VISUAL SEMIOTICS IN THE STUDY OF ART PHENOMENA: SYMBOL AND SYMPTOM

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Abstract. *The study aims to use the approach of visual semiotics to analyse the ritual graphic signs of the Rezekne Jewish cemetery as a segment of the city in terms of "signifier" and "signified", or "expression" and "content". The Star of David, as the dominant sign of the ritual graphics, is gradually losing the status of a sacred symbol and in a series of tombstones confirms the structure of a symptom. The paper is devoted not only to clarifying the cultural and social causes of such changes but also to the study of the mechanism of mutual transitions between symbols and symptoms, the differences in the coding of these types of signs, which has not been done in visual semiotics so far.*

Theoreticians have hitherto not paid due attention to the study of signs of graves as a segment of the urban environment. Moreover, the theory of visual semiotics also lacks a description of the specificity of signs in ritual graphics. Ritual graphics is an important indicator of the regularity of cultural processes in an ethnically diverse environment. When surveying the Jewish cemeteries of the Latgale region, the difference in the choice of visual graphics in the city and the countryside is obvious. In rural cemeteries that are still in use, the content and structure of verbal messages, as well as decorative graphics are traditional, therefore predictable. In city cemeteries, there is a change in graphics, deviations from tradition, its modification and obvious violations of tradition. Along with the verbal report about the deceased, the ritual graphic, on the one hand, complements it as an integral part, on the other hand, lives an independent life, because the first, and the only sign that the observer notices is the visual or non-verbal sign. In terms of information, the visual sign is noticeably more capacious, as it is older than the verbal and requires much less time for perception. The focus of the study is the divergence between the meanings of the sacred hexagram and the secular yellow star or "badge", the causal relationships of their use and perception from the point of view of visual semiotics and cultural philosophy - phenomena of symbolization and desymbolization.

Keywords: *cemeteries as a segment of the city, codes of ritual graphics; symbol and symptom, symbolization and desymbolization, visual semiotics.*

Introduction

The Rezekne Jewish cemetery is a substructure representing the "others" in the culture of Latgale; it has specific linguistic and ritual graphic traditions,

valuable genealogical material, historical evidence of the fate of local Jews, and a distinctive cult of graves defined by the ethnically diverse environment. It is one of the largest and oldest Jewish cemeteries in Latgale (established in 1786, at the current 91 Andreja Upisa Street).

Jews have always nurtured and preserved their cultural distinctiveness, which is also characteristic of their traditions of arranging graves. Depending on the cultural and social trends of the time, it is possible to trace changes in the formation of inscriptions, graphics, form, etc. of the Jewish tombstones in Rezekne. The interaction with the traditions of the local majority, the Latgalians, shows the hybridization of Jewish cemetery culture. In the 20th century, Yiddish gradually disappeared from grave inscriptions, during the Soviet occupation the role of the sacred language - Hebrew - diminished, while the influence of the Russian language increased. In the last decade of the 20th century, grave inscriptions in Russian with a significantly reduced Hebrew already dominated. In the second half of the 20th century, the symbolic meaning of the grave graphics became less important, local Jews adopted Latgalian traditions in the design of tombstones, sacred symbols coexisted with the secular ones and experienced transformations in representation and meaning in many places (Senkāne, 2017).

A cemetery as a segment of a city with its distinctive signs has not been the focus of semioticians' attention so far. Visual semiotics does not pay attention to the peculiarities of expression and content of the ritual graphics. The ritual graphics are an important indication of the cultural processes. The variety of verbal and non-verbal signs used in Jewish cemeteries in the Latgale region depends on the location of a cemetery (urban or rural area). In rural cemeteries that are still in use, the structure of messages and the catalogues of visual symbols are traditional and predictable. In urban cemeteries, there is a change of verbal and non-verbal signs, modifications and apparent violations of the norms of style and rhetoric.

