

GARDEN AS A CULTURAL TEXT

GRĂDINA CA TEXT CULTURAL

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Abstract. *The purpose of our research is to analyse the garden as a text. The texts are not only literary. They may be any physical structures meant to represent ideas from a semiotical point of view. In fact, the whole culture, considered as a text, is represented by a complex system of signs. The gardens are characterised by a high semiotical heterogeneity –many signs in passive state waiting to be discovered and interpreted. The high semiotic potential of the gardens may determine the interpreter (the visitor or the person who contemplates the garden) to take part in semiosis, the same way in which a book may attract the reader’s attention, determining him to discover its significations. The investigation of the gardens as „texts” means to find out the answers to a series of questions. Which are the significations of this „text”? How and what does this „text” communicate? How are the various components of the garden organised in order to create a coherent whole? Which are the established thematic models? How does this „text” involve other „texts”? The concepts of space and text from the cultural semiotics, their different semiotical and communicative functions in culture and cultural tradition have been analysed in our paper.*

Key words: semiotics of culture, communication, text, sign system, artefact

Rezumat. *Obiectivul cercetării noastre vizează abordarea grădinii ca text. Textele nu sunt numai literare. Pot fi orice structuri fizice făcute să întruchipeze idei în sens semiotic. De fapt, întreaga cultură, ca text, este o rețea de semne. Grădinile posedă o eterogenitate semiotică ridicată –multe semne în stare pasivă care așteaptă să fie descoperite și interpretate. Potențialul semiotic ridicat al grădinilor poate determina interpretul (pe vizitator sau pe cel ce contemplă o grădină) să participe la semioză, așa cum o carte bine scrisă poate capta atenția cititorului, provocându-l să-i descopere semnificațiile. Examinarea grădinilor ca „text” necesită căutarea răspunsurilor la o serie de întrebări. Care sunt semnificațiile acestui „text”? Cum și ce comunică acest „text”? Cum sunt organizate diferitele elemente componente astfel încât să creeze un întreg coerent? Care sunt modelele tematice stabilite? Cum implică acest „text” alte „texte”? Conceptele de spațiu și de text din semiotica culturii, diversele funcții semiotice și comunicative ale acestora în cultură și în tradiția culturală au fost analizate în lucrarea noastră.*

Cuvinte cheie: semiotica culturii, comunicare, text, sistem de semne, artefact

INTRODUCTION

The study of culture is always intrinsically semiotic, since it is always about communication. Communication, be it inter- or intrasubjective, is always social. In this article we intend to examine the compositional arrangements of the famous Japanese garden Ryōan-ji Zen as it constitutes a distinctive medium of *communication* and a way for complex philosophical perceptions and religious ideals to become tangible in topographical *text* form. Generally speaking, gardens are created by transforming principally unmodified environmental objects into *signs* and organizing these into *texts*. Texts represent social meanings that are materially encoded. While communication has generally been considered as essentially a linguistic phenomenon, in practice, communication involves ‘inscription’: meanings carried through different material forms that are brought together and organized in various combinations. Communication is executed through *sign systems* and *artefacts* that are frequently also the outcome of interactions. Therefore it would be natural to consider all disciplines studying *cultural phenomena* or human interactions as *semiotic*. No treatment of „culture” can, nowadays, escape the propositions of the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics about the textual nature of cultural phenomena. According to this school, textual features can be recognised in almost all *spatial representations* (gardens included) both in terms of artefacts and mentifacts.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In this article we intend to analyse the Japanese garden Ryōan-ji from a semiotic perspective – from the standpoint that considers the social dimensions of meaning systems – in terms of how *meaning* is organized and conveyed and how this garden constitutes a distinctive *medium of communication*. Ryōan-ji is a well-known Japanese garden composed principally of rock and gravel that employs a particular set of *representational resources* intended to project Zen sensibilities. In the case of the study of culture in quite different disciplines, cultural semiotics among them, we often meet the transfer of conventional methods that have been developed for a specific slot of culture, to other, sometimes considerably dissimilar and/or wider areas. „Text” has been such a methodological device for the semiotics of culture. Within cultural semiotics the *concept of text* has been defined and redefined many times. The diverse semiotic and communicative functions of text in culture and in cultural tradition – for example, as a container, a generator or a transmitter of information (e.g. Y. Lotman, 1981) – have made the position of the text relatively fluid on the semiotic metalevel as well. Indeed, even the very essence of text as an (artefactual) object is difficult to grasp.

