On Defining the Artwork. The Peircean Contribution

Ilinca Damian

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ILINCA DAMIAN

Abstract

The paper analyses the influence of Peircean semiotics as seen in the works of two authors from the fields of aesthetics and anthropology of art, namely Nelson Goodman and Alfred Gell. The goal of this paper is to note how Peirce’s work shaped the theories developed by the authors mentioned above and also to note how the authors developed the Peircean theories in order to fit their ideas. An important aspect of this paper is the methodology used in defining the artwork, for it can be conceptualised following the social interactions it generates by its mere presence or it can be taken into account only by itself, as a mode of representation of the object, outside both technological and social aspects. Given these approaches, how could one approach a subject prone to different modes of interpretation?

Keywords: semiotics, aesthetics, social anthropology, visual arts, index, symbol, sign.

Introduction

The subject matter of this paper is represented by the definitions supported by the work of art, as seen by the pragmatist theoreticians. There is no universally accepted definition of art and, subsequently of the artwork, in any domain that concerns a theoretical analysis of the work of art. Each theoretician comes with his own definition and system of thought concerning the subject, and this makes the study of the subject an incredibly frustrating one. In this paper I will compare and contrast three major contributions made in the field of artwork

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1 PhD Candidate, University of Bucharest.
interpretation: Charles Peirce’s theory of signs, Nelson Goodman’s aesthetics and Alfred Gell’s anthropological theory of art. Their common thread is the use of pragmatism into their methodology. Pragmatism is a theory developed in the last part of 19th century, which considers that the meaning of a proposition is visible in the practical consequences of adopting it and unpractical concepts must not be taken into account. An idea should work satisfactorily in order to be considered true. Pragmatism as a philosophical tool is considered to be fathered by Charles S. Peirce, who also developed the field of semiotics, a conceptual tool embedded with just as much pragmatism.

Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914) is widely known as a logician and important contributor in the fields of science, research methodology, mathematics and philosophy. He shaped semiotics, as a field of exploring the meaning-making, the symbol systems and the relationship between symbols and interpreters. His approach to signs and interpreters opened the way for the pragmatic manner of approaching the language systems. Even though semiotics is mainly related to linguistics, it made important changes in understanding, analysing and interpreting visual elements, such as works of art seen in this case as signs. In this paper the focus is set on how his theory of signs contributed to new definitions regarding images, pictures and works of art.

Nelson Goodman (1906-1998) is a 20th century philosopher, better known for his contribution to aesthetics, where he developed new tools in artistic research. His work, Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols (1968), is a turning point in contemporary aesthetics, who brought into use the concept and structure of representational tools. Although widely criticized, his approach to pictorial representations raised the attention for the subject and shifted the discourse on images, pictures and artworks in general.

Alfred Gell (1945-1997) is a social anthropologist best known for his work in conceptualising art, rituals, symbols and language within the anthropological discourse. Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory (1998) is his last work that puts into one complex discourse his innovative thinking throughout his career. Standing on the opposite side from Goodman, he argues against art being analysed in the same way as language. Gell’s view on visual arts consists in treating them as social
agents, actively contributing in changing the social paradigms, triggering emotions and generating social interactions.

The main sources used for this paper consist in selected works of the named authors. For Charles Peirce I used the volume *The Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, edited by Justus Buchler and published in 1955 at Dover Publications Inc. The volume was preferred to others, because of its structure, that allowed an overall understanding of Peirce’s work and contribution. For the present article chapter 7: *Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs* was of main influence. For Nelson Goodman I selected the edition from 1976 of *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, first published in 1968, particularly the first part, *Reality Remade*, where he defines and gives motivation for the terms used. For Alfred Gell, I chose the 1998 edition of *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, with direct reference to the first two parts, *The Problem Defined: The Need for an Anthropology of Art and The Theory of the Art Nexus*. Other sources include works that were influenced by Goodman or Gell, in order to see how their theories were approached and developed by others, just roughly cited or reminded of in the present paper.

The structure of this paper consists in a synthesis of the three works mentioned above with accent on the issues mentioned and a comparative analysis on them. The goal of this paper is to highlight the importance of the approach used by one author in developing a theoretical framework. The terms picture, artwork or work of art are to be considered with the same meaning, that of a man-made object belonging to the field of visual arts, having certain aesthetic qualities and a meaning for those who made it.

I. Peircean Semiotics Shaping Aesthetics and Anthropology of Art

I consider useful to begin with a presentation of Peirce’s main ideas as seen in his theory of signs, which are necessary in order to investigate further the ways it has subsequently been used.

After stating that logic is a form of semiotics, which is seen as a formal doctrine of signs, Peirce notes that one is able to observe the
characters of signs through Abstraction (Peirce, 1955, 98), and that by using scientific intelligence, one can consider what is true of signs in all cases.

