object standing in front of the viewer) towards the study of conscious receptive behaviours understood as special processes of social communication. This process is understood as one conducted through, and determined by, society-dependent decoding and institutions of a given culture.

This change of approach resulted in profound differences between aesthetic experience concepts formulated in the 1930s (also by leading Polish philosophers of aesthetics such as Roman Ingarden and Mieczysław Wallis) and those formulated more recently. In retrospect, it is clear that the differences run deeper than ones that may result from separate philosophical schools of their authors and which may have been perceived by them as crucial. The representatives of traditional philosophical aesthetics, regardless of their inclination towards the positivist or phenomenological traditions, always began their deliberations upon the aesthetic experience with the

following model situation: A FINISHED OBJECT was placed in front of an INDIVIDUAL RECIPIENT. The paradigm of basic aesthetic categories (artist, artwork, aesthetic experience, recipient) did not account the social, but also the historical aspects of aesthetic acts and phenomena.

Kant formulated a thesis about the impersonality and universality of the aesthetic sphere of life — a conceptualization that took its toll on the subsequent tradition of analysis, inasmuch as aesthetic experiences were treated as belonging to the spectrum of personal freedom, restrained by neither social nor pragmatic bonds. All supra-individual factors shaping the processes of interaction with art were considered secondary; it was believed that such factors might be disregarded if the deliberations are general and concentrate on capturing the important facets of aesthetic experience.

The concept of the subject of aesthetic experience was an obvious premise for these analyses. The subject of aesthetic experiences was placed in front of an art piece and the first task was to identify the qualities of the work, to justify it. If the recipient failed to do the above each time, if aesthetic experiences pertaining to one work of art significantly differed from one another, it simply meant not all of them were adequate.

Certain explanations of discrepancies in perception and evaluation of an art piece were attempted; one solution was to establish crucial qualifications of an individual recipient who is capable of having proper perception and adequate aesthetic experiences. For instance M. Wallis listed the following qualifications: the proper functioning of the senses, receptiveness towards the aesthetic qualities of art and nature, the ability to empathise with others, aesthetic sense rooted in knowledge about artistic styles and symbols, the circumstances of perceiving, the capacity of proper reasoning, etc. Although the author was aware that the model of a perfect recipient, experiencing art under perfect conditions, would never become reality, he still believed that experiences of numerous recipients correct and enhance each other. According to him, the experiences "with time lead to [...] impersonal aesthetic judgements [...] and we can have a strong subjective conviction that they are true even though they are only probable if regarded according to the rules of logic" (Wallis 1968). In the above and other analyses of aesthetic philosophers, the subject of an aesthetic experience was an abstract human being, removed from any particular social and historic matrix. If supra-individual factors, other than the cultural tradition, participated in such a meeting between an autonomous subject and the object of the experience, then they would only interfere with it, they would cause errors in perceptions and judgements. The cultural tradition itself was understood in cumulative

terms that is as knowledge accumulated by the recipient about historical "artistic styles and symbols," and not as the subject's own position on the cultural time line which determines his sensibility or the ways according to which he perceives and interprets things.

While the above described understanding of the subject of aesthetic experience can be found in almost all aesthetic concepts of the first half of the twentieth century, the definitions of the object of such an experience were much more diverse. The aesthetic philosophers disagreed upon the spectrum of characteristics that are attributed to the object, and of those inherent to it. Opinions differed particularly in regard to value: is the object's own characteristic, the characteristic of an attribute, or does it exist only subjectively as a correlate of individual or collective receptive preferences. There were also basic conceptual differences regarding an art work's mode of existence: it was perceived as either a physical object (e.g. by Wallis) or as an object derivatively intentional (e.g. by Ingarden), or as a psychological entity.

Although these differences matter in more detailed deliberations, they do not interfere with the common ground that remained the same for all philosophical aesthetics paradigms as the basis for the analysis of aesthetic experience. According to this common paradigm, an art piece is ahistorically placed in front of an abstract recipient, it has been shaped by its creator, and it is an object of perception. The characteristics, or at least a basic set thereof, of the said art piece are objective and the task of the recipient is to recognise them. If any discrepancies occur, they are due to mistakes in perception or a lack of qualifications on the recipient's part. Philosophical aesthetics — despite the differences between particular concepts — regards the identity of an art piece as an identity of an object. Regardless whether the meaning of the piece was considered in the context of the artist's intentions, or as something autonomous and inherent to the structure of the piece — the aim was to defend the art work's identity as a meaningful message.

The herein described paradigm of the subject being pure consciousness and the object being an objective and substantial entity positioned in front of the recipient is not restricted to the aesthetic realm. Modern critics of this paradigm correctly attribute it to the Cartesian understanding of *cogito*, which influenced the whole of modern philosophy. Even though there had been attempts to challenge the said paradigm — on different grounds by Kant, Marks, Nietzsche, Freud and Husserl — it remained the principal governing philosophy well into the twentieth century.

