

Observation on the Mechanism of Images Linking to Different Meanings

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ABSTRACT. Carrier of signs must be sensible. It can be an object or a phenomenon. They all contains image. Based on a different perspective on the perception and interpretation or limited by different forces one image can carry different meanings. It can present a form-sense or refer to a denotation. By contrasting the progresses of images linking to different meanings in a semiotic perspective t a basic difference between image and word can be found out. Image applies a principle of simultaneity and when the image is a carrier of ordinary signs it looks more like a word and applies a diachronic logic.

KEYWORDS: sign, image, mechanism, simultaneity

1. Introduction

Image is a long-term topic. Almost everything has an image not only the object but also a mind which can only exists in brain. The scope of image-related research is very broad. An American expert on visual art W.J.T. Mitchell advocated the establishment of “Science of Image” and he want to make image have an equal status as language. That reflects the importance value of the image had been much accounted of by scholars but also shows that there has not yet formed a sufficiently independent and systematic theory on the image.

Image used to be seen an analogy as language and paraphrased by grammar for it can carry referring meanings as words. It does express meanings so in this sense image can be seen as a language but apparently it’s not suitable to be analyzed totally by the grammar of the language.

Image is the core of art and the art maybe is the most difficult thing to be dictated by words. You can find some explicit referring meanings in a figurative painting but in an abstract painting you may only see some basic graphics. May you say that the graphics has names which are referring meanings too. But apparently any work of art carry not only referring meanings but also carry a more quantity about those can’t be translated into words. So the grammar for language is not suitable enough.

A famous psychologist Mr.R. Arnheim has analyzed image from the perspective of visual perception psychology in the book *Art and Visual Perception*. It is a great theory about form. But his discussion barely covered the referring meaning carried by image. So although his discuss is exquisite but we still need to find some other perspectives to face the comprehensive image.

Semiotics is compared to mathematics in the liberal arts. It grew out of Linguistics but it is the study about meanings. Anything about any meaning can be seen as a sign. And including words many carrier of signs are image. So we can bring image into the perspective of semiotics as different kinds of carrier and compare them to observe the laws in it and analyze the mechanism.

2. One Carrier with Different Meanings

Sign has an important function of communication, so the correspondence between the carrier and meaning is usually stable. But there are also many temporary,specific signs. We can see a lot of such phenomenon that one carrier is related to many different meanings.

Mr. Yi Heng Zhao has given a classic example about a stone [1]. For laying a foundation, the stone is only a material. To give a friend as a beautiful gift, the stone become a sign of friendship. As a souvenir of Nanjing city, is another symbolism of the stone. And if the stone is purely appreciated it has become a sign with a meaning of art.

AN object contains all kinds of information. We can see that it is not all the information in the carrier that can play a role in conveying meaning. Actually every meaning is “separated” from a purely object produced by nature. So the comprehensive information must be chosen or limited in order to carry a meaning. Otherwise the carrier can only point itself equal to nothing.

Whether to cherish friendship or being a memory of Nanjing city in the example above image play an important role in the expression of meaning. We can say undoubtedly that “image” is the most important part in a carrier just because a sign need to be identified by its appearance. So the most indispensable role in a carrier is the image

Except an object created by natural can be a sign but also many signs created by people for a pure purpose of expressing meaning. The latter are more popular and almost filling our spiritual lives such as Art,Sports games. In those the most popular and indispensable in our daily lives maybe is the character.

There is another two examples of conveying different meanings by a same carrier. In this two interesting examples made by children's point of view the carrier are all pure sign of image. One is about a painting and the other is about a Chinese character.

A cartoon picture, in a lively style, describes the Harry potter riding a broom. When it is printed on a drug packaging then it has a connection with the drug inside. Illiteracy children usually identify the object inside a box by the image printed on the packaging. Because they are always present at the same time, so the one can be easily identified become a designated sign of another. The image replaces the characters on the packaging to instruct the name of the drug. So now the image has been an index.

