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Revisiting Methodological Principles of Cultural-Semiotic Approach in Studying Art of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East

Natalia N. Seredkina*

*Siberian Federal University
79 Svobodny, Krasnoyarsk, 660041, Russia*

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This article is devoted to the analysis of cultural-semiotic approach that is considered as one of the key principles in studying the art of indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East. The author proposes systematization of the methodological principles of cultural-semiotic approach (understanding of culture as a structure consisting of series of symbolic systems and cultural texts; symbol creation principle actualized in fictional dialogism; culture representativeness and symbolic interpretation of signs of culture and the concept of "value" as a key concept in semantic philosophy of art). On the basis of correlation of cultural-semiotic approach methodological principles and constructivism ideas, the definition of "art" is specified. Art is understood as a cultural-semiotic construct that generates social meanings in the individual's and collective's consciousness and allows a human being to verify ideas about the world around us and, on a subconscious level, design his/her picture of the world.

Keywords: cultural-semiotic approach, constructivism, culture, art of indigenous peoples, culture text, symbol, sign, ethnocultural value, cultural-semiotic construction, picture of the world.

1. Introduction

Cultural-semiotic approach appears on the basis of philosophical hermeneutics and linguistic concepts, in particular, the theory of signs meaning by Ferdinand de Saussure. The founder of semiotics as a general theory of sign structures is an American philosopher, logician, mathematician, philosopher and natural scientist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). It was he who first created the classification of signs, highlighting iconic, natural and conventional signs. Further development of the semiotic

approach is associated with the studies by L. Wittgenstein, H.G. Gadamer, R. Montague, Ch. Morris, R. Carnap, S. Kripke, L. Tarsky, etc. The Russian school of semiotics started developing in the second half of the 20th century. In the early 1960s the Moscow-Tartu semiotic school that united scientists from Tartu, Moscow, Yerevan, Riga, Vilnius and others cities was formed. The school became the leading national school that developed the principles of structural analysis of culture. The scientists' interest was focused on the problem of formation and functioning of

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* Corresponding author E-mail address: NevolkoN@yandex.ru

the sign systems in human society. One of the leading representatives of the Moscow-Tartu school and the founder of modern semiotics is the Soviet literary theorist and cultural studies scholar Y.M. Lotman (1922 – 1993). The Tartu structural-semiotic school dominated in the 1960 and 1970s, in the 1980s there was a noticeable decline and in the 1990s the school practically ceased existing, but the ideas of its theorists both as a foreign semiotic school and a Russian one are still relevant for the contemporary cultural studies. Thus, N.L. Malinina (Malinina, 2010) devotes her research to the analysis of Y.M. Lotman' structural and semiotic ideas. M.S. Inkizhekova understands a traditional ethnic culture text as a way of knowing cultural traditions and worldviews of particular peoples (Inkizhekova, 2009). The substantive aspect of a cultural text, its meaning-making and representativeness are studied by T. Wijk (Wijk, 2011), F. Tenbruk (Tenbruk, 2013) and E. Fen (Fen, 2010). For our work the studies of ethnic art are also important. Ethnofuturism as a trend of modern art, became a topic for researches by V.O. Hartig (Hartig, 2006), E.P. Matochkin (Matochkin, 2009), L.I. Nekhviadovich (Nekhviadovich, 2010) and E.Y. Pavlova (Pavlova, 2007). It should be noted that since the early 20th century there was a “cultural turn” in the humanities towards consideration of culture structures as phenomena that form meanings of “definite cultural manifestations and activity types” (Wijk, 2011). The issue of generating of sociocultural sense-making function by cultural practices became particularly relevant in the last decade of the 20th – early 21st century due to the phenomena of globalization and multiculturalism (Kistova, 2013; Koptseva, 2011, 2012; Reznikova, 2013; Semenova, 2012). One of the tools for decoding sign constructions of cultural practices is cultural-semiotic approach which principles are the subject of this study.

The purpose of the study is to analyze and systematize the methodological principles of cultural-semiotic approach, to complement them taking into account constructivism ideas in relation to the symbolic “field” of art.

