

Signs behind Rossetti

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This article investigates related themes of the Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) in relation to his idealized representation of the human figure. Rossetti often represented the female figure in a significantly idealized and sensual manner. Semiotics is used to analyse the artwork of this artist in order to develop a greater understanding of these artworks, and to investigate possible meanings that certain signs might signify. The possible symbolism of these signs are from the key symbolist theorist, Juan Eduardo Cirlot (1916-1973), from his methodical study of symbolic signs. This article pinpoints semiotics' validity as a system for interpreting signs, and aims to show that there are deep and multifaceted meanings, imbedded in a painting. Semiotics as an interpretive mechanism could be used to explore other art disciplines and theories, because it provides a richer and in-depth understanding of meaning. Semiotics is also philosophical: it suggests that reality does not exist beyond individual interpretation, but that reality is a system of signs.

Key words: semiotics, signs, signifier, signified, symbolism

Tekens agter Rossetti

Hierdie artikel ondersoek spesifieke temas van die Pre-Raphaelite kunstenaar Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) in verband tot sy geïdealiseerde uitbeelding van die menslike figuur. Rossetti skilder dikwels die vroulike figuur in 'n aansienlik geïdealiseerde wyse. As sodanig voer hierdie artikel aan dat semiotiek gebruik kan word om Rossetti se kunswerke te ontleed vir 'n beter begrip op die ondersoek wat sekere tekens beteken. Die simboliek van hierdie tekens is gebaseer op die simbolist, Juan Eduardo Cirlot (1916-1973), as gevolg van sy metodiese studie van simboliese tekens. Hierdie artikel identifiseer ook semiotiek se geldigheid as 'n stelsel vir die interpretasie van tekens, met die doel om te wys dat daar diep en veelsydige betekenisse in 'n skildery is. Semiotiek as 'n interpretatiewe meganisme kan ook gebruik word om ander kuns-dissiplines en teorieë te analiseer en verken, want dit gee 'n ryker en in-diepte begrip van betekenis. Semiotiek is ook filosofies: dit dui daarop dat werklikheid nie kan bestaan buite individuele interpretasie nie, maar dat die werklikheid 'n stelsel van tekens is.

Sleutelwoorde: semiotiek, tekens, betekenaar, betekende, simboliek

In 1848 in Victorian England, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which originated at the Royal Academy where they all studied (Paglia 1990: 490-498). The Pre-Raphaelites aimed to renew medieval purity in terms of nature and religious and figurative subject matter, which, for them, had been lost in the art of the High Renaissance as epitomised by Raphael. The Pre-Raphaelites interpret social attributes in Victorian England, such as political, moral and economic systems to a degree that blurs the boundaries of any Victorian standards. Instead of the vibrant High Romantic liveliness portrayed in other paintings of the time, the Pre-Raphaelites disregarded any pictorial focus. For example, one does not only focus on the figurative representations, but rather, one's eye wanders off to all the immensely detailed areas depicted. It can be argued that the paint application and other formal values of a Pre-Raphaelite painting show a technical excellence of colour use, together with a romanticised subject matter.

The richness and botanical realism approach to subject matter and skill of Pre-Raphaelite paintings are the reason for investigating Pre-Raphaelitism for the purpose of this article. Also, it is an interest in the new way in which the Pre-Raphaelites, represented that which they

saw. Andres (2005: 11) states that “the revolutionary and innovative spirit of Pre-Raphaelite art initiated new approaches to perceptual and psychological realism, new ways of seeing, of feeling, of expressing emotions”. This notion is seen in the way in which the Pre-Raphaelites depict the opposite gender from a male point of view, and their paintings of women no longer compose orthodox representations of gender. Sometimes the female is seen as both an object for male desire and an active subject. This unconventional representation of gender was a reaction against socio-political (particularly Victorian) systems and traditions, where normative views are rejected and a personally experienced reality is depicted (Andres 2005: 161-162). It can be argued that this new approach to representation is most relevant to Rossetti as he often depicted the figure, usually female, in the most idealised and sensual manner (Paglia 1990: 490-498).

The aim of this article is to investigate a selected painting by artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) in order to emphasise his idealised and sensual approach of the female figure, which is best seen in the artwork *Venus Verticordia* (1864-1868). The aim is to interpret a historical cultural effect and place it in relation to the present by means of a contemporary method of analysis, in this case, semiotics (Kucich and Sadoff 2000: xiii).

Semiotics

Semiotics can be seen to consist of three areas. The first is semantics, which is the study of meaning. The second area is syntax that investigates grammatical structures, and the third can be seen as pragmatic, which, from a linguistic point of view, is primarily concerned with communication and meaning (Morris 1968: [sp] in Honderich 2005: 864). One might say that the development and understanding of meaning derives from the interpretation of signs. This is valid only if someone interprets something as signifying or referring to something other than itself. It can be argued that without consciously realising it, one interprets everything in relation to signs and that the meaning is derived from the placement of the signs in familiar systems of conventions. By way of definition, the semiotician Umberto Eco attempts to analyse the relationship of signs not only in a specific context, but also in a specific environment. The relationship of signs representing something, relevant to a specific environment, will be more familiar or valid to the interpreter in a certain place, as the location will impact on or determine the outcome of understanding.

