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## **SEMIOTICS OF AUTOMOBILE CODES IN THE WORKS OF CONTEMPORARY PAINTERS**

**\*Azam Keshavarz Hafshejani**

*Department of Graphic, College of Engineering, Shahin Shahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahin  
Shahr, Iran*

*\*Author for Correspondence*

### **ABSTRACT**

Our life is full of significant signs affecting all life aspects such as social and daily activities. The meanings of signs are not fixed or permanent and they vary based on social changes. In fact, Saussure believes that the semiotics is scientific when it socially studies the signs; furthermore, he notes that the signs may implicate different significative functions in different cultural contexts and foundations. The purpose of this study is to investigate the social codes of commodity in the works of contemporary painters to achieve a profound reading about the deeper layers of the works and the artists' attitude to commodities such as automobiles. In this regards, there are many questions should be answered about the elements of paintings paid attention by semioticians, the role of automobiles in Iran contemporary paintings, and the aspects of the codes attracting the artists' attention. The research method is a descriptive one based on analysis of text content and semiotics; also, the data are collected through studying the library and internet resources, articles, and interviews related to visual semiotics. The results of the study showed that using the semiotics, the dichotomy of automobiles signifier with nature and human leads to this signification that the contemporary Iranian artists have considered automobiles as an object for men or they have represented it from the position of technology fear.

**Keyword:** *Semiotics, the Codes of Commodity, Automobile, Contemporary Art*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Semiotic approach defines how the objects such as clothes or automobiles are converted into signs and implicate significative values of a culture. The tendency of semiotics is to study the signs in their cultural context and assess the culture as a complex system or systems of signs. An automobile is an object before it is considered as a sign; therefore, it firstly seems to implicate only a daily function, but according to the semiotic approach, it is converted into a sign and implicates significative values of a culture (Sojoudi, 2008).

Now, the main question is the neither sign function nor better to say its application to find the meaning of artworks. In fact, semioticians do not attempt to find the theme of work, but they explain the works meaning creation; in other words, they describe how an image creates meaning and what processes or elements compose the image theme. In the past, due to the superiority of commodities to signs, the efficiency and functional aspects of commodities dominated their sign values, but now the commodities regardless of their productivity have found sign values and social positions. In this regard, the contemporary art has to implicate the semiotic aspects of commodities while representing them. The purpose of this reading is to achieve the vision that makes it easy for the modern audience to understand the artworks, and on the other hand, it can provide the deeper layers of the categories for texts readers. It should be noted that reading the semiotics of images depends on how to view them or in other words, each image looks at something which should be discovered by viewers. In fact, semioticians know the strategies used for reading images and they can discover what each image looks at. Therefore, artworks viewers ought to get familiar with the strategies and elements used and considered by semioticians (Nojoumiyan, 2007).

In this study, to focus on semiotic aspects of paintings, it was attempted to use the works of artists who more realistically represent the codes. Therefore, among the signifiers, those helping audience to

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understand the works significations such as succession and companion elements, polar dichotomy, and so forth were clarified using visual examples while reading the selected works.

#### **Semiotics and Codes**

Human beings rarely perceive the fact that the means of communication between man and the universe (which are the mediums to transfer the recognition of the world to human) can significantly affect how to see and recognize the world. Actually, artists are among the few people who have discovered the secret. On the other hand, art is manifestation of the arbitrary borders; it is possible to separate all things from each other. In fact, the reality is sometimes fragmented in paintings, and it is observed that the events and objects without any logical or historical proximity come together; as a result, a new world is created and a new word is given. Actually, semioticians discover the relations in the world (Postman, 1996). Anything as a signifier or referrer which is considered as something other than itself can be a sign. Actually, such things unconsciously are interpreted as signs through being related to a familiar system of assignments (Dillon, 2011). According to Chandler (2008), any sign is composed of two elements: signifier and signified ones. A signifier element is the phonetic image of a spoken word and a signified element is the meaning formed in the audience's mind; in other words, a signifier element is the semblance of a sign while the signified element is the conceptual form of it. In fact, the cultural factors can create unity between signifier and signified elements.

