

In Hardy, T. (ed) (2006) Art Education in a Postmodern World, Bristol: Intellect Books.
pp. 113-124.

**Who's Afraid of Signs and Significations? Defending Semiotics in the Secondary
Art and Design Curriculum**

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Who's Afraid of Signs and Significations? Defending Semiotics in the Secondary Art and Design Curriculum

Semiotics remains something of a dirty word for art and design teachers in schools. It is often perceived as a hopelessly indulgent method employed by male academics bent on constructing over-complicated systems of analysis in pursuit of an object of study that few of them can agree upon. It has been suggested that the import of all this activity could be more simply stated by people who do not have methodological axes to grind, those not frightened by a bit of common senseⁱ. But this is to miss the point. The common belief that art reflects or mirrors reality encourages people to overlook the ways that representational practices are used to construct the symbolic formations that come to be understood as truths. Semiotics enables people to ask awkward questions to challenge the naturalised status of these cultural forms and practices, especially the network of normative values that are reproduced through the process of schooling. From the position of traditional art education, therefore, semiotics is undoubtedly an alien and corrupting influence, a method contaminated by its association with both linguistic semiology and that great 'other' cultural studies; art in schools is fearful of methodological contaminationⁱⁱ. Alternatively, from the positions of postmodern education, positions that acknowledge the inclusive agendas of say postfeminism and postcolonialism, semiotics is already moribund, tainted by its collusion with modernist metanarrative and imperial in its ambition. Additionally, the hybrid and formless nature of postmodernism's anointed vehicle, multi-media, is seen as foreign to semiotics which appears bound to structuralist principles and is therefore constipated in an age of fluidity. In schools, for whatever the reason and from whichever perspective, the potential accessibility of semiotic methods for both the reception and production of art is avoided.

Kerry Freedman states one such critical position:

the meaning of technological images cannot be simply understood in terms of what has been called 'visual literacy', which has generally meant the semiotic reading of signs and symbols.....the concept of visual literacy is an attempt to force images to fit illegitimately into a structuralist analysis of literary texts that tends to narrow visual meaning. Rather a broad view of creative production and interpretation in relation to multiple meanings and visual qualities is called for if we are to understand and teach about the use of images in contemporary lifeⁱⁱⁱ.

These sentiments are the product of misapprehensions. Semiotics is not synonymous with linguistics and/or literary criticism rather it belongs to a tradition which seeks to define systems of communication other than language^{iv}. This is an important quest in order to understand the multimodal nature of learning in secondary schools especially when language, particularly writing, holds a privileged position there. Art (and design) is positioned as ‘other’ within this logocentric curriculum and there is a danger for art and design teachers to separate out and valorise the visual as somehow ineffable, above and beyond the grasp of reasoned analysis. For semioticians, the disciplinary divisions that separate out expressive and communicative acts are not substantive, analytical categories as they are say for aestheticians, rather they are cultural practices indicative of the hierarchical distinctions used to perpetuate forms of legitimacy. Therefore semioticians have no need to differentiate between or within types of art object unlike traditional art critics and historians who are bound to a series of self-perpetuating oppositions: fine/applied, genius/artisan, primitive/decadent. Instead semioticians increasingly interrogate the matrix of meaning that results from the interrelationship between modes of production and reception, an interrogation that is social in orientation.

The accusation that semiotics has remained inert and stuck in a rigid structuralist paradigm is equally suspect; poststructuralist semiotics admits no closure:

Derrida, in particular, insisted that the meaning of any particular sign could not be located in a signified fixed by the internal operations of a synchronic system; rather, meaning arose exactly from the movement from one sign or signifier to the next, in a *perpetuum mobile* where there could be found neither a starting point for semiosis, nor a concluding moment in which semiosis terminated and the meanings of signs fully ‘arrived’^v.

However, such openness, uncertainty and ambivalence are situated uncomfortably within a curriculum that demands measurable outcomes and clearly defined bodies of knowledge. Therefore, when considering the possibility of a postmodern curriculum it is essential to examine the institutional host (the school) by which it is to be framed. Universal secondary education is a modernist phenomenon^{vi}. The inclusion of art and design in the curriculum is equally a product of modernist utopian philosophies, whether utilitarian, conceiving design education as answering to the needs of industry and thus the common good, or aesthetic, responding to innate critical and creative faculties to enable personal actualisation. Neither of these seems to hold much cogency

or viability for schools any longer so art and design is in a crisis of identity. Squeezed by rationalisation, threatened by technology and media studies it takes up defensive positions. A radical and wholesale shift to postmodern strategies appears to be a proactive answer; but art and design cannot take on the position of postmodern vanguard alone. Nevertheless, within the modernist structures of education the case for postmodern intervention as a form of resistance is well made^{vii}, a process that echoes the built-in critique of modernism practised by the avant-garde within the history of twentieth century art. Hal Foster elucidates the potential for continuous critical self-renewal:

Thus was formal modernism plotted along a temporal, diachronic, or vertical axis: in this respect it opposed an avant-gardist modernism that did intend “a break with the past”- that, concerned to extend the area of artistic competence, favoured a spatial, synchronic, or horizontal axis. A chief merit of the neo-avant-garde....is that it sought to keep these two axes in critical coordination.....it worked through its ambitious antecedents, and so sustained the vertical axis or historical dimension of art. At the same time it turned to past paradigms to open up present possibilities, and so developed the horizontal axis or social dimension of art as well^{viii}.

By neglecting semiotics art and design teachers are avoiding their ‘ambitious antecedents’ and failing to adopt methods that would enable them to question art practices so as to break the insularity of much current classroom practice. Furthermore, semiotics is close to pupils’ own modes of meaning-making in ways that logic, mathematics, formalist aesthetics and other systems that share a privileged status in the school curriculum are not:

Compared with logic it (semiotics) is highly pragmatic, because the inferences with which it is concerned are ones which pervade our everyday lives. They are the inferences by which we make sense, or fail to make sense, of our environment. Semiotics is profoundly social, because of the fundamental role which signs play in every moment of human life and of our interaction in society^{ix}.

Classroom practice

Although there is still much potential for its neglect, the National Curriculum has ensured that the critical reception of art cannot be disregarded. Despite Thistlewood’s heresies (1989)^x and an increasing literature, critical and contextual studies is at best a secondary observance servicing the primary concern of making, its significance in the classroom is far from secure^{xi}. What then is happening at the point of delivery?

Research highlights the modernist canon that lies at the centre of primary and secondary education up to and including GCSE^{xii}. Pupils learn to transcribe and pastiche exemplary sources and occasionally integrate some technical or stylistic feature, pointillism, fragmentation, and apply it to their own observations. One might argue that the Eurocentric historical period chosen (approximately thirty years either side of 1900) is appropriate to the focus of GCSE which emphasises personal response accommodated within the orthodoxy of working from observation. With young children transcription is a revealing process because they select from the image to be ‘copied’ those things or features which hold most interest for them. At secondary level, with its analytical imperatives and tools, the process of transcription focuses on the more superficial task of the imitation of surface. This is not without its benefits, but it is a time consuming task that offers no understanding of either the process of making (the pupil imitates the outcome, usually a photographic reproduction, not the practice of transforming perceptions/conceptions into sensible form) nor any historical or contextual investigation. Thus, at GCSE, ‘A’ Level and AVCE, the critical and contextual sketch-book is all too often a collection of transcriptions (some annotated), drawings and pamphlets from exhibitions, written personal responses to favoured images, extracts copied from art historical texts and serendipitous reproductions. It often possesses great energy and enthusiasm, seems to indicate visual investigation, but in truth has only its ‘look’, closer inspection reveals appropriation, imitation, material exploration and variation.

Dyson (1989), Taylor (1989), Parsons (1989), Csikszentmihalyi (1990), Schofield (1995), Cunliffe (1996), Dawtrey et al (1996) and Addison (2001)^{xiii} have suggested useful methods by which art and design can be critically approached in the classroom. Most will no doubt be criticised for belonging to modernist paradigms, whether those of developmental psychology, structuralism, humanist universalism, disinterested aestheticism or cultural studies. Some teachers possessing an art historical background may in addition use formalist and/or iconographic methods, for example, respectively, those of Wolfflin (1915)^{xiv} and Panofsky (1955)^{xv} who are both part of a modernist critical tradition. As such their methods depend on systematic analytical processes and may therefore seem inappropriate, especially at KS3, because there is little time to incorporate their use in any sustained and rigorous way. It is unlikely, therefore, that pupils would be able to assimilate and apply these methods independently or in other analytical contexts. What interpretative methods do pupils tend to use in their everyday

lives? I would argue that they use semiotics, they seek clues as to a person's personality, status, and accessibility through categories of signs. They interpret external signs such as clothes, body forms, posture, simultaneously with interactive ones such as gestures, speech, responsive actions and so on. This is the process of interpretation that should be built upon in the classroom. On one level the way in which such processes can be applied to representational art is obvious, represented indicators like gesture being decoded in the same way. But this transference from life to art would suggest that the vehicle of representation, its material base and formal organisation, is neutral as if it were independent of meaning: the old form/content dichotomy.