Modern critics of this opposition coming from the fields of philosophy,

sociology of knowledge, structural semiotics and hermeneutics try to prove that the relation between the object and the subject is not primary and absolute. To the contrary, on numerous levels it is constituted by and entangled, often unawares, in presuppositions, which existed before the relationship was formed. An empirical fact is not free from scientific theory; similarly, the category of the perceiving subject existing outside of society and history, beyond the cultural structure is a mostly useless abstraction.

These critical deliberations are conducted usually as a result of interdisciplinary efforts, ones that venture beyond the boundaries of the traditional, specialised fields of philosophy. One such area is aesthetics, a field that built its system of terminology, basic issues and furthermore the grounds for autonomy of its research topic upon these questioned ideas. The feeling of general crisis also affecting aesthetics is not a result of theoretical dilemmas — these cannot be formulated due to the language of traditional aesthetics — but rather of the feeling of helplessness when faced with problems of modern art and culture.

In consequence, many aesthetic philosophers began to acknowledge the normative and ahistorical aspect of their analyses. When the conceptualization of aesthetic experience treats its subject as abstract and its object as substantial, this inevitably leads to creating one universal model of all such experience. The above described models are formed by traditional aesthetics. They are an absolutized form of historical ways of experiencing art, which were appropriate for a circle of high artistic culture but are not applicable to new perception occurrences shaped by the structural changes of societies and the emergence of new art forms. Absolutizing a specific type of art experience restricted to the circle of high artistic culture and the values pertaining to this particular circle leads to a peculiar exclusiveness: a situation when non-elite circles with their art experiencing models and often different values remain beyond the scope of interest of aesthetic philosophers.

The traditional paradigm described above was consolidated by the Classical and Romantic German philosophy, the source of many aesthetic terms that remain in circulation even now. This paradigm leads to a mystical description of creative and receptive actions. Aesthetic deliberations on the act of creation concentrate upon its uniqueness and the impossibility of comparing such a work with any non-creative one. An act of creation is thereby described as unfettered action of an exceptionally talented individual. As such it is placed in opposition to work as a social act performed based on production techniques developed by a community, where each participating individual may be replaced by another.

This Romantic heritage of aesthetic consciousness proves particularly inadequate when faced with the modern trend to create art as a team and with the use of technology. However, every artist, not only a modern one, defines himself according to the state of the artistic tradition of his own culture, choosing from the techniques and artistic means developed by that culture. He also adjusts his creation to the available distribution channels. While choosing a course of action he also decides upon one of the roles the society prepared for artists within its structure. In short, artistic creation is a highly socialised activity and this crucial fact is ignored by traditional aesthetic philosophy.

Socialisation of artistic life, use of technology, participation of various institutions, artistic traditions and social perception codes — all these factors influence not only on the final shape of a work of art, but even more so its meaning for the recipients and the true functions it performs in a particular community. The notion that the artist is not the one who determines the meaning of his work, and that this meaning is also it is not by the shape of the piece has lost its novelty for critics and researchers of artistic communication some time ago. And yet the traditional set of aesthetic terms suggests that the process of perception should be analysed as a connection made with the help of a work of art between two entities: the creator and the recipient or, according to non-psychological concepts, between a finished object and a individual properly qualified recipient. Aesthetic philosophy is not able to analyse a situation where a particular text is differently interpreted not only by various individuals but also by whole groups of recipients. It has also failed to explain how it is possible that old works of art gain new meanings or lose their ability to provoke an aesthetic experience for subsequent generations. Another question left unanswered is why the artistic and non-artistic cultural creations may change their cultural functions in the course of the development of a single culture. In summary, aesthetic philosophy proved unable to account for the pluralism of modern culture, on its historical changes or on the social character of artistic activities.

*

* *

Modern semiotics of art and culture is one of the interdisciplinary fields that provide tools for analysing the above described issues. From this point of view, the achievements of structural semiotics are particularly profound: it is an attempt to overcome the paradigm of early modern philosophy that led to the crisis of philosophical aesthetics.

It should be generally noted that whenever the symbolic aspects of art were mentioned (for instance by the neo-Kantian tradition) or the semiotic character of various art works was noticed (for instance by Charles Morris or Y. A. Richards), semiotic categories were used to analyse the supra-individual (i.e. social) characteristics of experiencing art, which transcend the perception attainable through senses. A sign by its very definition is intersubjective. The sheer acknowledgement of semiotic processes present during an interaction with art meant that an aesthetic experience is not only an act of perception but also of participation in the life of a community. It is this participation that provides the code allowing for a transition from what is perceived to what carries a communicative meaning.

