SEMIOTICS CONCERNING AUDIO AND VISUAL ELEMENTS: SIGNS IN MUSIC AND PHOTOGRAPHY[*]

İşitsel ve Görsel Unsurlar için Göstergebilim: Müzik ve Fotoğrafta Göstergeler

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Abstract

In this paper, we intended to provide a general understanding about semiotic approaches to other sign systems beyond verbal languages. If we define semiotics or semiology as the study of signs, then we cannot segregate non-linguistic signs such as colours, melodies, shapes, musical sounds, images, beats and all other audio or visual elements. Our motivation here is to explore the signs in music and photography for making a contribution with brief information about semiotics concerning audio visual elements

Keywords:

Sign, Semiotics/semiology, Music, Photography

Özet

Bu makalede sözlü diller dışındaki işaret sistemlerine yönelik göstergebilimsel yaklaşımlara ilişkin genel bir kavrayış sağlamak amaçlanmıştır. Eğer göstergebilimi göstergeler üzerine çalışan alan olarak tanımlıyorsak, renkler, melodiler, şekiller, müzikal sesler, imgeler ve vuruşlar gibi bütün diğer dilsel olmayan işitsel ve görsel unsurları ayrı tutmamamız gerekir. Burada bizi motive eden müzik ve fotoğraftaki göstergeleri keşfetmeye çalışarak görsel ve işitsel unsurlara ilişkin göstergebilim konusunda kısa bir bilgi ile katkıda bulunmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Gösterge, Göstergebilim, Müzik, Fotoğraf

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Introduction:

Semiotics or semiology is broadly defined as the study of signs. Although semiotics emerges in relation with a particular discipline: which is namely linguistics, signs exist beyond the verbal communication. We live in a world of signs that represent anything further than itself. In so, we come to recognize that the languages are not only consisting of verbal languages. What implied here, aren't only non-verbal languages such as body language. A musical piece, a photograph or a movie also have things to tell us…

Although the notion of sign can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophers (i e. Plato, Aristotle) hitherto the conception has rather changed (see Manetti, 1993: Clarke 1987: Deely, 1982). The scholars who have backgrounds in language sciences and particularly followers of Saussure were the majority among the early semioticians (Deely, 1982: 7) However with the developments in the study of signs, sociological and cultural context has become more implemented in the field. Sebeok underlines that

> *"Semiotics is both a science with its own corpus*
> *of findings and its theories and a technique for studying*
> *anything that produces signs"*

(Sebeok, 2001:5).

We rarely realize that we are receiving countless messages encoded in and transmitted through music, movies, gestures, food, rituals, books or advertisements (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993:9)

Saussure considers all means including linguistic and non-linguistic elements used for communicational purposes as a subject matter of semiology (cited by: Clarke, 1987: 29) Because the signs do not individually exist and they occur in groups, semioticians entitle those set/group of signs as codes (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993:51).

Codes can be categorized according to various aspects, however widely accepted classification is to separate them into three types:

1.   Logical codes,

2.   Aesthetic codes

3.   Social codes

First category includes the codes used by science, second one includes the codes used by art and the last one includes the codes used by society (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993: 67)

Charles S. Peirce developed a triadic model, which can be seen below, and show how signs (a common term in semiotics and unlike Saussure he saw photographs images and music as such) are related to reality (Irvine 2012):
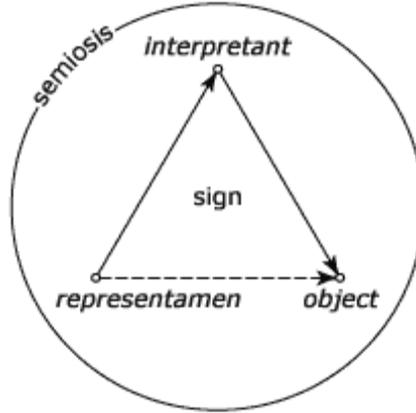
The easiest example of application of Peirce triadic model to images could be a well-known image: smiley. At first glance we see a circle, two dots and one curved line and nothing more. Even though one could immediately say, that it is an "emoticon", a symbol for luck and joy, for fun and entertainment and that it is used million over million times a day in short messages via mobile phones, via social networks or in e-mails.