Inclusion and Postmodernity

The contemporary field of images is extraordinarily diverse and inclusive, historical and multicultural ones no more or less than others, and the National Curriculum requires that this diversity be addressed. How, therefore, can teachers enable pupils to understand art objects from cultural and historical sources that use signifying systems different to their own? After all these objects, familiarised through reproductions, are often known in appropriated, decontextualised or recontextualised forms. For example, for Roman Catholics the infant Christ held in the lap of the Virgin, the Madonna and Child, is a sign that conventionally represents the incarnation, the signified (concept) 'god made flesh', or more specifically, with the compositional focus on the child's penis, 'god made man'^{xvi}. However, in conjunction with the humanity of Mary, the mother and child union is also a sign that embodies a related signified, the purity and divinity of motherhood. When this is represented by Masaccio (1401-28) in 'The Virgin and Child' (1426) in contrast to 'The Virgin and Child before a Firescreen' (1440) by a follower of Campin (active 1406-44) (both in the National Gallery, London), the technical and representational resources, the 'signifiers', produce contrasting effects. On the one hand, in the Masaccio, both the *mis-en-scène* and the technical manner are hieratic and austere while in contrast Mary's expression is tender. On the other hand, in the Flemish work, the surroundings are domestic, the manner naturalistic and detailed and Mary's actions somewhat brusque; thus for audiences the signification in each case is inflected by representational resources that indicate the ideological differences of the maker's habitus and the interpretative communities for which the paintings were produced. My descriptions are themselves formed in relation to my particular subject position, and I make sense of them because of my particular interests and the relationship between my ideological position and those embodied in

the paintings. My position is produced within specific secular and materialist discourses and it is therefore unlikely to correspond neatly with interpretations by Protestant, or Catholic, or Muslim communities.

Similarly, Cornelia Parker's piece 'Cold Dark Matter' from 1991 has been interpreted by some as an attack on the father and patriarchy. This interpretation was elicited by reading the object of the explosion, a garden shed (typically a private domestic space for men) as a symbol for the father's psyche (the shed being both a repository and a potential), and by reading the British army (the organisation commissioned to carry out the explosion) as an institutional index of homosocial, hierarchised, British patriarchy. The explosion thus plays on the private/public dichotomy of masculine power whereby male aggression, at the behest of a 'femme fatale', destroys its most private domain and in the process exposes the secrets of the masculine desire, a political act. Parker, in conversation with the feminist art historian Lisa Tickner^{xvii} discusses a range of interpretative responses to the work and Tickner notes the gendered identity of the shed. Parker responds: 'That's the kind of interpretation I'm always trying to avoid: the shed is the male domain and therefore... I don't talk about personal issues or psychology. It's always about maintaining a space for the work'^{xviii}. However, a little later she generously states:

And then I think being an artist is such a political thing in its own right. Just the fact that you're doing what you're doing is a political act, but I'm always trying to maintain a certain openness to interpretation. I want the work to tell *me* things, to surprise *me*, so that the work is kind of waste product from a process, an inquiry you started when you didn't know the answers at all. Later, in retrospect, you can talk eloquently about it but when you're in the middle of it you can't^{xix}.

As the meaning of the work of art is made anew in each interpretative act, what meanings come to hold validity at a particular moment of time depend on the power relations within interpretative communities, and at present the validity of different subject positions is increasingly recognised by art historians who acknowledge the lead provided by semiotics:

Once launched into the world, the work of art is subject to all of the vicissitudes of reception; as a work involving the sign, it encounters from the beginning the ineradicable fact of semiotic play. The idea of convergence, of causal chains moving toward the work of art should, in the perspective of semiotics, be supplemented by another shape: that of lines of

signification opening out from the work of art, in the permanent diffraction of reception^{xx}.

