

IS IT POSSIBLE TO APPLY THE CONCEPT "INTERPRETANT"
TO DIVERGING FIELDS UNIFORMLY?—SOMETHING ABOUT
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEMIOTICS AS PHILOSOPHY
OF SCIENCE AND SEMIOTICS OF ARTS

CHRISTOPH HUBIG

The thesis of this paper is that the direct application of Peirce's semiotic to the arts has been based upon a number of misunderstandings. Two false assumptions have played a cardinal role. The first is that Peirce's semiotic represents a scientific method instead of representing a *theory* of a scientific method, which it actually is; in other words, it is a *metatheory*. This corresponds to the false assumption that Peirce's categories of sign classification and interpretant classification are instruments of research instead of being metatheoretical categories that can be used to describe and analyze concrete events of sign communication (for example, science). The second and more crucial assumption concerns the application of the interpretant to science as opposed to the arts. Here it is overlooked that in science, interpretants carry the sole responsibility for the constitution of meaning, whereas in the arts, divergence from the interpretants upon which a work is based plays the decisive role. As a result of this distinction, the developments of science and of the arts are governed by different laws.

At this point, I intend to discuss the former assumption in more detail. Peirce's pragmatism as well as his pragmaticism represent a concept of the theory of science. It is the method by which sign communication, especially that of a scientific nature, is achieved, described, analyzed, and established. The examples that Peirce employed to develop his theory were taken mostly from situations of everyday life or from science. Only rarely did he make reference to the arts (for example, music).¹ Rather than serving as objects of analysis, however, his examples were used to clarify his theoretical semiotic concepts. It is part of his concept that the category "interpretant" and its uniform application to the areas of science and the arts represent a moot point. Peirce used the category "interpretant" to show how certain objects are able to function as signs. The objects were then designated as instruments in order to be in accordance with Peirce's concept of the intentional aspect of their nature.² Signs represent constructions of communicating subjects and are construed as such by them.

It is necessary to have a guideline that directs the application of the instruments to ideas or objects. In other words, a sign embodies a trinity of elements. It is the interpretant as the proper significate effect which fulfills the semantic operation of a sign. This allowed Peirce to employ a twofold

1. CP5 475

2. CP5 473.

interpretation of the "proper significate effect"³ as one that not only functions to create meaning, but also functions as the result of the grasping of the meaning, in which case the interpretant is the "proper significate outcome."⁴ These operations are generally divided into three subcategories: (a) the so-called "emotional" interpretants that serve, for example, as guidelines in reference to music ("feeling"); (b) the "energetic" or "dynamic" interpretants that represent the psychophysiological aspects of communication; and (c) lastly, the "logical" interpretants that embody habits in the form of behavior patterns. However, the fact that these interpretants exist as mental patterns and can be interpreted only by means of additional interpretants, leads one to construct a regressus ad infinitum. The "logical" interpretants are necessary for the formulation of a scientific theory in that they guarantee the common interpretation of signs. This fact allows for the development of a pragmaticistic or transcendental pragmaticistic theory of science. The more clearly the logical interpretants are defined, the more intersubjective a theory will prove to be.

However, the employment of Peirce's interpretant classification for the purpose of semiological investigations can be compared to the use of Kant's categories to build a steam engine. Peirce did not deal with instruments for the analysis of concrete signs, but with categories or models that lay bare the different fashions by which sign communication originates and pertains to meaning. Neither the misleadingly exact classification of interpretants, nor the distinction made between the terms 'symbol', 'index', and 'icon' serve to alter this fact.

Umberto Eco as well as diverse semiologists have recently tried applying Peirce's concept of the interpretant to the arts in an attempt to achieve a definition of semiotics relevant not only to science but to all fields. In doing so, they make use of a false principle which is bound up with two important problems. Problem 1: Although the use of pragmatism does indeed expand the interpretant's plane of reference, it also creates a new problem by confusing these theoretic planes. Without seeming to find it problematic, Eco describes this phenomenon in the following terms: "Der Begriff des Interpretans ist gerade in seinem Reichtum und in seiner Ungenauigkeit fruchtbar, weil er uns zeigt, wie die Kommunikation vermittels eines Systems kontinuierlicher Kommutationen durch das Verweisen von Zeichen zu Zeichen . . . die kulturellen Einheiten umschreibt."⁵

The relationship that the logical interpretant's degree of definition bears to the degree of a theory's intersubjectivity (as outlined above in subcategory "c") pertains only to the natural sciences. In dealing with the arts, Eco seems to refute the possibility of clear and exact identification of the interpretant. Though the matter is a complex one, it is confusion of the theoretical with the metatheoretical planes that is the source of

