Semiotic Analysis Of The Image Titled Wheatfield - A Confrontation

Introduction

This research paper presents the semiotic analysis of the image (Figure 1) titled 'Wheatfield- A confrontation' photographed by Agnes Denes in 1982.

Denes is a Hungarian-born American conceptual artist who is widely recognised as a pioneer in her environmental activism, and her relentless pursuit to elucidate political and societal injustices with her art. She is a master of many mediums and is also the pioneer of many art movements. The Photograph being analysed (Figure 1.) is an environmental, political, economical and social piece that has awarded Denes with several international accolades. It can be described as a prophetic interpretation of the present-day deterioration of humanity's core values.

To fully comprehend the visual literacy communicated by an artwork, one needs to define and understand what semiotics is. This paper aims to introduce the reader to the theory of semiotics, its key terms and briefly conduct a formal semiotic analysis to effectively communicate the visual interpretation of (Figure1.)

Deconstructing Semiotics

Semiotics or Semiology is the study of signs and sign-using behaviour. (Britannica online) According to …..' the science of signs and codes and the meanings they convey.' (Fourie 40) Semiotics can be broken down into four principal areas of study: The sign itself, sign systems, codes and their meanings. (Fourie 40.) These signs and codes are analyzed and interpreted to understand the modality of a person's unique perspective and viewpoint. Thus stripping the sign down to its bare core and finding meaning using logic and rationale.

Originating from Greece, the concept of defining signs represented showing respect and capacity. Signs were understood as a concept of reality which led to the question around human existence. (Fourie 2009.42) The theory of these universal interpretations of signs had german Philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) arguing that our interpretation of reality necessitates the mind's fundamental principles and experiences. (Fourie 42) One can identify this theory by the global use of synonymous ‘visual codes’ and how different languages use different words to represent the signified. (Fourie 2009.42)

Ferdinand de Saussure(1857-1913), one of the founding fathers of Semiology and modern linguistics, developed a systematic approach on how to understand the sign, as a basic unit of language. It consisted of three parts; The signifier, which is the physical quality of a sign. The referent, which is the object, concept or idea that the sign is referring to and he signified, which is the meaning attached to the sign. (Fourie 51). Saussure argued that a person's understanding of language and visual codes has been structurally imposed on by societal norms. (What is another word for its code of ethics/how it operates?) Saussure used

structuralism to define the paradigm of language and distinguished between langue, its code or grammar and parole, based on the language used (Fourie 44).

Charles Sanders Pierce(1839-1914), also considered one of the founding fathers of Semiology, based his theory on the concept that humans think in signs. (Fourie 48). Pierce argued that the essential function of a sign was to make ineffective relations, effective- using signs as the point of reference.

To analyse the symbolism behind this artwork (Figure 1), Visual codes can be introduced to the viewer for a deeper understanding of the message Denes is communicating. These codes are associated with our perceptions on factors like style, field forces, balance, depth, volume and area orientation. (DuPlooy 158-166)

Analysis

'Wheatfield- A Confrontation.' is Dene's most internationally acclaimed photograph- profoundly captured, conceptually astonishing and relevant in both a socio-economic perspective as well as being relevant to current human plights such as climate change and environmental concerns. In an interview with Stephen Zach’s she was asked how she knew about issues that plague us now back in the 60’s and her response was that scientists were already talking about it- one just had to read between the lines. In her own words as cited in her watershed retrospective at The Shed, the sliding art hall at New York’s Hudson Yards she says, ‘It was insane. It was impossible. But it would draw people’s attention to having to rethink their priorities and realize that unless human values were reassessed, the quality of life, even of life itself, was in danger.’

Figure 1. portrays a young Agnes Dene walking amongst a 2-acre wheat field located in Battery Park, downtown New York. Most people are familiar with New York City and can identify iconic NY structures in the background. Indicating its proximity and location with regards to its composition.

To perhaps give some context regarding this image, in 1982 this piece of land was worth an estimated US$4.5 billion (The art story: online) Denes had acquired a public grant of US$10,000 from the Public Art Fund of New York City. With the help of her small team, they grew and harvested 10,000 lbs of wheat which was to be exhibited in The International Art Show to end world hunger. This wheat was also distributed all around the world while the remaining straw was donated to the NYPD horses.