Different *conceptions of the text* as a *cultural phenomenon* have usually been strongly coupled to particular conceptions of the relation between culture and its exterior. This relation is often treated as separation of the text from the non-text. A general culturo-semiotic viewpoint as represented by Y. Lotman, suggests „[...] understanding of the text as any individual message the distinction of which (from the „non-text” or another text) is intuitively cognised with sufficient certainty”. This implies that „[...] the text possesses a beginning, an end and a

definite inner organisation” and this allows, along with other features, the creation of a typology necessary for an adequate deciphering of texts (Y. Lotman, 1974).

The three main features or aspects of the text, which have been described by Lotman using the terms „expressed”, „bordered”, and „structured” (Y. Lotman, 1974), come together by virtue of a general property of the different dimensions of the text: their confined or circumscribed nature. For the emergence of text into ontology, it has to be demarcated (see also Y. Lotman, 1970, cf. Merrell, 1982). Demarcation, in turn implies the creation of a unit that is self-reliant in its relation to the environment and describable through surroundings. Thus the text comes into being, or more correctly –is made to come into being – in the field of tension between at least two different spheres, or in the intersection between at least two systems of different semiotic structure. Indeed, it would otherwise not be semiotically intelligible: the existence of at least two different incongruent or asymmetrical realms is needed for the emergence of a *semiotic structure*, because – as stated in one of the most widespread elementary and common-sense understanding of the sign –, the sign stands for something that the given sign is not itself” (cf. C.S . Peirce’s definition: „A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity”; C. Peirce 2.228).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The immanently *meaningful nature of space* is closely connected with the semiotic essence of human being, beginning, on the one hand, from the dependence of the physical well-being of an individual on her/his ability to handle the surrounding space and, on the other hand, from philosophical discussions on the true nature and aim of human existence so as connected with the movement of *semiotic structures in spatial configurations*.

Gardens are essentially created by demarcating a territory, and this begins a process of shaping the environment. The act of composition continues as elements are selected, purposefully combined and cohesively arranged. Different cultures and social groups draw on specific *sign-making materials* and *patterns of organization* and use these for very specific purposes.

Analysis of semiotic modes of communication have focused on systems of meaning as they emerge from, and express, Western cultural values (Hodge and Kress, 1988; O’Toole, 1994; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996). However, semiotic systems are in every case both culturally and historically specific. There is a need, therefore, to examine systems of meaning-making used by other cultures, both for what insights they provide about the discursive practices particular to those cultures and for what light this may shed on the complex processes of semiosis (Lemke, 1998).

In Ryôan-ji garden the combination of rocks and gravel suggests *mountains* and *flowing water* (or clouds), with the moss perhaps representing a grove of minuscule trees surrounding the mountain crags. This is the most common interpretation of Ryôan-ji since, after all, *sansui* (mountains and water) colligate in Japanese and Chinese thought, in literature and in the visual arts (Anesaki, 1963; Slawson, 1987). While there are *visual elements* which

clearly make *iconic* reference to mountains and rivers, the textual meanings conveyed in the Ryōan-ji garden are far more than a representation of 'landscape-in-miniature'. The central focus of the garden design is no one particular rock or rock configuration, but centres on the relational contrast between positive space - rock forms - and negative space - unoccupied area - (McGovern, Sean, 2004).

This contrast of figure and ground is pronounced. The rocks command attention when contrasted with the neutralized space of gravel. Gradations from light to dark are seen in the shadows of the rocks and in the lines etched in the gravel. Volume and depth are achieved through the use of flat tones of black and grey. Varying density is created with tonal transitions in the grey lines which further emphasize expansiveness and perspective. The dark and light create tonal contrasts in a way that is homologous to both *suiboku* ink landscape paintings and to written Japanese language. Line is a repeated compositional element and is used with minimal variations. Linear shapes are used as a cohesive device by visually unifying and connecting independent elements to create one cohesive and coherent unit.

This *linear motif* is conveyed in nearly every element of the garden (in its most inclusive sense). Each serves to reiterate this linear pattern by repeating horizontal lines in different thicknesses and textures. The alternating effect of line accentuates the essential flatness of the display and thereby contributes to the sense of volume of the negative (unoccupied) space. *Framing* is a key organizing principle and feature of the garden (McGovern, Sean, 2004). Without the wall, of course, not just the design but the significance of the garden itself would be altogether different. As explained earlier, the series of straight lines work to frame the precinct, emphasizing its rectangularity, flatness and geometrically distributed space.