A theoretical perspective as regards semiotics by Eco (1976: 4) broadly states that “[i]t is a critique of the theory that the meaning of signals or signs is determined by objects...to which they refer, and is a rejection of the notion that ‘ironic’ signs must be likeness of their objects”. Eco argues that the meanings of signs are not defined by the actual objects to which they refer, rather that a typology (selection) of signs should function as a mode of interpretation, understanding and investigation. This is important in the field of semiotics, where attention is given to the construction of meaning and the representation of diverse forms. These forms are termed ‘texts’, and are an aggregation (typology) of signs comprising of images, sounds, gestures and words that are formulated according to the convention of a certain genre in a selected medium of communication. Different encodings, or sign relations, all supply new, diverse and perplexing formations to meaning as a whole (Halliday 1994: 344). The semiotician Eco suggests that semiotics can pertain to anything that can be seen as signifying something, basically to all that has meaning in any culture. Eco (1984: 129) also states, “the theory of codes explains how one possesses rules of competence that permit one to... form and interpret given messages or texts... [thus by the act of creating meaning] the very activity of sign production and interpretation nourishes and enriches the universe of codes”.

“Considering images as signs, semiotics sheds a particular light on them, focusing on the production of meaning in society” (Bal & Bryson 1991: 176). One could, therefore, in a contemporary mass media context, apply a semiotic analysis to all media texts. On the account that Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was the founder of semiotics and linguistic studies, for him, semiotics is the study of signs, which is part of social sciences. The main objective of de Saussure’s model is to establish the fundamental structural relationship of signs, in order to provide a greater understanding of an entity (or texts) in any situation. This might be an attempt to provide a greater understanding of the things in everyday life that an individual interprets through the use of signs and by recognising what the relationship between signs might signify. In addition, one has to keep in mind that individual interpretation of specific texts and signs might signify varied meanings (de Saussure 1983: 15-16). Though the term, ‘semiotics’, was promoted by Chandler (S.a.: [sp]), Peirce (1839-1914) saw it as the umbrella term of interpretation and analysis through and of signs.

Charles Peirce who, Pinxten (1989: 34) asserts, is a pragmatist (a practically orientated realist) philosopher with an interest in logic and linguistics, classified linguistics as the laws of language, as partial formulations of semiosis. It is due to this perception that Peirce viewed the system of semiotics as a more inclusive term, which for him is closely associated with logic and the general dogma of signs. Peirce appropriated the term, ‘semiotics’ from John Locke, a seventeenth-century British philosopher. Locke saw a relationship between signs (words and ideas) that he regarded as a key feature of human interpretation and understanding of texts and cognitive signs. Peirce acknowledged this development and understood the field of semiotics to be a fundamental element of human knowledge and a new science of logic (Pinxten 1989: 34). Therefore, both Peirce and de Saussure suggest that signs are part of individual knowledge, but de Saussure does not claim that the interpretation of signs plays an integral part in developing in-depth understanding. It is as if Peirce cannot see knowledge or reason as existing apart from signs and their interpretation. Also, Eco (b 1932) (in Chandler S.a.: [sp]) states that, “semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign”. Chandler argues that semiotics aims to analyse texts, which is based on any perceivable element of experience (Chandler S.a.: [sp]). Furthermore, de Saussure was the main founder of linguistic structuralism. He inspired European structuralists, delineating a structured system of sign relationships as a mode of analysis. In contrast, Peirce does not focus on a structured sign relationship in linguistic theories. Rather, he emphasises the participation of the individual to interpret the relationship between signs in order for them to arrive at a greater understanding of a specific context. Structuralist theories regarding language and linguistic studies developed a structured and almost formulated understanding. But individual interpretation of such studies might lead to interpretive meaning. According to Peters (1996: 1), from a post structuralist point of view, interpretive meaning is that which the individual understands through language without fixed formulations of meaning, as meaning is not fixed and is open to individual interpretation. So, from a semiotic point of view the latter suggests the notion of open-ended signs. According to Culler (1985: 115), many post modern theorists critique the structured resemblance between the signifier and the signified of a particular sign. The term ‘floating signifieds’ (Culler 1985: 115) is used to indicate a varied and unspecified signifier, sometimes with a non-existent or vague signified. One might say that the approach or situation of an interpreter will determine the meaning of the sign to that interpreter. Thus, the meaning of the signifier and the signified is formulated according to the mental construct of the interpreter. This gives rise to the notion that meaning is open-ended and that each text is open to multiple interpretations. Roland Barthes (1977: 39) argues that signs (especially non-linguistic ones) are open to individual interpretation, containing ‘floating signifieds’. As regards signifiers, Derrida (1978: 25) states, “they are not fixed to their signifieds but point beyond themselves to