For aesthetic philosophy from the 1930s an artwork was an object that also carried some meaning, for example it referred to something. The semiotic character of art, however, was treated as secondary, it was used to explain the non-aesthetic functions of art. At that time it was assumed that an aesthetic experience is based on perceiving those qualities of an object which are direct in nature. Structuralists, on the other hand, assumed that each cultural behaviour, also an aesthetic one, has a semiotic character, therefore an art piece is not an object but a meaningful structure.

The change in the paradigm of analysis of aesthetic experience was not limited to the acknowledgement of the fact that all cultural behaviours (creations) are semiotic in nature. The main point was THE RELATIVISATION OF THE TERMS SIGN AND MEANING. A sign — so say the structural semiologists — retains its identity only in the context of a particular semiotic system. In structural semiotics the basic category is not a sign or a text (respectively a work of art) but a language or semiotic system. One may speak about a sign, meaning or information only when one can point to a system that provides the said meaning. Upon this one issue all the authors agree, though they may have different opinions regarding numerous other matters: Ferdinand de Saussure, Louis Hjelmslev, Umberto Eco, Yuri Lotman, Roland Barthes, Algirdas Julien Greimas and many others. For the analysis of the traditional category of the aesthetic experience (that is the process of a receptive interaction with an art piece) the work of art and its semiotic functions lost their most basic position, and were replaced with semiotic systems of culture. The semioticians believe that such systems provide meaning for all creations of a culture, as they govern the behaviour of recipients. If we assume that a sign and meaning do not exist outside of a cultural or language system, this leads to the conclusion that an art piece understood as a meaningful structure retains its functions, identity and

meanings only in reference to a defined historical subsystem of a particular culture. Acknowledging that theoretically the language system category takes precedence over the sign and accepting the semiotic understanding of creations of a given culture meant challenging the old paradigm, whose basic assumption of which was direct interaction between the artwork and the recipient. Traditional analyses of an aesthetic experience were all based on the above described paradigm. The semiotic analysis of culture went even deeper: they challenged the opposition that was said to exist between the directness of perception and the intermediary character of semiotic processes.

For structuralists the elementary articulation of the world, by which they mean the distinction between objects, their colours and shapes, means that a network of categories and discontinuities is superimposed over the external experiences. Those are the same categories that form social, cultural and semiotic systems. Based on this assumption, the difference between epistemology, theory of language and theory of culture disappears. This modern "semiotic" version of Kantianism provides its categories with a very wide interpretation. It is upon these categories (understood as particularly human, species-specific capacity to articulate) that the world's cultures are based — built from many subsystems and historically diversified semantic structures which encompass and provide meaning for all human social behaviours. Cultures, as well as their essential components the ethnic languages, are social creations. Inevitably, the assumption that the relationship between the object and subject is created by the system of the particular culture leads to the socialisation of the said relationship. Moreover, the way the subject perceives himself and categorises his surroundings regardless of his sphere of activity — cognitive, religious, aesthetic, practical — is determined by a historically defined system of a culture and its proper subsystems.

The systemic understanding of culture lead to a reformulation of many important issues in cultural theory, as well as many aesthetic dilemmas. I shall list a few of them. The first one: thanks to the semiotic approach the identity of an art piece is not connected with its physical existence as an artefact, but with its meaning. Thus understood, the identity of an artwork is a culture-specific identity, and not an existential one. The above allows for an explanation why certain cultural phenomena and cultural creations changed their function in the course of history (that is because the system of culture changed), but also in terms of space — when one culture took up the creations of another.

Secondly, the systemic approach allows for a recognition of the pluralism of modern cultures. The coexistence in one culture of many circuits of

reception (that is many social environments realising various models of interacting with an art work, each targeting different values) may be analysed as a coexistence of many codes of aesthetic perception.

Thirdly, cultural semioticians distinguished between immanent artistic codes and codes of aesthetic perception, which allows for describing the phenomenon of socially diverse ways of understanding even modern pieces not as a disruption of the receptive processes, but as certain regularities resulting from semiotic complexities of cultures and the autonomous nature of its various codes.

Finally, the fourth issue resolved by structural semiotics of culture is the role of supra-individual determinants of creative processes. Semiotics offers terms such as the semiotic system, codes and generative grammar. These concepts were employed for instance by Greimas and Bremond in their efforts to describe the artistic codes for narrative texts as generative grammars.

Describing aesthetic experience in the language of modern semiotic certainly does not solve all possible theoretical problems that make the analysis of this cultural sphere difficult. It allows, however, to escape the concepts of the basic norm and ahistoricism, which dominated the analysis of the processes of interaction with art when described in the language of traditional aesthetic philosophy. Even though artistic and creative behaviours are usually performed by individuals, the semiotic approach allows us to describe them as social behaviours — they take place in the context of socially created systems of a given culture.

Bibliography

1. Wallis, Mieczysław (1968) "O zdaniach estetycznych." In *Przeżycie i wartość*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.