

Multimodality in focus – a new paradigm for semiotics?

Eero Tarasti

Way, Lyndon C. S. and Simon McKerrell (eds) 2017. *Music as Multimodal Discourse: Semiotics, Power and Protest*. London: Bloomsbury, 256 pp. ISBN (hardback) 9781474264426, ISBN (paperback) 9781350079861, ISBN (eBook-Watermarked) 9781474264433.

It is certainly true that multimodality is in fashion – or rather anything multi-, like multi-sensoriality, the multiple (Deleuze), etc. The word first evokes just different sense organs – seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling – but most of the adherents of the new school say it is much more: it is social semiotics. Yet, when you say semiotics, thousand of lamps start to click: there are hundreds of versions, traditions, concepts, approaches within semiotics. So one should first say what is then meant by semiotics. If we very broadly accept what Umberto Eco said, namely that semiotics=signification+communication, it is evident that in multimodality we underline primarily the latter.

The anthology edited and directed by Lyndon C. S. Way and Simon McKerrell entitled *Music as Multimodal Discourse: Semiotics, Power and Protest* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) is a very thought-provoking collection of essays on this new phenomenon. It is also very ‘British’ in the sense that the empirical material it deals with to support its theories mostly stems from the media of the Anglo-Saxon world, with some exceptions from Spain and Guatemala. But it is British also in the sense that it is a continuation of so-called British Cultural Theory, which indeed has expanded all over the world in the academia of sociology, linguistics, discourse analysis, anthropology, history, arts studies, ie. broadly, in the humanities. However, since semiotics is mentioned in the very title of the book, it legitimates us to scrutinize this new approach from the viewpoint of this 2000-year-old discipline called semiotics and sometimes semiology.

One typical feature in all the writers of the anthology is that they all use semiotics but they do not want to be called semioticians. They share the view that semiotics is identical

to the linguistic 'imperialism' once launched by the structuralists in the wake of Saussure's ideas, a phase already long left behind in the light of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Something essential is then forgotten, namely that semiotics in the meantime has developed radically and explosively in different schools and empirical fields, not only in the analysis of verbal sign systems but also, powerfully, in non-verbal issues. So the idea of studying all these aspects of messages surrounding us is nothing new, it has been going on for a long time (see Eco, Lotman, the Paris School, all the special branches of semiotics in theater, cinema, music, architecture, dance, etc). Very often it is then called 'intertextuality'. Yet multimodality tries to grasp states before meanings are manifested and crystallized into texts or into discourse. By discourse, we of course no longer mean only linguistic texts but something we could call 'symbolic power' after Michel Foucault, though the term was also used as early as by the Frankfurt school.

The nature of the book is revealed from the very beginning by its dedication: 'This book is dedicated to all those everyday composers, musicians, lyricists, fans and listeners who instinctively know how powerful music can be in communicating social change'. Social change? What is that? What change? It is pleasant to have analyses representing 'participant observation', ie. leading to some concrete program and action. But what has to be changed? The authors are certainly thinking of socially unjustified conditions. Is it that the position of marginalized people has to be improved? But who are marginalized? Those who represent popular culture, those who enjoy messages at the level of TV advertising and jingle tunes. I would like to propose a modest correction here: what is marginalized in the contemporary world is not popular culture, which in our commercialized and mediated world has constituted a new civilization; it has penetrated to every corner of the world. Instead, what is marginal in Western culture is the classical humanistic tradition, or what we could call 'cultivation' (German *Bildung*), which is in danger of vanishing or being banalized altogether. This kind of voice is not heard or accepted at all by the representatives of British cultural studies. If you like classical music you are elitist, ultraconservative, regressive, intolerant, even fascist, at least crypto-fascist, in your value profile. I would like to recommend to the inhabitants of the Brexit island to read one classic from continental Europe, namely Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction*. Though his theory is undeniably very Parisian when he supposes that the whole world follows the class distinctions of Parisian *arrondissements*, his conclusion is that tastes in music, food, dressing, lifestyle are not compact blocks of attitudes but positions to be shared very diversely. Thus you can be a left-wing radical and like Beethoven symphonies or Wagner. You may go to rock concerts and be ultraconservative. So it is saddening if the ideology of a new scholarly approach limits itself to stereotypical schemes of class boundaries. There are many semiotic schools with an inclination to political activity and consequences which basically accept the principle that research is value-based and never neutral; they might willingly join this front unless they were rejected by many voices from this choir of multi-issues.