In secondary schools the art and design teacher therefore has the difficult task of both substantiating privileged knowledge while simultaneously recognising the validity of different (relative?) positions. Should they revive the critical methods and criteria from the maker's culture or period, or should they have recourse to familiar and current methods? If teachers encourage the clue seeking most usually employed by pupils, they would need to complement it by providing, or asking pupils to research, contextual information. Without it pupils would be unable to decode what are likely to be relatively opaque sign systems. However, teachers should be careful not to impose preconceived structures in such a way as to predetermine interpretation. Thomas Puttfarcken (1998)^{xxi} demonstrates how, in bypassing traditional methods in favour of semiotic 'detective' work, one can strip away years of formalist misinterpretation. In his analysis of Caravaggio's paintings on the 'Story of St Matthew', he attends to the sort of details which can be marginalised in formalist accounts. This allows him to question received notions about the determining role of such privileged signifiers as compositional rhetoric and leads him to a radical reinterpretation:

We know that in good detective stories the person caught with a smoking gun or a blood stained knife is not the murderer. To traditional admirers of Caravaggio's art, in fact of most European art, this may seem an entirely inappropriate attitude to adopt in front of his masterpieces. Yet I believe it is an attitude which we are invited to adopt by the picture itself (The Martyrdom of St Matthew)..... we find that the close scrutiny of details belies the obvious display of pictorial composition. Expecting to witness the murder of the saint, we have virtually no option but to see the nude man with the sword as attacking Matthew; this is the logic of pictorial normality, and the immediate visual evidence seems fully to confirm our expectations. Yet in carefully observing and considering the details of dress, movement and expression, we come to a different conclusion^{xxii}.

The 'what' and the 'how'

The ways in which semiotics as an academic discipline can add to the everyday process is in its concern not only with the 'what' of signs, but in the 'how'. When considering how signs work in art it is necessary to examine them as signifying through a series of relationships. Thus the artwork is not a repository of meaning but a site for meaning-making. Seen from this perspective its multiple signifiers; materials, composition, modality, in combination with its signifieds; representations, ideology, allusions,

become an interrelated system through which meaning is actively produced. These meanings are not fixed in any intentionalist or affective way but are constructed through an interactive relationship between a work (no doubt once replete with intentions) and a perceiver and are thus open to difference and multiple significations. How the signifier relates to its signified (form with concept) and how in turn the perceiver relates the resulting sign to a referent (an experience or thing in the world) is the interesting question. How does the sender relate to the receiver? How is meaning altered by investigating the contexts of the artwork's making? Which contexts are significant? Who produces the meaning? How are intentions and interpretations negotiated? Where is meaning situated? In the artwork, in one or more of the active participants or somewhere outside and between them? By understanding how a system of signs works pupils are enabled to consider not just the content or technique of their own work and its relationship to exemplars, but their own practice, looking and making, as a method for the production of meaning and as a vehicle for communication.

Some commentators have argued that art historical methods are semiotic,^{xxiii} if so, why introduce a new terminology for something that already exists? Formalism, iconography and even connoisseurship, in their separate ways, isolate the work of art from its subjective and social dimensions. They posit objective systems that can produce 'right' or 'appropriate' attributions and interpretations through the retrieval of intentions (on the intentional fallacy see Preziosi 1989^{xxiv}). The new semiotics is more concerned with the uses of art, understanding the social application and transformation of artefactual codes, than in reinforcing the status of art as autonomous and ineffable. Nonetheless formalist methods might be seen as a proto-semiotic in that they answer:

the perfectly legitimate concern to assert the specificity of artistic, and principally plastic phenomena, and to preserve their study from any contamination by verbal models, whether linguistic or psychoanalytic, since the characteristic articulation and import of the work of art are assumed to be irreducible to the order and dimension of discourse^{xxv}.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the desire to map out the semic territory of a particular expressive and communicative mode, here the plastic arts, must have seemed urgent, a task giving credence to the hard-won position of (illusory?) autonomy which unburdened artists, however briefly, of their previous function as recorders and propagandists to power, servants to texts and design. Wolfflin's system of formalist, binary oppositions has particular similarities to the self-consciously semiotic system

formulated later by the anthropologist, Levi-Strauss (1963)^{xxvi} itself Saussurean in derivation. Although Wolfflin's method, like any other, can be applied as a blunt or subtle instrument, its basic tenet, the interrogation of an artwork through the imposition of associated oppositions, has very real possibilities for use with school pupils: in his case; linear/painterly, plane/recession, closed/open form, multiplicity/unity, absolute/relative clarity,^{xxvii} in Levi-Strauss' profane/sacred, cooked/raw, celibacy/marriage, female/male, central/peripheral. Wolfflin's formal and Levi-Strauss' social oppositions might be usefully extended through issue-based oppositions, e.g. conservation/redevelopment, purity/hybridity, popular/elite, genetic/social.