3 CP5.475.

4 CP5.473.

5 Umberto Eco, *Einführung in die Semiotik* (Munich: W. Fink, 1972), 78

misunderstanding. A more concrete form of signs does not exist. None are, for example, just a symbol, an index, or an icon; and neither signs nor their origins can be explained more concretely by the use of a single class of interpretants. However, this classification can be viewed as a categorical screen that enables us to describe methods of understanding signs, especially scientific ones. In spite of numerous attempts at classification, these categories have not remained too general, but rather too vague, for application to a number of different fields. On their own theoretical level, they are exactly defined.

Now I wish to consider the second assumption. This is the more crucial point. Writers such as Eco, Granger, and Nattiez⁶ believe that by conceiving the generality and imprecision of the interpretant in the arts to be an "asymptotic approximation"⁷ (Eco) of the model upon which a work of art is based, it is possible to formulate the concept of interpretant, in reference to the arts, more precisely. A question remains, however: Is this the principle upon which the genesis as well as the perception of an artwork is based? Whereas emotional and dynamic interpretants do not demand an answer to this question, the logical interpretants are another matter. If the substance of the arts were identical in character to that of the sciences it would only be possible to create according to "natural laws." The fixed and exactly defined logical interpretants would dictate the manner in which the signs expressing the artistic code are conceived of as well as the fashion in which an artwork is perceived. Nietzsche labeled the reduction of art to such style categories as "stylistic barbarism," barbarism that expresses itself in stylistic terms. The concept of art as a type of divergence, however, has been expounded in the works of Hegel, Lukács, and Adorno, who trace it back in part to the Greeks.⁸ It expresses the fact that a work of art (as opposed to the trade languages of science) cannot be completely reduced to interpretants. To be sure, in order to understand the production and perception of art works in terms of signs, one must first postulate interpretants. Hegel said, "The connoisseur interprets that which he has heard in terms of the laws and rules he is familiar with."⁹ This is necessary in order to understand the effect of an artwork's calculated divergence from a given norm. For it is just this characteristic divergence from the interpretants (in the form of a model) that gives birth to the expressive moments of a work. One needs to be familiar with sonata form (as an interpretant) in order to be able to grasp the characteristic substance of Beethoven's works. In the same way, an understanding of the norms upon which nineteenth century tonality is based is indispensable for comprehending the significance of Wagner's

6 Jean Jacques Nattiez, "De la sémiologie à la sémantique musicales," *Musique en Jeu*, 17(January 1975) 3-9; G. G. Granger, *Essai d'une philosophie du style* (Paris: A. Colin, 1968).

7 Eco, *Einführung in die Semiotik*, 78.

8 G. W. F. Hegel, *Ästhetik*, ed. Bassenge, 2 vols (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1966), 2:281ff; G. Lukács, *Ästhetik*, 4 vols (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1972), 3:70; Th. W. Adorno, *Nervenzpunkte der Neuen Musik* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1969), 101-116; Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), 138; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 308.

9 Hegel, *Ästhetik*, 2:321

divergence from it, just as the appreciation of Goya (as opposed to Velasquez) is dependent upon a knowledge of the habits which imbue the tradition of the painting of Spanish nobility, or the comprehension of Beckett's plays is based on familiarity with certain traditions. However, it is to be stressed that these examples cannot be reduced to mere interpretants, not even asymptotically.

If one then views the production and perception of art as the divergence from interpretants, it is possible to postulate the principle upon which the development of art is founded. In the course of time, a divergence can be transformed into a norm so that a school or a tradition will be based upon it. New codes are formed only indirectly—*ex negativo*—in the generalization of divergences from norm in art works. If new codes were immediately created in the artwork—as some investigators postulate—they would be the equivalent of private languages. The expressiveness of a work then becomes dependent upon a deviation from this new norm. In this fashion, the deviation from the original system continues becoming more and more exaggerated until the divergence is so great that the original model can no longer be recognized. At this point, new stylistic norms, systems, and interpretants come into being. The history and development of art is the history of continued divergences from continually developing interpretants. In contrast to that, the development of science or normal communication is governed by a completely different principle. In this case, new habits are transformed into (implicit) conventions by means of the community of investigators, and the system of interpretative categories is altered in the long run by attempts to achieve a common understanding of them via consensus rather than by the mechanism of divergence. If it is to function as a metatheory of the arts, semiotics must certainly take this difference into account.