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MODAL DIMENSIONS OF THE MEMORY-SYSTEM (IN ART)

Remembering as a process of classification and pigeonholing: who is active?

F. Nietzsche, Notebooks, paragr. 501.

1. Quite often we feel that our memory functions like Voltaire's famous image of "God's library": all books are revised there. As for the abridgements we are not abnormal: our memory does the same as all artificial memory systems and archives which record, edit and abbreviate information.

Nevertheless we have to admit that it is quite difficult to get a hold of the means of recalling things in memory. We can think that memory is some kind of an archive where to store things we have been experiencing day by day. Memory is then a large set of images in memory. But when we ask the particular way memory-images have been arranged or devices by which we can recollect those images we encounter some basic conceptual difficulties.

It is hard to recognize our own memory systems in use, because it is in itself as a means of recollecting memorizable things 'there'. In that sense memory doesn't refer to itself, only to the things (themes) in memory. The system, the way how to recall things from memory is always veiled and easily can disguise itself. In that sense memory doesn't unveil its own set of devices when it unfolds some forgotten things in memory. For example, we can't ask our memory: "did you remember to forget this or that thing"? Or we can, but it doesn't answer, it only recollects something "else" instead.

In that way memory chooses its own presence - and at that very moment refers to something else. Furthermore we can't see the signifier of memory: memory functions only when it denies its own signifier. It is transparent much in the same way as the signifier of the photographic image is when showing the target "out there". Probably that is why they both are so predisposed to the ideological recuperation.

There is a semiotic distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic levels of the signprocesses. Roland Barthes has said that the paradigmatic axis of the signprocess is a "mnemonic treasure": "in each series, unlike what happens at the syntagmatic level" (in presentia), "the terms are united in absentia". But, we



can ask, where is this "absentia"? Obviously in presentia in our memory, ready to differentiate things "there". We should not underestimate the fact that large parts of our mnemonic capacity is activated during the process of beholding pictures. And this is true even when we try to forget everything we could memorize and create something new. In fact the new is always born in our memory.

If we look at different kinds of graphic memories (books, pictures, etc.), which all have their own semiotic autonomy, we soon realize, that contrary to our memory, they seem to be able to refer themselves deictically. But, only with the help of our own memory.

2. Arthur Koestler has made a distinction between the "abstractive memory" and the "spotlight memory". The opposition is between the memory which condenses and schematizes information (and sacrifices particulars) and the memory which can recall vivid details (Janus: A Summing Up, The Act of Creation).

Koestler supposes that the abstractive memory arranges and recollects general codes or links between different categories and also takes care of "general impressions" in memory, whereas the spotlight memory can recall "scenes or details with almost hallucinatory clarity". (William B. Yates had almost the same division: the memory of concrete images and the abstract memory.)

Koestler had a vague idea about "the sense modalities" of memory, but he didn't develop the idea of these "perceptual modalities" any further. In the light of the new knowledge about modalities we can presume that the modal dimensions of memory systems could probably be a fresh and even a concrete way to make cross-references in any artificial memory systems (mainly in the hypertext and multi-media).

What are these modalities or modal functions? When looking at the picture we have to anticipate, to expect something on the basis of our interpersonal experiences. Thus a modal dimension is the relationship of viewer (or maker) to the commonly accepted (putative) world of the work (Michael O'Toole, Svetlana Alpers.)

On the basis of our psychological capacity or faculty we can recognize the basic mental orientation, the mood, the ethos of the picture and to comprehend what is happening there in the discursive sense. The modal function offers us some kind of a basic capacity with which to reach the world of the basic intonations, the interpersonal "colouring" of a memory impulse.

With the help of modal categories we "see" (sense, interpret) a picture, not only the concrete details of it ('the look' of a portrait) but also abstract categories and general intonations in (of) the work.

By and large the modal universe means the interpersonal attitude toward the world of the pictorial fiction. In that sense it expands the scope of the entity we call a subject matter of the work.



We can go further and presume that there is no memory (or memory-system) without a modal share. And, there is no database memory to which viewer (and maker) has not projected some of her/his modal expectations, which he/she expects to be interpersonal. There is no memory without our active share, without our attempt to try to plunge modal interpretation in different contexts.

Probably the most important thing is that the study of modal functions in art might offer us the possibility to create new links between old (and new) iconographical categories, especially if we think the iconclass system with its indexical operations. (Iconclass is a decimal system designed by Henri van de Waal for the iconographical analysis.)

The problem has certainly been how to get the iconclass system more interesting in the intellectual sense. Nowadays iconclass resists any intellectually stimulating links at various points. I think it is not beyond the decorum to demand that those iconographical indexes with instant catch-words should be intellectually more challenging and that they could offer more links as far as the putative and modal world of the picture is of concern.

One of the main problems when applying iconclass-index has been the problem how to classify pictures we recognize (appreciate) abstract? It is in some way symptomatic that modal categories are also abstract ('perspective', 'intimistic mood', 'characterization', 'contrasts', 'expressiveness', etc.). But in a slightly different way. However if it is possible to link the so called formal categories with the modal ones, it could open new paths for cross-references of many topoi - even between abstract and old art.

If we can create a database using modal categories as subject terms (to make new links between the old ones) it would enlarge possibilities to create new kind of hypertexts for database and even, to make s. c. representative and abstract art equal in some respects. The interest in modal functions could also define the concept of allegory in a new way - the way we have applied it in the postmodern theories: every interpretation is an allegory. Or moreover: allegory as a means of modal interpretation.

In many senses capacities of a computer are always our capacities. Even in hypermedia (multimedia) there are no semiotic networks which could create their own systems. It is we who plan systems for the database. It depends on our intellectual competence (or strength) to create a system which for can example take into account the general modal codes of our memory - which we any way use in our daily life. In this sense we could utilize modal functions in both categories Koestler mentions: from details (beyond which God is hiding according to Aby Warburg) to the general impression of the work of art.