Iconographic analysis, or even its Panofskian extension into iconology, contains the danger of assuming that the vehicle, or in semiotic terms the signifier, is neutral (an issue identified above). Here the artwork's content (the signified) is delivered by its material means (signifiers) in a seamless process of transmission where only the symbolic nature of its represented objects stands in the way of literal interpretation. The iconographer's job is then to decode the represented symbols: to do this they need recourse to originating texts (In the beginning was the word):

It means introducing into the analysis of the picture the authority of the text from which the picture is supposed to derive its arrangement through a kind of figurative and/or symbolic *application*, in which each pictorial element corresponds to a linguistic term.....iconography as a method, is theoretically founded on the postulate that the artistic image (indeed any relevant image) achieves a signifying articulation only within and because of the textual reference which passes through and eventually imprints itself in it^{xxviii}.

The insertion of art historical methods to support and provide academic credibility to a 'recreational' or 'vocational' subject might appear to be a tempting strategy. But the insularity of iconographic and/or formalist analysis is likely to prove an alienating experience for pupils hoping to learn about the relationship between the diversity of visual cultures and its significance for their own modes of production and reception, particularly in a period when art is having to defend its position in the curriculum not only on intrinsic but extrinsic grounds. For example it cannot be argued that the primacy afforded texts by iconography provides a suitable method to prepare pupils for the semic landscape of today's multi-media arts and communications which no longer attribute to the word a beginning.

The implications here for the relationship between verbal/visual modes of communication and power are touched on by Kress and Leeuwen (1996):

the opposition to the emergence of a new visual literacy is not based on an opposition to the visual media as such, but on an opposition to the visual media in situations where they form an alternative to writing and can therefore be seen as a potential threat to the present dominance of verbal literacy among elite groups^{xxix}.

The authors' 'grammar of visual design' is a systematic and exacting semiotic method for the analysis of images, largely two dimensional, from western culture. It would take too long here to examine the benefits and pitfalls of their system in relation to its application to the classroom, but it undoubtedly provides art and design teachers with a theoretical basis to develop an understanding of visual meaning making. Like any grammar it aims to establish patterns of use, if not exactly rules, and teachers may be wary of any such exercise that aims to define and thus limit and control. However, the authors contend that it is disempowering to deny pupils critical access to the dominant modes of communication. Building on the inclusive visual field embraced by Barthes (1957)^{xxx} the authors construct a method for analysing the production of meaning in images concentrating on their formal as opposed to lexical components. However, in place of formalist insularity they 'provide inventories of the major compositional structures which have become established as conventions,' and, following the principles established by the psychologist Arnheim, 'analyse how they are used to produce meaning...'^{xxxi}. For Kress and Leeuwen, unlike Saussure, signs are never arbitrary but always motivated. Although the motivated sign bears some resemblance to the notion of intention already criticised, for the authors signs are only interesting as a means of 'social (inter)action' not 'self-expression'. It is the use of images, not their intrinsic properties, that is the target of their method, an emphasis that provides a critique of much art and design practice in schools and one that is surely a key factor in any programme that seeks to educate the individual in a social context.

As well as providing art educators with a method to engage pupils in the social, interactive potential of art, semiotics provides ways of examining the relationship between word, image, sound and the other sensory modes used simultaneously in multi-media and installation. Rather than force the visual into the straitjacket of linguistic terminology recent semiotics provides a cross-modal vocabulary: 'it liberates the analyst from the problem that transferring concepts from one discipline into another

entails^{xxxii}. Art education does not possess a discrete formal language and teachers are fooling themselves if they think they have not already had recourse to the metaphoric application of others' terms; tone, rhythm, harmony, and metaphor itself, all have their origin in other arts. Semiotics can thus provide a common critical language with which to address not only the relationship between objects and their contexts, but the problematic relationship between objects and their viewing subjects:

The idea of 'context' as that which will, in a legislative sense, determine the contours of the work in question is therefore different from the 'context' that semiotics proposes: what the latter points to is, on the one hand, the unarrestable mobility of the signifier, and on the other, the construction of the work of art within always specific contexts of viewing^{xxxiii}.

If modernists, artists and educators, have tried to limit the arts by separating them into discrete 'areas of competence... unique to the nature of its medium'^{xxxiv} they have not done so without forming equivalent definitions of excellence across the arts. The postmodern art educator might consider a different alliance, one in which the key criteria is not quality, and its concomitant genius, but interest achieved in and through diversity: semiotics seeks out qualities of significance not significant quality. In this way the curriculum does not have to be based on hierarchical constructs of worth with their territorial claims and value oppositions but on motivated inquiry, a plural and critical approach to visual culture and its contexts including the pupils' own.

Word Count: 4,443

Endnotes

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