other signifiers in an indefinite referral of signifier to signified”. Also, Derrida (1976: 73) states, “[t]he sign[i]fied face, to the extent that it is still originally distinguished from the signifying face, is not considered a trace; by rights, it has no need of the signifier to be what it is... It is thus the idea of the sign that must be deconstructed through a meditation upon writing which would merge, as it must, with the undoing [*sollicitation*] of onto-theology, faith-fully repeating it in its *totality* and *making it insecure* in its most assured evidences”. Linguistically the latter reinstates meaning not to be fixed as Allison (2005: 98) points out, “[a]ll these values are denied to meaning once we admit its dependence upon nonpresent elements. Meaning can never be isolated or held in abstraction from its context, e.g., its linguistic, semiotic, or historical context”. To conclude, signs in a semiotic system of analysis might be perceived to be fixed as a structured system, but the act of interpretation enforces a shift of reason and meaning.

Semiotics can be seen as a vital system of analysis because semiotics (Chandler S.a.: [sp]) is the study that enables a philosophical approach to the realisation that reality, and the perception thereof is not a fixed entity and is open to multiple interpretations, and that it (semiotics) is a method of textual analysis. As Chandler (S.a.: [sp]) states, “[t]he study of signs is the study of the construction and maintenance of reality”. Thus, semiotics is an interpretive approach, based on a process of how signs relate to one another and what they might represent in a specific context. This provides a cognitive insight about meaning and understanding becoming open ended through individual interpretations in terms of signs (Priss 2004: [sp]).

Semioticians have elucidated that signs consist of a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the measurable subject that signifies, which is the context most easily identified. The signified is the concept to which the signifier refers. An understanding of signs is developed from the process of analysing what one knows about the phenomenology of a sign. One associates one’s preconceived ideas to the relevant signifier and signified. In this regard, the object of representation and the way it is represented, one might say, will establish a better and greater understanding of knowledge and information as regards signs (Schroder 2005: [sp]). Semiotically, signs can be combined to suggest different meanings to each interpreter, or they can be deconstructed to allow for multiple interpretations (Cocchiarella 1989: 254).

Signs are open to multiple interpretations that are relevant to individualised cognitive understanding. As Maturana (1978: 50) states, “denotation is not a primitive operation, it requires agreement consensus for the specification of the denotant and the denoted”. So, if a denotative sign is the most literal meaning of a sign, then the signifier and the signified of that sign in any context are in relation with one another. One might say that this provides a clear understanding of a particular sign relevant to individual interpretation ascribed to a set of mental structures. Thus, if an individual interprets a sign in order to understand it, he or she takes part in an analytical process by thinking of what that particular sign might be, and, as a result, meaning is developed (Keller 1998: [sp]). Eco (1984: 1) states, “the concept of sign must be disentangled from its trivial identification with the idea of coded equivalence and identity; the semiotic process of interpretation is present at the very core of the concept of sign”. This observation by Eco may imply that signs are embodied in a non-contradictory manner, which emphasises the role of each sign, that refers to and represents other signs, to function ‘synchronically’ and effectively. Thus all interpretations are dependent on signs.

It then is possible that the development and understanding of meaning can stem from the interpretation of signs. This is valid only if someone interprets something as signifying or referring to something other than itself. But Martin (1992: 17) suggests that if one had to use semiotics as a point of departure, one might come to realise that different meanings will play off

against each other. So then various meanings are related to a concept through the variation of signs that relate to other signs, which depends on the interpretation of the specificity of the signs.

There are two traditions in semiotics, respectively deriving from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) (Chandler 2002: 3-5). The main objective of de Saussure's model is to establish the fundamental structural relationship of signs, in order to provide a greater understanding of an entity (or texts) in any situation. This might be an attempt to provide a greater understanding of the things in everyday life that an individual interprets through the use of signs and by recognising what the relationship between signs might signify. Perhaps de Saussure insinuates that signs are part of the knowledge gained from understanding something, and that they should be used to develop in-depth meaning.

This is in contrast to the philosopher Charles Peirce who viewed the system of semiotics as a more inclusive and comprehensive term, which for him is closely associated with logic and the general belief of signs. Peirce acknowledged this development and understood the field of semiotics to be an essential component of human knowledge and a new science of logic (Pinxten 1989: 34). Therefore, both Peirce and de Saussure suggest that signs are part of individual knowledge, but de Saussure does not claim that the interpretation of signs plays an integral part in developing in-depth understanding. However, Peirce sees knowledge and reason as existing from signs and their interpretation. Peirce does not focus on a structured sign relationship in linguistic theories. Rather, he highlights the role of the individual to interpret the relationship between signs in order for them to arrive at a greater understanding of a specific context.

