

Notes on Anderson (1989)-Chap.3, "Symbolism"

After the "aesthetic response" of art's colors & shapes, one seeks its "meaning" which Anderson divides into "symbolism" & "iconography". Part of this may be non-cultural (the psychoanalytic schools of Freudianism & Jungianism), the rest may be cultural:

01.) Culturally Significant Meaning=implicit, non-didactic statements, it "connotes", does not "denote". Hence, it requires "cultural knowledge" to decode (see below):

02.) Interpretation=Social facts of self-aware beings (Bonobos, Chimpanzees, Orang utangs, Humans and Bottlenose Dolphins) are not self-evident, unlike physical "data". Therefore their meaning must be interpreted, that is, understood within a cultural context. Such interpretation can either be **normative** (practice) or **situational** (praxis). The early American ethnologist Ralph Linton suggested 3 aspects of interpretation, the 1st 2 of which Maquet utilized:

a.) Form, the physical shape of an action or an artifact

b.) Function, the purpose of such an action or artifact, to be understood in 2 ways:

i.) Manifest Function=The "evident" function from the "etic" perspective of an analyst or observer (the anthropologist), and the informant, easily verbalizable

ii.) Latent Function=A "deducible" function on the part of the outsider; not easily verbalizable by informants

c.) Principle, a variable added by Barnett (below), what physical principle underlies the operation or perception of the event/artifact? Expanding gases, leverage, positive/negative perception, etc.

d.) Significance, or meaning. What does the performance/object mean? To whom? and under what circumstances? This is not self-evident and thus requires:

i.) Cultural Interpretation via what the modern American ethnologist Clifford Geertz calls "thick description", the layering on of all possible ways of explaining the phenomenon based on ethnographic knowledge of a given culture. The corollary is that **no art is culture-free**, save, partially, the art of severely mentally-retarded or disturbed individuals such as schizophrenics.

03.) Representation=Art, like language, communicates by using "displacement" or "referencing", that is, referring to something not in one's sensory net at the time of communication. This makes both domains very useful since humans can escape

"stimulus/response" kinds of "operant conditioning" which is often genetically-encoded. A given stimulus, like the presence of food (cued by olfactory or visual cues) elicits the response, salivation, in hungry mammals. Unlike our dog, who salivates when presented with his food dish, we can discuss French cuisine at any moment, and without being hungry! We can now discuss things far removed, "displaced", from us in time & space. In technology this is useful since we can talk of resources, their location, nature & abundance, without having to travel to them at that moment.

04.) Semiology ("semeiotics") This is the "science of signs" developed by the 19th cen. American scientist & philosopher Charles S. Peirce. He called that which stands for, or represents, something else as a "Sign". He divided these signs into the following classes:

a.) Index=Measurable indicators that emerge from some natural or cultural phenomena, like regular breathing or a pulse indicating one is alive, or the various "indexes" of the stock market like the S&P Index. This is the least useful sign with regard to art, altho it may indicate craftsmanship well.

b.) Icon=Something that stands for something else by revealing a sensual link between itself and what it represents, like a skull & crossbones standing for "danger", as in a pirate's flag or the "poison" icon on a medicine bottle. If you get too close or drink it, you will die, rot and be reduced to bones. Hence the portrayal of bones implies (denotes) "mortality", and "danger". Icons are common & understandable **cross-culturally & extra-linguistically**, as in the icons at the Olympics, altho even there different cultural meanings may apply, as the modern Mexican folk art use of skulls or skeletal figures. Its study in art is called **iconography**.

c.) Symbol=Something that stands for something else arbitrarily, as in most words: there is nothing "dog-like" about the word /dog/. A graphic symbol would be an octagon indicating "stop". Symbols are much more culturally-plastic than are icons, and hold infinite meanings (unlike the limited, but affectively-powerful, meanings of icons). Therefore, their study abounds in art & is called **"symbolism"**.

i.) "Sumbolos", the ancient Greek origin of the etymology, referred to rejoining something that had been divided or broken in 2. Some tangible item (a token) stood for an abstract idea="friendship" if 2 friends could rejoin it.

ii.) Multi-valent, that symbols have many meanings, from Victor

Turner, a modern English anthropologist & founder of "symbolic anthropology".

iii.) Sensual/Normative "Poles" of Symbolism, from Turner, that symbols have an iconic dimension as well as an arbitrary one. The African "Milk Tree" would be an ex., from Exuded White Sap=Milk, the sensual end, to "Motherhood", the normative end.

iv.) Liminality & art (Mary Douglas, another English symbolic anthropologist who worked in Africa)

05.) Redundancy in Communication Systems=All of culture is one vast system of redundancy, enculturating its members from childhood in the same ideas, endlessly repeated on all possible channels until they become sub-conscious "tacit" cultural knowledge, accepted as the only imaginable reality. Since art is one of those forms of communication, and language is another, both are used together in redundant ways to reinforce meanings. Thus we use the purely arbitrary octagon as the symbol for a "stop" sign, but then reinforce its meaning with the equally arbitrary lexical tag, "STOP". Lastly, we add an iconic element, the red of blood, and therefore implicit danger, since dangerous encounters can lead to the actual spilling of blood, and paint the stop sign red. Thus icon & symbol are used together to communicate the same message "stop=danger" on two different channels! Maybe then the motorist will stop.

