

Semiotics and Western Painting: An Economy of Signs

All painters work with(in) a "pictorial language", i.e. an inherited set of conventions, elements and rules of picture-making. There is a similarity that exists between these components of pictorial language and the words that make up a written language. The visual components that constitute the broad categories of artistic production (folk art, European Academic painting, Modernism, Postmodernism, etc.) can be thought of as corresponding to the broad categories of language (French, English, German, Italian, Spanish, etc.) or what Saussure refers to as *langue*. [1] The study of the nature and use of the individual components of either a pictorial or written language - the *signifiers* and *signifieds* - is known as *Semiotics*.

Signs Within a System of Representation

To illustrate the use of the semiotic approach to the study of paintings, I'll draw from the analysis of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)* of 1907. [2]

The central figure of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)* follows the conventions associated with numerous representations of the female nude in the nineteenth century. Ingres' *Vénus Anadyomène* was widely regarded as exemplary by those who held the traditional view that the representation of the female nude entailed the production of a declassified and personified version of the feminine, one which enabled the male artist to display his power to transform the 'decadence' of the female body into either 'ideal beauty' or 'sensual love'. 'Vénus Anadyomène' (Venus rising from the sea) represents the Roman goddess of love and fertility after her mythological birth. This pose was found in Classical sculpture and thought to derive from a lost work by Apelles, who was regarded as the greatest painter of Greek antiquity....Ingres's 'Vénus Anadyomène' is a paradigm of 'the body as sign...formal and generalized'. 'Venus' is in a contrapposto pose, long hair trailing down her back and both arms held up to display her unblemished body. Several artists, including Bouguereau, used it in their paintings. It was also used in quasi-pornographic photographs and colonial postcards. [3]

Picasso used the *Vénus Anadyomène* pose as a conventional sign, one acquired no doubt through his own Academic training and study of art. It is the kind of thing that would be understood by him as "a meaningful sign", a recognizable kind of image, a legitimized and acknowledged form of representation. This was its *generic* stature. But it can also be categorized as part of the vocabulary of forms associated with the representation of the female body. In other words, it was a well established *species* of image (images of the female body) of a particular type or *genus* (western art). By comparison, a language might be thought of as the sum total of the words that make up a language, which includes as a subset all of the words that refer to women. When you want to talk about women, you have to make use of the words that your language makes available to you. And similarly with the artist: If you want to paint the female nude, you will always be painting in light of the past representations of women's bodies. This history provides you with a visual vocabulary that both enables and constrains what you can and will say with your painting. The painter inherits a "language" - a set of conventions. That's the *langue* within which one works, like it or not. But that's not all there is to painting (or speaking or writing). There is also the *use* of the language - the *parole*. And this is where things get a good deal more interesting (and complicated). When you operate within the conventions and signs of the language you perform various acts of expression. And these actions have effects. They are seen by others and enter into the fabric of social relations. They are also created by a person who is embedded in the social and lived world of human affairs. So these images that are made - these acts of expression - are emerge from a complex

background of feelings, beliefs, attitudes, desires and interests about oneself and others. And these acts of expression enter into relations with the feelings, desires and interests of others, i.e. they have effects. No one works or views art in a vacuum. And the better we understand this, the more effective we can be in understanding where these works of art come from, what meanings they might have, and what they do.

In the case of Picasso's *Les Demoiselle*, we have an example of a pictorial element - the *Vénus Anadyomène* - within the context of other elements in a painting. The painting and its elements are the result of a complex set of artistic and social relations existing in Europe just after the turn of the century. And what we want to understand is how this expressive act of Picasso's known as *Les Demoiselle d'Avignon* takes on meaning and enters into "an economy of signs".

First of all, we know that Picasso thought of *Les Demoiselle* as a major work even before he actually started the painting. He began by purchasing linen rather than cotton duck canvas. (Linen is more expensive and durable than cotton, so when permanence is an issue, linen is the canvas of choice.) He also ordered a specially made, uncharacteristically large wooden stretcher. He then proceeded to do numerous sketches and studies on paper, canvas and wood panels, some of them in color. "There are dozens of these, both individual works and *carnets*, or sketchbooks. Though there were significant exceptions, this procedure was at odds with many modernist or avant-garde practices of the late nineteenth century which valorized 'directness' and 'spontaneity'." [4] He obviously had something monumental in mind and felt this work would be a major statement, something on the scale of the Salon pieces by Ingres or Bouguereau, but distinct from the techniques and subjects of the Fauves.