To conclude, in the methodologies of de Saussure and Peirce one finds different methods to understand the foundations of signs. The open-endedness of a sign through interpretation is not as clear in the de Saussurean model, where a more orderly relationship is found between the signifier and the signified of a sign. It is still unclear whether Peirce's or de Saussure's model is superior, as an underlying characteristic of both models is that the meaning of a sign is not ultimately concerned within it, but is derived from interpretation (Chandler 2002: 33-37).

Signs

Signs consist of arbitrary relationships between signifiers and signifieds. For Peirce (according Chandler 2002: 37) the iconic sign is when the signifier directly refers to or resembles the signified, such as a picture of a house will refer to a house.

For Chandler (2002:37), the indexical sign suggests that the signifier is caused by the signified, such as the visual representation of smoke, which will signify fire. The denotative sign (Chandler 2002: 142-145) is the most literal and easily identifiable meaning of a sign, such as the term rose which signifies a specific flower. Additionally, Chandler (2002: 142-145) identifies the connotative sign as the individual understanding of something where the signifier refers to the secondary meaning of the signified, such as the word rose, which might signify passion or refer to the name of an individual.

Furthermore, the metonymic sign can be seen as a sign that refers to some part of something and in doing that refers to a larger whole, such as the visual representation of weapons which might signify military power (Chandler 2002: 130). Another sign is the synecdochal sign, which is a sign that refers to the signified in an arbitrary or partial manner, because the connotation of the sign as a whole has a different meaning than is apparent. The signified thus has a greater

connotation than the signifier, such as the representation of someone saluting which might signify a soldier (Chandler 2002: 133-134). A mythical sign is where the signifier of a mythical sign relates to traditional or historical allegories or narratives of the signified, such as the representation of a cowboy which might signify the myth of masculinity, and 'manliness' (Chandler 2002: 141). Also, the symbolic sign is when the signifier of something is interpreted by an individual to symbolise something, it is in an insubstantial relation to the signified, symbolizing a personal interpretation of something more than what the signifier signifies, such as the colour violet which might symbolically signify spirituality, power and the notion of the sublime (Chandler 2002: 37). As a whole, the metaphoric sign consists of three independent signs. The one is an ontological metaphoric sign, suggesting that the signifier signifies the notion of being (be it either human or animal) it refers to the signified that metaphorically represents something that is personified, such as individuals in certain yoga positions who may refer to a lotus flower or an upright cobra (Chandler 2002: 126-130). The other is an orientational metaphoric sign, where the signifier in no direct relation to the signified might refer to something being on or of, near or far, such as distance, perceiving something close that represents something far away, for example viewing clouds that seem close but are actually far away. But also metaphorically, the signified signifies a sense of personification or emotion (Chandler 2002: 126-130). So the structural metaphoric sign encompasses the above mentioned ontological and orientational metaphoric signs, which in relation to each other, gain a more complex meaning (Chandler 2002: 37). Lastly is the ironic sign, which is when the signifier refers to something but it actually refers to the signified of something different, such as reflecting the opposite in stating that something is wonderful, when in actual fact it is dreadful (Chandler 2002: 134).

With regard to semiotics being a mode of analysis, Chandler (2002: 214) states, "it does offer a focus of enquiry, with a central concern for meaning making practices which conventional academic disciplines treat as peripheral". Chandler contends that a cohesive conceptual framework is made possible by semiotic structures that amalgamate methods to allow interpretation of all forms of signification. One might say that signs related to their signifieds are potentially meaningful due to a set of social conventions, and that semiotics as a mode of analysis realises the possibility that meaning is not merely absorbed, but actively interpreted.

Semiotic analysis of Rossetti's artwork

In order to analyse Rossetti's artwork, *Venus Verticordia* (1864-1868), semiotics is used to examine the validity of semiotics as an interpretative system, and to achieve an in-depth interpretation of the signs in the painting. Clarity will be given on Rossetti's portrayal of female sensuality and mystery from a semiotic point of view.

In *Venus Verticordia*¹ (figure 1: 1864-1868), one sees a cluster of honeysuckles in the foreground. Behind the honeysuckles is a nude female figure, which is covered by these honeysuckle flowers up to her mid-torso. In her left hand she is holding a golden apple, and in her right hand she is holding an arrow with yellow butterflies situated on both. A halo, garlanded with yellow butterflies is depicted above the head of the female that illuminates her full-bodied red hair and the surrounding red roses in the background. Lastly, one sees a depiction of a blue bird against a completely black background, on the far right above the roses.



Figure 1
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Venus Verticordia*,
(oil on canvas, 1864-1868, 98cm x 69.9cm, Russel-Cotes Art Gallery, Bournemouth, London, (S.a.: [sp]).

The female figure

From a semiotic point of view, the nude female figure can be seen as a connotative sign, and in this case, for Cirlot (1962: 230), nudity can signify the awareness and focus of pure physical beauty.