At least they should concretely demonstrate their new CDA, ie. critical discourse analysis, and social semiotics in their full analysis of the phenomena under study. I am afraid that by limiting ourselves only to communication without reference to the results already reached decades ago in the field of signification we cannot get far. However, if we want to enact our ideological choices (certainly as such justified) and if the object is to ponder ‘how musical meaning is a part of broader socio-cultural and political discourse exposing how it has real power and agency in the social world’ (Way and McKerrell 2017: xiv) and ‘that music can articulate discourses not only of power, exploitation, abuse and hate, but also resistance, subversion, belonging, community and hope’ (xv), then we need concepts and metalanguage whereby we can analytically scrutinize these issues. This view was already presented by Tia DeNora in her study *Music in Everyday Life* in the section Conceptualizing Music as a Force: ‘Music is not merely a “meaningful” or “communicative” medium. It does much more than convey signification through non-verbal means. At the level of daily life, music has power’ (DeNora 2000: 16-17). Yet it is hard to imagine how anything could have power before it *signifies* something. Why are we social beings, why do we follow social orders and laws? Because they are *internalized* in our minds, they live within us as one part of our human mind. This was said as early as by Herbert Marcuse in the notion of internalized dominance. In my own modest effort to study the postcolonial situation I have proposed such concepts (Tarasti 2000), and as to more radical social involvement, in my theory of resistance (in Tarasti 2012, 2013, 2015). But this is not the issue here. Let us see what could be developed from the tools offered by the rich anthology in front of us.

It is probably true what Umberto Eco said once about popular culture: namely that when you open a coke bottle, the act itself is not terribly interesting for a semiotic analysis, but all the connotations in the mind of the consumer and his social practices, values, etc. are more challenging. In order to study them you need to be rather a sophisticated philosopher. What in fact happened with both popular cultural and so-called ‘elitist’ high culture of classical art in the 1960s in the vein of structuralism was the following. By showing that classical works of art, from Michelangelo, Dante, Racine, Pascal, Corneille to Goethe, Flaubert, Proust, Tolstoi, Belyi and Mallarmé, followed the same textual rules as revealed by structural linguistics and other semiotic schools, structuralism pulled them down to the same level as all texts in a culture. Yet, analyzing popular culture with the same tools, structuralism elevated it to the much higher status of an object worthy of academic discussion, which it had not been earlier. The reception of authors like Roland Barthes and others in the UK followed just these lines. And he is still almost the only one of the French structuralists mentioned by name in popular culture studies (thanks to his inspirational essay ‘The Grain of the Voice’; when I, as a young student, interviewed Barthes in Paris in 1973, he considered that psychoanalysis, Marxism and linguistics were the three great forces in semiotics. Yet, he had elegant hands, capable of playing Schumann whom he also studied).

The problem with the new multimodal approach is that all the empirical examples it uses concern only rather stereotypical, not to say trivial cases of media culture. I have not seen it analyzing more complex meanings and textual configurations, as for example in 'higher' level art works. Apparently the multimodal approach does not do this since they for ideological reasons exclude that world. I remember the situation in Swedish musicology in the 1980s and even earlier. There were 'serious' scholars (Alf Gabrielson and generative grammarians such as Johan Sundberg) in Uppsala and Stockholm at the Royal Swedish Academy of Music studying classical music, Swedish music history but also cognitive psychology. Professor Ingmar Bengtsson's *Musikvetenskap, Introduction to musicology* (Bengtsson 1973), with its deep interest in musical semiotics (which was unfortunately never published in English but used as the authoritative textbook in all Nordic, Swedish-speaking countries, Finland included) was nevertheless not 'serious' enough for the Helsinki professor Erik Tawaststjerna who said that at that age one could not adopt a new approach, he should rather have studied Liszt's B minor sonata. Yet, at same time there was the socially radical school in Göteborg around Professor Jan Ling (later also Rector of the whole University), who studied only 'progressive' issues of the musical *folkhemmet* ('home of the people'), but it is hard to say with what results. They would certainly have shared the same ideology as the multimodal approach.

Sometimes the scholars of the anthology refer to 'classical' musicology but then usually to its radical American wing of the so-called new musicology. This happens in connection to gender studies, which were taken to be so promising some time ago. The great guru is Susan McClary, with her *Feminine Endings: Music Gender and Sexuality* (2002), mentioned in particular in the essay by Aileen Dillane, Martin J. Power and Eoin Devereux. McClary tried to show that gender is musically constructed, that music had gendered aspects, and that gender and sexuality functioned in narratives making music a gendered discourse. That is all of course very exciting. But unfortunately we still do not have a theory of how gender is reflected in its own signs. The relation is certainly not a simple causality, even if we were to reject Freud's dictum about anatomy being destiny. It would be challenging and renewing indeed to study this mysterious connection between gender and art – particularly in such complex cases as Tchaikovsky, Proust and many others. But we are not sufficiently advanced in theory to do it successfully. We are given to understand, by the above-mentioned authors in their essay 'Shame Makes the World Go Around: Performed and Embodied (Gendered) Class Disgust in Morrissey's *The Slum Mums*' (Dillane, Power and Devereux 2017: 48-70), that this movement 'challenged structural and empirical research in musicology at a time when scholarship declared "signification" to be off-limits, yet where "structures" as graphed by theorists and "beauty" (see Hanslick, 1995, for example) as celebrated by aestheticians evidenced violence, misogyny and racism'. They argue that new musicology was a justified reaction on the American scene against extremely formalized Schenkerianism and set theory, or archival and sketch studies, but at the same time they focus all their own study on 'signification' as ideologically motivated issues in the Pandora's