Les Demoiselle was to deal with a subject that Picasso had approached on numerous occasions in the past. The brothel theme, and the representation of prostitutes in general, was very much a part of the thinking of the circle to which Picasso belonged. It "was...related to psychological and social concerns, in particular to Picasso's morbid fascination with prostitution and venereal disease; his interest (shared with contemporaries) in the images and meanings of 'primitive' sculpture, and his experience of existence in a bohemian community textured by ethnic difference, anarchism, philosophical ideas and notions of sexual liberty". [5]

The component which we are concerned -- the *Vénus Anadyomène* - embodies, among other things, an ongoing social relationship in the form of

a gendered commercial exchange -- between men with the relative socio-economic freedom to purchase or take their pleasure where they wished, and women whose relative lack of social and economic choice is evidenced in the sale of their bodies, actually or in representations. Implicit in such a commercial exchange is the existence of a...system specific to the culture, a system of thought in which the exploitation of women is normalized - made to seem unexceptional, normal, familiar. Implicit, too, are the words, images, or discourse through which the thought is presented....[The] *Vénus Anadyomène* pose is a 'token' of that exchange. It presupposes two encounters, an imaginary one, which is pictured, and an actual one between viewer and image. Both rely on an acceptance of particular [social, i.e.] class and gender relations and meanings. [6]

In other words, the representation of naked women as prostitutes, in harems or brothels, etc. belongs to a system of prevalent but largely unspoken and unequal power relations. These relations can be thought of as a set of rules about who can speak, what can be said about whom, when it can be said, and what meanings will be expressed. This is a part of what we have called the *ideological aspect of representation* and forms the semiotic background against which *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* must be understood.

These ideas can illuminate Picasso's use of the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose in at least two ways. Firstly, with respect to art as a 'language', Picasso entered into a 'collective contract' in which there was a given set of rules (including those governing what constituted 'meaningful' signs), which he learned in order to communicate with others. (Academies, art schools and Salons are institutions for

the maintenance of the rules in such production regimes; peer groups - Academicians, Fauves, Cubists - perform a similar function.) The 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose is one of these learned 'meaningful signs' within Academic discourse...[but] also used by non-Academicians, by Cézanne and by Matisse, Derain and Picasso....

Secondly, each of the elements of this language, such as the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose, has a value within a particular system of values. The value of the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose, as sign, is equal to other signs in the same system of tokens ('like a coin'), for which it can be 'exchanged'; in other words there is a currency of signs within a system. [The sum total of ways the body can be represented] *can* be considered as a language, a 'system'. For instance, we have identified the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose, as one element. Another one with equal 'value' is the 'odalisque pose'....Like the Venus pose, the odalisque pose is a gendered signifier of unblemished availability. As a token of possession, a colonization of the 'other', it was also used in photographic representations of the colonies....

The 'Vénus Anadyomène' and 'odalisque' poses can be considered as elements of the 'language' system known as 'the body': each has particular meanings within that language. Or they may be versions of 'the body' which is itself a sign in other systems such as 'woman', 'the feminine' or 'Classical myth' or 'history painting'. [7]

The Use of Signs

The full meaning of a sign is determined both by the relation of the sign to other signs in a language (the connection of the word or image to a concept), and **the context within which the sign** is being used. It may be combined with other signs, each of which may suggest different ideas. Just as the many meanings combined in a sentence produce complete thoughts that go beyond the meanings of the individual words, so the images or signs in a painting combine with other signs to produce new meanings. Finally, where a sentence is uttered, in whose company, by whom and for what purpose, etc., all of these things contribute to the overall meaning. The same can be said for paintings.

But here as well we must be aware of the multiple contexts out of which Picasso's use of the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose emerged and the newly developing interests and concerns which it was helping to shape. Picasso's painting was a development out of an ongoing Academic discourse (in which Ingres and Bouguereau were major figures). But it also signaled a major shift in the direction of the Modernist discourse and perhaps the first contribution to a new system of signs (Cubism) within Modernism.

Notes

1. Recall that the linguist Saussure distinguished between the *langue*, i.e. a language considered as a network or *system of signs*, and *parole*, i.e. the particular *uses* of the language (often referred to as "speech acts" by contemporary theorists). [[return](#)]
 2. This analysis follows closely the discussion by Francis Francina, "Realism and Ideology: An Introduction to Semiotics and Cubism", in Harrison, Francina and Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press in conjunction with the Open University, 1993. [[return](#)]
 3. Ibid., 113. [[return](#)]
 4. Ibid., 106. [[return](#)]
 5. Ibid., 107. [[return](#)]
 6. Ibid., 113. [[return](#)]
 7. Ibid., 119-20. [[return](#)]
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