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Affect, and the study of culture

In the 1970s, when I was a student of Literary Studies—in the Netherlands called the studies of General and Comparative Literature—Roman Jakobson’s communication model provided the most important framework and mode of thinking for understanding the specificity of literature. Of course, being interested in this specificity and the possibility of pursuing it, was highly modernist, although in culture, but not yet in scholarship, post-modernism was already flourishing. Jakobson’s model distinguished between six different functions of the sending of a message by a sender to a receiver of it. His model is analytical, instead of historical, and provided a systematic way of thinking about literary and other cultural texts. Because my interest in literature was inclined to address it by theoretical questions rather than historical questions, Jakobson’s communication model made a big impression on me. And although Jakobson was first of all a linguist, instead of a literary scholar, his model was one of the most sophisticated efforts to understanding the literary text in its difference from other cultural messages. And in addition, it also provided means to distinguish between different literary genres based on the dominance of other communicative functions.

In the 1990s and after, a different kind of reflections on literature became prevalent, focusing on gender and sexuality, postcoloniality, globalism and such issues. These fields too can be—and are—studied from a theoretical point of view, but in relation to the pursuit of understanding literature they looked more like specific themes being studied in their historical development and regional differences. Because of the fact that my introduction into the field of literary studies was determined by Jakobson’s communication model, I still have a great affinity and respect for scholars who ask theoretical instead of historical or thematic questions. This explains why I was immediately triggered by Stanisław Pietraszko’s text “Messages and values” and the request to respond to it.

But while reading Pietraszko’s text, I was also struck by his assumptions, by the kind of questions he asks, and by certain concepts he takes for granted. Although I consider myself someone who studies culture—that is cultural objects and cultural practices in all their manifestations—and although semiot-

ics has been, and still is in a certain way, my starting point for understanding culture, I did not always recognize myself in Pietraszko as a researcher of culture. Of course, his work is a prime example of structuralism, and being from a younger generation I consider myself as a post-structuralist. But you can only be a post-structuralist by first having digested structuralism; one cannot just reject or refuse structuralism without understanding what it has to offer. This explains my respect for Pietraszko's approach to the understanding of culture. Being a post-structuralist means, for example, that I am more interested in signification and the use of signs than in signs and their functions as such. I am interested in processes and productions rather than in structures.

Another important difference between Pietraszko's and myself is that his thinking starts from information and communication theory, whereas mine from (post-structuralist) semiotics. He tries to integrate semiology into assumptions that stem from information theory. This explains, for example, his assumption that the primary function of messages is conveying information, which is rather self-evident within information theory. His analysis of postcards is therefore for me rather puzzling, because most postcards are for me, according to Jakobson's distinction between six different functions of a message, phatic; they do not convey information, or very little, but because the person who is on vacation is far away, s/he tries to re-establish contact with family and/or friends who are still at home. But postcards can have many functions; so I am not so much interested in the primary function of it, but in how postcards are being used in specific contexts and in specific uses of them. I am more interested in the cultural practices of sending postcards than in postcards as such.

From the perspective of information theory it is also understandable that elements of signs that do not convey information are considered as "excess" or as "redundant." But for me, especially writing about literature and the visual arts, this functional approach of the arts is rather shocking because it denies the ontology of the arts: they are not functional, like a washing machine or computer; they are autonomous and cannot be compared to the manual of a computer. When I analyse a literary text or an art work, nothing is redundant or can be seen as "excess." For me as a cultural analyst, the task is to understand what it does and how it works. This means that when one considers the conveying of information as primary, one cannot really understand the cultural function of literature and the arts.

But as I said earlier, there are also some concepts which Pietraszko's takes for granted (which is understandable for the days in which he was writing) whereas they are now highly contested. Civilization, and civilizational status, for example. We are now very much aware of the fact that the idea of civilization was a Western, imperial concept that legitimized the colonial expansion of Western empires. The West brought civilization to African and Asian countries. The notion of civilization is utterly determined by very specific Western "values." And this brings me to another element of Pietraszko's study of culture, namely his ef-

fort to analyse the “axiosemiotic sphere.” His assumption that values are situated in the structural order of culture is very important. But I do not understand in which the “axiotic” problematic “competed and polemised with the semiological notion of culture as a semiotic system.”¹ Pietraszko refers here to an article of himself, which does not yet convince me that there is a “axiosemiotic sphere” that cannot be studied by a semiotic notion of culture. Of course, specific values, ideologies, are part of any culture; the best way to study them is not as cultural facts, but as cultural significance, and semiotics provides a good conceptual framework for analysing those values.

Coming from a post-structuralist position, I have developed my own, different doubts about semiotics. To understand culture as a structure of signs or as signifying processes is rather reductive. Meaning and the processes that produce meaning, is of crucial importance, but to better understand culture one should also take non-signifying processes into consideration. In the last fifteen years we have seen a so-called affective turn taking place in the study of culture, but also in politics and economics. Affects are intensities that interact with our bodies and/or our thinking; they do not signify, but are processed into a specific mood, feeling and yes, also into meaning or, for example, a political position. For, contemporary culture and politics are especially affect driven. Each time Pietraszko reflects on values, on axiology, and the “axiosemiotic” sphere, I had the feeling that, or perhaps I just hoped that, that he was in fact talking about affects and the affective/semiotic sphere. And that would mean that with his work he was an affect scholar *avant-la-lettre*.

Ernst van Alphen — Professor Emeritus at Leiden University. His many publications include the following books: *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self* (1992), *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature and Theory* (1997), *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in Times of New Media, Failed Images* (2014), *Photography and Its Counter-Practices* (2019), *Seven Logics of Sculpture* (2022), *Productive Archiving: Artistic Strategies, Future Memories, and Fluid Identities* (2022).

¹ S. Pietraszko, “Messages and values,” transl. T. Anessi, *Prace Kulturoznawcze* 26, 2022, no. 4, p. 107.