The aim of the study is to use the approach of visual semiotics to analyze some ritual graphic signs of the Rezekne Jewish cemetery as a segment of the city, clarifying the relationship between "signifier" and "signified" or expression and content in cases of symbolization and desymbolization of messages. The Star of David, as the dominant sign of the ritual graphics, is gradually losing its status of a sacred symbol and confirms the structure of a symptom (a simple message) in a number of tombstones. The paper is devoted not only to the clarification of the cultural and social causes of such changes, but also to the study of the mechanism of mutual transitions between symbols and symptoms, the differences in the coding of these types of signs, which has not been done (also in the visual semiotics of a city in general) so far.

Alongside the verbal message about the deceased, the Jewish ritual graphic, on the one hand, complements it as an integral part, on the other hand,

lives an independent life, since the first and the only (especially in the case of lack of knowledge of Hebrew and Yiddish) thing an observer notices is the visual or non-verbal sign. In terms of information, the visual sign is significantly more capacious, as it is older than the verbal one and requires much less time for perception. The study focuses on the semantic and pragmatic differences between the sacred hexagram and the secular yellow star or "badge" in the urban segment of the ethnically diverse culture - the substructure of cemeteries.

Visual Semiotics in Cultural Communication

Semiotics is an interdisciplinary approach; it functions and develops as an integration of various humanistic strategies, which range from the theoretical to the practical ones: from the philosophy of the visual image to the rules of interior design and table setting, book design and costume construction, etc. A sign is always a language tool because it participates in communication. Outside this communication, we are dealing only with symptoms. A sign includes within itself reading codes according to which it designates and signifies something specific and substitutes itself for something else (Eco, 1976). A sign consists of a signifier (*signifiant*) - a form a sign takes, and a signified *(signifie)* - a concept a sign represents. A sign is an entity, formed by the connection between the signifier and the signified (Saussure, 1983). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is the meaning.

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) uses cultural myths to analyze everyday phenomena as signs, thus demonstrating that semiotics seeks to include all sign systems (words, images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, etc.) and their diverse interrelationships that are the basis of cultural "behavior" and behavior within culture: rituals, norms, public perceptions, etc. (Barthes, 1957). Semioticians are interested in the process how meanings are being formed, what and how signs represent not only in the public sector, but also in the field of constructing and preserving reality - cultural creation. Umberto Eco (1932–2016) and Yuri Lotman (1922–1993), a representative of the Moscow-Tartu school of cultural semiotics, focus on signs in art (architecture, cinema, literature) and at the same time on signs in a city.

Eco recognizes that not only the space inhabited by humans, but also the world itself is a cultural phenomenon: what we see expresses how we see it. Wilderness depends on the setting of human "optics" and is culturally determined. The view from the window is often captured (and sold) as part of the interior. It is "semiotics that translates the natural into the social and cultural" (Eko 2006, p. 208).

At the end of the 20th century, a "visual turn" takes place in the humanities, as the status, functions, and use of visual information enter the scope of research (Chandler, 2000). Representation becomes inevitably the most relevant form of mediation of reality; there is a rapid shift of attention or perception from the verbal to the visual, to the layers of meaning that form and are formed by the visible signs. Visual reality is interpreted as a cultural formation that is subject to constant and continuous reading and interpretation. It turns out that segments of human-inhabited space contain mostly messages in the form of representations; they effectively translate current ideological, pragmatic and existential meanings.

Representations are cultural phenomena; they are sign systems, and therefore they participate in communication (Eko, 2006). Since human experience is multisensory, each representation of it is subject to the possibilities and limitations of the information channel used (Noeth, 1995). Vision is a channel of information transfer along with others (acoustic, verbal, tactile, etc.); visual semiotics is a separate case of semiotics. Its subject is communication that takes place in various optically organized forms of cultural expression. In other words, visual semiotics focuses on the communication tools of the visual channel in culture. Its aim is "to explain what we see by what is not visible to us, but thanks to which we catch the resemblance between the object and its representation" (Eko, 2006, p. 177). The meanings of representations can be perceived only in direct communication, in which there is either a diachronic interaction between the author and receiver, or a synchronous interaction of several information recipients. The visual encompasses multiple levels of communication and therefore also has multiple pragmatic effects, e.g. artistic representation (painting, theatre, sculpture, dance, architecture, etc.) transmits not only primary information or denotation, but also value priorities characterizing secondary connotations, generates emotional states, indexes local spaces, etc.

