Three basic concepts of form

A visual form's analysis after the »postmodern«

Miško Šuvaković

1. *Form and formalisms*

Beyond visual form, there is an implicit or explicit theory of form. The theory of form talks about visual shape, the procedures of shaping the surface, the body and the space, in other words, about perception of visual phenomena ranging from the recognition of shape to the coding/decoding of information, reading and comprehension of shape. Different ideological assumptions, systems or models of setting form into nets of discourse of Criticism, History of Arts, Philosophy, etc., are hidden behind primary levels of theory of form. Theory of form exists to specify, describe and explain various visual art works through concepts, productions and receptions of shapes. Often expected from the theory of form is the theory that produces the contextual frame, meanings, values and convictions for the specified production of art works, for example, theory of form of Bauhaus, Suprematism, De Stijl, New Tendencies, etc.

Reduction, approximation or explanation of visual artworks by concepts, models, schemes and discourses of theory of form will be called »formalism«. Modern 20th century frames of formal discourse on visual art could be differentiated through two traditions: (1) aesthetics formalism, and (2) language formalism, which is linguistical and semiotical formalism.

Aesthetics formalism starts from the integrity and autonomy of the art's subject (thing, situation, event). In other words, the art's subject is defined, and produced, and the specific thing, situation, or event is made or produced in the extraordinary, autonomous, and closed frame of art world. Axiology and semantics are derived by aesthetic formalism from a set of concepts of aesthetic contemplation of object phenomenality, which is direct experience that is not mediated by knowledge, and from »existence« of aesthetic qualities derived from the concepts of visual shape and shaping, that is, form. Aesthetic formalism has a long tradition in the history of modernism and in the theory of art. For example, the concept of autonomy was formulated by Kasimir Malevich (»Die Gegenstandslose Welt«, 1927),showing that art no longer cares to serve the state and religion, it no longer wishes to illustrate cultural history and is not concerned with presenting things. English critic Clive Bell described the principle of form productivity (»Art«, 1914.), claiming that forms arranged and combined after certain unknown and mystical laws have the

power to excite us quite extraordinarily. The dominance of experience over knowledge was worked out in the 50's by American critic Clement Greenberg (»Abstract, Representational and so forth«, 1954.), showing that art is a matter strictly of experience, not of principles.

Language (linguistic and semiotical) formalism in visual art's theories belongs to the big »linguistical turn« (boom) in the 20th century theory of ideas. When we consider the unusual course of language formalism – researching myth, psyche, society or its application to the theory of ideas, – we notice that formalism is one of the leading and, at the same time, one of the most heterogenous movements in the 20th century. Contextually, the concept of language formalism is derived from two essentially different traditions: (a) Slovenian (Russian, Pollish, Czech, etc.) formalism, which was later transposed in the concepts of structuralism and poststructuralism through semiotics and metasemiotics, and (b) linguistic and logical conceptualism of analytical philosophy. Language formalism applied to production, reception, and interpretation of visual art works leads to approximation of complex visual phenomenology (things, situation or events), by sign or textual models. They are constructions of hybrid visual forms based both on visual and linguistic phenomenology (for example, collages with text in Analytical Cubism, or textual environment of Conceptual Art).

We will soon consider the actual situation: the dominance of postmodern production and theory and the »formalistic« counterstrike. Postmodern poststructuralistic theory in original French or Slovenian variants developed as a critic of aesthetic formalism by transforming linguistic (semiotical) formalism in extreme relativism of sign arbitrarity, marking practice and textual models. Simplified, according to postmodern poststructuralistic linguistic formalism there are no new forms and meanings, but only new combinations (collage, montage, simulation, citing) of existing products (forms which are read as signs or texts). Artwork production is dominantly semiotical; it exists in the dominance of the discoursive arrangement of painting surface, installation arrangement, performance narration, etc. Postmodern poststructural production and theory shows that artwork isn't determined by ontological parameters, but by semantical uses of medium. The concept of representation is formulated as deciption of way of representations or as mimesis of existing mimesis produced in arbitrary semiotic practices.

The power of poststructural postmodern relativism in practice and theory of arts was dominant in 80's. The first reaction against postmodern semiotic formalism could be seen in pro-capitalistic design of objects exhibited at »Documenta 8«, in eruption of neo-geo paintings and especially in the triumph of sculpture concepts developed in the tradition of the St. Martin School. The new-new British sculpture become on international style connecting the modernistic sculptor's modus of British sculpture from 60's with emptied

fragments of postmodern signs. Today, it is difficult to differentiate the products of British sculpture from Ljubljana or Belgrade new sculpture.

Within the theory of art, the critique of linguistic formalism is developed. The analytical theory deals with the problems of psychology (for example, intentionality and perception), and with the problems of visual representations, which leads to critique of institutional theory of art, critique of arbitrary semiotic models and critique of quasiontological theoretical explanation. These theoretical positions are realistic: they represent the world existing independently of mind, stability and heterogeneity of cognitive mechanisms, ontological and causal nature of subject and object: art is cognitively and not simply culturally significant.