box of violence and racism. That is strange – and sad at the same time – and totally ignores what kind of research has grown in Europe from even the Hanslickian source they mention, though we would not accept it as the only standpoint of ‘absolute music’. There has been an international project on musical signification since 1984, when it was established in Paris at the French Broadcasting Company.

Susann McClary once in a lecture at a congress in the US said dramatically that Beethoven exhibits himself as a rapist in the violent transition to the *Freude* theme in his Ninth Symphony. Edward Laufer, a distinguished Canadian Schenker scholar, burst into laughter. ‘No, I was quite serious’, said McClary. The error in reasoning is here to think that if a man or woman has a bad ideology, the art they produce will also be bad and be doomed. There are cases like Richard Wagner, whose personal moral standards were certainly very low, but in spite of it he created enchanting music. On the other hand, we have a lot of morally and ethically extremely good people but their art is zero, boring. All the efforts to create morally purified and positive art, say in the Soviet Union or in Nazi Germany, is like that. One can well accept in principle the aesthetics of the USSR as such, but their consequences and applications are terrifying. Fortunately European scholars have always been more reasonable and the new musicology has never achieved the foothold in the Old world that it has in the New. Its results, in studies on Schubert (Solomon), Tchaikovsky and Sibelius (Tim Jackson), speak for themselves as historically exaggerated, arbitrary interpretations. In any case we have to remember that the journey from person to art is long and complicated. To follow the idea of the French linguist André Martinet, a ‘rearticulation’ occurs when we shift from one level to another. In his existential philosophy Søren Kierkegaard spoke about ‘leaps’ in the development of our identities. Hence what happens in art can be already far afield from the real personality.

Let me return to multimodal studies and see if they propose something new and promising for musical studies in some sense. Indeed, there is a lot of writing which may probably evoke new and productive openings. Specifically, with the fear of touching the area of signification which they deem regressive, they may perhaps have something new on the level of communication.

Lyndon C. S. Way and Simon McKerrell admit that music has been made of semiotic connections between music and language, but fundamentally their position is that music is not a language. That has been said many times. They obviously think that this is a progressive standpoint but they totally ignore the studies of music as a non-verbal sign system. Music is not always an aural phenomenon (Way and McKerrell 2017: 13). True, starting with Ernst Kurth in his music psychology a long time ago, many have said that music is not in tones, it only manifests in tones. Music has semiotic ambiguity. Also true, but we still try to understand that ambiguity and complexity and to form a metalanguage with which we could speak about it. Musical meaning is corporeal and our bodies are cultured. All this has been said by many in musical semiotics, from tango scholar Ramon Pelinsky to Gino Stefani and recently, in general,

the Venezuelan anthropologist José Enrique Finol in his work *Corposfera*. They accept Philipp Tagg's idea of music as something 'alogogenic' (Tagg 1979: 14). This certainly repeats what Curt Sachs once said about music as either logogenic or pathogenic. Göran Eriksson and David Machin deal with music in Sweden. They study a Swedish reality TV series and its musical messages. Unfortunatley the cases of how music carries the plot and its emotional contents remain rather scanty because the analytic vocabulary of their gurus, namely Bell and van Leeuwen, is so simple – or even false, like McClary's thesis that in opera masculine character have harsher staccato notes quoted from military music – we can list hundreds of contrary examples. The essay on Morrissey's *The Slum Mums* melody has been already discussed. Popular culture is automatically justified because it is the voice of the suppressed underclass. The melody itself is analyzed harmonically but certainly this is not the relevant level of analysis for this type of music where the musical signifier is in a musical respect very scanty, but its meanings lie elsewhere.