For Peirce a sign is a *Representamen*, something that stands for an Object in certain cases. The Representamen creates an *Interpretant* in one’s mind. The Interpretant can be an equivalent sign or a more developed one. The relationship between Representamen and Object is obtained through reference to an idea, seen here in a platonic sense and as the *Ground* of the Representamen (Peirce 1955, 99). Having the Representamen connected with the Ground, Object and also Interpretant, Peirce defines three branches of semiotics: Grammatica Speculativa, Logic Proper and Pure Rhetoric. *Grammatica Speculativa*, also named Pure Grammar is influenced by the Modistae medieval school of thought and refers to finding out the truth of a Representamen, needed so that it will embody meaning. Logic Proper follows the conditions of the truth of representations, and Pure Rhetoric follows the manners in which signs (and thoughts) develop into new signs (and thoughts) (Peirce 1955, 99).

Signs can be termed as Icons, Indexes and Symbols (Peirce 1955, 102). For an Icon, the Representamen functions as such when determining an Interpretant and it is not necessarily dependent upon having an Object (Peirce 1955, 104). Peirce states here that “anything is fit to be a Substitute for anything that it is like” (Peirce 1955, 104). When discussing about an Index, the Representamen refers to the Object through dynamical connection, being associated by contiguity. Among the characteristics of an index, there are the lack in needing resemblance to the object, and also having the ability to direct attention to it “by blind compulsion” (Peirce 1955, 107). A symbol has the representative quality of a law or regularity, a rule that determines an interpretant.

From Peirce’s theory of signs, focus was set on symbols at Goodman, and on indexes at Gell. The need of avoiding terms like “work of art”, “artwork” is visible for both works, apparently for avoiding the Western appreciation of what is considered to be proper art, and for including all forms of visual arts into their analysis.

Goodman’s *Languages of Art* makes for a theory of notation more than for an aesthetics theory. His approach to visual art, artworks and namely “pictures”, as he generally names them, is made in order to
illustrate “what notation is not” (Kulvicki 2006, 14). Pictures are autographic; they represent themselves more than they represent objects. Goodman states that “in order to represent an object a picture must be a symbol for it” (Goodman 1976, 5). He uses the term “symbol” in a Peircean manner, and this is suitable, given the way he is focused on notation and language, these two having in their core a need for rules and laws. He reiterates the Peircean problem of substitute, by saying that “almost anything can stand for almost anything else” (Goodman 1976, 6), but he makes the difference when he notes:

A Constable painting of Marlborough Castle is more like any other picture than it is like the Castle, yet it represents the Castle not another picture, not even the closest copy. (Goodman 1976, 5)

At the core of representation reference and denotation are to be found, as independent features. In the case of pictorial representation, resemblance is the feature that distinguishes the pictorial representation from other kinds of denotation, but is not necessary for representation (Goodman 1976, 6).

Why does Goodman use “symbol” as the main term in his art theory? Actually, although using the term in relation to art forms, Goodman argues that pictorial representation is “fatal to any theory of symbols” (Goodman 1976, 3). Despite being widely cited (both in a positive and negative light) and considered to be influential in the field of aesthetics, pictures are seen by Goodman as a problem, as the ones that do not fit the notational system, by lacking “semantic and syntactic finite differentiation” (Kulvicki 2006, 13). Pictures are discussed at the beginning and at the end of Languages of Art, mainly as a comparison for the other representational systems that are notational (music scores, writing etc.). Still, one should note the differentiation between allographic and autographic when considering art forms, where painting is the main form for autographic art by not admitting a notational system. Pictures are symbols that represent themselves more than they represent the objects, although they denote them. A picture is more than a language system.
Two observations need further attention. The first is that Goodman says that a picture must be a symbol in order to represent, but he does not say the picture actually is a symbol or that it actually represents the object. One should take into account this subtle use of language. This fits the subsequent development of Goodman’s theory, where pictures are not the best candidate for the title of symbols. The second observation is that the picture could be defined as such in direct relation to the object it represents. The picture as symbol would be the rule or regulation defining the object. It is not defined in relation to interpretant or ground and, of course, it is not defined as taking into account the viewers, the ones that are subjected to its action as a symbol.

On the other hand, Alfred Gell considers pictures as indexes in *Art and Agency*. His use of the term is, as he mentions, in direct relation to the Peircean definition. An index is “an entity from which the observer can make a causal inference of some kind” (Gell 1998, 13) and it is not a part of a language, by not having terms established by convention. The artwork seen as an index functions by abductive reasoning as a social agent, where it triggers responses, reactions, feelings from people that interact with it. Gell considers that similar to smoke being an index of fire, artworks can be indexes of various acts, beliefs. Artworks seen as indexes don’t function as languages because they use a different mode of inference, not based on conventions or tautologies (Gell 1998, 14), but merely on unconventional hypotheses that function as inferences. Gell’s theory, acting in the field of anthropology, starts from the Peircean idea of index, uses his definition for abduction but creates a new approach to the field. Right from the beginning, Gell states his worries concerning the interpretation of art as a language, and insists on both art and semiotics be considered from a different class, for they make room for other kinds of inferences (Gell 1998, 14).