According to Arnheim (1988), geometric shapes possess an inherent visual centre which encourages a visual dynamic. While square shapes (with their equal sides) support 'centricity', rectangular shapes emphasize 'eccentricity', with the apposing and unequal sides of the rectangular frame working in opposition to each other. Each cluster of rocks is additionally framed by a circular set of raked or 'scratched' lines. While the straight horizontal lines convey a sense of rigidly imposed order, the curving and circular lines intensify and concentrate and are utilized as a way of suggesting something 'incomplete', 'unresolved'. These dynamic lines suggest factors that are unsettled and accentuate the elements to which the viewer is asked to pay special attention.

The working relationship between line and rock provides an example of identical textual components, and their organized interrelationship is used to imply two nearly opposite meanings. In this text, the rocks can be seen as static and anchored – a quality of their inherent visual weight. But at the same time, they are dynamic – a quality of their shape and vectors. As suggested earlier, the rock and gravel design contains *visual elements* which make *iconic*

reference to mountains and rivers: the achromatic colour scheme is similar to that of ink on paper – black and white tonal contrasts which resemble the *suiboku* ink landscape paintings that are representative of the Zen tradition. But there is also a strong resemblance to the Zen tradition of calligraphy – the rocks on gravel suggest written characters on paper, both in the way they utilize similar black and white tonal contrasts and in the similar way in which the (positive) rock clusters are arranged on the (negative) space of gravel. These correspondences in appearance and configuration to the linguistic mode display the organizational patterns that are found in writing which Halliday (1994) calls ‘constituency’.

Constituency is the configuration and arrangement of smaller items into larger units. In this case, the largest unit is the garden itself, which in turn consists of five cluster groups; this further breaks down into clustered arrangements of large and small rocks in the order of 5, 2, 3, 2, 3.

The organizing principles and constituency patterns of the rock clusters of the Ryôan-ji garden closely correspond to the organization of systems of written language. In both the arrangement of rock clusters and the arrangement of linguistic units, we see that space is designed and utilized to mark off one unit from the other: in the garden, small narrow spaces between rocks consolidate smaller elements into clusters. In the linguistic examples, shapes form characters – or letters, which in turn are combined into words – and space acts to designate sentences or phrases and to create pauses and stops.

Another similarity between the rock garden and written characters can be observed in the way the rock clusters are not simply set out in ‘space’. Like written characters, movement is achieved by the repetition of regulated visual units. Rhythm is achieved by arranging the rocks in syncopated phrases of longs and shorts and varying heights and sizes, creating a sense of movement in time.

CONCLUSIONS

Inasmuch as all artefacts encompass a dimension of meaning, culture areas gain a purely semiotic aspect that has given rise to the description of them as *semiotic spaces*. Examining the Ryôan-ji garden as *text* sheds light on what was previously regarded as merely an aesthetic object and inevitably ineffable.

The Ryôan-ji garden is strongly multidimensional in its *semiotic organizing principles* and *communicative* purposes: the garden communicates using natural materials which were selected for their unique semiotic potentialities and allow the realization of particular *textual meanings*. It utilizes a restricted set of *semiotic materials* and modes to achieve precise *communicative* effects. Through their combination and collaboration, these semiotic materials and meaning making principles effectively convey an array of different meanings concurrently.

The Ryôan-ji garden acts as a textual exegesis: a way for complex philosophical perceptions and religious ideals to become tangible in topographical text form. This study also suggests that analysing how other gardens work as texts – not just other Japanese gardens, but the gardens of Europe, India, China and elsewhere – is a way of deepening our understanding of the extensive range of semiotic principles that different cultures draw on and utilize to convey meaning. More specifically, seeing gardens as *text* is a way of revealing the meaning-making principles that have shaped garden construction the world over, and thus provides a way to understand the relationship of garden design to the social, philosophical and cultural discourses and traditions which give it meaning.

All *sign systems* operate in physical and /or *semiotic space*, at the same time all space, be it physical or conceptual, is *semiotised* via *sign systems* at several levels of modelling. Culture is located in a certain physical environment, and artefacts are embedded in environment, shaping the later in unique ways that have given reason for the description of the planet in terms of culture areas.

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