

Fall 1974

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Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Gary. "Intention and Interpretation in Art: A Semiotic Analysis." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 1974): 33-42. doi:10.2307/428944.

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GARY SHAPIRO

Intention and Interpretation in Art: a Semiotic Analysis

KANT WAS PERHAPS the first philosopher to note the distinctive puzzle, verging on paradox, which marks our dealings with art. Works of art seem to place us under an obligation to interpret them and yet we are convinced that our interpretations will never be exhaustive. Kant attempts to account for this peculiar phenomenon by talking of "purposiveness without purpose" or of the aesthetic idea as "a representation of the imagination to which no concept is adequate." We are constrained to see some pattern or organization in a work of art and this is typically understood as a teleological or purposive organization which we may feel tempted to attribute to the intentions or experiences of some rational agent; yet we do not complete this attribution because it seems as if there is always some additional or more complex purposive pattern which escapes our comprehension. For Kant the phenomenon is to be understood in terms of the types of judgment and the need to find some link between the worlds of nature and of freedom; and it is important for his theory that he demonstrate that art is beautiful only insofar as it approximates to the beauty of nature. Others with similar metaphysical interests have introduced concepts like Schopenhauer's will or Hegel's absolute idea to cover roughly the same ground. Those who are dissatisfied

with such speculative schemes have suggested that the puzzle can be dissolved either by discovering a way of identifying the meaning of a work of art, by adopting a completely relativistic account of artistic meaning, or by abandoning talk of meaning and interpretation in favor of talk about aesthetic surfaces or physical objects.

What I want to suggest is that the apparent puzzle becomes somewhat intelligible when we understand the work of art as a sign. For a sign, as defined by Peirce, is something that stands for something to someone (or to another sign). So that a sign is constrained or limited in meaning by its own nature and its object, but open to interpretation because it must address some interpreter (or, more technically, it must have an interpretant). Now in order to make good this suggestion it is necessary to examine some aspects of the sign-relation. For it has been claimed, on plausible grounds, that semiotic theories of the arts are radically deficient insofar as they are unable to give either an account of the way in which the sign is representative of its object or of the nature of the interpretant in art. Charles Stevenson has suggested that although a semiotic aesthetics must be committed to demonstrating the iconic character of signs in art, no adequate description of this iconic character has yet been given. He also claims that the theory is unable to provide a way of specifying the proper interpretant in the artistic situation and notes

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that in practice we find an indefinite plurality of responses to works of art which do not seem to cluster around a single paradigmatic meaning.¹ While these objections may reflect some actual weaknesses in some types of semiotic aesthetics, it seems to me that the central ideas of the theory may be strong enough to withstand the criticism. Once these problematic areas are properly explicated the theory may also help us to restate Kant's puzzle. Peirce, who introduced the semiotic terminology, provides some useful distinctions, although he never was explicitly concerned with the way that signs function in art. So while it may be possible to follow him part of the way, some caution should be employed in appropriating his ideas. The account which follows is somewhat skeletal; if it is viable, however, it provides a way of talking about significance in art which is not forced to accept one of the several unsatisfactory theories which purport to discern a single and unique meaning in each work. It should also, if viable, be capable of explicating differences among various arts and providing a framework within which a plurality of possible relations between artists and their audiences may be understood.

I

To consider a work of art as a sign is, among other things, to treat it as having an object or being a sign of something. Here problems arise when we try to say what, in general, are the objects of art-signs and how it is that the sign represents its object. Many suggestions fail because they are not sufficiently comprehensive; there are just too many counter-examples. So if it is suggested that the object of an art-sign is an assertion, it is not difficult to counter this claim by referring to abstract paintings or non-program music where assertions can be detected only by an enormous effort of imagination. We may deal in a parallel fashion with the suggestion that the object of all artistic signs is some particular emotion (Clive Bell) or an emotion of some general type (Tolstoy). This discovery should not be too disconcerting, for signs

generally do not need to refer to objects of some given sort; and art proverbially is said to be unconstricted in its choice of materials and subject-matter.