In Peirce theory, a sign is constituted by three parts: *object, interpretant, reprsentamen*, and they cannot be separated. In this example the circle, the two dots and the curved line are the *representamen,* an expression in reality, but due to a social and cultural imprints, we use *interpretants* to understand, that this sign is referring to a certain object, namely luck, joy and so on. It´s social and cultural use over decades turned out graphic symbol into a sign which represents a complex feeling.

Dörfler (2000: 19) sums up these three types of signs, according to Peirce:

> 1. **Icon:** which are just representing things, by being similar to them

> 2. **Index:** showing things, because they are in physical relation to them.

> 3. **Symbols:** which are by use related to its significance.

Signs such as the words of a verbal language and things conventionally linked to another thing separated from the natural signs those exist without

intention and called as conventional signs or intentional signs (representations in Pierce terminology) which are in the centre of semiotic inquiry (Meyers, 1996: 19).

Today we live in a world of auditory and visual materials full of non-linguistic signs. Audio or visual tools such as music, movies, photographs, cartoons are easily shared and used for explaining situations, feelings or ideas etc.

One interesting fact is, that 9/11 and Vietnam War as words have a huge assortment of denoted meanings – the former, before was just a every years date, and is now a symbol for terror attacks, and the latter is just among hundreds of cruel wars, but still stands for the failure of the world power USA. However beyond these examples no doubt that images or sounds have an enormous influence on world's society. The photo supported by music can tell more than the words and can function for interpreting and re-interpreting process. It would be a great mistake to abstain from analysing auditory or visual materials.

Signs and music

Musical semiotics is a challenging field and seeking the meanings in musical pieces is a difficult pursuit because the music perhaps is the most abstract art. However its language is more powerful than any other language and it can carry and convey deepest meanings ever. Musical meaning for long has been questioned by many scholars; musicologists, ethnomusicologists, philosophers, anthropologists etc. "The developments in music semiotics have raised many questions such as: Is semiotics applicable to music? How should we investigate music for its meanings in a semiotic perspective? Does music only effects and directed to human emotions? Or it can be directed to human mind or reason? Is music analogous to languages?" And so on…

One cannot deny that music has its own language to communicate with us and it is used for human communication. Claude Lévi Strauss, in his famous model of music and myths, claims that both are derived from language:

Mathematics

Myth (sense)

Music (Sound)

Language (Sound+Sense)
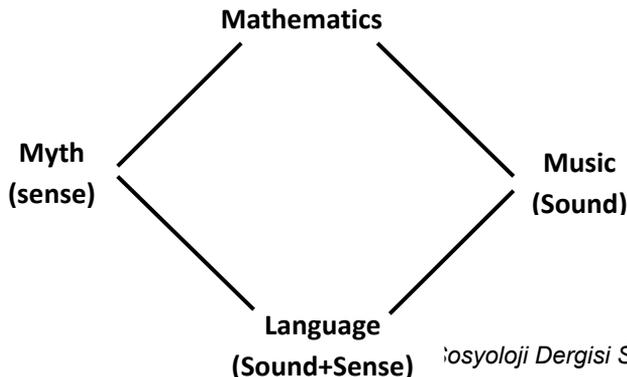
Following Saussure who defines language as a system whose units (words) have two sides: signifier (sound) and signified (sense), Lévi Strauss considers music as a language without sense (signified) and myth existing independently of its sounds (Tarasti, 2002:5)

Eco criticizes Lévi Strauss for identifying profound articulatory matrix which governs every sign system, with just one of surface manifestations, attributing a privileged status to the tonal system in music and neglecting that tonal system which Western ear has grown accustomed to it, was born at a given historical moment.

> *"thus proposing the tonal system in music and figurative procedures in painting as basic and natural metalanguages, exclusively entitled to define (or reject) every other musical or visual language"*

(Eco, 1979:230)

As explained properly by Eco, ascribing constitutive status to a specific musical structure leads excluding of all other music and prevent us to see the bigger and real picture. It also puts a study of music in an ethnocentric position. Musical meaning is inseparable from its social and cultural context. In a study seeking to explore musical signs and meanings, one should take cultural, social historical and socio-psychological contexts into consideration. Music is produced, experienced and interpreted in variety of ways across cultures yet still it is possible to mention about universal properties of music.