Chinese characters are typical symbols, although they contain many pictographic characters that have evolved from simulated morphological characteristics. But the corresponding relationship between the form and meaning is mainly artificially established and it is arbitrary. So the form of the character in fact is inconsequential. Meaning which is coherent to the form of a character is always omitted by adults and makes no sense. But for children especially who cannot read Chinese characters, the form can often restore its original meaning as an image. Children can notice the different sizes of two characters in same form and think that the size of a character can influence the meanings. For example, they may think bigger “man” refers to an adult and smaller “man” refers to a boy.

In other cases the change of the meaning is also very common.

In a context of artistic meta-language, the aesthetic significance of Chinese characters is wholly revived. Even the Latin alphabet which is not originated from iconicity will partly resume form-sense such as in a poster.

In these examples, we can see the comprehensive image is linked to variety orientations of meaning due to different kinds of limiting force. And in different types they reflect different operating mechanisms. For the sake of convenience in the observation let me categorize it in the first step with special intention. By comparing different types and the reasons for the change in meaning, it is easier to see how the image works.

3. The Different Ways of Connection

Classification is not really so absolute. Many signs connect to the meaning by a mixed way but there is always a basic aspect it depends on.

There's a lot of ways to classify signs, and my way is mainly borrowed from American philosopher Peirce, although he himself has a lot of different ways to classify signs.

Peirce divided signs into icon,index and symbol according to the relationship between sign and its object [2]. It shows the different way of logical expression and ideology.

But although this classification can cover most situations it is not very suitable to all signs especially those involving art. So in this paper I separate signs into “ordinary signs” and “artist signs” firstly as two primary types and transplant his system to the part of “ordinary signs”.

“Ordinary signs” is a relative term, which in this paper refers to those carry a referring meaning or a concept or anything can be clearly explained by language. In other words it means signs not involving about art. And on the contrary “Artist signs” are those presented in an artist way and probably containing form sense.

3.1 Image as “Ordinary Signs”

Ordinary signs are very close to what we normally think of signs. The connection between their carriers and meanings are relatively more clearly and can be classified more easily.

Word belongs to “ordinary signs” and maybe we can say every ordinary signs has a similarity with word. They all have a nearly one-to-one correspondence between carrier and meaning. Such as a logo can only refer to one company. Sometimes a single word can indeed point to many meanings but in context its ambiguity will be limited to be a unique one.

All the ordinary signs are limited by different limiting forces to point to their respective meanings. Let’s use Pierce’s rules of “Trichotomy” [3] to divide ordinary signs into three types before observing these phenomena.

3.1.1 Images as an Icon

Icon is seen as such a sign that it refers to its object only by virtue of its own character.

When image is an icon, there is a similar relationship between its meaning and form. The relationship relies on natural motivations. A cartoon picture of Harry potter is just an icon.

You might think that in this situation it is greatly related to the form just like an artist image. But it is important to note, however, that this correlation with form is only focused on the first step. The real purpose of the sign reflects on the second step in which the meaning leaves the form and refers to a denotation outside.

The form play a role like a bridge. You can remove many details in the form and only keep key similarities. The omitting of details will not affect the expression to the referring meaning. This is the reason that many icons can only maintain a very simple and basic form.

And though the primary constriction came from interior form but the later constriction is coming from external yet. For instance, every name is named by people. Just like Harry potter is named by his author.

3.1.2 Image as an Index

An index relies on causality or adjacency to establish a relationship of meaning.

Footprint can cue a people passing by and the cartoon picture can index the drug in the box where the picture on. Causation and adjacency relations also have obvious motivations. But differently the motivation does not exist wholly in the form. Whatever footprint size or depth, the footprint can index. As long as there is a footprint then you know someone passing by.

Adjacency link is an external link-power too. A same agent can represent this thing but also another thing. His image is simply to make the audience recognize him and then through the adjacency relationship his feeling suggested by his appearance is linked with the goods. Sometimes, spokesman’s image and the goods will be some “alike”, but it’s not enough to connect them two strictly.

So the carrier in an index is just as a result of behaviour or a meaning indexed by the neighbour. Obviously the two causes all have no much relationship with how the form looks like.

3.1.3 Image as a Symbol

Symbols indicate its object by rules.

Symbols are the most typical signs in normally thought. Words,characters,punctuation marks, numbers,and all the conventional signs are all symbols.

