

CHAPTER ONE

SEMIOTICS AND HERMENEUTICS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is concerned with the ideas of signification, interpretation and meaning and their application to the task of interpreting children's drawing practices. To begin I present a brief introduction and discussion of semiotics, the study of signs and signification systems, because I argue that drawings can be profitably viewed as semiotic processes and structures which children organise and construct for specific signification or representational purposes. An important task for those needing to interpret children's drawings is to understand how they signify for the child. If we return to the drawing in Figure 1, it is difficult to understand how it is meaningful for the child unless we have some knowledge of the child's interests and concerns which lead to the production of the drawing. Even then it is difficult to gain a clear understanding of those affective, cognitive and physical processes that constitute the dynamics of the drawing process. This is not a representational drawing in the conventional sense of depicting a view of an object or event. However it is a drawing in which the child is attempting to represent his specific idiosyncratic interests in tall structures and the letter form 'r', further, it is a drawing in which these interests are visualised according to the child's idiosyncratic graphic logic.

In many ways my discussion of this drawing helps to make the distinction between representation and signification. Representation can be understood in the conventional sense of a re-presentation, in a formal structure, of a prior view or experience of objects or events, so that these can be recognised in the representational form. John Willats (1997, p. 22) writes that:

If a picture is to provide an effective representation it must be possible to recognise in it the shapes of the objects that the artist or draftsman intended to represent. I shall therefore define an effective shape representation as a pictorial representation in which the three dimensional shapes of objects that the artist or draftsman intends to portray can be seen, clearly and unambiguously.

Here representation consists of a direct association between the representational image as signifier, and the objects represented as signified. This is not unlike the sign relation, consisting of signifier and signified, postulated in structural linguistics by Saussure (1916). For Willats (1997) and Wollheim (1973) there are clearly pictorial representations which are more effective than others in conveying information about three-dimensional form. For example, some pictorial representations, such as orthographic projections, only provide information of two-dimensional shapes, whilst others such as isometric projections or linear perspective, depict information about three-dimensional form.

The way in which I am using the term signification on the other hand replaces the relation between signifier and signified to one between signifier and signifier. That is to say, the relation is not between a signifier and something beyond and outside of its domain which we can access directly, a signified, because that which is signified can never be accessed except through signification, hence the signified is always a signifier. Thus when we speak of an effective representation we are not comparing a representational form with a true likeness which we can somehow approach outside of symbolic systems, our judgement is always already informed by symbolic systems.

An important question to ask therefore is when teaching and responding to observational drawing should we be instructing students to produce effective and unambiguous representational drawings which implies a didactic and sectarian pedagogy with an implicit hierarchy of achievement, or should we be concerned with encouraging students to respond to such drawing tasks by providing access to conventional drawing strategies but also respecting and legitimising more idiosyncratic productions and then trying to understand the ways in which they function as observational drawings for the student? The approach I will be taking is the latter. Whilst it is possible to argue that when used for specific purposes certain projection systems in drawing convey information more effectively than others, for example, an engineering drawing contains information for a specific purpose; a child or student's response to an observational task may take many forms depending upon how the child orients him or herself to the drawing practice. These individual orientations to drawing practice have to be considered carefully in relation to their graphic outcomes. Consequently when initiating drawing practices in schools we need to consider why we want students to draw, what will students achieve through drawing, what can we explore through drawing and how do we respond to the different strategies and outcomes of drawing practice? Here the notion of signification is, I believe, appropriate in that it provides a way of thinking about drawing practices in terms of their different signifying strategies. With these concerns in mind I will provide a brief introduction to semiotic theory and then show how it can help in our task of interpreting children's drawings.

SEMIOTICS

In various realms of social and cultural study today it is almost *passé* to acknowledge the view that perception and our understanding of reality is a semiotic construction through language or other sign systems including images. That is to say, there is no clear distinction between reality and its symbolisation and that therefore reality is a symbolic construction. However, in our everyday life contexts it is difficult to break the grip of simple communication models which suggest that language is a neutral medium that reflects or describes reality. Thus the suggestion that reality is a semiotic construction and that signs such as words or images shape our perception and understanding

of experience and not the other way round, where we have experiences and then we find the right words to represent is sometimes difficult to accept.

But words or images are not labels that we attach to reveal prior ideas, events, experiences or perceptions, rather these semiotic orders actually create our conceptions of reality and therefore, the conceptual framework through which reality is made accessible. This suggests that conscious experience and thought is a construction built out of signs and that our lives are largely lived within and according to different sign systems that we inherit and develop. A further implication of this material production of reality through semiotic orders concerns our ideas about identity, of ourselves and of others. Again it is quite natural to think of our selves as unique individuals who possess an inner core of self, a distinct personality or identity and that language allows us to access this unique psychological sphere (Walkerdine and Blackman 2001, p. 17). We do not in contrast normally consider our selves as fragmented, partial or incomplete. However, if we accept the shaping of meaning by linguistic or visual signs it is possible to acknowledge that this unified conception of self is a consequence of words such as 'I', 'me', 'myself', 'you', or 'yourself', which appear to designate a unified individual.

The Saussurian legacy

The study of semiotics today constitutes an important field of enquiry in social and cultural studies. There are numerous texts that describe historical and theoretical developments (see for example: Bignell 1997; Hawkes 1977; Kress and Hodge 1991; Barthes 1973, 1977; Saussure 1959; Eco 1976; Sebeok 1969; Kristeva 1986). It is generally agreed that Charles Saunders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure were the founding figures. Saussure's division of the sign into its constituent parts of signifier and signified formed the basis of later work by Levi-Strauss (1966), Barthes (1973) and many others. Saussure's division does not articulate the relation between a sign and a referent in the world, it exists purely within the realm of signification. If we take the verbal sign *house* the signifier consists of the verbal sound whilst the signified is the concept, and together they constitute the verbal sign. In visual terms a picture of a house can be understood similarly so that the signifier consists of the visual marks whilst the signified is the visual image and together they constitute the visual sign. Barthes (1973) developed Saussure's sign division onto a second level of meaning which he termed myth or ideology, so that the sign on the first level of meaning becomes a signifier on a second level. We can grasp these two semiotic levels by considering a well known consumer brand name such as *Calvin Klein*. On the first semiotic level the letters (signifier) simply denote a name (signified). However on the second level the name *Calvin Klein* signifies a world of designer fashion and it becomes a fashion statement that circulates within the wider textual semiotics (visual and verbal) of contemporary fashion design.

We can think of the first level as the level of denotation in that on this

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