A textual image is independent of the outside world and makes its meanings and significations in the relation between its internal elements. In fact, from the semioticians' point of view, each image is composed of pieces or segments which are distributed in a level called text. When a text is read according to the structural semiotics; in fact, it is attempted to find a relation among the pieces and segments which it finally leads to find a structure for the image (Nojumiyan, 2007).

When a visual sign is inserted in a text, it is converted into an image sign; therefore, an image sign is defined as a visual sign recorded for a material or inserted in a text. Regarding the paintings, visual signs refer to the way of viewing an object. Before an image is read physically, it is mentally captured; so the purpose of image semiotics is to discover the rules of this reading (Ahmadi, 2010). According to Erik Bui Suns, in a collection such as a painting, the meaning of any sign unit cannot be independent of the collection; in this regard, in spite of Saussure's opinion, the collection is not a system but it is only a semiotic one which has lost its connotations to maintain a meaning compatible with the meanings of other signs in the collection.

The meaning of a sign depends on the code inserted in the sign; actually, codes create a framework in which the signs find meaning or better to say, codes convert the signs into meaningful systems, so that they make a relation between the signifier and the signified (Ahmadi, 2010). According to Chandler (2008), semioticians have found that dividing codes into different groups can be helpful for producing and interpreting the meaning of each code; also, he believes that different types of codes may interfere with each other or include similar contents. Anyhow, he divides the codes into different types including textual, interpretive, perceptual, and social ones. On the other hand, social codes are divided into categories of verbal language, bodily codes, commodity codes, and behavioral codes.

Regarding the social codes, it should be noted that the social distinctions of a culture are determined by social codes; in other words, individuals' social identity is transferred through their actions such as speaking manners, hairstyles, food habits, etc. In fact, according to Chandler (2008), people have learned to read the signs of the world as assignments and community rules dominating the cultural-social context. The main strategies and elements used and paid attention by structural semioticians for reading the images are mostly resulted from the distinction among signifiers which it is divided into two types including succession (how the elements are replaced with each other) and companion (how the elements come together). In the following, it is attempted to introduce the succession and companion elements as well as assess the role of directions in perceiving the semiotic signs according to the mentioned issues.

#### **Reading Images**

According to Saussure, the differences among the signs are more important than their similarities, because the dichotomies play essential role in meaning production; also, they are applied in cultural processes and

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help us to organize the complexity of experiences. Using the opposite qualities of visual elements together causes their visual meaning to be clarified and highlighted; on the other hand, the mood and feeling of visual messages are significantly expressed. In fact, the technique supports the designer’s purposes; since each visual message is a complex combination of various elements and there is the risk of ambiguity in understanding the meanings, it is recommended to clarify the general and ambiguous concepts through applying contrast technique.

Duns (2003) believes that in contemporary paintings, many dichotomies such as nature and culture, human and machine, nature and technology, etc. have been used for automobile semiotics to create meaning in the works. In order to reveal the hidden values of artworks, semioticians choose the most important dichotomy and its signifier while reading the works; then, substitute another signifier for main one using succession method.

Directions are the other important issue regarding the semiotics, and there are usually different directions in artworks; anyhow, directions from the signification in an image. In fact, each direction evokes a meaning which composes a visual message. Among the directions, vertical one is the most important reference for human to maintain the balance and mobility. Moving from right to left is a weak movement and shows the motion from front to back, surface to depth, and dynamicity to stativity, but on the contrary, moving from left to right is a robust movement showing the motion from depth to surface. Left direction is light and hot while the right direction is heavy and cold, but both directions show going to extremes. Also, moving from top to bottom is read as coldness, silence, the increase of weight, the reduction of warmth and passion, and vice versa. Therefore, it is important to consider the directions while reading the images. Directions include top to bottom, bottom to top, front and back, left and right, geographical directions, inside and outside, center, and margins (Ayatollahi, 2001).