The nude female figure can also be seen as a synecdochal sign, suggesting that nudity additionally refers to unjustified desires and lust (Cirlot 1962: 230). So the nude female figure can therefore be seen as signifying aspects of both sensuality and sexuality.

The female figure's skin can be seen as a metonymic sign that refers to meaning in a larger whole. As Cirlot (1962: 298) states, "[s]kin is associated with the ideas of birth and rebirth".

The representation of the two hands can be seen as a connotative sign, which signifies Cirlot's (1962: 138) idea that "[t]he difference between the right hand and the left is usually ignored, but when the distinction is made it appears merely to serve the purpose of enriching the basic significance with the additional implications of space-symbolism, the right side corresponding to the rational, the conscious, the logical and the virile; the left side representing the converse". Thus both the rational and irrational are suggested.

From a semiotic point of view, the female figure's neck can be seen as a symbolic sign, which signifies a neck and throat to symbolise the Zodiac sign of Taurus (Cirlot 1962: 332). Additionally, Cirlot (1962: 331) asserts that Taurus can signify fertilisation and creation.

Semiotically, the female figure's mouth can be seen as a synecdochal sign, referring to a mouth that might signify "the point of convergence between the external and the inner worlds" (Cirlot 1962: 222). Thus, the mouth might refer to the joining of oneself, one's being, that entails

all emotion and thought, to external elements, beings or experiences, through verbal processes. For example, from a religious point of view, if one were to give praise to a higher being, emotion and rational or irrational thought would be joined together expressing that passion verbally.

Also, the female figure's eyes can be seen as a symbolic sign, that possibly symbolises spiritual qualities. As Cirlot (1962: 99) states, "[g]iven that the sun is the source of light and that light is symbolic of the intelligence and of the spirit, then the process of seeing represents a spiritual act and symbolises understanding".

From a semiotic point of view, the grey colour of the female figure's eyes can also be seen as a symbolic sign. But knowing that the female figure as a whole can suggest sexuality as well as spirituality, love, health, beauty and purity, might lead to an interpretation that contradicts the above interpretations. This is because, in Cirlot's (1962: 54) view, the colour grey can symbolise depression.

The the female figure's hair can be seen as a connotative and symbolic sign, and for Cirlot (1962: 135) the connotation of hair is, "energy, and [it is] related to symbolism of levels. That is, a head of hair, being located on the head, stands for higher forces, whereas abundant body-hair signifies the prevalence of the baser forces". So the possible symbolism refers to higher spiritual forces (Cirlot 1962: 134-135).

But the female's hair can also be seen as an ontological metaphoric sign, because the flow of the female figure's hair, might signify water. In this regard Cirlot (1962: 364) states, "[i]n Egyptian hieroglyphs, the symbol for water is a wavy line... when tripled, symbolises a volume of water".

The 'golden' highlights of the female figure's hair can be seen as a synecdochal sign, suggesting that the colour of her hair signifies sunlight and relates to the notion of spiritual energy (Cirlot 1962: 135). But the hints of an orange colour in the female figure's hair can also be seen as a synecdochal sign, signifying aspiration and self-respect (Cirlot 1962: 54).

In addition, the red colour of the female figure's hair can be seen as a symbolic sign, suggesting that red symbolises "pulsing blood and of fire, for the surging and tearing emotions" Cirlot (1962: 53).

The apple in the female figure's left hand can be seen as a synecdochal sign, which refers to an apple that might signify an excess of desires (Cirlot 1962: 14). Diel (1952: 15), states, "[t]he warning not to eat the forbidden apple came, therefore, from the mouth of the supreme being, as a warning against the exaltation of materialistic desire". Thus the apple can be seen as a metonymic sign that refers to Biblical allegories and earthly desires.

The golden colour of the apple can also be seen as a symbolic sign that emphasises the symbolic signification of the colour gold that refers to superiority and spiritual enrichment (Cirlot 1962: 120). For Fontana (1993: 66), the colour gold signifies logic, reason and an association with the sun.

For Parris (1984: 208), an apple might suggest Ancient Greek myths of romance and deities. Parris (1984: 208) states, "[t]he Phrygian boy is Paris who awarded the golden apple to Aphrodite and was persuaded by her to woo Helen". This is an exemplar taken from Rossetti's sonnet accompanying this painting.² So the apple can be seen as a mythical sign that relates to traditional or historical allegories or narratives.

From a semiotic point of view, the arrow held in the female figure's right hand can be seen as a mythical sign, which might refer to ancient Greek beliefs in that it is reminiscent of the weapon of Apollo and Diana, that signifies superior power (Cirlot 1962: 19-20). Cirlot (1962: 19-20) states that an arrow, "because of its shape, it has undeniable phallic significance, specially when it is shown in emblems balanced against the symbol of the 'mystic Centre', feminine in character, such as the heart." Thus the arrow might be a symbolic sign that refers to a phallic symbol, and a symbol of power and weaponry in ancient Greek beliefs of Apollo and Diana.