The failure to say anything more at this point, however, provides ammunition for the thesis that all generalizations about art are either trivial or false. Now in talking about the objects of signs another sort of approach is available. If we cannot initially limit the range of possible objects we may be able to say what the *mode* of representation is by which the sign is related to its object. Here the most frequent suggestion has been that works of art are icons of their objects, that is, that they resemble their objects in some way. So landscapes, like photographs, resemble the scenes that they are of, and music, it has been claimed, bears some structural similarity to the emotions. The relation of resemblance may assume more or less complex forms: Peirce distinguishes images, diagrams, and metaphors which resemble their objects by qualitative similarity, structural analogy, or by representing "the representative character of a representamen by representing a parallelism in something else."²

Nevertheless it seems to me that iconicity is not the central representative relation in art. For one thing, there are many icons such as reflections in mirrors or roadmaps which are clearly not works of art. My photograph and Constable's painting may both be iconic of the same landscape, yet my "picture" may be intended, used, and understood as nothing more than a reminder of my travels, while Constable's is felt, with good reason, to have some further significance. The further significance here might be expressed by saying that Constable's painting not only resembles the scene but, among other things, should be regarded as an intentional representation of it. So far this suffices to distinguish the painting from casual reflections but not from photographs and maps. Now although all of these may be intentionally iconic, we characteristically dwell on the intentional iconicity of the painting in a way which we do not when considering the tourist photograph or the roadmap. In the latter cases an interest in

the fact that someone *meant* the things to be iconic arises mainly when the things fail to resemble or when we look at them as symptoms of personal biography. We may not be able to read the map, or we may wonder why the photographer cut John off at the neck.

In order to explicate this difference it may be useful to distinguish various sorts of representation at this point. While an icon resembles its objects in some way, an index is connected with its object existentially, for example by pointing to it or being an effect of it. A symbol represents its object by means of an association of ideas, a convention, or a law. While a sign may represent in more than one of these ways, there is no necessity that it do so. The difference between the two sorts of iconic signs discussed previously amounts to the difference between a relatively simple icon and a sign which uses an icon but is also symbolic. One way of expressing the difference is to point out that icons (and indices) are *natural* signs while symbols require convention. In the case of the painting the point is that someone has chosen to exhibit an icon of a scene *as* an icon. By a conventional symbolism associated with the practices of art our attention is called to the fact that the icon *is meant* to be an icon.

We might consider, briefly, the proposal that a work of art represents its **object** indexically. Thus, it might be suggested that a Pollock painting is an index of Pollock's action in making the painting. This must be at least part of the truth. Just as the bullet hole in mouldy bread (to use Peirce's example) is an index of the bullet's being fired, so these drippings and scrapings are indices of a series of actions in which Pollock dripped and scraped paint. Surely the arrangement of paint is not *iconic* of Pollock's action, for it does not resemble human movements (although it may, accidentally or not, be iconic of something else). Yet there is a distinction to be made between a sign incorporating an index and being an index without qualification. My painted walls are also an index of my activity in painting or, better, a scraped surface is an index of the scraper's scraping. Now

Pollock's painting may be said to *exhibit* its indexical character, while my painted or scraped walls will hopefully not be regarded as indices but as walls.

The relation of the art-sign to its object, then, is not iconic or indexical, but symbolic; it represents by means of a conventional symbolism rather than by being a natural sign. This conclusion is not innocuous, for there are strong theoretical tendencies to construe things otherwise. For expression theorists the enduring vehicle in the situation is a sign of a certain experience of the artist's in just the same way that a cry of pain or a gesture is a sign of someone's state of mind. A concomitant of this approach is that that which is distinctive of art must be found not in the kind of sign process which art is, but in a special property of the object represented. So Collingwood supposes that the artist expresses emotion in a distinctive and final form; the ultimate emotion in artistic expression is a completely determinate individual feeling, and the artist is distinguished from other men by his ability to achieve this definitive articulation. Dewey takes the object to be "an experience" characterized by its inclusiveness, organic unity, and consummatory quality. A consequence of these theories of art as a natural sign is to make the notion of art much more elastic than it is ordinarily taken to be. On the one hand, much which passes as art in the considered judgment of critics and audiences is to be excluded if the artist's experience is not of the paradigmatic type; and much which we do not ordinarily take to be art replaces it because it may be correlated with the experience in question.