One of the most fascinating chapters is the one dealing with recontextualization and fascist music by John E. Richardson. There are cases of fascist musical practices in many countries which consist of adopting or stealing some melody from its authentic innocent context and providing it with a fascist meaning in a new context. This is very much the same as the musical quotations once studied by Zofia Lissa, ie. a melody is transferred or transplanted to a new 'isotopy', so to say. 'When a textual element is taken from a specific context we argue it is decontextualized, when this same element is inserted into a new context, we argue it is recontextualised' (Richardson in Way and McKerrell 2017: 77). That is certainly a productive methodological discovery which can be applied to any musical culture, so it is not something just typical of fascism but quite general. If Turkish music appears in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony finale we can say that it is recontextualised. So any ideology could adopt this technique, which has its own varieties. Way brings these ideas further to the Turkish mediascape and its protest music. He distinguishes between voice melodies and instrumental melodies. Theo van Leeuwen studies a phenomenon which everyone has experienced, namely the jingle melodies of TV advertisement. Even in old age one can remember by heart tens of jingle melodies once heard on TV; they are rooted deeply in our subconscious psyche and so this phenomenon is certainly culturally significant. They often act as leitmotivs by their use and appearance. They are like heralds, they are made to be remembered. They are musical signs and the only way to get into their essence is musico-semiotic analysis by all the sign categories from Peirce (icon, index, symbol) to Greimas (seme, isotopy, modality) or existential semiotics (zemic, presign, actsign, postsign, geno/phenosign etc.). In themselves, these logos are trivial.

Johnny Wingstedt also examines jingles as musical designs Again Halliday's textual metafunctions are mentioned, as a semantic gesture I would say. But the study of the jingle of Mr Clean does not tempt us to hear it. Laura Filardo-Llamas justly grasps the problem of home violence in Spain and its representation in multimodal discourses. Rusty Barrett adds to the whole the voice of Latin America by studying indigenous hip-hop as anti-colonial discourse in

Guatemala, very fascinating. He speaks for the Maya movement defending their native values in this country. Matthew Ord examines British folk rock recording as countercultural discourse. For him, musical meaning is metaphorical, and one may here remember what Roland Barthes once said about musical meaning: '*Seule la métaphore est exacte*'.

Finally, I want to mention that the journal *Semiotica* just dedicated a special issue to multimodality in argumentation (Rocci and Pollarolli 2018). A quite essential note there is by Paul van den Hoven (2018: 330), who sees multimodal argumentative discourse as a shift towards the audience. Like once the notion of genre, it is nowadays rather determined by the receiver, the consumer of the message (Cobley 1996 and 2002). The discourse world is a rhetorically organized world. But this is also the danger of the whole multimodal approach, namely, if it studies only extremely regulated media messages, the whole context of multimodality gets distorted by one type of messages of our electronic 'bubble' world. Reality, ie. all communication, is of course multi-modal but in a much deeper, more problematic and complex sense than anything the mass media offer us. The idea to study argumentation level by level starting from the basic phenomenal point of view is certainly the right one. By that we gradually get to the meaning processes which even the most banal popular culture messages can offer us. It will be interesting to observe in which directions multimodal studies develop in the future.

REFERENCES

- Barthes, Roland 1977. *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bengtsson, Ingmar 1973. *Musikvetenskap: En översikt*. Stockholm: Esselte Studium.
- Bourdieu, Pierre 1979. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Cobley, Paul ed. 1996. *The Communication Theory Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Cobley, Paul 2002. Analyzing narrative genres. *Sign System Studies* 29(2). Tartu: Tartu University.
- DeNora, Tia 2000. *Music in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press.
- McClary, Susann 2002. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*. 2nd edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rocci, Andrea and Chiara Pollarolli (eds) 2018. *Multimodality in Argumentation*. Special issue of *Semiotica* 220. Berlin: Mouton.
- Ryan, Michael 2010. *Cultural Studies: A Practical Introduction*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Tagg, Philipp 1979. *Kojak, Fifty Seconds of Television Music: Towards the Analysis of Affect in Popular Music*. Gothenburg: Musikvetenskapliga Institutionen.
- Tagg, Philipp 1987. Musicology and the Semiotics of Popular Music. *Semiotica* 66(1): 279–98.
- Tarasti, Eero 2000. *Existential Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Tarasti, Eero 2012. *Semiotics of Classical Music*. Berlin: Mouton.

- Tarasti, Eero 2015. *Sein und Schein: Explorations on Existential Semiotics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- van den Hoven, Paul 2018. Discussing Discourse Modalities in Argument Theory: Reconsidering a Paradigm. *Semiotica* 220: 19–40.
- Way, Lyndon C. S. and Simon McKerrell (eds) 2017. *Music as Multimodal Discourse: Semiotics, Power and Protest*. Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics. London: Bloomsbury.

Eero Tarasti is Emeritus Professor of Musicology at the Department of Philosophy, History, Culture and Art Studies of the University of Helsinki, Finland, and former president of the IASS/AIS (International Association for Semiotic Studies).

Email: eero.tarasti@helsinki.fi