A halo is seen above the head of the female figure, radiating a bright light, which might be seen as a symbolic sign. It is here that Cirlot (1962: 135) suggests that a halo might signify Christian holiness and intellectual energy. With regard to haloes, Fontana (1993: 130) states that they signify, "[a] symbol of divine radiance, the wisdom of the gods and the emanation of life force from the head". Parris (1984: 209) identifies haloes as symbolically signifying spirituality.

Semiotically, the alluring property of the halo that attracts butterflies can be seen as a metonymic sign. Surprisingly, Parris (1984: 209) identifies the alluring property of the halo to signify death, and the death of lovers. Arguably, one might say that the butterflies are drawn to the halo in the same way that moths are drawn to bright light. So, this suggests attraction and allure, and if one were to consider that property of the halo that is depicted together with the sensual nude female figure, jointly it might refer to sexuality.

Additionally, the halo can be seen as a connotative sign that refers to a sense of purity (Parris 1984: 209). But Parris (1984: 209) points out that Rossetti's intent to idealise the female figure is indicated by placing a halo above her head. One might say it is the purity (the halo) of the female figure that is associated with her sensuous beauty and in a sense her sexuality, that can be seen as elevating the female identity but also objectifying her. Stephens (in Parris 1984: 209) argues that the female figure can be seen as a 'femme fatale', when he states that "[s]he guard[s] the apple with a threatening dart, while the psyche, tremulous of wing, traverses its surface". Parris (1984: 209) also sees the sensuous female figure as the seductress of hearts. So overall, the halo above the female figure's head might signify Christian holiness, intellectual energy, spirituality, purity, and also death, and the death of lovers.

The background and environment

From a semiotic point of view, in *Venus Verticordia* (figure 1: 1864-1868), the honeysuckle can be seen as a denotative sign that refers to an actual honeysuckle. The honeysuckle can also be seen as a symbolic sign, and as it is seen as a flower, symbolically it might suggest feminine beauty. Interestingly, if the bud of the flower is open, it can also suggest the energy of the sun (Fontana 1993: 104).

The red colour of the honeysuckle can be seen as a metonymic sign, referring to the red colour signifying emotional sensitivity, passion and a bearer of life (Cirlot 1962: 50-54). But the yellow coloured petals of the honeysuckle can be seen as a symbolic sign, suggesting that yellow can symbolically signify the sun, and the hints of gold are suggestive of mysticism (Cirlot 1962: 110). According to Parris (1984: 208-209), the honeysuckle might symbolise sexual connotations. This painting is accompanied by one of Rossetti's poems, *The Honeysuckle and Chimes*. In this case, Parris (1984: 208-209) is of the opinion that the sexual connotations might come from this poem, where Rossetti writes about the honeysuckle's form and allure that attract bees.

In between the honeysuckles, one sees the depiction of green leaves, which might be seen as a connotative sign referring to happiness (Cirlot 1962: 181). Cirlot (1962: 181) states, “[w]hen several leaves appear together as a motif, they represent people”. Thus leaves can also be seen as a metonymic sign. Additionally, the green colour of the leaves can also be seen as a symbolic sign. Fontana (1993: 67) identifies the colour green to symbolise life, evolution and nature.

In *Venus Verticordia*, red and pink roses are seen in the background behind the female figure. From a semiotic point of view, the red roses can be seen as a denotative sign, which refers to the red roses as being actual red roses. But the roses can also be seen as a connotative sign, as Cirlot (1962: 275) states that a rose is “in essence, a symbol of completion, of consummate achievement and perfection”. But for Fontana (1993:104), a rose can signify Christian connotations of the Virgin Mary, and even the blood shed by Jesus on the cross. Also, Parris (1984: 208) suggests that roses, especially red roses, can refer to sensual love.

The red colour of the roses can also be seen as a symbolic sign that suggests the colour red symbolises life (Fontana 1993: 66). However, from a semiotic point of view, the pink roses can be seen as a metonymic sign, which might signify the colour of flesh (Cirlot 1962: 54). In addition, the pink roses can also be seen as a symbolic sign, where Cirlot (1962: 54) asserts that pink can symbolically signify sensualism and emotions.

The black section of the background behind the roses can be seen as a synecdochal sign, signifying fermentation and the process of decay (Cirlot 1962: 56). The colour black can also be seen as a symbolic sign that signifies occultation and feeling or showing sorrow (Cirlot 1962: 56).

The secondary images

In *Venus Verticordia*, one can see yellow butterflies positioned on the halo, arrow and apple. From a semiotic point of view, the butterflies can be seen as a metonymic sign, which might relate to the soul and the unconscious (Cirlot’s 1962: 35). The butterflies can also be seen as a symbolic sign. As Cirlot (1962: 35) states that butterflies can symbolically signify, “[t]he Angel of Death... [also]... equated with life rather than with the soul in the sense of the spirit or transcendent being”. In addition, the butterfly can signify female elegance and gracefulness, and in Japan a beautiful female wearing a kimono will be associated with butterflies (1998-2011: [sp]).

