Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim (1729–1781)

Lessing’s contribution to the semiotics of the Enlightenment was his demarcation between prose, poetry, and *painting by means of the classification of their *signs. The typology of *signs developed for this purpose is to be found in and around the writings about *Laokoon and was, under the influence of Mendelssohn’s criticism, developed in two stages (Mendelssohn 1880; Lessing 1886–1924, vol.14):

(1) Starting, in his first outline, from the principle that the characteristic common to the arts is imitation, Lessing described their effect as “pleasing delusion.” Natural signs used in painting produce this effect by similarity with objects; arbitrary signs, such as signs within time, are used in poetry. The former express objects, specifically their
visual properties, while the latter refer to actions (Hardenberg 1979:362). Mendelssohn criticized this classification of signs, arguing, first, that the naturalness of signs cannot be attributed to the spatial isomorphism of the imitation effect but rather to the concept of imitation in general, so that the signs of poetry were also natural, and, second, that signs of poetry were arbitrary only when they signify objects. The distinction arbitrary/natural ceased to be a criterion for the classification of the arts. In addition, this distinction did not make it possible to specify the difference between imitation and representation (Hardenberg 1979:363; Buch 1972).

(2) Bodmer (1728), who influenced Lessing, had already, in his poetics, inserted the notion of “concept” between words and objects. Concepts had to be “adequate” to the objects and words to the concepts. The question of what this adequacy was led Lessing to his innovative statement that an adequate representation — one that distinguishes poetry from prose — not only brings about “clear” and “distinct” conceptions but also “vivacious” ones. This means that an object-reference (Gegenstandsbezüge) is a necessary but not sufficient condition for denoting the function of signs in poetry. In opposition to prose, whose signs appeal only to understanding, poetry is much more directed to imagination (Herrmann 1970; Schweizer 1972). Signs were no longer to be classified according to a relation of similarity to objects but by their adequacy in the process of perception, in which the objects become imaginable as wholes.

The distinction between spatial and temporal signs became fertile in a new way: painting as well as poetry contains both types of signs. Arbitrary signs in painting — relating to actions — and arbitrary signs in poetry — relating to objects — are nevertheless aesthetically less valuable because they prevent the rise of an impression of wholeness within the imagination. This impression of wholeness is produced, in painting, when objects are presented in space, and, in poetry, when actions are presented in time. The new criterion of sign classification and sign valuation is no longer the question of similarity to the object but that of functionality with respect to the impression of wholeness it evokes within the imagination. Having attained that, we may speak of *truth; in this sense, painting, for example, is more restricted and less able to represent a man in his truth, including extreme actions and their expression, e.g., Laokoon (Lessing 1886–1924, vol. 9: 94–111; vol. 14: 380, 383, 393, 423). Only poetry is able to overcome the conflict, inherent in painting, between being either fine or true, because poetic signs, especially in drama, refer to characters — ideal objects — which are not only of the same *form (*structure) as the empirical world but also transcend concrete human actions within time (Hardenberg 1979: 370 ff.).

C.H.