In this work we take into account the methodological principles of cultural anthropology, ethnology, ethno-psychology and hermeneutics, history of art and philosophy of culture. Particular attention is paid to the conception of structuralist constructivism by P. Bourdieu and ideas of constructivism theorists (F. Barth, E. Gellner, V.S. Malakhov, V.A. Tishkov, E. Hobsbawm, etc.). Fundamental principles of cultural-semiotic approach are represented by the researches of J. Alexander, F. C. Smith, C. Geertz, Y.M. Lotman, G.N. Lola, E.A. Orlova, Ch.S. Peirce.

Study of theoretical materials, devoted to cultural-semiotic approach, found it necessary to use analytical-descriptive method, which includes both the analysis of individual elements that constitute the basic principles of the approach, and summarizing the data obtained. From the logical procedures practiced in the study, theoretical methods (analysis of the socio-philosophical, socio-anthropological, cultural, ethnological, ethnopsychological, cultural scientific literature), empirical (analysis and interpretation) and the method of introspection (reflection) were the most actively used.

2. Systematization of methodological principles of cultural-semiotic approach

Based on the theoretical studies analysis results of the researches who study the semiotics of culture, the methodological principles of cultural-semiotic approach will be put in order.

The first methodological principle of cultural-semiotic approach is understanding *of*

culture as a structure consisting of a series of symbolic systems and cultural texts.

According to the sociologists Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith, cultural structures should be understood semiotically. “According to our hypothesis, the culture should be thought of as a structure consisting of symbolic systems. Symbols are signs that have the status of generalization and provide categories for understanding the elements of social, individual and organic life” (cited by Wijk, 2011). Pierre Bourdieu considers the nature of these structures, “Social agents construct social reality through cognitive structures that can be applied to all the objects in the world ...” (Bourdieu). These objects are symbolic systems that constitute the core of “dramatized document” cultural texts (C. Geertz). According to this principle, art in general and a work of art in particular, represent a secondary informative sociocultural text that is, like any other text, according to the Y.M. Lotman’s logic, has a specific language structure and internal organization. Reconstruction of this “document”, according to F. Smith and J. Alexander (Alexander, Smith, 2010), is of great importance for understanding of the impact that culture has on social life’s formation. J. Alexander and F. Smith, the authors of a new approach in cultural sociology – “a strong programme” believe that “internal senses” of cultural texts not only function in society, but also have a modelling effect on social life, i.e. in some sense direct our activities. Scientists who supported hermeneutic and semiotic understanding of culture separate culture and social structure believing that culture is a relatively autonomous beginning, participating in the reproduction of social relations (Alexander, Smith, 2010).

Extrapolating the aforementioned theoretical model of culture as a collection of texts on socio-cultural reality, it is possible to identify a number of cultural texts, which play an important role

in a society life. These are cultural-semiotic practices by which we mean the amount of social actions in which sign-symbolic forms of culture that carry certain social values and meanings are produced, preserved and transmitted. Mentioning these cultural-semiotic practices we mean art, cinematograph, mass media, political discourse, art criticism, etc. These texts represent informative structure that actively functions within society.

The second principle of cultural-semiotic approach is the principle of *symbol creation, actualized in the artistic dialogism.*

The main idea of this principle is “symbol”. This category is of great interest to scientists. Different aspects of symbol are studied. These are both ontogeny of symbol and its cognitive function and, unlike a sign and symbol, its hermeneutics, and the symbolic nature of culture. Our interest is focused on the role of symbol in relation to the field of art. It is known that art is symbolic and allows portraying an ideal that, according to Kant, is the highest purpose of art (Basin, 2012, p. 22). I. Kant interprets the concept of “symbol” as beauty, lovely presentation of things and an image given in the “corporal representation”. Symbol in art, according to Kant, is a symbolic form, which expresses and communicates aesthetic ideas (ibid.)

