

Values in Post-Modern Art

The appellation "post-modern" was finally adopted after being used (Jencks, 1976) to describe an architectural style—really a lack of style, since its main characteristic is heterogeneity. In the meanwhile, "post-modern" (the semiosis of the formula deserves attention) has been adopted as the label for almost any new form of iconoclasm extending from architecture to art, technology, social activism, religion, politics, and ethics. This paper will refer mainly post-modern art and will place it in a value perspective, arguing that the changes associated with the post-modern are actually the result of the semiotization of artistic activity. This phenomenon is part of a broader development, i.e., the switch from direct human activity to mediated activity, from the objective level of work (of art in particular) to its meta-level, or what can generally be called the shift from the behavioral to the cognitive paradigm.

Almost four years ago, Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979: 12) issued a rather provocative statement: "Our working hypothesis is that the statutes of knowledge change when society enters the so-called post-industrial age and culture, the post-modern." In order to check whether this working hypothesis is justified, let us first define the post-industrial, since Lyotard connects the culture of the post-modern and post-industrial. We are looking for a semiotic identification, and by doing so, we place the object to be identified in its context in order to be able to define its meaning. This semiotic methodology, as simple as it sounds, deserves attention because it is a way of proving the consistency of our discourse and the effectiveness of our applications.

The post-industrial age is characterized by a specific semiosis. A particular semiosis, understood as the *cooperation* of three subjects, "such as sign, its object, and its interpretant" (Peirce 5.484) cannot be defined without identifying the three subjects. This identification represents the working premise of our research. The post-industrial has as representamen the processing of information. Its object is the ensemble of human relations and of man-machine relations as mediated by signs. Finally, its interpretant is the awareness (process in time) of the meta-level of knowledge. According to our premise it follows that human activity in the post-industrial age generally becomes more abstract (typical abduction).

In order to now semiotically define post-modern semiosis, we have to proceed in a similar way. An interesting statement, made by Suzi Gablik (1977:85) in respect to the issue of progress in art, might serve as a starting point: "Stylistic change reflects varying modes of cognitive-logical capacity, suggesting that the history of art may be seen as an evolution in certain kinds of thought processes." She continues, almost along the line of a semiotic inference: "It is only in the art of our time that the logical mechanisms of intelligence have come to their fullest maturity in the sense of becoming entirely separated from perceptual content...." Similar remarks are quite common in our days (cf. Foster, 1983), they are reflected in Jürgen Habermas' (1980) attempt to explain modernity as an Enlightenment type of project focused on the inner logic of science, art, and ethics. But our perspective is quite different from that of the traditional philosophic discourse, which, after all, characterizes Habermas' thinking. It is precisely the limits of this discourse that justify the attempt to define what it is that makes post-modern semiosis necessary (or at least possible). Again referring to Suzi Gablick's pertinent observation, I would like to insist on its semiotic significance.

In the tradition of Peirce's semiotic, not only are we entitled to substitute "logical mechanisms" with "semiosis," but we are for sure in the position to say that the separation from perceptual content is a main characteristic of the post-modern (literature, music, architecture, etc.). The process started with the repudiation of primitivism in art and continues with the repudiation of art as such. The challenge is a *new* concept of art, or rather, freedom from any concept.

In order to talk about values in the post-modern era, we first have to ask, "What is the post-modern?" We are the post-modern. We are everything that pertains to this appellation, and even the originators of the name (one more name in a series belonging to the game called "writing history," that is, giving names to successions of events that most researchers believe cannot otherwise be identified and dealt with). Rorty (1983: 589), while missing important characteristics of the post-modern gives a very important reference: Post-modernism is post-philosophical. He actually maintains the opposite, and one can only regret the short-sightedness of his argument. The formulation, which I would like to adopt here,

offers an encompassing contextual description. Keeping it in mind, we can proceed along a path that is otherwise doubtful.

Post-modern, in its narrow etymological meaning, represents or refers to anything that has happened in the arts since the modern. This is rather ambiguous since “the modern” has never been satisfactorily described. Nevertheless, we know that in the body of identified post-modern artworks, the narrative mode was abolished (they don't tell stories, they are their own stories); indeterminacy (in space and time) and a certain ritualistic quality are integrated in the post-modern work; narcissism is displayed; and a double coding strategy is programmatically pursued. The goal of art in the post-modern paradigm is no longer predominantly behavioural, as it still was in the modern, but cognitive. The post-modern is the art of the artificial environment.

