Aesthetics and meaning

Summary

The main research goal of this monograph is to provide a systematic account of aesthetic and artistic phenomena by following an interpretive or semantic approach to reality and our understanding of it. The semantic perspective developed in this monograph contains the theoretical and methodological assumptions necessary for the elaboration of a more cogent and, in a range of aspects, new concept of aesthetic phenomena in today's aesthetics and philosophy of art. The following theoretical pillars form the conceptual core of the semantic approach to reality and our understanding of it: a) a phenomenalistic concept of reality as the world of phenomena or the phenomenal world (“we can speak of Being only at the level of events” – Vattimo, 2004, p. 6); b) the standpoint that a manifestation of the phenomenal world is inseparable from the process of interpretation which mediates any apprehension of the world by a human subject; c) a distinctive account of interpretation as a process that manifests two genetically and functionally different semantic structures – experience *hic et nunc* (patyrimas – in Lithuanian) and generalized experience (*patirtis*). It should be noted that this distinction between two semantic structures is largely neglected in hermeneutic theory.

The semantic (interpretive) concept of reality and of our understanding of it differs in some key respects from the traditional approach to the world and its reflection in consciousness. The latter still retains its influence in contemporary theoretical thought: considerable traces of this approach can be observed in aesthetics, especially in some works of Anglo-American analytic aesthetics. Substantial elements of the traditional approach can be linked with a point of view that emphasizes a principled opposition between object and subject, treats the perceived phenomena of external reality as objective data that precede the process of interpretation, shares the belief that the nature of a subject's conscious relationship to the outer world should be characterized in terms of sensory perception, observation, and cognition, espouses a view equating the subject with a person who is usually understood as an agent not involved in the sphere of practical activities and life, etc. These and some other elements of the traditional approach lie at the heart of a conceptual perspective which determines a distorted, in certain aspects, understanding of aesthetic and artistic phenomena in today's aesthetics and philosophy of art. The semantic or interpretive approach provides conceptual premises that allow us to overcome these distortions and to work out a more convincing explanation of many problems in aesthetics.
The research presented in this book is, in essence, theoretical. However, the diverse and controversial practices of contemporary art are taken into account: they inspire, to some extent, the development of the semantic concept, which serves as a tool enabling us to provide the proper explanation for today's art, including the so-called ready-mades, various forms of performance, etc.

This book consists of a preface, a short introduction, and three parts. The goals and nature of our research are defined in the introduction. This research belongs to the sphere of philosophical aesthetics. Philosophy is understood as a sociocultural artifact aiming at a compensation for the historical, cultural, and individual limitations of the general experience accumulated in various fields of knowledge and activity or possessed by an individual. These limitations of experience are understood as its limitations from the standpoint of rationality: philosophy helps us surpass, broaden, and reinterpret the settled rational limits of general experience. In aesthetics, the mission of philosophy is to evaluate our knowledge and methodology and, if possible, in the context of new insights, to propose more meaningful and rational approaches to the solution of aesthetic problems.

The nature of philosophical aesthetics determines, in part, the chief goals of our research: 1) to define the theoretical principles behind a semantic concept of reality and our understanding of it; 2) to determine the methodological requirements which follow from this concept and which must be met when researching cultural phenomena, including artistic and aesthetic ones; 3) to reveal the shortcomings of analytic aesthetics as well as of some other currents in contemporary aesthetics, the shortcomings that can be detected through semantic principles of analysis; and 4) to explain, on the basis of a semantic approach, the nature of aesthetic phenomena and works of art, their interpretation and meaning, and a range of other problems dealt with in aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

The first part of this book, "The Principle of Meaning and the Perspectives for its Application in Aesthetics," is devoted to the development of the phenomenalistic concept of reality, the discovery of the proper method of interpretation, the functional roles played by experience *hic et nunc* and generalized experience in this process, and the description of an amazing variety of meanings. General guidelines for the semantic explanation of aesthetic phenomena are also defined in this part of the book.

An examination of these issues leads to some important insights and conclusions concerning the nature of an interpretive (semantic) concept of reality and its usefulness for analysis in aesthetics. The author of this research agrees with many postmodernists that the only world accessible to a person is a phenomenal one. What exists appears to an individual in the form of phenomena, which manifest themselves in and through experience *hic et nunc*. This experience
comes into being through the interpretation of perceived events, things, situations, and so on. Thus, the only world we have access to is one of interpreted phenomena.

Special attention is devoted to the phenomenon of interpretation itself. Our concept of an act of interpretation, developed during this investigation, rests on the essential distinction already indicated between two semantic structures: experience *hic et nunc* and a person's general experience. Interpretation is treated as the interaction of two semantic elements: a) information (uninterpreted), which is gained mainly through the senses and which reflects the features of perceived objects in external reality; and b) the segments of a person's general experience involved in the process of interpretation. General experience consists of important knowledge, beliefs, convictions, skills, know-how, value systems, attitudes, etc. A person considers it useful, applicable, more or less effective, reliable, valuable, meaningful, and rational. The meanings on which general experience is based are marked by such properties as generality (Woozley, 1996), some abstraction, decontextualization, and dephenomenalization. Through this interaction, information (obtained through the senses) acquires meaning, becomes meaningful. As a result, perceived objects become "permeated" with meaning, intelligible. Hence, the chief function of general experience is to serve as the semantic context within which information is given meaning so that it may be interpreted. The outcome of interpretation, thanks to which the interaction of uninterpreted information and general experience takes place, is experience *hic et nunc*. This kind of experience consists of meanings the distinctive nature of which lies chiefly in their particularized, contextual, and phenomenal character. It is a semantic artifact which directly presents the results of an act of interpretation taking place here and now. In precise terms, what exists appears through it, in the form of the phenomenal world, to the subject of interpretation.