The truth of theories of the Collingwood-Dewey type lies in the claim that works of art, to be such, must be regarded as human products. Following this suggestion, it may be appropriate to revise an earlier suggestion by finding at least this generic feature of the objects of art-signs: they must be human intentions or experiences. What I want to stress is that these experiences or intentions are represented symbolically, rather than naturally; and I am dubious of attempts, like Dewey's and Collingwood's,

to delineate in much detail what these intentions or experiences must be. If we begin with those things which are usually taken to be works of art, we find an indefinite variety of such intentions; while if we begin by specifying the intentions in advance we find it impossible to correlate these particular sorts of intentions with that which we take to be art. Those who have spoken of an "intentional fallacy" have generally been thinking of the tendency to understand art in terms of extra-artistic intentions of some kind, such as the sublimated expression of repressed desires, or participating in the class struggle. As practical advice to critics and audiences this admonition is excellent. What it seems to overlook is the need to discern the particular way in which we are to regard a work of art. When we interpret a piece of literature, for example, we look for what Northrop Frye calls the "radical of presentation," the voice with which the work speaks. The narrator may be an omniscient story teller, as in the epic, or a solitary voice overheard, as in the lyric mode. In painting, to use an example of Panofsky's, a "city in the sky" may be a vision, an actual heavenly city, or simply a far off city represented by an unusual set of conventions; the painting itself, as a surface, does not resolve the ambiguity.³ To do that we need to see the painting as a sign of an intention to represent the city in some particular way.

The situation described here has a certain amount of looseness about it. We interpret an art-sign as having some intention as its object, but we are never in a position to give an exhaustive catalogue of the basic types of artistic intention. If we abandoned the first restriction, it would be possible to construct a completely morphological aesthetics, making reference to the immediately presented qualities and structures of art-objects; but as Gombrich has suggested this would result in our seeing no significant difference between two paintings with similar morphology, even though one was extremely traditional and the other a daring innovation.⁴ The second limitation arises from the fact that one of the things which art does is not simply to seek new

material but to present what it does in new ways. Many artistic intentions are to be understood as revisions or comments upon previous traditions and styles; so to anticipate the possible forms of the artist's intention would be to do his work for him.

It might be suggested that all this talk about the necessity of intention as the object of the artistic sign simply amounts to the old and trivial claim that works of art must be artifacts. However, there are some complications. On the semiotic account given here, works of art are not only artifacts; they manifest or exhibit their artifactuality. And just as it is not clear that there is any exhaustive account of the ways in which something may be presented as an artifact, so there is no apparent limitation on what might count as an artifact. Duchamp's urinal and similar ready-mades seem to have established that the artist need not be an artificer (in the sense of a planner or craftsman). Natural objects, too, might be taken to be artifacts in an extended sense if someone exhibits them as works of art; so a piece of driftwood or a patterned slab of marble become artifacts, in a sense, because someone exhibits them in a certain way.

I am suggesting that we need to take an empirical and pluralistic approach to the nature of intention in two ways. On the one hand, the history of art reveals an indefinite variety of artistic purposes or ends: think of Byzantine mosaics, Bartok's music, and Pope's poetry. Each of the many intentional theories of interpretation is probably useful in helping us to discern types of artistic intent of which we might otherwise be ignorant. Yet each fails in its claims to have discovered the fundamental form of intention for all art. Moreover artistic intention often exhibits what Freud calls over-determination; there may be a complex network of purposes involved in the production of a work, even to the point where we hesitate to say that they are all summed up in a single dominant intention. A second respect in which theory should be methodologically pluralistic is in questions about the analysis of intention itself, i.e., whether it is to be construed as an introspectible mental event,

a set of dispositions to act, or in some other fashion. Certainly we often do attribute intentions to artists which they could not have articulated themselves. Empirical method requires us to admit that intentions may simply be more or less vague, complex, linguistically formulable by the agent, and so on. However, this pluralistic account of intention need not be taken as excluding the possibility of a comprehensive aesthetic theory; for such a theory may deal with the relations between intention, art object, and interpretation (as does the semiotic account) while surrendering the attempt to find a determinate form of all artistic intentions. Of course intention, if it is to play a role in the theory should have some common nature underlying its plurality of forms; yet this nature may be of a very general and even vague sort.