For Gell pictures are indexes in relation to the members of the community, to those it interferes with. Artworks are indexes in relation with the interpretant they have, and how this acts socially. This definition takes into account a more volatile component, the viewer. On this account, Gell talks about the *innocent eye* (Gell 1998, 12), sensitive to the power a picture can have, due to its physical qualities. In an earlier work, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology”
(2006, 159-186) Gell considers artworks to be a technological product able to interact with the viewers due to their power to enchant, to awe and make changes in viewers’ belief system by triggering attention and raising questions. Gell’s main concern, when defining artworks is their relation to the viewers and the importance the interpretant earns in the field human interaction and, subsequently in social anthropology.

II. On Defining the Artwork from Different Points of View

The main difference between Gell and Goodman is the point of view from which they analyse the artwork. Gell analyses it with an interest in social interaction, focusing on how art interacts with the outside world, how it is perceived, and concludes that it acts as a social agent, being active in changing perception, ideas and beliefs. Goodman focuses on representational tools, how the artwork is conceived and perceived on a semiotic basis. Its interaction with the outside is not taken into account. For Goodman, the innocent eye does not exist. The viewer is culturally bound and will make assumptions in relation to what he/she already knows about what the picture might represent. So, the viewer must not be taken into account, for he/she acts due to the rules and regulations already known (ergo, art forms being symbols).

This does not mean that a picture is a different type of sign when analysed from different points of view. On what both authors agree is that pictures make for more than what semiotics can give as a proper answer. One should note here that the difficulty in defining art is related to what one would consider important in relation to art, may it be the object it refers to, the viewers it influences or those who actually make the art object. Being an universal act (seem in all cultures and historical times), the ability of conceive objects of art, with an aesthetic, social and semantic value, is related, in every case, with factors such as culture, viewers, objects represented, grounds, belief systems, creators, means of creation, needs and uses.

Considering the two examples given above, could one consider that art, as understood through works of art, can be defined in as many ways as the factors contributing to its presence? If every factor involved
in the existence of the artwork gives a different account of what the artwork is, this being based on a theoretical tool (philosophy, anthropology) that also defines and acknowledges the factors, should we blame the complexity of art or of our thought system?

Semiotics does imply, in the existence of the artwork as a sign, only the presence of the object, the interpretant and the ground. Both authors notice the vague link between sign and the object and value more the relationship between sign and ground or sign and interpretant. Both ground and interpretant are related to the people conceiving or observing the artwork, so, to the mind. The object, as the only one from the ground – object – interpretant trio related more to the external world than to the mind of the viewer, is acknowledged by both authors as being denoted rather than represented (Goodman 1976, 7) or related by proximity not by a scientific tool (Gell 1998, 13). Object is not essential in these theories. But for Peirce, “the Sign can only represent the Object and tell about it” (Peirce 1955, 100), meaning that one cannot meet or recognise the Object through the Sign. The Sign acts as a messenger, a bearer of information for the Object. But in the case of Sign being loosely related to Object, but strongly related to Ground and Interpretant, does the Sign keep its qualities as a Sign unaltered?

The art object is more related to the Ground of the Representamen, the Idea that needs representation and less to the Object that needs representation. Just as well, the art object is prone to achieving a meaning, an Interpretant, from every viewer which interacts with it. These being taken into consideration, could we consider the artwork as a different kind of sign, namely a mental sign, which bears a stronger relationship to mental attributes of a sign, those related to the scientific intelligence analysing the sign, than to the Object?

**Conclusions**

Starting from Peircean concepts, that are not necessarily related to visual arts, the authors end up creating theories concerning the named subject and moreover, reshaping the approach to it. In the given situation, when, by starting from different approaches, even if using the
same theoretical framework (the sign theory) and the same subject (the artwork), one builds new but opposite theoretical frameworks, the question that arises concerns the multi-dimensionality of the subject. If so, a theoretical framework considering the artwork as a part of a bigger context (may it be social or representational) is not suitable. It is possible that a theoretical framework, where the artwork becomes its own subject, resembling itself and describing itself, in an autographic manner, where individuals interacting with it are subject to exploring a different manner in constructing the external world, would be more suitable. Could it be that the artwork as a mental sign, as described above, could act from Ground and Interpretant and lead to the acknowledgement or even discovery of an Object? More research on the subject is needed.

REFERENCES