According to the modern theory of art, symbol creation presents both during the process of a piece of art creation and in the process of a viewer’s communication with a product. According to V.V. Bychkov’s opinion, symbolization is understood as a dialogic process of “creativity – perception – co-creation”, with an artistic symbol in its center, and a deep meaning of the symbolized (metaphysical reality) “shines through” it, and it is fully actualized only in the artistic symbol (Bychkov, 2012). Bychkov defines artistic symbol as a core of the artistic image that

expresses a certain reality, which is realized only in the process of aesthetic perception of a particular work of art by a particular recipient in his/her inner world. In his article “Symbolization in Art as an Aesthetic Principle” Bychkov differentiates the concepts of “symbol” and “symbolization”. A symbol is the result of symbolization, the expression of a reality in a definite form. The process of artistic symbolization, according to the author, is a multilevel dynamic system that includes metaphysical reality – artistic expression (creativity) – a work of art – aesthetic perception of a product by a recipient. The scientist emphasizes that artistic symbolization includes in its field not only the act of artistic creation (symbolization in the narrow sense is creating a work of art as a kind of symbol, located outside reality), but also the process of aesthetic perception as a unique personal actualization of a symbol.

According to E.A. Orlova, “in every studied and observed society certain areas of ordering are found, where interaction and communication are specially organized and have specific symbolic expression” (Orlova, 2004, p. 153). The author is referring to a system of symbols designed to organize the relation of a man with the world around. The founder of semiotics Ch.S. Pierce notes that an action of a symbol is based on the fact that information, encoded in it will be understood in a certain way by a person who interprets it (Pierce, 2000). According to N.L. Koretskaia, the ability of a symbol to fixation, storage and transfer of information provides its close connection with the traditions, rites and customs, and through them “a system of symbols is included into national consciousness” (Koretskaia, 1998) Y.M. Lotman believes that a symbol has a quality to accumulate, consolidate and transmit information over many generations, acting as a keeper of non-genetic, cultural memory of the people, rooted in the depths of the archaic (Lotman, 1996).

A number of scientists, who studied fine art of Siberia, note active interest of artists to representations of the motifs connected with archaic views of peoples. For example, E.Y. Pavlova focuses attention on the increased interest of the contemporary artists of Western Siberia to ancient cultural traditions (Pavlova, 2007). As the basis of artistic creativity the authors use mythological motifs and national legends of their peoples, as well as ethnographic, archaeological and historical materials. The author considers the current state of art in Siberia within the framework of artistic movement called “ethnofuturism” originated in the late 1980s. It is this movement, according to the researcher, that best reflects the essence of the contemporary art, which by the archaic forms determines place of ethnos and its culture in the modern world. S.V. Kardinskaia interprets ethnofuturism in terms of ethnic problematics, giving it the possibility to develop “deep” and “authentic” ethnicity by constructing an ideal model based on archetypes.

E.P. Matochkin considers specificity of “arheoart” as a special movement in Siberian art (Matochkin, 2009). The author makes an attempt to identify the prerequisites of one of the important trends in the Siberian art and also highlights its distinctive features. Consideration of arheoart in its development is based on the general survey of individual Siberian artists’ creativity (in particular, creativity by V.I. Surikov as “the forerunner of the Siberian arheoart”, G.I. Gurkin, V.F. Kapelko V.N. Kizlasov, S.P. Lazarev, I.I. Ortonulov, N.I. Tretiakov, M.P. Chevalkov etc.). Review of the Siberian artists’ creativity includes description of the individual paintings, mainly the storyline, which the author relates to the legacy of the past as its immediate representation. In the researcher’s opinion in the basis of the contemporary artists’ address to arheoart there are “attempts through

the art of antiquity again get in touch with mother earth's warmth and with the myths that generated natural existence" (Matochkin, 2009, p.10). In addition, through the legacy of the past the artists try to comprehend the cultural space of Siberia and art becomes one of the means of its comprehension. In this case, the task of an artist is to create a new spiritual space of modernity through references to the past.