Both types of experience are shaped in the sphere of sociocultural practice and should be seen as a semantic dimension integral to any conscious act, to any kind of activity. The variety of the meanings that form the basis of both kinds of experience faithfully reflects the epistemological, functional, and sectoral differentiation and diversity of practice. That is why it is unreasonable to think that the semantic content of experience can be equated with one type of meaning, e.g. the cognitive one. It is no secret that such an equation has been widespread in traditional philosophy and in theoretical culture in general. Elements of it have been prominent in aesthetic investigations until now, and they have exerted, as we have already noted, a negative influence on many solutions to problems in today's aesthetics and philosophy of art. Various sorts of meanings, including cognitive, evaluative, and pragmatic ones, are presented in the semantic content of experience. Experience and the meanings that shape its content can be understood in terms of other interpretive perspectives and char-
acterized as, for example, everyday or professional, pretheoretical or theoretical, scientific or commonsensical, moral, political, religious, or aesthetic.

The semantic component, which includes different sorts of meaning, is the chief – but not the only – segment of experience. The other integral component is the emotional one. This latter one manifests itself mostly in experience *hic et nunc*. The emotional reaction of an individual is related to several factors: 1) the value (evaluative) dimension of a person's general experience on the whole; 2) the value system or evaluative meanings as a distinctive and very important integral part of the general experience of any subject; and 3) the actual needs and interests of an individual as related to the particular context and circumstances of an act of interpretation. A person's emotional response depends directly on the value meaning that comes into being as a result of evaluating the objects involved in the process of interpretation. Thanks to this evaluation, a value meaning is ascribed to interpreted objects. This meaning represents the value or significance that emerges when perceived objects and their properties are evaluated in the context of a person's value system and his or her actual needs and interests. Strictly speaking, an emotional reaction is directly determined by how a person apprehends the relationship between the value meaning ascribed to an interpreted object and the value system fixed in that person's general experience as well as in his needs and interests as manifested in a particular context of interpretation.

An interpretive concept of reality, the outlines of which have been presented above, determines the guidelines that should be followed in a semantic analysis of aesthetic and artistic phenomena, namely: a) objects may be understood as aesthetic and examined, provided that they are interpreted, i.e. that they manifest themselves as phenomena in experience *hic et nunc*; b) perceived phenomena may acquire an aesthetic meaning and become aesthetic phenomena under the condition that they are interpreted in the context of a certain segment of general experience involving value meanings; aesthetic phenomena do not exist outside of this segment and the value dimension of experience *hic et nunc*; c) an apprehension of the relationship between the value meaning ascribed to an interpreted phenomenon and the value component of the general experience involved in the process of interpretation is one of the chief factors in determining a person's emotional response; d) the nature of aesthetic phenomena and of a person's emotional reaction cannot be adequately explained if the process of interpretation is equated with the act of cognition and a person's general experience is identified only with cognitive meanings; etc.

The second part of this book is entitled „The Nature of Aesthetic Phenomena and Meaning,“ and it is devoted to a semantic investigation of a person's aesthetic relationship to the surrounding world, of the aesthetic properties of reality, and of aesthetic attitudes, experiences, and values, including beauty, aesthetic objects, and other problems of contemporary aesthetics. The main aim of
this investigation is to reveal the role and significance of the semantic dimension in the conception of these issues. This investigation is closely connected with a critical examination of analytic aesthetics, and it takes into account, in particular, the insufficient attention devoted to the semantic dimension of aesthetic phenomena.

This analysis is based on the theoretical premise that a person's aesthetic relationship to the world is, in essence, interpretive. The elements of this relationship— the aesthetic object, its aesthetic properties, the aesthetic experience, the person as the subject of an aesthetic relationship— acquire their status and manifest themselves as aesthetic phenomena only within the framework of this relationship. None of these elements can be considered outside this relationship and process of interpretation (Palmer, 1969). It is hardly possible for objective aesthetic phenomena and objective aesthetic properties to exist independently of an act of interpretation and of a person taking part in it. Accordingly, the supposed dichotomy between so-called objective and subjective aesthetic properties loses its meaning. The close connection between interpretation and a person's aesthetic relationship to the world allows us to speak about the phenomenal, processlike, functional, and correlative characteristics of an aesthetic object, of aesthetic properties, attitudes, and experiences, and of other components of aesthetic relationships.