II

Supposing that this account of art as symbolic of intentions is accepted, can we go on to identify the meaning of a work of art with the artist's intention? This step has been taken without too much hesitation by intentionalistic theorists such as Erwin Panofsky and Albert Hofstadter.⁵ However, it is not clear that this identification is either necessary or permissible. For while the artist's intention, as the object of the art-sign, is a condition of the sign's being meaningful, it is not identical with the sign's meaning. This can be put in more technical terms: the meaning of the sign is not the sign's object but its interpretant or the rule by which it determines its interpretant. The sign's meaning is what it will be interpreted as. In order to talk about the meaning of a work of art, then, we must talk about its interpretation.

Some doubts concerning semiotic aesthetics have focused on just this question of our ability to locate the interpretant of a work of art. Stevenson seems to suggest that since no one has been able to say what *the* unique interpretant of an aesthetic sign is, the semiotic theory is radically incomplete. Now of course there are a variety of theories which purport to say how a work of art

is to be properly interpreted. The appropriate response is held to be emotional, or cognitive, or active; more specifically, various theorists have held that it is an emotion like or unlike those we experience in everyday life, that it is propositional knowledge about the world or a kind of intuition, or that it is a reorganization of our practical attitudes or an acceptance of our tragic condition. However, it seems to me that the failure to identify the interpretant of the art-sign is not a weakness of the semiotic theory, but one of its strengths.

To ask, as Stevenson does, that we say what *the* interpretant of the sign is, is to misunderstand both what it is to be a sign and, more specifically, what it is to be a work of art. A sign is the sort of thing which requires interpretation, but to which no single interpretant is adequate. This situation arises from the fact that the interpretant of a sign is itself a sign. A single sign is indeterminate in meaning insofar as it is capable of giving rise to a multiplicity of interpretants at a given time and to an indefinite series of interpretants over a period of time. But how and for what reason would we want to single out one of these interpretants as the only proper meaning of a sign? Now of course we do frequently believe that we know the meaning of a concept, a theory, or even of a work of art. Peirce, for example, developed his pragmatism as a method of discovering the ultimate or final interpretant of a sign (or at least of an "intellectual concept"). So perhaps what is needed is an account of the interpretants of art-signs in particular, rather than a consideration of the question whether any sign must have a unique meaning; for it may turn out that there are quite different types of signs. If this is the case, then it may also be possible to distinguish artistic semiosis from other kinds of signification.

It has been suggested, by Panofsky and others, that to understand a work of art we go through the same sort of process as when we understand a gesture.⁶ A gesture is supposed to be symbolic of an intention on the part of the gester; we can, in principle, understand the meaning of a gesture by

taking account of appropriate evidence concerning social conventions or temperamental peculiarities. In the case of works of art, the evidence is much more complex, for we need to know about stylistic conventions or iconographical material as well as understanding the general cultural background of the work; this simply renders the interpreter's or iconologist's task a difficult but not an impossible one. Yet there seems to be some disanalogies of art and gesture which should also be noted. A gesture is usually addressed to a quite definite and limited audience, while works of art tend to be of a more public nature. This, in turn, is connected with the fact that art tends to be enduring while gestures are ephemeral. (Exceptions to both principles may be found, but it is significant that these differences hold in the primary cases). These variations are significant, because our supposition that the gesture has a determinate meaning is supported by its dependence on a specific context which furnishes us with the clues to its meaning; but the art object, while it arises out of a particular historical, social, and personal context endures so that it acquires a life beyond that context. This endurance seems to be more than an accidental feature, so much so that it is puzzling when artists turn, as recently, to the fabrication of deliberately ephemeral works. It could be said that the work manages to escape or transcend its original context only to take a place within a larger one which might be called the "art-world." But to suppose that we can now discern the unique meaning of the work by understanding the conventions of its new context is to beg the question; for it may be that these conventions are such as to preclude the assignment of a single meaning to the work.⁷