The readings of the visible take place in everyday practice; the visual reality as a sign system is learned in the human living space and human action. Optical messages provide large amounts of information in a short time. A visual image is more informative than a verbal expression because it is biologically older, more specific and able to influence a wider audience. "In this sense, a word is weaker than a painting" (Arnheim, 1957, p. 173).

A city is a human-inhabited space, which in its multiplicity of cultural and social segments can and does contain a maximum of producible and reproducible visual signs/texts, and in which intensive meaning-making, textual change and rapid development can be observed.

The subject of research in the urban visual semiotics is the strategies, practices and ways of organising traditional (elemental) and planned inhabited space, the principles of territory zoning and hierarchical order, optically fixed

landmarks of meaning and their systems of functioning, forms of representation of the identity of a city and a region, symbolic and graphic languages of a city, the explication of signs and expertise in clarifying their humanity, global and local, general and individual phenomena of cultural and social continuity, also the impact of visual aspects on person's world view, identities, well-being, actions, etc.

Signs are imprints of perception and understanding of reality. A city, saturated with art symbols and images, constantly renews and varies interpretations of reality and the past, present and future of culture. A city is a field of everyday communicative practices; it is a visual semiotic space having multiple layers and many meanings; the constant efforts of its inhabitants to act produce general, shared orientations of meanings, values, beauty etc. in discrete visible objects and their complexes. Visual semiotics shifts the emphasis from a city person or a person in a city to the humanity of a city or the human-like city.

In general, three fields of sign activity must be taken into account in the urban visual semiotics: 1) the anthropogenic environment; 2) the space of architecture, sculptures and other material objects; 3) intensive cultural and social communication.

Coding in Visual Semiotics:
Parallels between Architecture and Tombstones

A city has a textually communicative nature. Its visual marking expresses not so much the functionality of individual objects and zones, but people's perceptions of the world, existential comfort, mythical and historical narratives, aesthetic, social and value prescriptions. Visual semiotics sees a city not as a physical place structured by discrete material objects, but as a specifically humanly organised and arranged complex communication environment, which reflects the particularities of human existence and translates his/her communication in time. Ensembles of urban objects are observed and read as texts that transmit ideological, mnemonic and suggestive (propositional) messages. Moreover, artistic images and symbols are not passive representations of reality, but active agents of meaning-making that initiate and take part in the creation and organisation of a new neighbourhood. Semiotics correlates with aesthetics and the science of art. Eco talks about semiotic aesthetics that views art as a communicative process (Eko, 2006). Semiotic and aesthetic aspects of imagery cannot be separated in practice, e.g. information of the deceased as a semiotic phenomenon and a tombstone as an aesthetic phenomenon (Eko, 2006, p. 266).

The sets of areas and objects that make up the architectonics of a city are saturated with meanings and presented in accordance with the requirements of the visual text: behind each visible representation there is a message that can be

attributed to the signified (object) in a certain way. The entire visual space of a city can be seen as a text created for potential readers. A city regularly transforms its "habitat", the metaphors of which embody each and every model of the world order.

Eco analyses the semiotics of a city in his study "The Missing Structure. Introduction to Semiotics" (La struttura assente: introduzione alla ricerca semiologica, 1968) and Lotman does the same in works published after his death – "Simvolika Peterburga" (1996), "Arhitektura v kontekste kuļtury" (2010). Both Eco and Lotman are interested in the iconic (similarity-based) or symbolic (according to Barthes) relation between the signifier and the signified: the task of visual semiotics is to clarify the type of relation between them, or the code. The code is a certain principle of correspondence between the signifier and the signified and the basic condition of the message they create (Eko, 2006).

For example, the signifier appropriates the perceptual conditions of the signified through the recognition code. The recognition code of the signified functions according to the list of graphical symbols adopted in the representation conventions. The recognition code allows the identification of the signified on the basis of features communicated by the iconic or similarity code. The iconic code helps to find a correspondence between the distinctive feature of the signifier and the content to be signified (Eko, 2006).

