The Battle Between Semiotics And Phenomenology

The world we live in today is a world full of signs and symbols. Stop what you are doing right now and look up. If you are in your house, outside sitting on a park bench, or in the library, there are signs all around you. Signs that have underlying meanings in order to represent specific things. For example, if you are sitting at a park and you see two people exchange a hug before they take two different paths home, this is a sign of their connection and friendship. If you see someone waving at you, this is a sign that represents acknowledgment. Semiotics is the interpretation of different signs in the world around us. It is concerned with how meaning is interpreted and concluded from signs and symbols and communicated within society (Shepherd and Wallis, 2004). But how do we as humans know that a simple wave from one person to another is a representation of a friendly acknowledgment? Signs can be interpreted in countless ways depending on the audience that is present. To some people it might represent a relationship but to others it could spark a deeper meaning of social pressure. This is due to the concept of phenomenology, which is the study of how humans interpret the world through our own consciousness as we experience life. It is concerned with how the world is present to humans physically living within it rather than simply how the world exists (Fortier, 2002). While both semiotics and phenomenology are thought to be “two approaches as opposed but necessarily interconnected. (Shepherd and Wallis, 2004). I support Shepherd and Wallis’ claim as I believe that phenomenology is an extension of the interpretation of semiotics. Without semiotics and realizing that the signs and symbols around us are representations for a greater meaning, it would be impossible to look at the earth from a phenomenological approach.

The tutorial production that was held in the AV room allowed me to view different aspects in both a semiotic and phenomenological perspective and to see how these two approaches are interconnected. As a brief explanation, their performance started off with Maggie lining us up outside the room and making sure we were on her list before we were able to enter. We were then told to sit in a circle with our performance group. Maggie went to sit at the teacher’s desk and began to work on the computer. The other performers in the group sat in a circle, just as we did and talked quietly. All of the sudden, Simone started banging consistently on the windows and the door of the room. No one from the performance group acknowledge her and continued on with their conversation. Maggie started playing loud classical music and the people sitting in the circle started talking longer. At one-point Maggie got up to wipe down the windows that Simone was knocking on. Finally, after around 3 min of constant knocking, Maggie told one of the performers to open the door and let Simone in, but they were all in the corner being shielded by Maggie as she walked in. The scene ended with Simone telling Maggie to get out of the room and Maggie following her demand.

Looking at this performance from a semiotic approach, there were many signs and symbols that were communicated to me throughout its entirety. To start from the beginning, Maggie’s clipboard was a sign of authority. She was in control of the audience and her clipboard gave her power over everyone in the room. No one doubted her or challenged her authority when she had her clipboard in hand. Also, Maggie’s authority was represented by the seat that she was sitting in as well as her desk. It was blatantly different than all the other chairs in the room which made her stand out. The first loud, deep, and unexpected sound of the knock made everyone’s head turn immediately towards the door as that sound represent a desire to enter the room. The

loud classical music that Maggie was playing was representing the performers increased desire to ignore Simone who was knocking at the door. Also, Maggie's use of the spray bottle and paper towels to clean the windows symbolized her removing something unwanted, which was Simone's presence and knocking. The AV performance contained hundreds of symbols that could be interpreted using a semiotic approach.

On the other hand, this performance can also be interpreted from a phenomenological perspective. Immediately when Maggie came out and very sternly asked us to line up to take roll before we entered the AV room, a feeling of social anxiety came over me. I was scared that this was going to be a performance where the audience was going to have to participate heavily in. My middle school math teacher used to greet us every day before class just as Maggie did. I always struggled with math and this teacher in particular used to randomly call on us for answers, and of course I never knew the correct answer, so I would feel embarrassed because I always got it wrong. Maggie represented my math teacher which immediately evoked social anxiety within me which was a very unpleasant feeling. My emotions and previous experiences impacted my first impression of the performance. Obviously, this experience was very different for other members of the audience lined up because many of them were laughing about the serious situation as Maggie called us into the room. Another phenomenological analysis interpreted from the performance was the consistent, loud knocking on the windows and door as everyone blatantly ignored Simone. Her head would pop up in the window, she would knock loudly four times, pause a few seconds and then move to the next window and repeat the knocking as the performers continued with their conversation and Maggie continued to type on the computer. I couldn't help but place my full attention on Simone as my levels of stress increased with every knock. This sounds silly but when I was little, my older brother used to run up the basement stairs faster than me, shut the door and would lock me in the dark and scary basement. I would knock on the door continuously while my brother would ignore me and continue on as if I wasn't home. This created an extremely stressful representation of tension and being forgotten about by people who you are supposed to trust. Just as when Maggie was bringing people into the room at the beginning of the performance, other students were laughing as Simone continuously knocked, as they believe this was a comical situation but because of my personal previous experience, I interpreted the knock very differently that my fellow classmates.

Overall, I was able to make analyses from the AV performance from both a semiotic and phenomenological viewpoint. While the semiotic interpretations were based on how the symbols represented things within the world logically and scientifically, the phenomenological approach was dependent on my personal experiences and emotions in which my representation was altered because of my bodily experiences. While these two interpretations were very different, they were also correlated. For example, the semiotic approach of viewing the clipboard as a sign of authority, made me also phenomenologically make the connection to my middle school math teacher who was in authority over me. Together, these two approaches created an overall feeling of social anxiety which would have not been achieved with only one approach. In conclusion, I agree with Shepherd and Wallis' claim that semiotics and phenomenology are two different approaches to interpret the world around us, but they are interrelated in many ways which help us gain a deeper meaning of everything we encounter.

Sources

1. Fortier, Mark. 2002. Theory/Theatre an Introduction. 2nd ed. London ; New York: Routledge.
2. Shepherd, Simon. 2004. ‘Semiotics and Phenomenology’. In Drama/Theatre/Performance, 236–40. London ; New York: Routledge.