

# ***Towards a Semioinstitutional Theory of the Aesthetic: Some Results of Metahistorical Thinking in Aesthetics***

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ABSTRACT. The semiotic and/or semiologic discourse was developed on the conceptual base of the signifier-signified relations analysis. Pierce, Saussure, Jakobson, Russian Formalists, Bakhtin, Barthes, Derrida and some others took verbal significations as the pure model of signifying phenomenon. Conclusions of such investigations could be applied to all fields of communication as fundamentally analogical to the verbal one because language was supposed to be involved in all forms of human activity. On this way semioticians/semiologists played a great role in art theory development, but non-verbal aspects of art were hardly covered with it. This was one of reasons why post-structuralist researches (Deleuze, Foucault, Barthes) appeared. Simultaneously, theory of art went on the basis of modern and contemporary art to institutional theory (Dickie and others) seeing its subject in the origin of verbal conventions on creations of art in special community called "the artworld". This text is an attempt to conjoin the two theories in one and to reach a new, broader view on the aesthetic and origins of artistic creations, especially in contemporary art process.

From the very beginning philosophy, the earliest form of theory, it turned special to nature or words and verbal orders as the main mean of sense communication that had been extracted from myths and immediate observations. *Pythagoras* and his school supposed that Prime Being, total, eternal, unchangeable was pure nature of numbers and words, sort or perennial Prime Poetry. From this point of view all secondary kinds of being,

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including human existence, activity, communication, art were supposed to be implications of this Prime Poetry. Pythagoreans preferred to research rhythmical aspects of these phenomena, and results of these investigations we know as their mathematical and musicological constructions. Pythagorean ideas were inspired with idea of Prime Poetry as Prime Code that was spread in all secondary forms of being as codes of their perfection. The last kind of codes were supposed to be separated from substances and fixed in abstract invariant orders of signs (theorems, formulas, musical orders, chromatic preferences, diets, etc) by Pythagorean scholars. Natural language seemed to be not in the focus of their attention, as we happen to know from different sources concerned with Pythagorean affairs. The matter, as we propose, was that verbal signification must have been evaluated in Pythagorean community as a kind of signification with sounds ordered by rhythms. Later, by other thinkers, natural language was imagined as prime model of signification.

We still can only generate some abstract ideas on analogies of some Old Testament's statements and Greek philosophers' concepts. Some of these surprising analogies are concerned with concepts concerning the origin of language. We remember the famous Biblical statements that in the very beginning there was the Word possessed by God and the word was God. It means that God was supposed to be the Primary Word-Code (Pracode), generating many word codes before the act of Creation. It was necessary for establishing something actually existing and differing from the very God's simple substance from absolute nothingness of external to God being. Then we see that this Primary Word-Code appears, among other phenomena, in Adam's capability to give everything the name according and fit to its nature.

We propose it was thanks to circulation of ideas that one of outstanding Greek thinkers, *Heraclitus*, who denied Creation and found cosmos everlasting, nevertheless, found that it was ruled by eternal and unchangeable Word-Code-Law (these meanings are presupposed in what he called Logos). This fundamental analogy of Asian and Greek ideas is not rare or outstanding (the same we see in the cases of Pythagorean *numbers*, Democritean *atoms* and some other ancient concepts). The rare and outstanding fact we see in totality and wholeness of Heraclitus' mental construction in which we see him stressing attention on "natural" connection between

words (the signifiers) and things (the signifieds). He used special orders of propositions ("dark style") to manifest universality of eternal logos in changing things.

*Democritus* found words absolutely conventional but used textual organization (rhythm) to make explicit those meanings that couldn't be explained. *Plato* in almost all of his dialogues investigates problems of correctness of names. In some texts his investigations turn especially concentrated. In *Cratylus*<sup>1</sup> we face one of earliest written discussions on questions of verbal signification. One character, called Cratylus, insists on the "inherent correctness" of names; another, Hermogenes, rejects it saying there are no names coming to things from their nature, but names are carried out from "habit and custom". *Aristotle* paid great attention to researching relations between words and psychical phenomena including mental meanings. This problem is basic for his work *On Interpretation*<sup>2</sup> where he defines words as *phone semantike* (signifying sounds). He made the first attempt of comprehensive explanation of verbal forms origination. According to it spoken words are supposed to be symbols or signs of affections or impressions of the soul and written words are defined as signs secondary to them - signs of spoken words. All languages, consequently, are thought out sets of vocal and graphic signifying instruments with which phenomena are identified.