In the following, it is attempted to assess the dichotomy and directions in figures 1-8.



**Figure 1:**



**Figure 2:**



**Figure 3:**



**Figure 4:**



**Figure 5:**



**Figure 6:**



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**Figure 7:**



**Figure 8:**

Figure 1: it obviously shows the dichotomy of nature and technology, nature and culture, dynamicity and stativity, neutrality and artificiality, and hardness and softness. What the audiences perceive is that the nature, softness, and dynamicity are the victors of these dichotomies; also, the failure of automobiles which are the symbol of technology, culture, stativity, artificiality, and hardness is shown by their accident scene. In terms of spatial and directional companion relations, it is mostly emphasized on the center and margins. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, what located in the center of an image is applied as the core of image information followed by the other elements of the image. The elements located in the margins are considered as secondary and dependent ones. Regarding the dichotomy of nature and technology, as observed, the automobiles are located in the center of the image and the nature has surrounded them as if the automobiles are digested in the nature while the emphasis is not on the automobiles themselves but on their being abandoned and wrecked.

Figure 2: as observed, the signifier of abandoned and wrecked automobiles in figure 1 has been replaced with another signifier of the same family, a new automobile. This succession has caused the reading of the image to be changed and a new dichotomy is created in which the victor or loser is not identified, or, even to some extent it shows the failure of the nature; in this case, the emphasis of the work is completely pulled towards the center of the image where the automobiles are located.

Figure 3: in this figure, the nature signifier is deleted; as observed, the concept of image is completely changed and the least dichotomy is created. As mentioned, applying the opposite qualities of visual elements together clarifies their visual meaning; therefore, removing the dichotomies leads to ambiguous meanings.

Figure 4: in this image, the horizon line which is created by nature has divided the space into two parts. Such structure conveys the concepts of tranquility, coldness, death, as well as femininity; in other words, it is a stilled, pensive, and sad line. On the other hand, the dried tree is located in the horizon which it shows the growth in the nature as dynamicity against the stativity and death of automobile. Also, the man and the tree trunk are the only vertical elements of the image showing the resistance, warmth, dynamicity, strength, pride, and snobbery. In addition, the vertical line of the man in the image includes the highest motion and action.

The image shows the automobile direction which is from left to right; also, it respectively includes a man, an automobile, and a woman. In addition, the nature has been used as the background. Totally, the elements arrangement follows a same formula in both directions. The movement from left to right is a robust one showing the motion from depth to the surface. The left and right sides always show going to extremes while the center shows the balance. Here, the automobile has been converted into a male symbol because of holding the woman in it. On the other hand, the woman is close to the center of image (which shows the balance) as well as to the nature. The right side of the image composing the serenity and heaviness is filled with the nature; therefore, the image shows the dichotomy of human as the ally of the automobile with the nature which it creates the dichotomy of nature and technology, nature and culture, dynamicity and stativity, neutrality and artificiality, and hardness and softness. In figure 4, the other issue which should be noted is the automobile model that is familiar to Iranian audiences; thus, it acts as the nostalgia and reduces the dichotomy intensity.

Figure 5: the automobile model is changed into an unfamiliar one; therefore, the hidden signifier shows its impact; as a result, the dichotomy of technology and nature increases.

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Figure 6: in this image, the automobile and people have been put in an urban space which it causes the dichotomy to be reduced and the nostalgia of the work to increase as much as possible.

