# Issues raised by Ruthrof's 'Meaning: An intersemiotic perspective'

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## Introduction

In 'Meaning: An intersemiotic perspective', Ruthrof argues that the entirety of human experience can be construed in terms of sign systems. Following Peirce, who maintains that we think only in signs, he says:

... reality is the result of the corroboration of one system by at least one other sign system. Or, more simply, reality occurs when signs from different significatory systems support one another. (Ruthrof 1995: 25)

In my opinion, Ruthrof's theory of sign systems is highly persuasive. There are, however, ethical considerations arising from it that I think need discussing. If what I have to say in the following is cogent, we shall find ourselves faced with a choice: either reject Ruthrof's theory of signs, or profoundly revise our attitudes with regard to art. Given the persuasiveness of Ruthrof's theory,[1] I shall be urging the latter.

## Ethical Considerations

According to Ruthrof's realist textualism, the fact that the entirety of experience can be expressed in terms of sign systems means that ultimately there can be differences only of degree between any one given sign 'subsystem' and another. By 'differences only of degree' between sign-systems, I mean that there are no signs that are wholly separate from other signs. In this regard, Ruthrof refers to the well-known position of Eco:

[Eco] draws our attention to the point that one could unravel the total of signs of any culture by beginning with [one] sign and following its myriad interconnections. (Ruthrof 1995: 38)

To use one of Ruthrof's examples, while 'the hole in the tooth felt by the tip of the tongue is quite different from the 'same' hole seen in a

dentist's mirror' (Ruthrof 1995: 31), the mere fact that we can talk about the *difference* between the two perceptions of the holes implies the exis- tence of a common textual framework according to which the two experi- ences can be compared. There is thus no absolute difference between the one sign-system and the other.

Problems arise, however, when we move into the realm of art — for example, fiction. Consider, on the one hand, the murder of a real person, such as Sharon Tate, and the murder of a fictional person, such as Roger Ackroyd (in Agatha Christie's novel). Traditionally, of course, the view has been that there can be no objection to fictional accounts of murder[2] — precisely because they are fictional, that is, non-real. But if Ruthrof is right, we are no longer justified in drawing a sharp dividing line between fiction and nonfiction. In the case of both Sharon Tate and Roger Ackroyd, for example, similar kinds of information are available: we can obtain information as to the appearance of both Tate and Ackroyd; we can obtain information as to the tastes of both persons; we can situate both with regard to other individuals and events. In short, we can compare the two. Granted, the sort of interaction between a fictional world and what, to use Husserl's term, we could call the lifeworld, is limited; but as in the example of the tooth, the mere fact that we can *compare* these two murders means that they have something in common, and are thus not different in any *absolute* ontological sense.[3] Characters in novels may be only fictional, but the fact that they are composed of the same 'stuff' — *signs* — as 'real' people means that we need to be careful with regard to them.[4]

And, in fact, the obvious ethical question now becomes: is it therefore wrong to write murder stories? As I pointed out in Note 2, moralists *have* objected to such stories, precisely because of a supposed 'corrupting' effect on the reader. Now murder stories may or may not have a corrupt- ing effect, but this is not the moral problem that I see arising from Ruthrof's theory. The moral problem I see arising is, rather, this: in that the writers of murder stories are responsible for the events that unfold in their works, to what extent can the writers be said to be responsible for murder? In a nutshell, was Agatha Christie a criminal? An added complication here is that according to Ruthrof's theory — particularly as expounded in the early *The Reader's Construction of Narrative* (which draws on the ideas of such theorists as Ingarden and Iser) — the reader himself is part-author of the text. If this is so, then the reader, too, must assume a certain amount of any guilt, merely by virtue of reading and partly bringing into being ('concretizing' is Ingarden's term) the literary work. One could perhaps see here a semiotic justification for the Biblical 'See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil' apothegm.

Ruthrof does go some way towards providing a means of resolving this problem. Consider the following passage:

The visual image of a tree is meaningful because it can be and has been corroborated by tactile and other significations. I am able to recognize by touch, i.e., classify as a meaningful part of a set of experiences, a bolt underneath my car's gearbox even if I cannot see it because the tactile signification is corroborated by recollected visual signs (bolt-signs), as well as other signs. (Ruthrof 1995: 25)

Given this, I imagine Ruthrof would say that because the signs we receive from a murder story are of *one* kind only — the kind formed by words on a page — there is insufficient corroboration with other sign-systems for the fictional murder to be considered on a par with the 'real' murder. I think, however, that Ruthrof would admit that the difference is still only of degree. But if so, this leads to further moral complications. It leads, for example, to the conclusion that it is less wrong to murder an unknown person, such as a vagrant, than it is to murder someone in the public eye — precisely because there are fewer linkages between the sign-systems of the world and the sign-system of the vagrant than there are between the sign-systems of the world and the sign-system of the person in the public eye. (I say that this is a complication, but, of course, in practice the murder of a person in the public eye, such as a celebrity, generally *is* dealt with more severely than the murder of a vagrant.) Moreover, if writing a murder story turns out to be a peccadillo rather than a genuine crime, we are still in the uncomfortable position of having to justify committing a peccadillo. Wouldn't we be on morally safer ground if we simply chose not to write murder stories at all? Reading murder stories, after all, is not necessary for our survival.