Late antiquity, especially in Rome, also kept process of signification in focus of attention because it was the period of culture when rhetoric was dominating. Rhetorical figures, abstracted from all kinds of contents gave very rich material for sign researches. Thus we can find deep thoughts in many writings on rhetoric of this period, but we think enough to point only at *Sextus Empiricus* who separated three aspects in phenomena of signification: *the signifier*, *the signified* and *the referent*. Roman rhetorical culture and education gave the world such great person of Christian thought as *Saint Augustine*. At first, he was a very talented professional in this field but when he had been christened, he turned a new kind of theorist that could be called, in wide sense, a theologian, but in narrow and exact sense – a re-

<sup>1</sup> *Plato* in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 12. Translated by Harold N. Fowler. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1921.

<sup>2</sup> *Aristotle's Categories and De interpretation*. Translated with notes and glossary by John Lloyd Ackrill. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963.

searcher of Divine Signification. We must see that he had forgotten pagan views on rhetoric as self-dominated knowledge but he hadn't forgotten his rhetorical skills and his professional experience. Saint Augustine used his skills and previous professional rhetorical experience in his theoretical approach to meanings of God in the world created by Him from nothingness. Thus he established a new form of interpretation where sign phenomena should be evaluated not only on the base of relation to each other but on the base of relation to each other derived from their place and meaning in the whole of creation. Later on this fundament the great construction of Christian hermeneutics appeared.

From this period, almost purely dedicated to abstract investigations of verbal signification in relation to God, Creation and creatures later grammatical, linguistic and philological studies came out and finally transformed to such state that was called *semiology* in Europe (*Saussure*) and *semi-otic(s)* in America (*Pierce*). We don't want to occupy the larger place of this article to historical circumstances of medieval discourse on signs and names and their importance for future semiotics/semiology: majority of this aspects are put by *Eco* into the context of his *The Name of the Rose*<sup>3</sup> and also could be find in his remarks *on its margins* (*Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (1984)).

The only remark that we must put on the margins of medieval retro-spection is predominated to say that this period by all its cultural conditions fixed mental attention of European theorists on verbal signification, its origination, order, hierarchy, and all like that. *Nominalism, realism, conceptualism* are not exact, precise and correct names for philosophical mode of discourse, but they are such ones for the mode of discourse later called *semiotical/semiological*. *Saint Thomas Aquinas* for his philosophizing was called Angelic Doctor but he himself defined philosophy as art to connect words correctly. Since Middle Ages putting language into the center of investigations turned the dominating mode to think out signification and communication.

The first philosopher who used the word, very close to "semiotics", *John Locke*, published his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in 1689 - 1690. Locke used the word *semiotike* as *the doctrine of signs* that consid-

<sup>3</sup> Eco, U. *The Name of the Rose*. New York: Harcourt, 1983.

ers the nature of “signs the mind makes use of for the understanding of things, or conveying its knowledge to others”.<sup>4</sup> Locke stated that all signs were conventional, “a voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an Idea”. In aesthetic sense it’s essential to say that Locke was the first who managed to combine ontological and linguistic analysis in one doctrine. The thing is, according to Locke’s idea of *tabula rasa* human mind is clean without sensual data that appear as mental content in the form of words.

Aesthetics must be inspired with its possibility to enjoy the role of the epistemological discipline that will unite ontological and semiological analysis, having been supposed to be absolutely divided for reasons of scientific purity (see, for instance, famous Eco’s argumentation on this subject in his work on *the absent structure* (1968)<sup>5</sup> where he criticizes Heidegger for *ontologyzing*). We must put our main intention here: we think it was a historic gag, concerned, again, with linguistic aspects of misunderstanding that aesthetics and semiology were not in the rank of one and general *metaepistemological* discourse in philosophy after Locke. The problem is, Locke didn’t mean external senses to be the instruments of writing on *tabula rasa* of human mind: they were no *instruments*, but the *only* instrument known under the name of the *interior sense*.