This last possibility seems closer to the practice of critics and audiences than does Panofsky's analogy. A work of art characteristically is susceptible of many interpretations, although not all interpretations that are offered are acceptable. We may see Don Quixote as a madman, a tragic ironist, a metaphysician, or as a representative of the decaying gentry, but we cannot understand him coherently as a peasant or the king in disguise. One reason that we return to the

same work again and again, while we allow gestures to pass into oblivion, is that we continue to find new meanings or new interpretations of the former, but not of the latter.

This partial indeterminacy of the sign in art can be accounted for in terms of some of the general characteristics of signs. A sign does not determine its own interpretation, but requires interpretation. This is especially true of symbols, which are signs primarily by virtue of a law or convention rather than by having a natural connection with their object. At any time, there is a limited continuum of possible interpretations available of a given symbol. So a work of art admits of an indefinite number of possible interpretations within a given range, but it may exclude those that fall outside of this range. This can be illustrated most perspicuously, perhaps, in the case of the performing arts: we can imagine an indefinite number of ways to produce *Hamlet* or to arrange a symphony, even if certain kinds of production or arrangement are precluded. This situation is not limited to the performing arts, however; a painting or a poem must be *taken* in some way by its viewer or reader. Perhaps there is more freedom of interpretation in these non-performing arts, for the viewers and readers are not subject to the many constraints of a practical nature which may restrict the freedom of the performer, such as limited resources and the necessity of finding an audience.

It has sometimes been suggested that we ought to distinguish rather sharply between the performer's interpretation and the critic's or audience's understanding of a work.⁸ So it is claimed that scripts and scores do require interpretation or performance while poems and paintings are more complete and need only be read or seen. There is a difference here, but it does not seem to me that it affects the general thrust of the semiotic theory. For my seeing or reading of a work is just as much *mine* as the performer's playing is *his* interpretation: in each case the work must be taken in a certain way by emphasizing some aspects rather than others or by seeing things in a particular light. Of course, the performing arts introduce additional complications, for I may interpret a performance of *Hamlet*

rather than the script. The analogy of the two kinds of arts becomes clearer if we think of a poem as a script for its readers; to read a poem aloud is to implicitly or explicitly adopt a certain understanding or interpretation of it which is indicated by modulations of the voice. Silent readings are derivative from readings aloud, although some poems may be sufficiently complex to preclude the possibility of articulating all of the aspects of a given interpretation by means of the voice alone.

The idea that this indeterminacy of interpretation can be eliminated by introducing the notion of the work of art as a type, of which its various performances or interpretations are tokens does not seem to be of much interest. For supposing that we adopt such a terminology, which may be illuminating in some ways, the question remains as to whether the type itself is fully determinate. It may be that the type is indeterminate in the sense that it has a legitimate variety of interpretants at a given time; but it may also be indeterminate by being capable of changing or growing. Let us return to the analogy of art and gesture. The gesture has the meaning that it does because of the contextual limitations ordinarily associated with it. But what are the contextual limitations on the meaning of a work of art? Isn't it a feature of the practices and conventions of art that we are led to see new meanings in a work because of changes in style and approach which post-date the work of art itself? Primitive masks, late Hellenistic sculpture and mannerist painting do come to be seen in a new light after the growth and popularity of non-representational modes in the visual arts. Of course, it might be suggested that this is a naive kind of projection of our own concerns and prejudices onto the past. Such projection does occur when we attempt to understand the gestures or customs of the past as if they were contemporary; we might, through ignorance or lack of imagination, understand the hand-shaking of armed men in terms of our present social habit. Yet the analogy with gesture is to be used with care. For the work of art endures and is offered to a relatively non-specific public which revises its understanding of

art continuously. Just as a dramatist may be aware of offering his audience a script which admits of many possible productions and interpretations, so artists have recently come to think of their works as subject to undergoing drastic transformations of critical appraisal as stylistic change accelerates in the arts. In semiotic terms, we may say that symbols grow through their interpretation. The work of art is what Peirce calls a "living" symbol, like a constitution or a social practice, which retains its identity through change.⁹ Often the meaning of a work of art grows through its interpretation by other works, as well as through critical understanding. It is not only pastiches, like Picasso's of Velasquez, but whole stylistic movements which comment on and articulate the meaning of others, as in the case of the mannerist revision of renaissance perspectivism.

