

THE SEMIOTICS OF CHILDREN'S DRAWING PRACTICES

The analysis of student's observational drawings in the previous chapter explored a number of semiotic strategies that students may employ when making drawings from observation. I introduced the ideas of syntax and meaning in relation to the terms metonymy and metaphor in order to consider how each drawing might function as a legitimate semiotic production for the student rather than reading or assessing a drawing as a view-centred production which demanded the use of a particular representational system such as linear perspective. In this chapter I want to consider drawings produced by much younger children in order to show that even in very early drawings we can detect the emergence of a graphic syntax, a local semiotics, that the child develops to produce representational images. There is a wealth of study on the development of children's drawing practices (see for example: Goodnow 1977; Luquet 1927; Lowenfeld and Brittain 1970; Piaget and Inhelder 1956; Cox 1998) and ample reviews of this literature already exist (see for example: Thomas and Silk 1990) which is easily accessed. I do not intend to provide a detailed analysis or review of this work but I shall refer to the research and publications of John Matthews (1994, 1999) who I believe has made considerable headway in helping us to understand the complexity and sophistication of children's early drawing as visual semiotic practice.

In many studies of young children's drawings (see for example Lowenfeld and Brittain 1970) there is a tendency to view their early mark-making as random and meaningless. Such drawings are often referred to as *scribble* drawings, an interesting word with pejorative undertones. In terms of the development of visual representation, scribble drawings are viewed as the first stage along a hierarchical route that leads to the development of recognisable visual forms. The end point of this route is usually taken to be the ability to employ the drawing system we know in the West as linear perspective. It has to be said immediately that such ideas on development are underpinned by a representational paradigm which is eurocentric, and that in other cultures children use different graphic forms for symbolic and representational purposes. Cox (1992) argues that children need to be given training in particular representational techniques like perspective drawing so that they can acquire drawing skills to produce 'realistic' pictures, in a similar sense to them acquiring correct grammar and spelling in their learning of Standard English. This argument assumes a particular understanding of the purpose of visual representation, which is to produce drawings in which the three-dimensional forms of objects seen from a particular viewpoint are depicted and easily recognised in the two-dimensional forms of the drawing; and the most effective way of achieving this is through the use of linear perspective. In many

ways this representational system is given the status of being able to represent visual perception, in other words it appears to depict optical truth. Development in visual representation therefore consists of a developmental continuum from the random chaos of scribble to the order and authority of projection systems such as perspective.

However in a body of research spanning over twenty years Matthews proves quite conclusively that scribble drawings are not random or chaotic but organised and meaningful. In his book, *The Art of Childhood and Adolescence*, he describes the origins of what I have termed visual syntax and syntactical relations and how these function for the child to encode both conceptual and expressive concerns. Matthews describes three *generational structures* of marks (pp. 19–27) which children produce and by combining these simple marks they begin to explore objects people and events within the phenomenology of their experience:

Some early paintings and drawings are not pictures of things, but they are representations in a fuller sense, in that they record the child's process of attention to objects and events. Far from being meaningless, the early paintings and drawings are products of a complex or family of representational and expressive modes (pp. 20–21).

Matthews shows with abundant evidence of hundreds of drawings and paintings that very young children are capable of employing the simple syntax of the three generational structures for complex representational purposes. For example, by using a series of 'push-pull' and 'horizontal arcs' (first generation) a child of two years represents an aeroplane as an object; and then in a series of elliptical rotations an aeroplane in flight (see p. 34). Each drawing has therefore a different semiotic purpose, the first to represent the configuration of an object, the second to represent a dynamic movement. Second generation structures include continuous rotations, moving points and demarcated line endings (pp. 25–27). Third generation structures include core and radial forms, the use of parallel lines, right-angular structures and U shapes on baselines (pp. 27–28).