2. *Three cognitive theories of form*

If we look at any picture, sculpture, environment, film or performance, we could ask ourselves what and how do we see, what and how do we feel, what and how do we read, what and how do we talk, or tell by writing to Others, what and how we produce (write, paint, etc.)??? There is also one of the basic questions whose answer enters distinctions among cultural categories of classicism, romanticism, modernism and postmodernism: What is the relation of that what we see and produce in relation to our previous knowledge, our conceptualism and discourses? For example, classicism and different reactions to modernism start from concern for our productions and perceptions led by existing or previous knowledge – language or concept always precede picture. On the contrary, romantism and modernism (especially modernism in the Anglosaxon frame) start from act and perception before our knowledge – picture always precedes language and knowledge about picture.

If we apply the cognitive theory to art analysis, it necessarily ought to introduce a set of limitations. Art work, whatever and whoever it is, is not a part of natural world continuity. It is made and introduced into the world continuity. Reception of art work is a reception of certain material systems of appearance (thing, situation or event) which, along with complex phenomenology, also have a conceptually-linguistic setting. From the standpoint of cognitive theories, art work is understood through superposition of 2 informal systems: directly perceived information about form, thing, and invariants and information about settings of work in the nets of art discourses. According to different types of information, we can also talk about different cognitive systems of receiving and processing information.

We shall take up three basic approaches to visual form: (1) The system of knowledge that stands behind the production and reception of art works is exclusively a linguistic and semiotical system, that is, work of mind can be literally or metaphorically described by logical or syntactical machine (computer analogy). (2) The system of knowledge that stands behind the

production and reception of art works is internalistic, that is, both the production and reception of art work are defined by cognitive ability of the subject, that is, by his vertical (intuition, beliefs, intentions, emotions, desires) and horizontal (perception, motoric skills, etc.) powers. (3) The system of knowledge which stands behind the production and reception of art works is externalistic, that is, both the production and reception of art works are determined by ontological existence of phenomena outside the subject.

2.1. *Linguistic and semiotic concepts of visual form*

The appearance of a picture is analogous to the appearance of writing or letter or text. Elements and structural relations of elements on the picture's surface are defined by linguistic and semiotic character of each human work, that is, the possible nature of human mind, which is similar to a linguistical-semiotical machine. Linguistic or semiotic structure of picture's surface may be: (1) dominantly syntactic, or (2) syntactic and semantic.

To say that the picture's surface (topology of picture's surface) is dominantly syntactically arranged means to say that the appearance of the surface is not in referent relations with the world outside the picture or representation of the world in other pictures, but that appearance of the topology of surface is determined by the rules of formation and transformation. By the rules of formation and transformation, if we follow the transformation of syntactical theory from Morris' semiotic rules to technical rules for production of drawings from Group 143, we call the rules that show how elements are being connected in the visual structure and how visual structure can be derived from another or other visual structure by formal change of relations between the elements of surface. Within this, visual elements may be: texture, colour, composition, line, spot, different pictures, iconic signs, invariants, letters (signs, letters, words, sintagms, texts), etc. Visual form, that is, topology of the picture's surface, is a visual phenomenon constructed by analogy to linguistic and semiotic rules. Visual elements, the constituents of form, are visual appearances used in a way that »sign vehicles« are used (Morris) or »signifiers« (Saussure, Barthes, Lacan) in linguistic and semiotic processes. If we search for a cognitive ontological base for procedures of producing syntactical pictures (geometric abstraction, neoconstructivism, minimal art, etc.), then we can derive the assumption that syntactic pictures are the result of mental processes of pictures (reflections, mimesis, representation), of mental pictures or states. If visual pictures are the result of reflection of mental processes and structures, then we may suppose that the mind is analogous to a syntactical machine.

Syntactic and semiotic character of topology of the picture's surface is interpreted through two instances: (a) the topology of the picture's surface exists in some referent relations with world outside the picture (things,

situations, events, texts, other pictures, etc.), and (b) the artist's mind, which produces the picture, or that of an observer, which perceives the picture, is not analogous to the syntactic machine, but to the syntactic and semantic machine. Relations of reference made by subject (artist or observer), visual forms and the world outside the picture are realised by: (1) similarity of the surface topology and the world's object; (2) generative relations of production, that is, by the possibility of reconstructing the form's realization on the basis of data that are given by the picture's surface topology; (3) symbolic coding of the surface's topology (cross, spiral); (4) analogies to discursive reference: from the relation of titles and topology of picture's surface to the usage of discursive aspects as form elements. Semantic aspects, that is, referent relations of picture and world outside, are determined by phenomenal aspects of the picture itself and relatively unstable central conditions (point of view, context, history etc.).

2.2 *Internalistic theories of form*

Internatistic theories of form start from the attitude that any picture is a part of continuity that is realised by subject through his intentions, beliefs, knowledge, wishes, perceptive and productive powers. Elements and relations of the picture's surface topology are determined by horizontal and vertical powers of the subject.