There is some limitation on this interpretative freedom which stems from the artist's intention and from the fact that the product (or the sign in the sign relationship) is an opaque element which prevents interpretation from ever coinciding precisely with intention. Paul Valery has suggested that this situation gives rise to a "creative misunderstanding" in which the work is destined to have more meanings for its collective audience than it does for its producer.¹⁰ If art were or approximated to being a direct means of communication (as some have supposed) then the work would tend to be a disposable instrument which would be exhausted by achieving a definite effect. The kind of opacity and indeterminacy detected by critics like Valery can perhaps be accounted for categorially by reference to the indeterminacy of signs.

There are two main ways of denying this indeterminacy of artistic meaning which it may be helpful to examine. The first tends to fall back on the conception of a determinate meaning for each work, while the second denies that there is any work which is identical in the various situations of performance and interpretation. Two varieties of the first position are of special interest; one takes the meaning to be identical with the experience or intention of the artist while the other takes it to be a kind of limit

which our various perceptions of the work tend to approximate. Collingwood's theory is a good example of the former sort of approach, and it is significant that his most obvious difficulty is to account for the status of the work as embodied in a medium (the sign-vehicle). Since he identifies the work with a determinate expression of the artist's and treats the embodied work as a kind of dead shell, he is forced to regard critical or audience response as aiming at a kind of total identity with the artist's experience. Although he wants to claim that art flourishes when there is some reciprocal relation between the artist's experience and the audience's understanding, his categorical apparatus does not allow him any systematic way of recognizing this reciprocity.¹¹

Alternatively, it has been suggested by Stephen Pepper and others that the work of art is the ideal limit of an infinite series of perceptions.¹² But why should we assume that informed and critical perception will tend to converge on one interpretation or understanding of the work? We may very well eliminate some possible interpretations by such a process, but there is no reason, to expect convergence on a single critical object.

In terms of semiotic categories, it seems that Collingwood's theory depends upon collapsing the sign relationship by omitting the central element—the sign itself. This leaves identity as the only possible relation between the artist and his audience. Pepper on the other hand, would eliminate the sign's object and reconstitute the sign relation between the sign and its interpretant. But once the sign's object has been eliminated, what principle remains by which the plurality of interpretations may be limited? Dewey seems to have recognized this difficulty, at least implicitly, by suggesting that each act of aesthetic perception creates a new work of art. For Dewey the "work" of art is literally what it is in a particular experience.¹³ We might say that Dewey's version of the sign relationship recognizes only the interpretant. All of these attempts to evade the idea of indeterminacy seem to be phenomenologically false, insofar as we are not disturbed at allowing that there may quite legitimately be a continuum of

possible interpretations of a single work; moreover we want to insist that it is the same work which lends itself to these different interpretations. One reason for this insistence is that experience with art is enriched by coming back to a work and seeing it freshly; on Dewey's account we could never do this.

