

Current Issues in Pictorial Semiotics

Course Description

- *What is the systematic nature and the historical origin of pictorial semiotics ?*
- *How do pictures differ from – and resemble – verbal signs ?*
- *What reasons are there for considering the picture to be a sign in the first place ?*
- *How can conventionalist theories of pictures and other iconic signs be demonstrated to be false ?*
- *What is the specificity of the picture sign within iconic semiosis ?*
- *How is pictorial meaning related to ordinary perception and to what extent can indexicality account for this relationship ?*
- *Can the different models for pictorial analysis account for all kinds of pictures, or are different models suitable for separate sub-categories ?*
- *Can visual rhetoric be amended in order to explain the relationship of pictorial meaning to the world of our experience, notably in terms of wholes and parts ?*
- *What is the peculiar semiotic nature of pictures depicting other pictures ?*
- *How are photographs — and digital pictures — different from hand-made pictures ?*
- *In what way do pictures function within society at large and in relation to cultures and subcultures?*
- *How can the history of art, notably the advent of modernism, be understood in semiotic terms?*
- *How are other visual signs — from the body to the landscape — different and similar to pictures ?*

These are some relevant issues of contemporary pictorial semiotics which will be addressed in the present course. The semiotics of pictures has some original features : First, unlike other parts of semiotics, it *covers a domain which has never been occupied before*. Art history has only been involved with a very small set of pictures, those recognised as being works of art ; and it has almost exclusively studied these works as individual objects, neglecting properties possessed by pictures in general, or some subgroup of

pictures. Unlike the semiotics of verbal texts, which can rely on linguistic foundations, and which has in part been anticipated by literary theory, pictorial semiotics must start from scratch.

In spite of all this, it seems to me that pictorial semiotics has got on to a very promising start in the last three or four decades. After the influential, but seriously flawed, Panzani analysis in which Barthes postulated a set of simplistic linguistic analogies, a number of better constructed and much more interesting, but still problematical, models have been elaborated, notably by the Greimas school, the Groupe μ , the Quebec school, the Perth school and the Lund school. Unlike the French structuralists, the scholars constructing these models have tried to address, to varying degrees, the specificity of pictorial meaning, and thus to elucidate the manner in which meaning is conveyed by pictures, as opposed to the more familiar way in which it is transmitted by verbal language.

Although, as I suggested above, pictorial semiotics has not much help to attend from art history, it certainly has a lot to learn from other disciplines, such as the psychology and phenomenology of perception, cognitive psychology, and even, properly understood, linguistics, both its classical structuralist brand, and the contemporary cognitivist variety. Actually, many of the remaining defects of the models mentioned above derive from their neglect to take the findings of the above-mentioned disciplines seriously into account.

The latter consideration is particularly relevant to the second respect in which pictorial semiotics is peculiar. Perhaps not only for accidental reasons, picture have *been at the core of all efforts to export linguistic models* to the analysis of other semiotic systems. Within semiotics proper, Lindekens, Eco, and others tried to show that pictures were structured just like verbal language ; among more traditional philosophers, Bierman and Goodman argued for essentially the same point, although invoking very different reasons. Just as several other scholars, I have tried to show that these arguments are untenable. In so doing, however, I have been relying largely on results and concepts taken over from cognitive and perceptual psychology, in conjunction with the logical refutation of the arguments advanced. Contrary to what is often believed, the redemption of iconicity does not in any way preclude the possibility of semiotic inquiry : instead, it opens up the new domain of pictorial semiosis for a much more detailed and profitable study. Actually, my arguments against the « critique of iconicity » propounded by Eco and others yielded a twofold result : it showed that the

ordinary common sense world must be organised in a peculiar way, in order for pictorial signs to be possible ; and it demonstrated that the picture was just one of the many varieties of iconic signs.

The present course is intended to be a kind of state of the art description of pictorial semiotics (with some extensions to visual semiotics generally). It will present the results of some forty years of work which is largely unfamiliar to scholars in the Anglo-Saxon world, since most of the contributions were written in languages other than English. Although it is thus intended to give an overview of the work of many scholars, it has been conceived from a particular point of view, that of the Lund school, which I myself prefer to call the « ecological » schools, since it is based on the idea that all semiosis is grounded in the common sense structures of the ordinary Lifeworld.

Course Outline

1. The Quadrature of the Hermeneutic Circle. Historical and Systematic Introduction to Pictorial Semiotics

The first lecture will present pictorial semiotics within the framework of general semiotic theory. It will construe semiotics as a particular point of view taken on everything which is human or, more generally, endowed with life, rather than simply the continuation of the mixed or separate doctrines due to Saussure and Peirce. The historical part will describe briefly the development of pictorial semiotics and the peculiarities of its different schools and traditions, following upon the somewhat premature founding gesture attributed to Barthes.

2. The Psychology and Archaeology of Semiosis. Pictoriality as a Semiotic Function

In this lecture, we will discuss the emergence of the semiotic function, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, and we will consider the part played by the picture sign in this development. In order to demonstrate that pictures are indeed signs, we will explore the basic elements of the sign presupposed but never put into focus neither by Saussure nor by Peirce. Indeed, explorations in the psychology and phenomenology of perception will turn out to be necessary, in order to characterise the sign in opposition to more elementary

meanings, such as those given to us in the common sense world, variously characterized as the “lifeworld”, the “natural world”, or the world of “ecological physics”.