It is important to note that the site selected was just a stone throw away from Wall Street, which is where the New York Stock Exchange is located and where wheat would be traded as a commodity. What we can take from this in terms of semiotics is the dual-purpose reference to the world’s economy and the actual physical state of the world that we live in. Wheat is also so essential to the human diet – it is a commodity that we rely on so heavily which speaks to the feeling this artwork exudes, that of importance. That this is the most important statement for human beings on this planet. Once the feeling of significance passes, one should feel a slight anger - anger at the mismanagement of not only our environment but of the economies that define our livelihoods and how we go about our day-to-day life.

Denes' portrays a raw and direct activist approach making a loud statement contrasting the

abundance of life sources with the harsh realities of destruction and environmental deterioration of our planet. This stark contrast created by the surrounding environment metaphorically communicates the true reality of humanity and their disregard for the environment. A mirage of golden wheat filled with abundance and opportunity sprouted beneath the immutable silence of 'capitalist greed'.(Holland Carter 2019 online)

Depth and Volume

Denes's use of strategic structure in photographing this space creates an illusion of depth between contrasting spaces and is typically understood as volume duality. Volume duality expresses the interplay between the negative and positive space identifying size ratios within the image. Denes has created substance with her placement of the camera angle and the contrast between the positive and the negative. This is illustrated by the foreground, the Wheatfield and the background, Manhattan's skyline. Denes is identified as the subject in the foreground in this composition. By using graphic depth factors, she has created the illusion of depth, the subject standing in a wheatfield in comparison to the relative sizing and dimensions of the city behind her, she has created depth with the placement of the elements in the Photograph. The viewer can identify that the wheatfield is in front of the city. The vertical and horizontal lines create a linear perspective guiding the viewer's eyes along the artwork. This linear separation distinguishes the different fields of depth.

Style

The use of natural, desaturated colours in the foreground can be associated with the light atmosphere of the subject's surroundings. The warm earthy tones of the wheat make the viewer feel safe and hopeful. There is a slight use of Notan lighting which is low in contrast and is equally distributed on the artwork, however, this is enhanced by the use of strong complementary colours which creates a vibrant use as the wheat is used with a high saturation. The foreground, due to its subject matter, appears lighter compared to the backdrop. The colours reflect contrasting moods and symbols themselves. The warm hues share enthusiasm and positivity whereas the cooler darker hues are colder and foreboding. This strategic use of contrast in colours plays on the psychology of the human mind which encourages the viewer to dive deeper into understanding the message behind the artwork. Perhaps the use of lighter hues was a point to grab the attention of the upper class, those who have the means to contribute to preventing world hunger, speak up about climate change and do their part. It's a theory but with understanding the psychology of color, Denes has made a strong argument targeted at a specific demographic.

Area Orientation

To understand area orientation, we can take the subject matter ratios in the frame and its strategic use of height, width and shape. The viewer uses logic to identify certain elements like Denes standing in the wheatfield. By interpreting this realistic portrayal we identify familiarity with its surroundings. The wide-angle shot establishes the location and differentiates between the subject matter in the foreground and in the background (Duplooy 166). Looking back at the graphic depth factors will guide the viewer's attention across the artwork towards the right-hand side. Denes is depicted in a heroic manner with the selected focus of the camera technique. This has been done to emphasize the role she is representing.

Conclusion

After introducing what Semiotics is and conducting a formal semiotic analysis of Agnes Denes ‘ Wheatfield- A Confrontation’ this paper has discussed the Theory of Semiotics, the visual codes of modern linguistics and has deconstructed Agnes Denes wildy prophetic artwork to enlighten a sensory experience. Through her noticeable use of graphic depth factors, colours, volume and area orientation she has successfully portrayed her message on the human condition and has evoked a sense of wonder in doing so, giving a 2D surface life.

‘It was insane. It was impossible. But it would draw people’s attention to having to rethink their priorities and realize that unless human values were reassessed, the quality of life, even of life itself, was in danger’ (Agnes Dene). As we sit, with billions of people across the world in quarantine- a piece of art has never hit closer to home than this masterpiece.