It might be suggested that on this account the supreme work of art would be a figure like Rorschach's ink-blots, which is indefinitely susceptible of interpretation. Surely no theory in aesthetics could be more compelling than is our knowledge of the artistic inferiority of Rorschach's figures to, say, a Rembrandt. The differences between the Rorschach and the Rembrandt are illuminating, however. For one thing, while the Rorschach may in a sense give rise to a greater diversity of interpretations (is it an evil wizard or a peaceful pond?) these interpretations have little interrelation and the viewer, having produced a few, quickly tires of the game. The Rembrandt typically gives rise to a variety of interpretations which not only tend to be interrelated but also to be augmented by additional viewings. Moreover, it seems to be precisely the more determinate intention of the artist which accounts for the greater interpretability of the painting. In art, as perhaps in political life, the relation between freedom and constraint is not simply an inverse proportional. To develop this notion we would need to have what Peirce called a "logic of vagueness." Until we do, it should be noted that we are able to make distinctions between the trivially and the richly vague. The relation of the two products considered should cause no surprise to those acquainted with the arts, for the same contrast can be observed on a larger scale between a complex and rich artistic tradition which offers a wealth of possibilities to the artist and one with few constraints and little substance where the possibilities for innovation are not provided by the context.

To put the point in a metaphysical way, it is not the case that when something becomes more determinate it also becomes less indeterminate; rather it may lose its indeterminacy in certain respects while acquiring other types, perhaps unanticipated.¹⁴

So, presented with a blank canvas and taking a negative attitude toward all traditions, the artist may have few *real* possibilities of construction although his logical possibilities may be infinite. Conversely, a highly developed style and iconography do not repress the painter's expression but provide expressive possibilities. The same holds true of the interpreter's situation. The blank canvas offers only trivial possibilities of interpretation, unless supported by contextual evidence which leads us to see it as a definite move in some style or tradition—as is the case with much contemporary "impoverished" art. On the other hand, difficult and intricate works like the Bible and the Homeric epics have been the constant delight of interpreters for centuries.

III

At this point it seems necessary to ask whether the semiotic theory enables us to distinguish art from other sign activities. Insofar as *any* sign has some indeterminacy about it, nothing interesting has been learned about signs in art. We might be inclined to suggest, then, that the ambiguity or indeterminacy in art is no more severe than in other areas and may be minimized, if not eliminated, by the application of certain tests and procedures. In this sense, the theory might say too much about symbols in art by assimilating them to all other signs, and providing no grounds for distinguishing them from these other signs.

Suppose we ask how, on the semiotic account, a work of art is different from a concept. Both are symbols rather than icons or indices. Both require interpretation and their proper type of interpretant is of a general or logical variety. Peirce claims that all symbols grow, although the responsible inquirer in science or philosophy will attempt to limit this growth as much as possible. All symbols must themselves be general and repeatable: concepts are expressed in words and works of art can be described by a notation if they are not associated with some enduring thing like a canvas or a text.

One important difference, however, seems to hinge on the way in which a sign in art

may blend or condense several different aspects of signification. Whereas a concept is expressed by a word, the material aspect of the word does not contribute to its meaning and may actually hinder communication if it is hard to pronounce or write. When language is employed poetically, on the other hand, it is difficult to separate its meaning as poetry from the sound-sequence. In the sculptures of George Segal or the paintings of Jasper Johns, the materiality of the signs is emphasized so as to make their iconicity somewhat suspect. The types of complexity that arise in art can be regarded mainly in terms of this convergence of various elements which might be separated, for the sake of clarity, in other situations.¹⁵

One way of achieving such complexity is to combine various types of representation in a single product. A painting may be an icon of a certain scene, an index of the painter's brush-strokes and a symbol of his intentions. In other kinds of symbolism this over-determination may be confusing or accidental, but in art it is central. Another type of complexity is obtained by stressing the various aspects of the sign vehicle: a sculpture is a sign of a general order (what Peirce calls a legisign) because it is enduring or repeatable; so is a word or a concept. Moreover, each requires to be instantiated by vehicles with some material aspect—sounds or marks in the case of the word and a metallic surface, perhaps, in the other. Additionally the sign will have some immediate quality—the way that the words look or sound and the immediate visual or tactile aspect of the sculpture. A work of art will characteristically manifest all these aspects at the same time and their interconnection will be important for determining the way in which the sign is to be taken; ordinarily we will not pay too much attention to the sound of a word and almost none at all to its physical vehicle, because we rightly suppose that these are related peripherally, if at all, to its meaning.