Thus, the ability of symbols to have definite meanings, as well as possibility of their reading and understanding, makes them the texts of culture. According to C. Geertz, it is necessary to study not the ontological status of the phenomena of our world, but their value, i.e. consider them in terms of their symbolic manifestation. Symbol creation both as the process of a cultural text creation and its perception by a subject involves disclosure of a specific message. In the sphere of art this message is often introduced by archaic representations acting as symbols.

The third principle is connected with *the representativeness of culture and symbolic interpretation of the signs of culture*.

The symbolic nature of cultural texts determines representative character of culture in general. F. Tenbruk defines representativeness of culture in its intermediary role. He writes: "Culture is representative, i.e. it produces ideas, meanings and values, which act due to their de facto recognition. It covers those beliefs, views, world view, ideas and ideologies that affect social action as they are actively or passively separated or accepted" (Tenbruk, 2013, p.101). Cultural codes that provide transference of social experience and information are universal means of representation, structural organization and transference of cultural experience, information and values. The fundamental role of cultural form in these processes is found in the fact that it manifests itself as a message and a text.

Appeal of cultural texts to an individual and society in general generate a "response back" from the viewer. In the epoch of modernity practice of interpretation becomes especially important. According to Vattimo, we live in "the era of interpretation", and religion and faith give it to us (cited by Rzaeva, 2011). R.O. Rzaeva notes that attention to the interpretative nature of culture is determined by the fact that postmodern consciousness is based on the interpretive mind. According to the researcher, symbolic representations act as a reaction to attitudes and beliefs that exist in society and serve as an identifier of "the Other" in the postmodern society, which is associated with the postmodern perception of the text as an infinite chain of denotation (Rzaeva, 2011). Cultural text is interpreted by a subject as a "behavioral code". "The subject of postmodernism prefers possibility of existence under the proposed code to individual freedom" (ibid.).

The fourth principle of cultural-semiotic approach is defined by the concept of "value" as one of the key in the conception of the semantic philosophy of art.

Cultural texts are significant for an individual and society due to content they represent. As a result of analysis of the works of art created by representatives of indigenous peoples, it is possible to consider sign-symbolic forms of works as an expression of a society's values that constitute the core of their culture. E.Y. Basin defines the aesthetic value as kalos – harmony, unity and integration of parts of the whole in a work of art. The world of aesthetic qualities or values, according to Basin, is the world of eternal objects outside of time and space (Basin, 2012, p.267). In painting figurative sign acts as the language of values communication. Morris, referring to painting, outlines such values as objective values, acting values and mental values (Basin, 2012, p.294). Since our interest concerns art of

indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East, we separate ethno-cultural values that define representative character of the national art, and give the following definition: *Ethno-cultural values is a definite, formed in the historical dynamics of ethnos, socio-cultural construct that embodies especially significant views of an ethno-cultural group.* During the study of ethnic fine art works the following ethnic-cultural values were found: 1) a single ethno-cultural ideological basis (religious-mythological); 2) specific types of cultural heroes, characteristic of a definite ethno-cultural group; 3) ideas of an ethnos' perfect personality type; 4) the most relevant things; 5) unique cultural signs for different types of social communication. Thus, we offer to consider a work of fine art as a cultural-semiotic space of representation in sign-symbolic forms of ethno-cultural values that serve as a powerful factor of an ethnic society's self-identity in a multicultural system.

Thus, cultural-semiotic approach as a methodological approach to the study of art offers a particular model of interconnection between culture as a social structure and a subject (an individual, a society). According to this approach, culture is understood as a structure consisting of a series of symbolic systems and cultural texts, representative and interpretive nature of which is actualized in the process of symbol creation and artistic dialogue. The important concepts of cultural-semiotic approach are "symbol" and "value" that define representative character of cultural texts.