Figure 7: in terms of spatial companion, there are various directions (such as top to bottom, front and back, left to right, geographical directions, center, and the margins) in the image. The multiplicity of directions causes a sense of chaos to be created in the artwork. According to Gestalt principles, the relations among the visual elements cause them to be organized into groups or unified wholes. In fact, the points' mutual relation in an image is that they struggle for drawing the viewers' attention. In this image, it is difficult to focus on the points while viewing the image, because there are distances between the points and this causes them to repel each other. Actually, the suspension of image points intensifies the decentralization. Apparently, it seems there is no relation among the image elements, but a deeper look at the elements shows that there is a type of semantic relation among the signpost, the human, the automobile, and the shoe. This semantic relation implicates the concept of movement. Also, the image shows the dichotomy of human and technology. In addition, as a result of the image elements suspension, it seems as an explosion occurred at the scene; however the signifier of automobile does not convey the sense of suspension; actually, in spite of other elements, it seems to be falling. On the other hand, the human seems to be uncertain and attempts to cope with the situation. The automobile as a male symbol in the feminine space of the work shows a top to bottom movement which is interpreted as moving towards silence and death. The empty, upside down and suspended chair induces the concept of vacuum and nullity. These two elements, the automobile and the chair, are located on the left side which is light and hot and shows going to extremes. Although the woman status is not equivalent, she is located in the center of the image which it shows the balance; on the other hand, a feminine symbol, a show, accompanies her. The shoe is located at the bottom right which shows less warmth than the top or left direction. The signpost is the other element of the image showing two opposite directions, one to eat and one to ward off, which it creates a semantic signification. Thus, the dichotomies of human and automobile, human and technology, man and woman, neutrality and artificiality, stativity and dynamicity, and hardness and softness are observed in the image.

Figure 8: the signifier of worn out automobile has been replaced with a new one which it has caused the signification to be changed; therefore, the image shows the human's superiority to the automobile. As a result, the dichotomy between two objects of technology and human is intensified; also, the significations of the work are changed using the hidden signifier and consequently, the concepts are changed as well.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Automobiles in Contemporary Iranian Painters***

There are a few artworks with the subject of automobiles among Iranian painters while we all have to deal with it strongly in daily life. On the other hand, in the majority of the works, the painted automobile is a model, Paykan, familiar to Iranian audiences which it acts as the nostalgia for Iranian viewers. The signification scope of the automobile has widely changed in contemporary history of Iran and it acts as a dynamic sign. In fact, the dynamicity of this automobile sign functions is related to time and its being a national automobile which has led to different significations at different times. Since, today middle and lower classes use this automobile in Iran, its signification has changed in comparison to the past. In fact, the social position of this automobile is the main reason for using other higher models including advanced technologies, because owning the new models can be interpreted as belonging to higher social classes. On the other hand, most of these automobiles are today worn out as a result of being used for a long time; so the majority of them can be found forgotten, desolated as well as cluttered and piled in secluded garages. Therefore, using Paykan in the paintings can show the lost aspirations of a generation symbolically appearing in the paintings.

In Iranian artists' paintings, Paykan can create a nostalgic sense for the viewer who lived in those years and has retained those memories in the mind. The other issue observed in many contemporary Iranian painters' works and has been converted into a paradox in Iran society is a severe emotional approach to the past and nostalgia along with the hasty destruction of what remains of the past. Also, it is possible to

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view the other forms of past representations including memories, personal interpretations, nostalgia, and sanctimony to the past in contemporary Iranian paintings (Amin, 2008).

The horizon line is a visual element which is observed in most of assessed works. This line as a cool and calm one creates a boundary between the top and the bottom of the image and finally, it conveys the concept of calmness and death; in other words, it is a stilled, pensive, and sad line. Since the line has the closest relation with the nature, it simultaneously creates visual calmness and shows the end of nature space in the image. In terms of elements, each image can be divided into two types including single-element and multiple-element ones. In single-element images, it is completely focused on one of image elements while in multiple-elements images, two or more visual elements are adjacent and due to this proximity, they give specific meaning to each other (Ayatollahi, 2006).

Among the studied works, only a few of them emphasized the automobile as a single-element object. In fact, this object mostly has been used alongside and confrontation with other visual elements to create semantic signification. On the other hand, in spite of automobiles nature which is related to motion, they are mostly painted in stopped or static status; in other words, it is not emphasized on the automobile as a signifier of movement rather, the emphasis is on the counter-movement (Duns, 2003).