3. From the Critique of the Iconicity Critique to Pictorality

In order to show why Eco, Goodman, and others were wrong in their classical critique of iconicity, we will pursue a close reading of Peirce, but we will interpret his text in accordance with more recent findings in cognitive and perceptual psychology. We will arrive at the conclusion that there are two very different kinds of iconicity, which we will call primary and secondary iconicity. Even so, pictorial iconicity has its peculiarities, which we will also try to elucidate..

4. From the Linguistic Model to Semiotic Ecology: Structure and Indexicality in Pictures and in the Perceptual World

The argument of our third lecture showed that iconicity could only be saved from the critical arguments advanced by Bierman and Goodman by means of introducing a properly structured common sense world. In this lecture, we will first consider to what extent the linguistic model may still be helpful, and in which respects it is misleading. Then the necessary furnishing of the common sense world, which is also the basis of picture interpretation, will be discussed in its own right. In this connection, the importance of indexicality to perception, in itself and as it carries over to pictorial representation, will be demonstrated. This will also prompt a return to the theory of indexicality, inspired, once again, in a close reading of Peirce, but developed on the bases of more recent psychological findings. The function of structural opposition will be discussed in contrast to the perceptual logic of indexicality.

5. The Last Dilution of The Panzani Soup. Going Beyond the Barthesian Heritage

It cannot be denied: for all practical purposes, Barthes initiated pictorial semiotics when he wrote his analysis of an advertisement for Panzani pasta. All serious approaches to pictorial semiotics have since then started out as critical observation on the Panzani model. Here we will discuss the theoretical and practical defects of Barthes’ conception, as they were rendered explicit by the different schools evolving from this criticism. We

will explore the illusory parallel, suggested by several scholars, between Barthes and Panofsky, and we will end by inquiring into the residue never redeemed by any of the extent approaches (not counting those simply repeating Barthes' confusions), i.e. the study of ideology and, more broadly, the social role of picture circulation.

6. Modelling the Picture. Approaches to the Analysis of Pictorial Discourse

The first thing any art historian will ask of pictorial semiotics is: how can it analyse a picture? The immediate answer, of course, is that semiotics is not concerned to analyse individual pictures. But there is a second, more complex answer: to begin with, the analysis of pictures is a perfectly legitimate method of semiotic research; but it only works as such when the model is applied to a number of pictures, and the results are used to modify the original model. In the second place, models developed in that manner by semiotic inquiry may be used for art historical purposes, in order to analyse the work of some particular artist. In this lecture, therefore, we will consider some models proposed so far for the analysis of pictures, and we will investigate to what extent they can be generalised.

7. From Ecology to Mereology. Pictorial Rhetoric as a Science of Parts and Wholes

In this lecture, we will consider the peculiar way in which pictures relate to perceptual reality. Some semioticians, in particular the Groupe μ , have suggested models, along the lines of classical rhetoric, for the way in which pictures relate to the real world. In this section, I will propose a model which also makes use of rhetorical transgression, but which is more firmly grounded in perceptual reality, as analysed in terms of parts and wholes, as well as contiguity and sets. As a particular subset of such rhetorical pictures, we will consider pictures reproducing other pictures, known by art critics as "visual paraphrases".

8. History of Pictorial Densification. The Pictorial Flow in Information Society

One of the reasons for considering pictorial semiotics to be highly relevant to contemporary life is that pictures are becoming more and more predominant

in society, from the emergence of newspapers to the advent of cyberspace. Classical approaches to semiotics such as those of the Bakhtin circle, the Prague school, and the Tartu school are useful tools for understanding the way in which pictures, as well as any other “texts”, circulate within society. But it will not be sufficient to integrate these various theories in order to obtain an adequate theory: they will also have to be modified. In the process, we will also be able to shed some new light on the great rupture in the development of visual art, the emergence of Modernism.

9. From Mechanical Reproduction to Digital Production: Painting, Photography, and Beyond.

Pictorial semiotics should not only be capable of explaining what is peculiar to pictures, as against other kinds of signs — it must also be able to specify the specificity of the various subcategories of pictures. Our case study concerns the semiotics of photography, not only because photography initiates the rupture with traditional hand-made pictures, but also because there is an appreciable amount of writings of this theme, which we can discuss and criticise (notably by Vanlier, Dubois, and Schaeffer). In the end, this discussion turns out to be too limited in scope: as we will see, digital pictures, which are not hand-made, are in some respects very different from photographs.

10. Vision and Space: From the Body to the Landscape

So far, we have mainly discussed the picture sign as a subcategory of iconic signs. But it is, of course, also a species of the category visual signs. In this lecture, we will consider to what extent other visually conveyed species of meaning, from the body to the environment, are similar or different from pictures. Differently put, what can we learn from pictorial semiotics which may serve to elucidate other visual signs — and what may the study of different kinds of visual signs bring to pictorial semiotics?

Readings will be indicated along with each lecture. Many relevant texts are already available online at the Department of semiotics, Lund University: <http://www.arthist.lu.se/kultsem/semiotics/index.html>

The first lecture will be posted at the middle or the end of the Spring term 2002.

Contact information:

Göran Sonesson,

Full professor of semiotics,

Department of semiotics

Lund University,

Box 117,

S-221 00 Lund

Sweden

Tel. (+46)-(0)46/2229531 or (+46)-(0)40/293923

FAX (+46)-(0)46/2224204 or (+46)-(0)46/2223392

E-mail: goran.sonesson@artnew.lu.se

Department page: http://www.arthist.lu.se/kultsem/semiotics/kult_sem_eng.html

Personal page: http://www.arthist.lu.se/kultsem/sonesson/CV_gs.html

© Göran Sonesson