The concept of interior sense was developed in the depth of Saint Thomas Aquinas’ gnoseological analytics as the base (*formally* ontological) of the right order to connect words. We remember his idea expressed in the text *On Being and Essence*<sup>6</sup> as well as in other places that a human person is a case of *subjectum esse* (actually existing subject) where (as in all such cases) *materia signata* (signed matter) is actualized, brought to actual reality of a separate being, substance by *the signifier* – the form. But human

<sup>4</sup> Locke, J. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> Эко, У. Отсутствующая структура. Введение в семиологию. Санкт-Петербург: Петрополис, 1998. We didn’t find an English version of this text. It’s interesting that Eco doesn’t mention it in the list of his works on his site (<http://www.umbertoeco.com/en/books-on-philosophy.html>). In Italian it appeared with following copyright: 1968 Casa Ed. Valentino Bammiani & C. Sp.a Via Pisacane, 26 – Milano. This book was also translated into Spanish. In English Eco expressed similar ideas in *A Theory of Semiotics*: Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *On Being and Essence* / Translated by Armand Maurer. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1968.

subjects are characterized in genetical aspect with essential quality that here *materia signata* appearing as human body could be signed with the only *signifier* – the unique individual form (intellectual soul).

So, the essence for a human subject means contractedness from the individual soul and individual body – the individual signifying and the individual signified. Surely, in widely observed theological perspective (*Summa theologiae*) it means that before the Terrible Court a human person must stand unique and this unique portion of sensitive and thinking matter is to be judged for eternal sensual and intellectual prosperity or sufferings of the same conditions. This absolute correlation means there must be *the Signifier* for the game with such firm rules. In this aspect, if we developed this idea to the end, its mental line must be called *the virtual semiological proof of God's being*. We know that there were and there are some theorists ready to think like that – for instance, Jacques Maritain and especially Etienne Gilson. I thought of this, translating some of their texts and publishing them in Russian when I was younger. And I still think it's a perspective line of thinking if you happen to think *theologically*.

But from my young years, since I was a student of a philosophical faculty I decided to be an aesthetician, and immediately understood it meant to decide to think, at least in professional field, aesthetically. This aesthetic way of thinking hasn't bored me to the present. So now I decide to continue my way of aesthetic thinking presenting to professional community one thing that I noticed by the way when I wasn't already too young and was writing my text *Aesthetics: the Beginnings of the Classic Theory* (2011)<sup>7</sup>. When I was writing this text I thought the aesthetic simultaneously in the historic and epistemological modes of aesthetic thinking. This case of aesthetic thinking I could call metahistory of aesthetics and I like to think that it was invented by Benedetto Croce in the world, followed *Alexey F. Losev* in Russia and that I am following the both. Metahistorical mode of aesthetic thinking meets, first of all with dividing historical unity of aesthetic theoretical experience into *implicit* and *explicit* parts. And thinking *metahistorically* things that happened in history of aesthetics I noticed the gag of this history that I am telling you now.

<sup>7</sup> It's not translated into English, so I refer to the Russian original: Дзикевич С.А. Эстетика: начала классической теории. М.: Академический проект, 2011.

Traditionally it's generally accepted that it was *Baumgarten* who brought aesthetic thinking from the implicit to the explicit mode. It's also known how it happened: he contemplated some analogies of metaphysics and poetry and proposed the analogies were gnoseologically fundamental, being different appearances of one nature and this nature had to be thought and investigated separately, in a special philosophical, gnoseological discipline. He called it *aesthetics* because of the analogical nature he had earlier seen in metaphysics and poetry. He realized that they were of this general inspiring cause and this cause was *interior sense*, or *aesthesis* in Greek. When we take any ancient Greek dictionary we see, he was *etymologically* right using this word because it meant all multiplicity and richness of sensual experience of a human person.