The signification scope of a commodity is inseparably related to social changes and acts dynamically in multiple layers. As owning automobile can be considered as a social acceptance or norm at a time, it can be converted to an anomaly another time; as a result, the social changes cause the signified (that is formed based on the car signifier in the mind) and its reading to be different in each period of time. Cars are often known as antithesis of rural areas and its values as well as one of the main causes of the green areas destruction which it causes man to be feared; therefore, nature and technology are the common issues discussed regarding rural areas and automobiles which it shows the human's unconscious concerns about the destruction of nature and nature revenge on human. Anyhow, the dichotomy of automobiles and human shows the inhuman power of metal against the vulnerability and mortality of the human body (Richards, 2006).

Actually, the automobile is considered as symbol of selfish individualism and dramatic use; in other words, it is mentally difficult to accept that the automobile can include positive aspects as well; on the other hand, it strongly evokes the concept of freedom, because driving allows the human to enjoy the displacement. In fact, it provides the freedom of mobility for the human in his relations with the society. Actually, the location and distance are very important variables which play essential role in perceiving the meaning of mobility freedom; in this regard, the automobile is considered as the most objective means of mobility. Also, the automobile can provide a type of private space inside the public space of a city. A space in which everything is provided and arranged as maternal for passengers' comfort; in fact, there are a few objects which can create such a feeling in humans (Richards, 2009).

Fear of technology leads to fanatical proscription, rejection, or avoidance of technology or certain aspects of it which it causes not to understand the reality, power, and impact of technology. In Iran, in addition to the mentioned dichotomies, there are other reasons, such as the traditional context and the tension created between modernity and tradition in the contemporary era as well as the fear of relation with the West, involved in the fear of technology. In some works, the automobiles are plotted worn out which it is emphasized on the destruction of them. Also, there are other works in which the automobile is used in dichotomies to create the meaning. However, in these dichotomies, automobiles are often overwhelmed and sometimes it is converted into a tool for nature; also, in dichotomy of human and automobiles, human injuries are often ignored. The other important issue which should be noted is that in most works, men have posed next to the automobiles which it shows that the automobiles are paid attention by painters as an object for men and a signifier of the male gender. In this regard, the automobiles describe the sexual desires so that their body acts as male body and separate themselves from other vehicles. Totally, the magic power of automobiles is resulted from the combination of bestiality and metal or a mixture of momentum and energy which are the human qualities along with the superhuman technology (Richards, 2009).

In the following, some samples of Iranian paintings including the element of automobile are provided:

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**Conclusion**

In this paper, the methods used by semioticians to read artworks were provided. It was found that the signifier system of automobiles is identified through its companion with the other elements. Also, the dichotomy of automobiles and other elements such as nature and human as well as the created signification were assessed. In addition, the succession and companion elements and the directions were investigated in some paintings. Furthermore, using the absent element in conversion test, it was found that the changes in the signifier level can change the signified and, consequently, the signification. Also, the study on some works including the signifier of automobile showed that in the majority of the works, the painted automobile is Paykan, a familiar model to Iranian audiences which it acts as the nostalgia and a dynamic sign for them. In fact, the dynamicity of this automobile sign functions is related to time and its being a national automobile which has led to different significations at different times. On the other hand,



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most of these automobiles are today worn out as a result of being used for a long time; so the majority of them can be found forgotten, desolated as well as cluttered and piled in secluded garages. Therefore, using Paykan in the paintings can show the lost aspirations of a generation symbolically appearing in the paintings.

The companion and dichotomy of automobiles and nature is the other studied issue. Also, in these works, there are many unpleasant significations for human such as the vulnerability of human body against the automobiles material (which is metal), concerns of not being safe and human injury and death. The plurality use of such significations does not aesthetically and visually produce interesting scenes which they lead to the fear of technology. Anyhow, the companion of these subjects in an image creates a signifier system showing that the contemporary painters have paid attention to the automobile codes from the fear of technology perspective. The other issue is the gender given to the automobiles by the painters. In fact, automobiles are used as an object for men and a signifier of the male gender.

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