Peirce proposes:

> *"...various sounds made by the instruments of an orchestra strike upon the ear, and the result is a peculiar musical emotion, quite distinct from the sounds themselves. This emotion is essentially the same thing as a hypothetic inference, and every hypothetic inference involves the formation of such an emotion"*

(Cited by Eco, 1979:132)

Musical sounds are representing something beyond themselves hence music has its own signification processes. Musical meanings created by composers, performers and listeners. Listeners interpret what they hear just as readers of a poem or a novel. However there is no performer in reading experience whereas there are performers in musical experience who also have manipulative power on musical meaning.

Another important point is to never forget music is not a verbal language and always remember not to seek linguistic signs in all musical expressions. Music has capacity to represent and stimulate the feelings and expressions which hardly possible to be explained or expressed by any other tool. Funeral march reflects the solemn pace in the ritual of accompanying a deceased acquaintance. Its melodic and temporal structure signifies mourning by revealing the grief. If we use Saussurian terminology; the musical elements such as tempo, the melodic line etc. are signifiers and the grief is the signified. And both musical elements of funeral march (signifier) and the grief (signified) build the sign of mourning.

Sting's song "Russian children" with its music, sounds like a protest scream against nuclear weapons and cold war. Expression of the opposition in the lyric[3] of the song for potential war between two sides of cold war is supported thoroughly by its music. No doubt music has social and cultural context. However one should always remember that listening music is an

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[3] *In Europe and America there's a growing feeling of hysteria*
Conditioned to respond to all the threats
In the rhetorical speeches of the Soviets
Mister Krushchev said, 'We will bury you'
I don't subscribe to this point of view
It'd be such an ignorant thing to do
If the Russians love their children too
How can I save my little boy
From Oppenheimer's deadly toy?
There is no monopoly on common sense
On either side of the political fence We share the same biology
Regardless of ideology
Believe me when I say to you
I hope the Russians love their children too

There is no historical precedent to put
Words in the mouth of the president
There's no such thing as a winnable war
It's a lie we don't believe anymore
Mister Reagan says 'We will protect you'
I don't subscribe to this point of view
Believe me when I say to you
I hope the Russians love their children too
What might save us, me and you
Is if the Russians love their children too
Written by Sting (& Sergei Prokofiev)

individual experience and stimulates various emotions. In so we come to recognize also different interpretations of listeners not only by performers.

Tarasti argues that a little attention has been paid to the understanding of the signs by semiotics and draws our attention to the role of music semiotics in the understanding of signs:

> *"...by music we come to understand many*
> *aspects of our existence. In this way, musical semiotics*
> *can play a crucial role in general semiotics, the latter*
> *understood as research into humanity's general*
> *symbolic and semiotic capacities"*

(Tarasti, 2002:25)

Nattiez, following Jean Molino, separates 3 levels of semiotic analysis of music: poietic, neutral and esthesic. (Nattiez, 1990:15) Poietic level refers to the analyses on the production process, neutral level refers to the analyses on the immanent properties of musical piece and esthesic level refers to the analyses on how it is received by its addressee. Nattiez uses tripartite model like Pierce and he relying on Molino's approach claims that music can be analysed through the examination of these three levels (Nattiez, 1990)

Non-linguistic signs such as the ones in music are hard to determine compared to linguistic signs. And linguistic signs are in the centre of early studies of semiotics/semiology. It is not surprising that we have more guiding information and studies about linguistic signs, because sign studies emerged in linguistics. However today even the concept: "language" is redefined by semioticians who take any system of communication as a language (Monaco, 2009: 176).

However, Langer negates the application of linguistic structures to musical pieces:

> *"Yet it [music] is not, logically speaking, a*
> *language, for it has no vocabulary. To call the tones of*
> *a scale its 'words', harmony its 'grammar', and*
> *thematic development its 'syntax', is a useless allegory,*
> *for tones lack the very thing that distinguishes a word*
> *from a mere vocable: fixed connotation, or movement is*
> *a sense of its direction"*

(Langer, 1957: 228-229)

On the other hand, music semioticians tended to focus on *semiosis* and meanings represented by sounds in music. Although connections and

substitutions can be found within musical motives and a sign structure that represents Peirce's triangle we still have problems in assigning meanings to music and determining what constitutes a musical *representamen* or signifier (Samuels, 1995:4). Similar problems exist in semiotics of visual materials.