Semiotically, the blue bird in the top right corner of the painting can be seen as an ontological metaphorical sign, which indicates that a blue bird might signify the human soul and spiritual progress to enrichment (Cirlot 1962: 28). Also, Bachelard (1943 in Cirlot 1962: 27) is of the opinion that a blue bird can signify air. If a bird is in flight, it may suggest height and that of soaring spirits. In addition, Kerrigan (2011: 1) states, “[t]he bluebird is symbolic of happiness and fulfillment. When you see a bluebird around you it is a reminder that your world is filled with happiness and satisfaction, it shows us to take a closer look and to value and appreciate all of the joy that surrounds our lives”.

The blue colour of the bird can be seen as a synecdochal sign, and in this case, Cirlot (1962: 56) points out that blue can signify the spirit and space, that ultimately signifies spiritual transcendence. What is more, Fontana (1993: 66) states that blue can signify intellectuality, peace, love and the notion of something that can last forever.

The formal elements

In *Venus Verticordia*, the use of warm colour is seen in the honeysuckles in the foreground and the roses behind the female figure, with cooler colours further into the background behind the roses. As regards colour, Cirlot (1962: 52) states, “warm ‘advancing’ colours correspond to the processes of assimilation, activity and intensity (red, orange, yellow and, by extension, white) and the second covers cold, ‘retreating’ colours, corresponding to processes of dissimulation, passivity and debilitation (blue, indigo, violet and, by extension, black)”. Hence, semiotically, the dark cooler colours in the background behind the roses can be seen as a symbolic sign, which, in this case, signifies immorality for Cirlot (1962: 54).

The dark colours can also be seen as a connotative sign as connoting gloom (Cirlot 1962: 54). But the light, warm colours in the foreground, seen in the honeysuckles and roses, and even in the female can be seen as a connotative sign, indicating that something that is praiseworthy or positive, as well as lively and energetic (Cirlot 1962: 54).

It is possible that the light, warm colours can also be seen as a metonymic sign, which might signify glory and high moral standards (Cirlot 1962: 54).

Conclusion

Semiotics is the study that enables a realisation that reality is not fixed but open to multiple interpretations. So, reality is a construction of a system of signs where signs allow interpretations of any texts, including verbal and visual texts. Interpreting signs can give rise to new meanings allowing cognitive realisations so that meaning becomes open ended through the interpretation of signs (Priss 2004: [sp]).

From a semiotic point of view, a sign’s literal meaning (signifier) and what the concept thereof (signified) is not only signifies a relationship between the signifier and signified, but also to other signs. So, if an individual interprets a sign, the meaning of that sign becomes open-ended and a personal understanding develops.

There are two leading semiotics models, of de Saussure and Peirce (Chandler 2002: 3-5). De Saussure’s model aims to establish the fundamental structural relationship of signs, in order to provide a greater understanding of an entity (or texts) in any situation. This might be an attempt to provide a richer understanding of the things in every day life if each individual uses signs as a method of interpretation. De Saussure suggests that signs are part of the knowledge gained from understanding something, and should perhaps be used to develop in-depth meaning. This is in contrast to the philosopher Charles Peirce, who emphasised the individual interpretation of signs in the field of semiotics to be a fundamental element of human knowledge and a new science of logic (Pinxten 1989: 34).

A sign, as a whole, for de Saussure, refers to the specific association between the signifier and the signified, and the relationship between the two for him is identified as signification. De Saussure points out that the signifier/signified relationship is how meaning is developed (de Saussure 1983: 121). Thus, de Saussure stresses that there is no direct relationship between the signifier and signified, rather arbitrary relations are found. It is here where the signification of the relationship of signs as they represent meaning differs from Peirce’s system (de Saussure 1983: 121).

Venus Verticordia (figure 1: 1864-1868) was investigated by using semiotics in order to explore the various signs in the painting, to find possible meanings. One might say that the honeysuckle, as a whole, refers to spiritual rebirth, and has sexual connotations. But the honeysuckle can also signify spiritual experiences that are associated with the energy of the sun. The honeysuckle is represented in a warm red hue that might suggest emotional sensitivity, passion and a bearer of life. Moreover, the honeysuckle flowers have yellow coloured petals that can signify the sun, but the hints of gold might signify mysticism.

Regarding the nude female figure, she might suggest a sense of purity and innocence, as well as a focus on physical beauty and lust that is controlled by the unconscious. Also, the female figure can be seen as a 'femme fatale' and a seductress of hearts. Her skin suggests notions of birth and rebirth. Her neck refers to the Taurus Zodiac sign, suggesting fertilisation and creation. Additionally, her mouth might suggest the meeting of inner and outer worlds. Also, her eyes can refer to spirituality, but the grey colour might refer to a sense of depression.