It's important in historical aspect of theoretic thinking because it let us escape from difficulties with *noesis* as the case of total but absolutely mental act; contemplation, inspiring both metaphysics and poetry is a total but *all-organic* act, so in Greek it must called *aesthesis*. But in *metahistorical* aspect this case of naming is even more interesting: Baumgarten just translated from Latin into Greek (because there was no other way to stress attention at it when writing in Latin as Baumgarten did) the concept of *the interior sense* known in metaphysics since Saint Thomas Aquinas who thought it was an all-organic capability possessed by every human subject (because of his abovementioned essence) and consisting of five ingredients – *vis aestimativa, vis cognitiva, sensus communis, memoria, imaginatio*.

Saint Thomas, much earlier than Locke, confirmed the mind empty without the interior sense data because external senses have only this way to get coordinated, and his position means that the mind's work is necessary only when the level of sensual data coordination in the interior sense coordination has been passed. Then the mind appears on the stay of cognition, gives names to the interior data phenomena and investigates criteria of their correctness and of correctness of their connections. Since Saint Thomas' writings his point turned *a common place* of European gnoseology and for John Locke it was essential to prove it *empirically, even medically*, as his profession led him. So his idea was involved, first of all, in special kinds of epistemological thinking and later in Britain appeared in generalized forms of philosophy of attitude, taste, the beautiful, the sublime and art, but all these fields led to philosophy of language and in metahistorical

perspective - to Wittgenstein, Collingwood, some others.

So thanks to the concrete historical context of thinking on themes of the interior sense on the Island they didn't need to search for a special term for it. On the Continent, in Germany the way of thinking on the theme of the interior sense was put in the general epistemological context of Leibniz-Wolf school where privation such special term appeared and was filled by Baumgarten's *Aesthetics*. Then this short-time historic slip was erased by works of *Kant* who evaluated both Baumgarten and British authors and constructed a great building of aesthetic theory – starting from the fundament of transcendent aesthetics to judgment capability analysis. Kant was the first who combined these two ways of aesthetic thinking – gnoseologically subjective and so ontologically realistic and formally verbal ones. In this construction of aesthetics both ontological and semiological ways of thinking lived together but on different floors and it was not a gag.

The historic gag came later, when *Hegel* in his *Lectures* put under doubts the very idea of *aesthetics as it had earlier appeared* Baumgarten's work – and, finally, Kant's achievement that we've described. Aesthetical content of philosophical thinking was replaced with thinking on history of beautiful in fine art. It was still a kind of gnoseology and ontology as they could be interpreted in Hegel's system terms, but it was no more verbal analysis in formal aspect. The gag started and it continued to almost to the end of the 20th century. We remember as Croce called his aesthetics as theory of expression *general linguistics* and it was also supposed in Rudolf Carnap's distinguishing between “the language we speak and the language which we use to speak about that language”, the higher-level language used to describe language itself as an object of study.

Omitting some historic details we must say that to the late 60s of the 20th century the lines in aesthetic thinking we've observed earlier kept separated. In 1974 *George Dickie* published his work *Art and the Aesthetic: an Institutional Analysis*<sup>8</sup>, where these lines were finally combined together. But the thing was the author didn't want it. He had developed an idea that artifacts are getting status of creations of art and corresponding values

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<sup>8</sup> Dickie, George. *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*. Ithaca and L.: Cornell University Press, 1974.

in verbal practice of the institutional chain – the artworld, and this was supposed to be analogical to all other procedures in which somebody or something is changing the previous public status. The mean to bring the change could be only one: language, specialized verbal practice. We don't care how many times Dickie has corrected details of his position, here the only and key detail is interesting: the aesthetic can't exist without verbal confirmation of its status. In this process words are *signifying* the reality of aesthetic experience and so *aesthesis* and *semiosis* are permanently turning to one another and the future project of aesthetics must be concerned with some new way – *semioinstitutional* – way of thinking the aesthetic (and art as intersubjective culmination of aesthetic experience).

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