Returning to the parallel post-industrial/post-modern and to Lyotard's suggestion, we can notice that aesthetic expression is conveyed more and more by means of information processing and by a systematic deconstruction of traditional aesthetic practice. Previous stylistic characteristics--and not surprisingly, the main example is architecture--are reified. Compulsory rules deriving from cultural conventions are broken. Heterogeneity, misquotations, faking, and (aesthetic) cheating become not only possible, but almost desirable. Almost nothing is forbidden. It seems as though the post-modern is at once a refined collage, a critical display of broken conventions and rules, or, to use a better adapted semiotic concept, a configuration of disparate and sometimes antagonistic characteristics. Simultaneity is integrated in aesthetic expression, myths are objectified, allusions become the very subject, inter-media expression is almost a goal in itself. This all means that the semiosis extends to self-evaluation embedded as a source of aesthetic tension. The aesthetic action implies the continuation of catharsis to which the author is also subject. According to this complex semiotic condition, the post-modern requires perception on several levels.

Umberto Eco's novel, *The Name of the Rose* (1980), serve as the perfect example--especially of the semiotic community, which can perceive the semiotic level without missing all the other levels of this post-modern fiction. Eco's book addresses a reader aware of the meta-level. The crime and the investigation have their own merit, but they are of secondary importance; so are the numerous allusions to one or the other member of the small semiotic community, to some of the never-concluded discussions on the primordially of the sign, the text, structure, or some other concept. Literary codes are mixed, philosophic ideas interwoven, quotations wittily fabricated and immediately authenticated. But the reader is not expected to “fish” the red herrings generously let loose in this ironic novel. Eco would almost as naturally and ironically design a building that some of us might attribute to Venturi or Graves (the opposite is less probable). This means, more generally, that passive perception is less possible in the post-modern because of the implicit provocation.

To perceive the post-modern is analogous to being a witness, if not a participant, at a ritual, or crime, if you prefer (although crime is not an exclusively post-modern phenomenon), intellectually in tune with what we see, hear, or touch, and trying to cope with the tactics involved in the ritual or the crime. This contradictory semiotic position--witness to and participant in the event--determines post-modern semiosis, which is artificial, in respect to the environment, predominantly oral, strikingly cultural (not to say illiterate). As a critical conscience of himself/herself, the post-modern artist tends to approach the aesthetic realm in a quasi-ritualized manner, as an ensemble or unity (holistic vs. atomistic), outside of historic content (ahistoric), in relation to the artificial environment (while still romantically defending ecological values). Instead of a centralized system of values, the post-modern accepts only multi-centricity. In other words, it is a distributed aesthetic reality, each instance having its own center. Since no one dominant center can be identified, i.e., accepted, there is a need for a certain order, to which the post-modern artist naively, or perversely, makes confession, or for intrinsic relations of interrelated patterns. Consequently, the post-modern is heavy, baroque, almost rococo.

The constitutive function of post-modern artistic expression is exercised in direct polemic with the cultural background. This is not an art of an ideal, but of *alternatives*. The fact that post-modern artists enlist politically in what in Europe is called *the alternative scene* is part of the semiosis I am trying to analyze. In the general framework of post-industrial semiotic human activity, at itself becomes an alternative that is legitimized in the marketplace. This is the final proof of the point made in this paper; that

is, the changes associated with the post-modern are actually the result of the semiotization of human activity in post-industrial society. Semiotization means here the generalized use of signs for mediating purposes (for a more detailed discussion, see Nadin, 1981). Some of these fall into the category of the artificial mentioned in my research several times. This is not to say that post-modern architecture is *artificial* architecture *per se*. Rather, it follows the tendency of going from the objective level or architectural language to what is called the meta-level. To explain: Painting after painting, writing about writing, performing in respect to performances, building based on buildings, and music about music are part of the same process. It happens post-modern architecture has perhaps been more direct or more visible than any other form of aesthetic or non-aesthetic practice, making the "quoting" of previous works of architecture, or of architectural treatise, more obvious. It is not that architects producing post-modern architecture decided to be eclectic at any price. It is not that they wanted to produce so-called doubly-coded architectural objects that "speak" the language of architecture for those who can understand it, while simultaneously offering vernacular images, enjoyable architecture for everyone else who does not speak "architecturese." In fact, post-modern architecture is one of the very mediated types of activities in which the mediation takes place through previous examples of architecture, used as signs integrated, often from a critical perspective, in the new *de-sign*. It is the architecture of a highly specialized language which is "spoken" by some architects no longer willing to accept the limitations of functionalism or even modern formalism. The same goes for painting, poetry, theater, and music.

As post-philosophical, the post-modern escapes history, by making it relational. This is what Rorty actually cannot accept. Making a point is not the same as understanding or explaining the consequences of such a state of affairs. These consequences deserve our attention and continued interdisciplinary research. Whether the predictive power of semiotic theories can be proven today is not a matter to be taken rhetorically, since human praxis is more and more semiotic in nature. Obviously, semiotic discourse, like any other semiotic activity, influences the way we see and understand phenomena. In the case of the post-modern, semiotics has already been directly involved. This brings us to a clear end: The semiotic approach to the post-modern is a test case for semiotics. We have a unique opportunity to deal with semiotic *raw material* and follow our hypotheses along the line of developments as they unfold. In this particular case, observer and participant belong to the same sign system.