Throughout this book Matthews provides a highly detailed study of how children devise and explore simple syntactical structures and semiotic relations in their early mark-making and drawing to represent all kinds of experiences including; objects, people, movement of objects, time sequences, narratives, action sequences, sound and play. In other words Matthews is describing the beginning of semiotic activity and early processes of semiosis in young children's drawing practices. The drawing of objects from a fixed viewpoint, the major criterion framing many studies of the development of representation, is not of central concern to young children as they draw.

In my own studies (Atkinson 1991) of young children's paintings and drawings a similar picture emerges in relation to syntax and representation. Simply scanning their drawings for recognisable features may fail to appreciate the different ways in which drawings function as representations. Consider the drawing in Figure 9, made by a 6 year old boy, Captain America, the

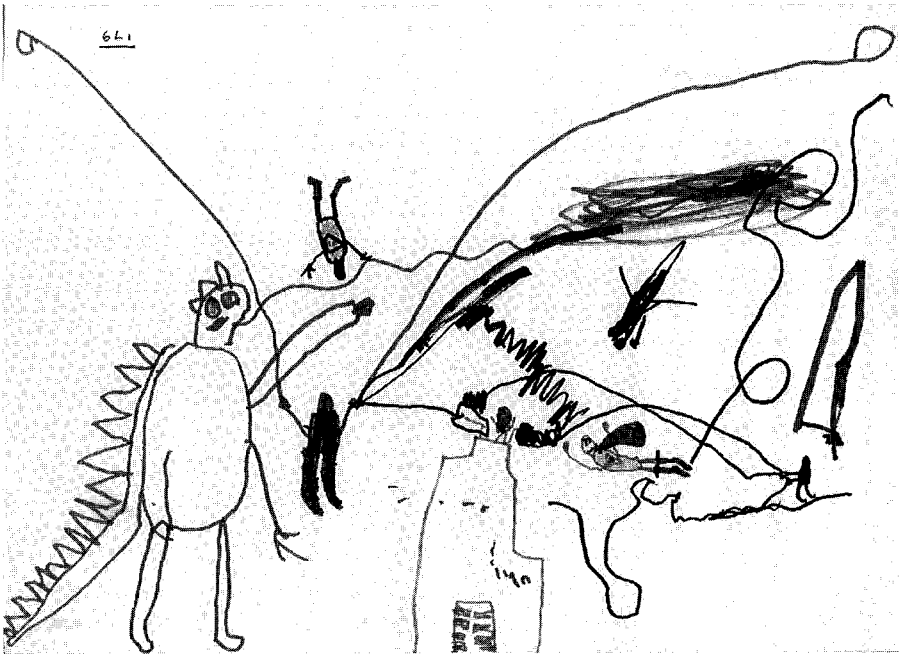


Figure 9.

horizontal flying figure right of centre, is placed at the end of a spiralling line, deliberately constructed to represent his acrobatic flight path. Spiderman, the vertical figure left of centre and to the immediate right of the monster figure, is depicted with lines projecting from both hands to the left and right top corners of the drawing surface where the lines form a loop. These lines signify Spiderman's anchor ropes and the loops signify the anchor points that allow him to escape the monster's clutches. They also signify the 'firing' of these ropes and their 'anchoring' around their respective anchor points. The lines emerging from the small figure, bottom right, depict a missile or laser trajectory and their end-points suggest explosive impacts. Similarly the line from the monster's mouth ends in a series of elliptical rotations suggesting that the lines represent explosion and fire. Thus these linear forms are employed by the child to represent the actions of flight, laser-fire, flame trajectories and rope trajectories, in other word they can be read as both time and action representations. But when we inspect the child's depiction of the various figures in the drawing we find that similar lines are used for quite different representational (semiotic) purposes. Captain America's outstretched arms are depicted by a single line with a circular blob on the end. The line is used to depict the linear extension of an arm in space. However, both legs are depicted by a line that depicts the contour of each limb, as are the legs of the monster. These lines depict therefore both the volume and extension of each limb. In

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