06.) Analogy=The use of icons implies the reliance upon "analogy", making a formal equation, using some distinctive features between something known and something unknown (or known less well), and grouping them together. Frequently, something from the unknown world of nature is "imported", as an "imported analog", into the familiar (known) world of culture, based on some similarity (usually of form, less frequently in function, most rarely in principle) **as perceived by the senses**. A tree has a trunk that looks like the torso of a human, as its up-raised branches appear similar to human arms in form, as does its descending roots recall supporting legs, and holes within its trunk equate to a mouth or eyes. Hence the demonic animated trees of Halloween art. In the

outline of Melanesian art presented in Chap. 2, Anderson notes an ex. of such "iconic analogy", the exaggerated nose in their masks indicating a phallus and, by extension, "phallic aggression" of men, something for which we have "native exegesis" as well as Freudian evidence for

07.) Analogy as a Heuristic=But we go even further in using analogy as a **heuristic**, a device to generate knowledge. This was the case when 19th and early 20th century "tree surgeons" amputated damaged limbs and "bandaged" the stumps with tar or concrete on the analogy to severed mammalian limbs and flowing sap to dripping human vital blood. This was done to "cure" the trees, not realizing that trees are plants, not mammals or, specifically people, and wall off damage thru further circumscribing cellular growth. The "bandages", in effect, sealed in the injury and actually caused rot! The practice has now been discontinued. So even we, sophisticated literate members of world civilizations use analogy. Indeed, analogy is still the metaphor of discovery on cutting-edge sciences as particle physicists call newly discovered sub-atomic particles by their "color" or "spin", even tho they exhibit neither.

08.) "Primitives" as Analogical Thinkers=Some 19th century "armchair anthropologists", like the Frenchman Lucien Levy-Bruhl, believed that "primitives" tended not to think rationally and abstractly; he called them "pre-logical", unlike then current Westerners, but in the concrete terms of analogy. This part influenced Carl Jung, who did not take it perjoratively, as most people did, but positively, by believing they were more closely connected to the "archetypes" of the "collective unconscious" than were modern Westerners. We now know that Levy Bruhl was only partially right. Indeed, analogy is very pervasive in non-Western thought, more so on the non-literate level, but we also know, via the work of the 20th century structuralist, the Frenchman Claude Lévi-Strauss, that non-literates are, indeed, very rational & abstract, but in the manipulation of analogical systems (the sensual codes of the "logic of the concrete" as he called it), but they do so **abstractly**. Moreover, we now know that Western society, even modern scientists, tend to use analogy along with abstract thought, particularly during the "discovery" phase of science where little is known. In that case a heuristic (a useful guide) must be applied, & that heuristic is analogy, e.g., "charmed" sub-atomic particles in modern physics.

09.) Communication=the exchange of information between organisms. Many lower animals, like insects, depend upon primarily olefactory cues, like pheromones, to communicate. Humans still unconsciously use them, and other non-linguistic methods like personal space, tacility, pupil size, facial expressions and gestures

to communicate (the last being the most culturally "plastic", or variable), but we, as primates, emphasize vision, hence visual cues. Art, whether performance or artifactual, tends to be visual art (music, of course, being a prominent exception). All this communication can be divided into 2 classes:

a.) Message=The intended, often verbalizable or visually demonstrable, communication. The actor/artist can articulate this.

b.) Information=The unintended, often "tacit", communication. The analyst (critic/audience) can infer this. For ex., the Balinese wood carver may want to communicate the identity of a specific demon, like the witch Rangda, by showing her characteristics like big canines, a skeletal face, and long loose hair. That is the "message".

But, in doing so, he may execute it with inept carving and sloppy painting. This reveals to the appreciator the unintended "information" that the artisan either was unskilled or careless in his craft.

He gives examples from Northwest Coast Art, which he points out is nearly always iconic, an "stylization", where icons are reduced to a schematic, and the parts distributed in what appears to Westerners to be an "arbitrary", non-naturalistic way (but which the native artists see as naturalism)., e.g., the Halibut decoded by Boas pictured in the chapter.

Walbiri of Central Australia, a "pictographic" art rather like a visual language.

Nancy Munn, a student of Victor Turner, women's "sand-writing", requiring "sand stories" of the acts of the ancestors in the Dream Time, but actually homey stories of the subsistence quest attributed to dreams by the women, thus life reaffirms art.

"myth/material cultural mutual referentiality"-(Roe)=that the material thing (the drawing) calls up the verbal account (the myth), just as the myth is annotated by the material object=

"mythic empiricism"-(Roe), that the "tautology of the Savage Mind" confirms the mythic world by objects that the myths were designed to explain, and thereby gives credence to the sacred story believed to be true.

[Anderson 1990=The Sepik as Phallic Aggression]

The Culture Geographic Areas=Melanesia (New Guinea, the northern islands of the Trobriands and the Solomons), and then within it, the Sepik River of the northeastern coast (not the modern nation-state of "Papua New Guinea", a mere creature of the post-colonial world).

The Sepik as 1 of the World's Great Art Centers=Anthony Forge, the local ethnographer, recorded 100 ceremonial men's houses within a 5 mile radius

of his base camp, all festooned & crammed with art: façade painting & interior sculpture, & the Abelam's (his study group) neighbors built 15 more in just one 6-month ceremonial period!