The use of visual materials for communicational purposes is not new in human history. Cave art is one of early evidence of such communicational use. Greek or Roman paintings, sculpture display religious or political figures such as portraits of monarchs show that how history is visually recorded. It´s the task of archaeologists and historians to interpret such visual evidences and for example to ask: "Why a certain sovereign is holding an apple? What is represented by the apple? One could go on forever, by talking about the meaning of apples during European history -just to mention the denotation of Constantinople, later named Istanbul or Vienna as "Golden Apples" during the Ottoman Empire.

Signs and photographs:

We perceive and interpret visual material in different ways. As the meanings of an image not only produced by its creator but also its viewer, image-making and image-reading processes both are the important parts of the meaning. (Ege, 2009) Photographs have never been the exact representation of the reality. However today they come to be illusion rather than the epitome of truth. They are more likely to be simulations when they are processed, manipulated and warped through computer with the potentials of changing by image processing as we see in the manipulation of Saddam Hussein's photograph by a little touch on his moustache to make him resemble Hitler (Lovejoy, 2004).

Social networks are the newest or at least the most important development in human communication in terms of the overwhelming numbers of users and exchanged messages. A close look on those networks websites reveals that images and mainly photographs make out a great part of those communications among the users who share images to communicate with their virtual friends. Internet is not the only technology that changes our relationships with visual images but we have plenty of other ICTs. Having capability of creating digitalized image and storing hundreds of them in a small disk, a digital camera provide potentials for easier manipulation (Ege, 2009) Eco's statement claiming that modern avant-garde challenged the idea of 'creation from nothingness' is beyond a nostalgic expression. He draws our attention to this kind of repetitive production (Eco, 1994: 95).

Visual materials consist of elements those can change how the general image is perceived and interpreted such as focus, angle, colours, contrast, lightning. For example; if a photographer wishes to emphasize or direct viewers'

attention to something, he/she basically can focus on an object by blurring the other things. There are plenty of photograph analyses seek for understanding the meanings represented by images in visual media. However it is not only about what message (signified) intended to be given in an image (signifier), in Peirciean terms it is also about *interpretant:* which is the meaning assigned by the viewer.

Messages are culturally determined and can be interpreted differently, due to different cultural backgrounds. In that sense cultural background is not just meant as the difference from Italy to France, but also the differences between sub-cultures or political cultures etc. A war picture could be interpreted in different ways. For example, if it is used in a conservative newspaper or a very left newspaper, the meaning might change. The development of modern media with and their existence in every household led to the interesting occurrence that people worldwide tend to have the same images in mind to certain events. For example If somebody hears or reads the words 9/11, World Trade Center and Terror Attacks, in their mind immediately would pop up the image of a passenger plane which is crashing into one of the smoking twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. Or when somebody read or hear the words Vietnam War, there would be a big chance that they have the image in their mind, on which a naked Vietnamese girl is running away, among other children, from a Napalm Bomb attack.

The "Accidental Napalm" photo which was taken by AP photographer Nick Ut on June 8, 1972, near Trang Bang in South Vietnam, is a good example for how an image can have further powerful meanings. As any person who has

seen the photo would never forget, the photo shows children fleeing in terror, in the center there is a focus on a nine-year-old girl who is naked, ripped off her burning clothes after she was splashed by napalm. Obviously, photographs are static images capable of stopping time at a crucial moment. According to Hariman and Lucaites because of its static nature, this picture holds the experience of horror for all the times and repeats itself (2003:44)

On the left we see an image which we would immediately recognize as an advertisement and see pasta, tomatoes, onion, parmesan etc. as well as the brand written on the packed stuff in a shopping net. We can also

see written "Pates – Sauce – Parmesan A L´Italienne De Luxe". According to Barthes a photograph has three messages a non- coded message a coded message, a linguistic message. Reduced of every writing, we would just see here food, e.g. pasta, tomatoes, onion, parmesan, etc. nothing more and we might think nothing more of it but the picture has also a coded- message: it´s shown by arrangement of food and by the colours, which are used (red, green and white). According to Barthes we would immediately think of it, as it represents Italy somehow, he calls it *Italiacinity*, to use a neologism not to affect the interpreting process with a new sign (Barthes 1977: 35). This effect is supported through the linguistic message, which refers to image with A L`talienne de Luxe. From the French words we know that it is a French advertisement.