3. Art as a Cultural-Semiotic Construct

The purpose of this section is to complement and develop the methodological principles of cultural-semiotic approach based on addressing to theoretical ideas of constructivism, the direction, which became one of the most topical problems

in the modern humanities at the beginning of the 21st century. This is connected with the fact that the basis of this approach constitutes the topical idea of symbolic production of ethnicity by the means of cultural-semiotic practices. Postmodern cultural text is a special field where construction can be carried out. Supporters of constructivism (V.A. Tishkov, V.S. Malakhov, etc.) prove that identifying oneself as a member of a particular community involves imagination (i.e. an individual creates an image) of this community. Due to construction and symbolic creation of an ethno-cultural group's image, symbolic field of social reality is actualized (P. Bourdieu).

Nowadays ethnic identity construction practices at all the levels of social life of an individual and society in general are widely used. Such constructing fields as print and electronic media, Soviet and national cinema and organization of national celebrations are in the centre of researchers' attention. Scientists analyze symbolic space of a culture's text, with the help of which reality is not only socially reproduced but also originated again, created in each particular human existence in the process of artistic dialogue. According to Rzaeva, one of the trends of the modern society is "mediaization" of reality, which, in the author's opinion, leads to the "the loss of image identity". Identity appears more like a simulation possible, transient response, rather than as the basis of our existence (Rzaeva, 2011). It is obvious that ethnic identity, constructed by images of cultural texts is transient, as it is constructed here and now in the process of artistic dialogue. For most indigenous peoples ethnicity may not be the basis for existence in a multicultural system, but understanding of the possibility to recreate it plays an important role in their lives.

Art is an equally important sphere of culture that has constructivist opportunities. Constructivist theory allows us to consider *art*

as a cultural-semiotic construct that generates social meanings in individual and collective consciousness. Sign-symbolic forms of compositions are sensuously-present construct of arts. Due to symbols a person has a symbolic “reality” by which he/she constructs a holistic picture of the world. According to G.N. Lola, “an artist is not a copyist, an artist is a creator of another reality” (Lola, 2011, p.38). Depending on the emotional component in the structure of personality, as well as on social, political and ethnic factors, an individual constructs either a positive image of his/her community, or negative, connected with the forms of hyperidentity (ethnocentrism, ethnodomination, ethnic narcissism and nationalism) or with the forms of **hypoidentity** (ethnic indifference, **ethnic negativism**, ethnic elimination, ethnonihilism). This is explained by the fact that a symbol’s decoding can’t be reduced only to the single formulation, but confirms the worldviews of both an individual and an ethnic group in general. The same symbolic forms have a lot of interpretations. A researcher’s task in this case, according to C. Geertz, is searching, identifying and clarifying the meaning of the expressed social. He writes: “The analysis represents investigation of semantic structures, ... as well as the determination of their social basis and social significance” (Geertz, 2004, p.15). At that, interpretation assumes transition of the semantic structures’ values of a text, identified during the analysis, onto the social level. In other words, the main value of a cultural text interpretation is reading a cultural text as expression of the social context. A cultural text should not be interpreted in isolation from the life of society. A text is expression of socially important meanings and values. According to C. Geertz, the meaning of semiotic approach to culture is to “help us to gain access to the conceptual world which people who we study live in, so that we can (in

the broad sense of the word) have a dialogue with them” (Geertz, 2004, p.32). The interconnection of art and social reality gives evidence about *sociocultural dynamics of art that allows conducting verification of human ideas about the world and constructing one’s own picture of the world on a subconscious level.*

In every society, according to C. Geertz, the sphere of culture consists of a number of cultural systems. There is a typical set of cultural systems, which are repeated in most societies. These are religion, ideology, politics, science and art. On the basis of these cultural systems, or rather their impulses, a person forms vision of the world, his/her picture of the world. R. Ayerman, sociology professor at Yale University, introduces the concept of “imagination space”, which is constructed by imagination and creativity that are “directly related to the semantic dimension” (Fen, 2010, p.77). According to G.N. Lola, “by the produced impressions communicative reality of art creates and maintains the situation of meanings exchange between the interacting subjects. In turn, such an exchange is synchronous to formation of the general semiotic space, in which consistency and understanding are possible” (Lola, 2011, p. 39-40). This understanding of communication is represented in the paradigm of social constructivism, which develops the idea of reality created as a result of everyday interactions, semantic interpretations and reinterpretations. The author keeps to the constructivism idea, in particular, those, relating to the symbolic nature of interaction: “cultural context of a work of art develops in a communicative reality and is created by it” (ibid., p. 40). G.N. Lola proposes to use the term “narrative canon” for understanding of the mechanisms for constructing reality. According to the researcher, narrative canon is a “dynamic semiotic structure organized around semantic kernel; ... it is a way of organization

and existence of a communicative resource of an art product” (ibid.).