The female figure's hair can suggest a sense of higher forces, and the flow of her hair might refer to the flow of water that signifies fruitfulness. The 'golden' highlights in her hair might signify sunlight and refer to spiritual energy, and the orange tint can signify aspiration and self-respect.

The halo above the female figure's head might suggest Christian holiness, intellectual energy, spirituality, purity, death and the death of lovers.

The apple in the female figure's left hand can signify excess of desires. But the golden colour of the apple might refer to superiority, spiritual enrichment, logic, reason and an association with the sun. Also, the apple can be seen to signify mythologies, particularly ancient Greek myths of romance, as well as Biblical allegories and earthly desires. The arrow can be seen to signify superior power, phallic symbols and the ancient Greek beliefs of Apollo and Diana, and the weaponry that they used.

The background and environment, such as the roses depicted behind the female figure, may suggest a sense of completion, sensual love, consummate achievement and perfection, Christian connotations of the Virgin Mary, and even the blood shed by Jesus on the cross. Furthermore, the red colour of the roses can signify life. There are also pink roses that can be seen to signify the colour of flesh, sensuality and emotions.

It is possible that the black section of the background can signify fermentation and the process of decay, mystical or supernatural powers, and feeling or showing sorrow.

The depiction of butterflies can be seen to suggest a sense of the soul and the unconscious. The blue bird in the background can be seen as referring to the human soul and spiritual growth. Also, the blue bird can signify air, because if a bird is in flight, it may suggest height and of soaring spirits. But the blue colour of the bird can signify the spirit and space, ultimately signifies spiritual transcendence, intellectuality, peace, love and the notion of something that can last forever.

Regarding the use of colour in the painting, the warm colours in the foreground can signify activity and intensity, and the light colours might signify glory and the positive. But, the cool colours in the background can be seen to signify immorality, gloom and the processes of dissimulation and passivity.

Thus, overall, the painting refers to sexuality, spirituality and spiritual experiences. But the sense of spirituality and the experience thereof plays off against lust and feminine beauty. These signs are not clear, and a sense of mysticism is apparent throughout the painting, which, at the same time, evokes a sense of emotional sensitivity. The female figure looks at the viewer in an inviting way, making the viewer aware of her physical beauty. This idealised female figure can be seen as a seductress, but she is pure as well, with a halo above her head suggesting a sense of holiness.

The female figure's full head of hair refers to spiritual energy and aspiration. Moreover, there is a sense of female superiority and power in the painting that can be seen by the female holding an arrow and an apple with rich connotations. But, by situating the female in amongst a bed of vivid roses, a sense of sensual feminine love, flesh and emotion is evoked.

So, there might be underlying subliminal meanings in this painting. These might be messages referring to the moral and immoral state of humanity, and to the unconscious. One might even interpret signs within this painting to suggest a questioning of what is pure. Perhaps the painting raises questions about beauty in any form, which can signify a purity of the self, as the self is a spiritual energy that might last forever.

Taken together, the use of semiotics to attain a more in-depth understanding of Rossetti's paintings opened up a broader and richer perspective into his approach to subject matter. This article has shown the validity of semiotics, and by using signs, the possibility to achieve in-depth interpretation and new meanings were suggested in relation to a historical paintings. Interestingly, one might argue that it became possible to find new interpretations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Using a 'new' method of analysis in order to interpret something 'old' can be argued to revive an historical art tradition to fit a post modern zeitgeist. By using signs as a mode of interpretation this article has shown that there are greater meanings to such a rich text as a painting than is apparent. The use of semiotics as a mechanism for interpretation and analysis could be used to investigate other Pre-Raphaelite artists, other art disciplines and other theories, because it provides a richer perspective to develop a more in-depth understanding, of potential meaning. Semiotics is important because it suggests that reality does not exist outside individual interpretation, but refers to reality as a system of signs. From a semiotic point of view, reality can be seen as constructed by each individual and this suggests that meaning is not fixed, but open to every individual's personal understanding. Possibly semiotics can be seen as a framework to identify various meanings of something, in order to show that what we see is not normally what we think it is.

Notes

1 Verticordia refers to an Australian genus of plants that is identified by five or ten calyx-lobes enclosing the petals that are separated in pointed feathery fibers. The flowers vary from white, pink, or yellow, and on the lower stem a cluster of broad leaves are formed. Interestingly,

other theorists have also identified the term 'Verticordia' to suggest 'turns the heart' (2011: [sp]).

2 She hath the apple in her hand for thee, Yet almost her heart would hold it back; She muses,

with her eyes upon the track
Of that which is in my spirit they can see. Haply, 'Behold, he is at peace,' saith she; 'Alas! The apple for her lips, - the dart That follows its brief sweetness to his heart, - The wandering of hiss feet perpetually.'

But if she give the fruit that works her spell,
Those eyes shall flame as for her Phrygian boy.
Then shall her bird's strained throat the woe foretell,
And her far seas moan as a single shell,
And her grove with love-lit fires of Troy (Ash S.a.: [sp]).

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