Panofsky (1982: 28-54), distinguishes the meaning of a visual / iconographic artwork into three strata:

1. Primary/natural subject matter: Here the interpretation is inferred from the pre-iconographical description, which means that the iconographic material relies on the natural world of pure forms.

2. Secondary/conventional subject matter: The second stratum in which artistic motifs are connected with themes or concepts, constitute the world of images, stories and allegories.

3. Intrinsic meaning/content: At this third stratum the analysis should take into account the attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious persuasion, because personal qualifications make a condensed difference on the artwork.

Bohnsack (2007: 56) makes once again a distinction between pre-iconographic and iconographic interpretation. Pre- iconographic interpretation should just describe the things what are seen on a photo. In previous example pasta, onions, tomatoes etc. In the iconographic interpretation the researcher has to describe acting. Bohnsack´s example (Bohnsack 2007: 58) is a picture where a man is taking his hats off. We could interpret this acting as saluting to someone. The problem is that the researcher uses his own categories of interpretation. Since this problem is inescapable in every qualitative research, we just state here, that the researches would just use the very obvious categories to prescribe acting. The second step is classified in three units: Planimetry, scenic choreography and perspective. Bohnsack states that these methods lead to understand the formal language of a certain photograph.

Bohnsack (2007: 56) states further that before all, Planimetry leads to the immanent and evident System of a certain photograph. Planimetry can hereby be understood as a method to mark the composition of a photograph with just

as much lines as necessary. The perspective of a photograph identifies things or persons in relation to space and body, and leads to the Weltanschauung[4]. After the photograph is described as such, the important step would be interpretation, which Bohnsack calls Iconological-Iconic Interpretation. The researches use his knowledge of icons to make an interpretation. In the final step Bohnsack would interpret the relation between text and image, maybe comparable to Barthes linguistic message.

Conclusion:

Both music and photography use their own mechanisms and functioning for expressing of emotions and conceptions. Therefore both have different signification processes than the verbal languages. In music and photography meaning is produced and transported by audio and visual structures such as melody, rhythm, colors, and brightness/contrast….etc. Those audio or visual structures generate the meanings of what we see in the image or what we hear in the music. In communication sciences, there are some studies that elaborate the audio-visual media in terms of semiotics. However semiotics concerning audio visual elements needs more sociological and cultural studies. Sign studies belong to an interdisciplinary field related to various social sciences and humanities and to seek meanings behind what we hear or what we see, we should first aware of that every meaning is created in a cultural context and is derived from history, customs, beliefs, aesthetics and intellectual accumulation. Any sign study should consider following principles:

1.   The visual and audio signs exist in larger context which can be related or unrelated to a linguistic signification

2.   Those signs have different meaning-making mechanisms.

3.   We all perceive and interpret audio visual signs depending on our personal-social-cultural and historical background.

4.   The study of audio and visual signs requires more complex and challenging afford compared to studies in linguistic sign studies.

5.   Audio visual signs involve deeper and more intensive meanings which can affect their addressee more than any verbal language can.

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[4] a German philosophical term used even in English, translated the best as "view of life" or "ideology"

Non-linguistic sign systems considered in this paper, such as the sign systems namely those in music and photography; include a semiotic process, exploration of which can provide us a rich knowledge on the meaning worlds of human societies.

Semiotics or semiology is a young discipline which lacks of settled frameworks and still developing. Particularly studying nonlinguistic signs such as the ones in images and (musical) sounds is more challenging also because of it is relative novelty in the field. However semiology/semiotics as a study of signs needs more discussions and works especially on audio and visual elements for its development.

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