The connection between the carrier and meaning of symbols is purely artificial. There is no natural motivation in it. So the form can be everything in original. It used to be arbitrary until gradually became stably connected with its meaning in daily use.

In a symbol the basic information such as how big or how beautiful doesn’t work. As a symbol carrier the form only needs to maintain a unique form to make itself can be identified. In this case it differs from an icon only because its identification comes from a rule but not similarity. The symbol is often concise too for can be easily identified.

And it is same as the former two types that in the progress of a symbol connecting to the meaning, being identified is only the first step. And in the next step what the symbol means is depending on the “dictionary” in receiver mind and meta-language rule.

In a word, a symbol is actually a name of an object or a concept and all the limiting-force are artificial and have no association with form.

3.1.4 Diachronic Logic

The limiting-force of the above signs has little association with form-sense. This should be a clear distinction to the

art signs as we will see below.

And the two-step way exists in all the representation progresses of the above signs. The more details the carrier takes the less clarity of separation in the two steps. Two steps means the operating mechanism should be diachronic.

3.2 Images as Artistic Sign

Artistic sign is comparatively special. As a typical art form, painting can be seen as both a single sign and a comprehensive text. Usually painting is seen as an undecipherable text in Semiotics. It can carry referring meanings but the more which it carries is meaning of nameless.

A circle we can call it the sun and we can also call it the moon. We can consider it as any object containing a circular form. But because it can represent too much things so that in fact it is equal to a thing without a unique name.

So in an artistic sign we need enough details joined up and create a self-disciplined text. Then the text can make the whole image present a unique feeling. And interrelated details can make image nearly get the ability to definite itself a referring meaning. But details may bring ambiguity too. The cartoon portrait of Harry Potter can mean a happy flying by riding a broom or a wizard or a boy with a pair of black glasses. It is very difficult to definite an image completely clearly only by the power of self-disciplined. Image can never express an exact concept unless it is defined by a power from external like rules.

We can deduce at least two characteristics about image.

3.2.1 Meaning Just in the Form

When image is as an artistic signs, its meaning resides in its form. This is different from the ordinary sign. In another word, its limiting-force comes from within the form. The referring meaning does exist but is skipped or ignored in fact. In a lot of figurative art, there will be a recognizable theme and image, but those meanings look more like a false position such as the “play games” in Beijing Opera.

Whatever you know or don't know the boy's name you can get a feeling of happy or lively or some nameless else from that Harry Potter cartoon picture. The form makes sense.

Because of this skipping over the referring meaning the artistic sign then has another characteristic that distinguishes them from other symbols: translucency.

When the connection between the image and the meaning is very clear then the sign will look like an instruction with a completely transparent. Then there is not any possibility leaved for form to make any sense. And if any part in a text means a clear meaning the text will be an instructor and lack of “assumption” which is a necessary condition of being art.

When the meaning of the image is very opaque, it can't refer to anything and become its own completely and not a sign of anything again.

The bearing of the image to the artistic meaning depends on its own presentation and internal associations but also depends on some external meaning that can be separated from the image itself.

From what has been discussed above the artist image must be translucent.

3.2.2 Simultaneous Logic

The two limiting forces coming from both internal and external create a balance in an artist form. So there is seemingly only one step needed in the meanings presentation. We can say an art sign image runs in a principle of Simultaneity which is an apparent different mechanism from ordinary signs.

On the contrary, word-language operates on a diachronic logical grammar. Words are firstly combined into sentences, then paragraphs, and finally text. When you read, the meaning of each word comes to your mind in turn and then forms associations finally.

When an artist sign express a meaning all the details participate in the progress in the same time. When an icon expresses its meaning we get its likely things firstly through a simultaneous way too but this way doesn't last till the finally result. The other two kinds of ordinary signs are more less Simultaneity. They depend more on diachronic logical way to link to their object.

4. Conclusion

Artist sign is a special sign, by comparing it with ordinary signs we can see the image's form plays an indispensable role in it. In the ordinary signs the image's form is partly or nearly totally omitted. Form is the basic of anything. So through observation and analysis of the phenomenon above a conclusion is drawn that the most important characteristic of the image is that it adopts a running logic of simultaneity.

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