The iconic code is used to distinguish discrete units of meaning in a representation: figures (separate differentiated elements of an expression, e.g. colour, texture); signs (non-independent elements of an expression, which being a part always point to the whole - the overall visual image, a certain paradigm, excluding unrelated articulations from it, e.g. lancet window), and syntactic units of expression, or syntagms (Bart, 1994). Eco's signs are not independent; they always form a reference or a pointer to the whole, to the result of the combination.

In the Eco's hierarchy, the codes are arranged according to the type of articulation; the representations are characterised by the following codes: iconic – they ensure the recognition of discrete units of meaning; iconographic – they form composite conventional semes that can be recognised by permanent features and elements; the signifieds of the iconic code become the signifiers of the iconographic code, for example, the Annunciation paintings depict an angel, a woman and a dove or a ray of light in one plane; taste and sensibility – they hold together moving or changing connotations, cultural conventions (the ideal of beauty in certain periods of time); rhetorical – they are responsible for knowledge of conventions (accepted representations of the norm); they can be divided into rhetorical figures (tropes), premises (axioms), arguments (an appeal to tradition or vice versa); stylistic – they encourage the search for solutions

sanctioned by rhetoric (e.g. academic drawing), the author's individual stylistic discoveries (Eko, 2006).

Eco is convinced that the creation and perception of visual objects are determined by codes as specific conventions. By throwing a net of one or another code on experience, we make it poorer and put it in a frame, but we get safe conditions to pass it on.

Both Eco and Lotman address and cover only a few segments of the urban space that are linked to creativity and respond quickly to the demands of the era and their sign complexes (gesture, posture, costume, cinema, ornament, painting, sculpture, dance, sacred objects, architecture, interior design). A cemetery as a delimited substructure with its mainly unchanging catalogues of signs and worn-out metaphors does not attract semioticians: here the codes are constant in their tradition and therefore habitual, predictable. The graphics of tombstones have a certain functional affinity with the visually semiotic solution of the buildings discussed by Eco: both sign systems are the product of creativity and imply the operation of the iconic, stylistic, taste, rhetorical and other codes, both are related to the function of human "accommodation", meet the style requirements of the era and can fit into the urban territory and elsewhere, etc.

In architecture, the signifier or expression is the building itself, the signified or content is the function of the object or the purpose of the building. The architectural object stands for a certain idea of living or accommodation, i.e. the activities of using this object (Eko, 2006). Architectural messages convey ideas about the ideology represented by its designer. Architecture, as an act of communication, has several functions that can also be attributed to the complex formation of a tombstone: the aesthetic (it is a pleasure to see it); the imperative (its content determines a certain way of living); the emotive and the factual (it confirms communication and ensures the connection between the components of the urban environment). The imperative of a tombstone may be implicitly included in the epitaph or in the secular (representing the occupation of the deceased) sign. The discrete units of meaning visible in the facade of buildings can also be observed in tombstones: colours, textures, decorative elements, etc.

The code for the connection and transmission of the architectural visual signs is stylistic. The signs in architecture combine according to certain requirements: combinations of signs fit into a tradition or lay the foundations for a new one if they have their own, previously inarticulated stylistic code. A previously used code leads to an expected solution. By perceiving a recognisable sign (e. g. the spire of a tower), an observer will prepare for a certain paradigm and syntax, appropriate proportions, etc. The conventional codes of taste and sensibility connect to the assessment of the conformity of sign combinations. The sign, although recognisable as a separate discrete unit of

meaning, has a connection with the stylistic code and is only significant in the overall image of the building.

The combinations of visual signs on tombstones are mostly rhetorically and stylistically determined. If a tombstone as an object is the overall image, the signs are sacred, secular graphics and verbal inscriptions. If a decorative graphic sign has a symbolic connotation, it can be an independent unit of meaning and can fit into the paradigm of other signs without losing any of its self-sufficiency and completeness.