Causal internalism tends to describe and explain the appearance of artwork by ontological organization of subject's mental system. Then visual form is: (a) the product of a certain mental organization; or (b) »picture« (representation) of certain mental organization. To say that visual form is the product of a certain mental organization means that the mental state of the subject is a cause of visual form, that is, mental state initiates a given state of the picture's surface topology. For example, one of Expressionism's dogmas is that the painter's state (sorrow, happiness, drunkenness, extasy, fury, etc.) causes a certain picture's surface topology, which reveals to us his mental states. Similarly, in Surrealism, the automatic drawing or text is received and interpretated as a result of unconscious work. Insisting on relations of mental states, processes and picture could be generalized through the concept that each picture (from the landscape or portrait to the gird) is preceded by the constitution of mental representation, which is, therefore, realized through possible technical and stylistic categories. For example, the painter who watched Sainte Victorine mountain had some mental representations of the mountain (which differ phenomenally from the real mountain because they are determined by mind's aspects) and he transformed these in visual representations of the mountain. In other words, internalistic theory of visual form places mental representations between the mountain and the picture of the mountain. Hard realistic internalism tends to show that mental representations of the mountain are dominantly determined by ontological aspects of the mind, and so the visual representations of the mountain are

determined by ontological aspects of the painter's mind. In the case of picture's representation, the observer's system »eye-mind« works with specific mental representations, which it treats and relates to the discoursive knowledge, emotional state, etc. The picture can be defined from the internalistic standpoint as a material representation of mental representation or their syntactic and semantic structures.

2.3. *Externalistic theories of form*

Externalism is the explanation of mental states (predominantly or totally) by the characteristics that function outside the organism. Externalistic definitions of the picture explain knowledge, which stands at the base of picture production or reception showing the importance of relations between artwork and world. In this direction, for example, Gibson makes distinction between two levels of the picture's perception: (a) perception of the picture as picture, that is, specific object and (b) perception of that which the picture shows. Externalistic theory of the visual form imposes a question: »How can we describe mental reference or picture reference in situations that are not mental or are not 'from' painting«?

The externalistic answer to the question »What is in the mind/brain of the painter who paints a picture or an observer who watches it?« is: external information about material aspects of the picture and information about world. For example, Gibson carries out a critique of classical externalism, which shows correspondencies of things in the world, retinal image of the object, mental picture and painting. Gibson's thesis is based on critical approach to theory of form and Gestalt. His intention is to show that the subject doesn't perceive forms and colours, that is, the painter does not represent forms and colours. The painter perceives and represents invariants. Gibson's thesis can be explained by comparative analysis of realistic, expressionistic and cubist portraits. Each portrait can be perceived as the portrait of a certain person. We can start with the theory of form. As fans of Courbet's realistic portrait, we would hardly count Klee's or Braque's portraits as portraits, because their form (Gestalt) does not fit the form concept of Courbet's realism. Nevertheless, because even a naive look is able to recognize the face in the realistic, expressionistic or cubistic picture (even on a caricature level), that means that picture-portrait is determined, predominantly, by invariants of the human face, and then, secondarily, by arrangement of those invariants into a specific or individual form. Then, Gibson points out that there isn't anything like literal representation of existent environmental objects (landscape, and even a human face). The idea of literal representation (similarity) is wrong because a picture showes only some (limited number) of invariants of environmental phenomenons. In the Gibsonian frame, the picture is not a record of the world but is a representation of information about the world attained through perception.

It is possible to talk about different externalistic theories: informational (Gibson, Dretske), and classical (image on the retina, Gestalt), but also about specific externalism developed in theory and practice of non-representational painting: concretism. Concretism postulates that only essential aspects of painting (and art) are those determined by the artwork itself, that is, by its objectivity, materiality, surface, space, colour, etc. Production, and also reception of the picture, are reduced to production (treatment, construction, making) that is direct perceiving and experiencing/trying, of the picture's material aspects. The idea of concretism spanning from avant-garde solutions of Doesburg and Constructivist's ideas of concretism are parts of modernistic ideology and reactions on postmodernism.

Literature:

V. Božičević, »Optical array: natural and artificiel«, *Radovi,* Filozofski fakultet Zadar, 1989.

J. A. Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind / An Essay on Faculty Psychology,* The MIT Press, 1983.

J. J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to visual Perception,* LEA, 1986.

M. Potrč, *Intrenationality and Extension,* Acta Analytica, 1989.

M. Potrč, *Jezik, misel in predmet*, DZS, 1988.

M. Šuvaković, *Drama slike i diskursa / predavanja o jeziku i saznanju u savremenoj umetnosti 1986-1990* (unprinted).

Dj. Vidanović, *Problemi jezika i uma,* IICSSOS, 1989.

R. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art,* Thames and Hudson, 1987.

*Modernism*Criticism*Realism / Alternative contexts for art,* ed. C. Harrison and Fred Orton, Harper and Row, 1984.

Kompjutori, mozak i ljudski um, ed. N. Miščević i N. Smokrović, Dometi, 1989.