One could, perhaps, argue along utilitarian lines here, suggesting that the pleasure given to many people by murder stories outweighs any nebulous transgression against fictional persons. I don't think, however, that this is a very helpful answer, precisely because it invites all the criticisms that can be directed at utilitarianism itself (the violation of the rights of minorities, etc.). I think a better answer is simply to argue that no matter what we do, *we cannot help harming people* — fictional or otherwise. Let me explain.

A short while ago, cognizant of the ethical problems with sign systems I have been describing, I attempted to write a story, 'Cry on your smile', in which absolutely nothing unpleasant happens to the characters. In the very first paragraph, for example, I have the central character unearth a gold ingot in his back yard; later he is offered sex at just the moment he wants it, etc. For a while, it seemed to me that my attempt had succeeded. But of course, in order for there to be satisfaction of some desire, there

must first have been the desire itself — that is, a lack. And lacks, by their very nature, are unpleasant. I soon realized that what I was really doing when I was trying to write a story where nothing unpleasant happens is attempting to *seize presence* (in the Derridean sense). I wanted presence (pleasure) without concomitant absence (desire). But signs, by their very nature, are characterized by absence. As Derrida reminds us in 'Différance', all presence is deferred, is available only as a trace. In my story's terms: if finding one gold ingot in the garden is good, wouldn't finding two be better? And wouldn't three be better than two? Logically, my character would have had to find an *infinite number* of ingots in his garden — and that, sadly, is simply not possible. The world is not like that. It may or may not be a vale of tears, but it is certainly a vale of signs.

Nietzsche was aware of this when he discussed the position of a human being's eyes and noted that they are destined to perform an act of exclusion. (If we look at something, we are thereby not looking at something else.) An ethical example would be that if we give all our money to one charity, we are simultaneously *not* giving all our money to the other charities. Utilitarianism urges us constantly to consider how good is allocated by our actions, but semiotics reveals that every single one of our actions — conscious and unconscious — would properly have to be evaluated.

There is, however, still the point that we can get by without reading murder stories. We can certainly get by without watching films with extreme violence — and films, by virtue of the fact that they employ a greater number of sign systems than do novels, are clearly much more morally suspect than novels. So if we were to reject those literary works that harm their characters, how much of literature would we lose? Certainly all of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy: in *Anna Karenin*, for example, virtually none of the characters — except Levin — escapes wretchedness. On the other hand, we would retain Jane Austen, for her characters generally do to one another nothing that we should object to in 'real life'. Perhaps surprisingly, while we would lose the *Odyssey*, we would retain Joyce's *Ulysses*, for one advantage of a novel in which there are no real events is that there are no events that actually harm any of the characters.[5] Science fiction novels such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* likewise would be admissible — as would any novel or story concerned with the exploration of ideas rather than with subjecting characters to unpleasantness. The stories of Borges and Calvino would fall into this category.

The above may seem an outrageously reductive dismissal of the canonical figures in Western literature; but as I see it, we have no real choice. I do not for one minute expect that the present article will lead to the abolition of murder stories; but if we are to be consistent, the only other

option (apart from paying mere lip-service to Ruthrof's theory) is to dismiss the idea of a textual reality itself.

## Notes

1. Ruthrof even safeguards himself from the charge that his system is vulnerable to a version of Russell's paradox. When he suggests that the totality of experience is, as it were, the set of all signs, one could ask: is the set of all signs itself a sign? Just as in Russell's paradox, answering 'yes' and answering 'no' would lead to contradiction. Ruthrof, however, anticipates this problem by saying: 'Non-signs can of course be stipulated as the general transcendental possibility for signs, without themselves being knowable: a kind of non-semiotic noumenon' (Ruthrof 1995: 25). In other words, the set of all signs would be a *non-sign*, just as the set of all sets is designated by mathematicians to be not a 'set' but, rather, a 'proper class'. See, for example, Reinhardt (1974).
2. Strict churchmen, of course, have often objected to such fictions; but as will be seen, the moral issues they raise are different from those that I see arising from a textual theory of reality.
3. One concomitant of this would seem to be the redundancy of much literary theory. After all, if we are able to negotiate the (sign-composed) objects of the 'real' world without the benefit of theory, we should surely be able to do the same with the (sign-composed) objects of fiction.
4. Perhaps Cartesian dualists would have grounds for maintaining that there is an absolute difference between people and fictional characters. Only people, after all, have a sense of the 'I'. On the other hand — and I am aware that this is solipsistic — I have no evidence for the 'I-ness' of other people anyway, so why should I be expected to make an arbitrary distinction between other people and fictional characters?
5. Of course, if Ruthrof is right and there is no absolute difference between one sign system and another, then simply 'rejecting' literary works would not achieve anything in an absolute sense. The *Odyssey*, for example, would in a certain way still be present, even if only as a trace, in works such as *Ulysses*. But objecting to the rejection of certain literary works on the grounds that they will always be present as a trace would be akin to saying that because a murderer cannot be considered apart from society, all of society must be held responsible for the murder. As always, pragmatic considerations intervene.

## References

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