

SEMIOTICS, HERMENEUTICS AND OBSERVATIONAL DRAWINGS

If we acknowledge that responding to students' and children's drawings is a process of interpretation then we are, I would suggest, acknowledging that this process is constituted within hermeneutic relations. It is how these relations are constituted that is so important for the pedagogical outcome. When I began teaching in secondary schools I often used collections of objects as a starting point for a drawing activity. During the lesson I would try to *correct* those drawings that appeared to deviate too much from the family of projection systems known in the West as perspectival projection, assuming, wrongly, that this should be the form of representation which students should aim for and try to achieve. If I came across a drawing which appeared strange or incomprehensible one my responses I remember vividly was to insist that the student 'looked more carefully', thereby assuming that this was not happening. Another tactic I adopted for explaining drawings that I read as weak or mysterious representations was to believe that the student *lacked* drawing ability. In those days my pedagogical approach took little account of what kind of information a student might be attempting to encode in his or her drawing form and the semiotic logic he or she employed. I was in fact guilty of ignoring the possibility that a student's drawing form was legitimate for its semiotic purpose. It seems then that in the context of teaching art I saw drawing as an activity concerned with developing accurate perception accompanied by competent hand-eye coordination to achieve a good representational image. Underpinning this conception of drawing practice are attendant ideas of the autonomous individual and the idea of universal vision. For as long as the eye received the necessary perceptual information and could translate this perception through technical competence into a drawing there should be no problem, and if there were problems they were the result of poor perception or lack of technical skill.

My approach to student's drawings was predetermined by a particular representational expectation, that of linear perspective, which determined or influenced my judgement. This powerful representational technique was placed like a template upon student's drawings in order to evaluate the representational efficacy of a drawing. Historically perspective has occupied a privileged position in relation to representing views of the world, many people in the West still take it to be an 'accurate' representation of how we see objects in the world from a fixed viewpoint. The outcome of applying perspective as the main criterion for judging student's drawing practices is of course that those who are proficient in this drawing system are regarded as able drawers whilst those who do not are seen as lacking in drawing ability. My hermeneutical relation to student's drawings constituted therefore a form of cultural repro-

duction. That is to say I was interpreting my student's drawings through a particular representational tradition that I expected them to reproduce. I must make the point that my early teaching practice may or may not have been typical of that of other teachers at the time, I can only recount that from conversations with other teachers about assessment my views and practices were not uncommon.

It took some time for me to realise that not being able to employ perspectival projection in an observational drawing does not necessarily equate with a lack in drawing ability or faulty perception. Drawings produced by children and older students often manifest what appears to be a complex amalgam of drawing systems (Dubery and Willats 1972), which we can separate out into orthographic projection, oblique projection or naïve perspective, for example. Such drawings can appear as muddled or confused if we expect to see a perspectival drawing. But if we try to consider a drawing from the student's position of interest and try to understand what semiotic information he or she is attempting to encode, we may begin to realise that the use of different drawing systems or mark configurations within a drawing may allude to fluctuating interests and the encoding of different kinds or qualities of information which are quite different from view-specific information. Thus a drawing from observation may not be concerned only with representing objects from a specific viewpoint, but other kinds of information may be included.

If we examine Figure 3, a drawing produced by a year nine student (13–14 years) in secondary school in the UK, this drawing seems to indicate a variety



Figure 3.

of interpretational interests. The way in which the glass is depicted through the use of a naïve perspectival drawing system may indicate an interest in representing a view of its three-dimensional form in space. When we consider the depiction of the plate however on which the glass is placed and also the table mat on which the plate stands a different drawing system, orthographic projection, is employed which may indicate a different semiotic interest, perhaps a desire to signify the enduring or canonical shapes of these objects. When we consider the depiction of occlusion in the drawing there are some interesting semiotic strategies. The glass containing dark liquid occludes the rear portion of the plate and the edge of the table through an implied horizontal plane. However, there are also 'on-top-of' relations which are depicted – the crisps layered on the plate, the plate on top of the table mat – which involve occlusion through an implied vertical plane. The fusion of different semiotic interests facilitated through the use of different drawing systems and mark configurations give this drawing a fascinating spatial semiotics.

In general terms the drawing could be said to manifest a mixture of viewer-centred and object-centred representational interests (Atkinson 1993; Matthews 1999). These interests seem to demand different syntactic rules for their respective semantic structures. The syntax of a drawing can be said to constitute the graphic elements and the rules by which the drawing is constructed for the student. It is the metonymic logic by which the lines and marks constitute the drawing and relate to each other. The difficulty with such an analysis of the drawing is that it fragments and abstracts what in effect is an organic and evolutionary process that unfolds as the drawing practice proceeds through time. Such evolution can be seen as an holistic and dynamical semiotic sequence, a process of semiosis, which involves a layering of different experiential interests which, in turn, demand an orchestration of different drawing repertoires (Atkinson 1993; Wolf and Perry 1988).

If we only employ perspective, for example, as a criterion to assess the efficacy of this representational drawing we may overlook different perceptual and cognitive experiences and semiotic interests that led to its production. But there is also a further difficulty with the deeper analysis I have provided. Teasing out the use of different drawing systems, oblique projection, orthographic projection, and so on, may be helpful for making more effective responses to student's drawing practices, but in the duration of the drawing practice the mark configurations which form the drawing systems we abstract may constitute responses to different experiential interests in the objects *as well as* to the unfolding syntactical (metonymic) structure of the drawing (Atkinson 1993). In other words, the student's own drawing practice may constitute a developing semiotic language, a process of semiosis that is functioning reflexively on both semantic and syntactic levels. Put more simply a drawing practice may consist of two dialogues, one which involves the student functioning reflexively upon the quality and potential of his or her mark making, and another which involves functioning reflexively upon the efficacy of the drawing as a signification in relation to its referent, imagined or real.

Art in Education

Identity and Practice

Atkinson, D.

2002, IX, 206 p. 45 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1085-9