Thus, art is understood as a space of imagination, as a form of social reality that forms the basis for social identities and practices. Art creates a space for collective and individual verification of ideas about the world around us. Every time it will be a unique “product”, as a recipient perceives and constructs an image not as he/she sees it, but how he/she knows it, that is, through the existing experience, relying on the judgments of the objective world. Constructing a holistic picture of the world, an individual looks at the world around him/her, society and him/herself, acquiring at the same time a feeling of involvement and integrity of oneself as a member of society.

In the process of communication an individual enters into another dimension of reality, transforming colorful strokes, represented in the art space of the works of fine art into semiotic-symbolic forms, thanks to which, an individual artistic picture of the world is constructed. In the process of dialogue and communication with a cultural text understanding of differentiation between “own” / “other” and “we” / “they” takes place, and this fact allows to detect ethnicity, i.e. an individual constructs an image of his/her community and ethnic picture of the world. Thus, the art of ethnos becomes an explicated form of understanding and expression of a definite community’s identity. According to I.G. Yakovenko, “as well as extended text, when necessary, art forms a kind of image of the universe, a picture of the world, in which there is a place for the community that generated an author” (cited by Nehviadovich, 2010, p.150).

4. Resume

1. Cultural-semiotic approach is considered as one of the major methodological approaches in studying the art of indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East. This approach allows us to identify and scientifically experience socio-cultural reality of an ethno-cultural group by structural analysis of sign systems and texts of its culture.

2. Methodological principles of cultural-semiotic approach were systematized:

- Understanding of culture as a structure consisting of a series of symbolic systems and cultural texts;
- principle of symbol creation, actualized in artistic dialogism;
- representative nature of culture and symbolic interpretation of the signs of culture;
- the concept of “value” as a key one in the conception of semantic philosophy of art.

3. Consideration of cultural-semiotic approach in correlation with constructivism ideas made it possible to complement the methodological principles of the approach in regard to understanding the nature of art. Art is understood as a cultural-semiotic construct that generates social meanings in individual and collective consciousness. As a secondary constructing system art, in its cultural and semiotic forms, embodies already existing and functioning primary constructs that embody ethnical and cultural values. Art has a socio-cultural dynamics that allows humans to verify ideas about the world and construct their own picture of the world on a subconscious level.

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К вопросу о методологических принципах культурно-семиотического подхода в изучении искусства индигенных народов Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока

Н.Н. Середкина

*Сибирский федеральный университет
Россия, 660041, Красноярск, пр. Свободный, 79*

Статья посвящена анализу культурно-семиотического подхода, рассматриваемого в качестве одного из основных в изучении искусства индигенных народов Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока. Предложена авторская систематизация методологических принципов культурно-семиотического подхода (понимание культуры как структуры, состоящей из ряда символических систем и культурных текстов; принцип символотворчества, актуализируемого в художественном диалогизме; репрезентативность культуры и символическая интерпретация знаков культуры; понятие «ценность» как одно из ключевых в концепции семантической философии искусства). На основе корреляции методологических принципов культурно-семиотического подхода и идей конструктивизма уточняется определение понятия «искусство». Искусство понимается как культурно-семиотический конструкт, порождающий социальные смыслы в индивидуальных и коллективных сознаниях и позволяющий осуществлять верификацию человеком представлений об окружающем мире и конструировать на подсознательном уровне свою картину мира.

Ключевые слова: культурно-семиотический подход, конструктивизм, культура, искусство индигенных народов, культурный текст, символ, знак, этнокультурная ценность, культурно-семиотический конструкт, картина мира.