The denotation of an architectural sign, like that of a tombstone, is its utilitarian function, while the connotation is related to the ideology of the message. The connotation represents a system of conventions according to which an object can acquire symbolic meaning: the use of an object according to its symbolic content can displace the primary utilitarian (denotative) function (e.g. a chair-throne that is uncomfortable for sitting becomes a symbol of power). The hexagram ornament, popular in Europe and Arab countries, became a Jewish sacred symbol that started to appear engraved on Jewish tombstones in the territory of Latvia at the end of the 18th century (Melers, 2006). The symbolic (connotation) overpowers the utilitarian decorative denotation. The denotative function of the graphics can only be guessed by analogy with local tradition (the cross); the linguistic signs are perceived as the visual ones - with the connotation of the other, the foreign or the exotic. The remnants of Jewish culture in Rezekne and elsewhere in Latgale and Latvia can be observed precisely in the visual semiotics of architecture and tombstones (Senkāne, 2017).

If the code organises the relationship between the signifier and the signified, Eco calls it semantic and relates it to the symbolic nature of the sign structure. The semantic codes articulate the primary (windows, roof, stairs), secondary (pediment, column, tympanum) functions and the living ideology (kitchen, study, salon) of a building, as well as the social (station, hotel, summer cottage) and spatial (labyrinth, cruciform church) types of a building (Eko, 2006). The combination of primary and secondary functions marks the boundaries of the syntagm, where the third articulation of the semantic code - the living ideology - is realised. Eco speaks of internal (room layout) and external (facade), visual syntagms of a spatial structure, and the units of the living ideology implicit in them.

A tombstone as a complex visual object is also characterised by three articulations of the functions of the semantic code. If we assume that a tombstone, an inscription and decorative elements - each separately - can articulate primary and secondary functions, as well as the ideology of both, then there could be at least three syntagms per grave unit. In this sense, the Jewish decorative graphics (the Star of David, but also the menorah, the Hanukkah candelabrum): 1) denotatively fulfil a decorative function (as a hexagram

without a sacred symbolic context); 2) connotatively contain a symbolic meaning (as the Star of David); 3) reveal the principles of existence characteristic of a certain era (a yellow secular hexagram sign accompanied by a coloured figure, the so-called "badge").

The architectural codes are based on the established, fixed rhetoric. Real art brings something new to the interpretation of its meanings. It takes place through the operation of "styling", which is the application of new secondary functions on top of the fixed primary ones. The new secondary functions can change the ideology of the object. The use of the "styling" operation can be observed in the decorative graphics of tombstones, when figurative changes are made to the visual form of constant symbols. After the Second World War, the Star of David was replaced by a yellow "badge" on a number of Jewish tombstones: the decorative function of representing a certain ethnic identity was preserved, but the connotation of a sacred symbol was lost [see Figure 1. "The use of the "badge" in the decorative graphics of a tombstone. Rezekne Jewish cemetery."]

Figure 1 **The use of the "badge" in the decorative graphics of a tombstone**
(Rezekne Jewish cemetery)

The correction of the Star of David (yellow colour, lack of abbreviations in the middle of the hexagram) shows a change of the code and thus of the connotation: the sign metonymically (hence rhetorically) refers to the Holocaust. The ethnic, religious and cultural identity of the deceased is no longer represented by a constant, semantically capacious symbol, but by a reference to a specific historical fact, acquiring new secondary functions: commemorating the victims, condemning the anti-Semites and honouring the rescuers.

An architect and a designer of a tombstone serve "the needs of a certain living ideology" (Eko, 2006, p. 238). He is forced to search for and use the codes of external semiotic systems in order to fit into the comprehensible rhetoric that the addressee expects from him.

Visual Sign in the Decorative Graphics of Cemetery: Symbol and Symptom

The public perspective of cultural communication envisages various forms of ethnic self-identification and representation: 1) ways of interpreting visual objects, sign systems and markers (as the basis of the identity of personalities, groups, ethnic groups) are sought; 2) types of cultural, national, civic, religious, professional identity construction are identified through visual means of representation and communication; 3) a typology of visual forms of cultural identity translation within individual cultures and the sphere of cultural contacts is summarized, etc.

Lotman discovers the representation of identities in a symbol. The symbol is always a complete text; it may not be part of a series of interrelated entities, but if it is, it retains its independence of meaning and structure, and can therefore be easily removed from one semiotic environment and inserted into another.