The sign process in art can also be distinguished from others by noting some characteristic features of the attitude or type of intelligence which art requires. When Peirce discusses the characteristics of signs

he seems to have in mind the purposes of a sign-user who has an interest in discovering the correct or proper meaning of a sign, and his pragmatic principle is intended to help such a sign-user clarify and determine his meanings or ideas. If such a sign-user is called a "scientific intelligence" (as Peirce suggests) then it may be that we need to account also for the workings of the artistic intelligence. Whereas the scientific intelligence has an interest in fixing meaning the artistic intelligence is committed to multiplying meaning. This may simply be another way of expressing a Kantian type of contrast between the theoretical and aesthetic attitudes: in the theoretical attitude we attempt to see things as exemplifications of definite concepts, while in the aesthetic attitude we tend to contemplate something in a variety of ways or see it in a number of different lights, without feeling a need to focus on only one of these ways or lights. We could say that signs of various types succeed one another according to different sorts of laws or practices. Peirce calls the science which "ascertain[s] the laws by which in every scientific intelligence one sign gives birth to another" pure rhetoric. But might we not conceive of different types of rhetoric which would deal with different types of sign uses? In some areas, the sign-process tends to converge: the possibility or the hope of such a convergence seems to be the ground of scientific inquiry. A scientific criticism will wish to apply this model to the study of art, supposing that the "true" meaning of the work is a kind of limit of the process of critical inquiry. It is important to remember, however, that this model does not flow simply from the structure of the sign-relationship but is only one way in which signs may "succeed one another."

¹ Charles Stevenson, "Symbolism in the Nonrepresentative Arts," in *Language, Thought, and Culture*, ed., Paul Henle (Ann Arbor, 1958). Stevenson's own theory of interpretation which sees it as derivative from evaluation, seems to be dependent upon the thesis that a work of art is intrinsically amorphous. A semiotic account tends to give the work a more definite identity.

² Charles Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass., 1931), 2.277. This somewhat esoteric pronouncement seems to mean that a metaphor describes rather than exhibits an icon.

³ Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York, 1955), p. 34.

⁴ Ernst Gombrich, "Norm and Form," in *Problems in Aesthetics*, ed., Morris Weitz (New York, 1970).

⁵ A recent statement of this position is to be found in Eric Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, 1967).

⁶ Panofsky, p. 26ff.

⁷ Arthur Danto develops this notion in "The Art-World," *Journal of Philosophy*, 1964.

⁸ Joseph Margolis "Describing and Interpreting Works of Art" in *Contemporary Studies in Aesthetics*, ed. Francis J. Coleman (New York, 1968).

⁹ Peirce, *Collected Papers* 2.302.

¹⁰ "All the artist can do is to fashion *some thing* that will produce a certain effect on someone else's mind. There will never be any accurate way of comparing what has happened in the two minds; and moreover, if what has happened in the one were communicated directly to the other, all art would collapse. The whole effect of art, the *effort* the author's work demands of the consumer, would be impossible without the interposition, between the author and his audience, of a new and impenetrable element capable of acting upon other men's being. *A creator is one who makes others create.*" Paul Valery, *Aesthetics* (New York, 1964), p. 143.

¹¹ Collingwood introduces the notion of collaboration between artist and audience in *The Principles of Art* (New York, 1958), Chapter 14. This should be compared with his insistence on the imaginary or ideal status of the work in Chapters 6 and 7 of the same book.

¹² Stephen Pepper, *The Work of Art* (Bloomington, 1955).

¹³ "The *product* of art—temple, painting, statue, poem—is not the *work* of art. The work takes place when a human being cooperates with the product so that the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties." John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York, 1958), p. 214. While this appears to be the most consistent strand in Dewey's thought on art, there are expressions which might support a different interpretation of his ideas. Dewey does talk of art as involving a triadic relationship, but apparently takes this triadic relationship to obtain only within a single apprehension of a work of art. Cf. p. 106.

¹⁴ Justus Buchler has argued this convincingly both on the metaphysical level and in relation to what he calls query. See his *Nature and Judgment* (New York, 1954) and *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* (New York, 1966).

¹⁵ There is an interesting account of such condensation in Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (New York, 1968).