Every culture needs archaic layers of texts, and the symbol is a concentrate of the archaic. It will always be an envoy of other cultural eras. The memory of the symbol is always older than the textual environment surrounding it. It is capable of storing vast texts of cultural significance in a scrolled form. The symbol never belongs to a single synchronous cultural aspect, but always weaves through it vertically. As an important mechanism of collective cultural memory, the symbol transfers texts, plot schemes and other semiotic formations from one cultural layer to another.

Constant sets of symbols perform a unifying function; they prevent the culture from splitting into isolated chronological segments. The persistence and lifespan of a symbolic unit largely determine the national and areal boundaries of cultures.

The nature of the symbol is dual: 1) by interweaving cultural layers, the symbol asserts its invariant essence in repetition; 2) the symbol actively correlates with the cultural context, transforms under its influence and transforms it itself (Lotman, 1992). The symbol accumulates and organises new experiences around itself (Lotman, 1992).

The invariant essence of the symbol is realised in variants. The cultural context in which the "eternal" meaning of the symbol is subject to change is proof of its variability. In this sense, visual symbols in the semiotic space of a

city are certainly indicators of its variability. The most active symbols are characterised by a certain indeterminacy in text-expression and text-content relations: the potentials of the symbol's meanings are always broader than the given implementation. Therefore, it forms a reserve of meanings, due to which the symbol is able to enter into unexpected connections, changing its essence and unpredictably deforming the textual environment around itself. In terms of expression, simple symbols are the most semantically inclusive: "a cross, a circle, a pentagram have far greater potentials of meaning than Apollo skinning the satyr Marsyas" (Lotman, 1992, p. 194). It is the simple symbols that form the symbolic core of culture. The saturation with them indicates the symbolizing orientation of culture.

Symbolization allows texts or their fragments to be read as symbols, even though they do not presuppose such perception in their natural context; desymbolization turns symbols into simple messages (denotates); what is a symbol to the symbolising consciousness is otherwise a symptom. The symptom only ensures the presence of the primary function of the denotate in the sign.

Lotman explains the essence of the symptom in terms of a reminiscence: the symbol exists before and independently of the text into which it enters; it emerges in memory from the depths of cultural memory and revives in a new text "like a grain thrown into fresh soil" (Lotman, 1992, p. 195), while the reminiscence - a reference, a quotation - is an organic part that is only synchronously functioning in a new text; it is brought into memory from the new text. A symbol in the creative process is implemented as the reminiscence in perception. Depending on how recent in the past and to what depths of meaning the reminiscence leads, the reminiscence (reference, quotation) can be seen as a desymbolizing symptom.

Although a customer of the decorative graphics intended to engrave a sacred symbol on a tombstone, its enhancement or clarification with yellow colour makes a reader see only the reminiscence of the Holocaust in the hexagram. Whoever wanted this clarification was aware of the symbolic and/or symptomatic layers of its perception? Seeing a "badge" instead of the Star of David, a reference instead of an archaic symbol, in a Jewish cemetery, a question arises: is this a symptom of the other striving to be more easily seen and understood? Or the iconic code has been replaced by the rhetorical code - in terms of expression and content-, respecting the intolerance of the ruling ideology towards the representations of religious affiliation?

Conclusion

The replacement of the constant archaic symbols with the signs that deteriorate meaning can indicate not only the imposition of ideologies, but also

a change of the message recipient. Such a trend suggests peculiar tools for the implementation of intercultural dialogue, oriented towards the self-presentation of a seperate ethnic group, using recognisable stereotypical features instead of specific cult symbols. In any case, communication still exists; at least objects of the cemetery culture are still capable of transmitting their functions in the form of semantically intensive archaic symbols and symptoms. In this way, the "other" can be noticed and understood.

Code-switching in object-function relations and adjustments in representation and message in such closed conservative segments can show unique trends in the scenery of local identities. Their encryption allows to reveal the regularities of ethnically diverse cultural and social processes in synchronic and diachronic perspective.

Acknowledgement

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