The theoretical account dominant in contemporary analytic aesthetics stresses the perceptual, value-relevant, and supervenient character of aesthetic properties (Hermerén, 1998). There are also authors who draw attention to their semantic aspect. However, we should note that the value component in the semantic content of aesthetic properties does not always receive due attention. Value meanings form a core of semantic aura, which manifests itself in the perception of aesthetic properties. This aura is partly determined by the phenomenal qualities of an interpreted object as well as by the value meanings inherent in a person's general experience when taking part in the process of interpretation.

An analysis of the various concepts of the aesthetic attitude leads to the conclusion that the main attempts to explain it in traditional epistemic and psychological terms (e.g. sensory perception, knowledge, psychical distance, disinterested attention, contemplation, and so on) have been unsuccessful and demand a conceptually new approach to this problem. It seems that the interpretive concept of the aesthetic attitude can claim this role. According to it, the aesthetic attitude can be characterized as an intentional (in certain cases, spontaneous), exclusively interpretive, semantic attitude toward perceived phenomena. The interpretive nature of this attitude reflects the fact that the aim of an anticipated interpretation of an aesthetic object lies in the interpretation itself or, rather, in an eventual spiritual reward connected to a future interpretive act. This interpretation, conditioned by the aesthetic attitude, has no direct goal outside
itself. This interpretive character is a distinctive feature of the aesthetic attitude and precludes the direct manifestation of a practical attitude toward the world.

Aesthetic experience is, according to many authors, a central concept of today's aesthetics and philosophy of art despite the dissonant voices that can be heard exerting a considerable impact upon current aesthetic thought. An aesthetic experience takes the form of a particularized (hic et nunc) experience and comes into being within the framework of an aesthetic, i.e. exclusively interpretive, attitude toward perceived phenomena. The chief component of aesthetic experience is semantic, apart from the affective (psychological) one. The content of the semantic component expresses the results of aesthetic interpretation, during which information reflecting the features of perceived things, events, or situations is interpreted in the context of a person's general experience, particularly in its value layer, and acquires a corresponding meaning. That is why the semantic content of aesthetic experience cannot be identified only with cognitive meanings: value meanings play the central role, cognitive ones – only an auxiliary one. The affective or emotional component of aesthetic experience can be seen as an epiphenomenon of the interpretation. Its character depends mainly on the semantic outcomes of the interpretation.

The last chapter of the second part of this book explains the role played by semantic factors in the conception of aesthetic values, including beauty. This chapter includes a short description and evaluation of the main explanations provided in analytic aesthetics of the nature of these values. Semantic analysis implies that the nature of aesthetic values cannot be convincingly explained if these values are understood separately from an act of interpretation and a person's general experience of this act. An especially important role and significance must be accorded to the value dimension of general experience and to the hierarchy of values constituting a person's value system. Aesthetic value manifests itself in the aesthetic experience that is lived out by a person here and now. In addition, there are two spheres of its indirect manifestation: the person's general experience and his/her practical activities. Aesthetic value is connected to both, i.e. the semantic and the affective, dimensions of aesthetic experience hic et nunc. We reinterpret the point of view that aesthetic value can be understood as a supervenient property related to the so-called primary or secondary qualities of aesthetic objects. We assume that supervenience can be equated with the value meanings connected to these properties of an object during its aesthetic interpretation. The beauty of things and events is mainly determined by the place that the value meanings involved in the act of interpreting an object occupy in the hierarchy of a person's value system.

A semantic investigation of the issues concerning the nature of artworks, their interpretation and value, is provided in „The Work of Art and its Meaning,” which forms the third part of this book.
This investigation begins with a discussion of the reasons for the harmful neglect of the semantic dimension of artworks that is noticeable in some concepts of art in today's aesthetics and philosophy of art. The lack of attention to the semantic aspects of artworks is due, for the most part, to the following circumstances: a) an anti-essentialist position in regard to the nature and definition of art; b) a scientific approach to the analysis of artistic phenomena, especially in the fine arts, which are often understood as artifacts that mainly possess sensory, perceptual, formal, expressive, and aesthetic properties; c) a tendency toward the cognitive particularism dominant in the analytic and, especially, in the postmodern philosophy of art; d) the enormous, constantly changing variety of artistic artifacts available throughout history for empirical study; and e) the negative influence on art theory exerted by empirical, sensualistic, and scientistic approaches to artworks. To a great extent, these approaches lead to reification, to a physicalistic and empirical view of artifacts, and this view leads in turn to an intolerable neglect of the interpretive, semantic, and communicative aspects of works of art and of the meanings fixed in their content and communicated during their interpretation.

The next step in our investigation involves a discussion and evaluation from a semantic point of view of the traditional (functional) and nontraditional concepts of art. The first group of concepts consists of mimetic, expressive, formalistic, and aesthetic theories, and the second one — of so-called cluster, institutional, and historical theories. Neither type of art theory is free of various shortcomings that weaken its focus on the semantic aspects of a work of art. First of all, many proponents of these theories tend to the traditional opinion that a person's relationship to the surrounding world is, in essence, cognitive. This attitude leaves outside the center of attention rich layers of value (evaluative) and pragmatic meanings and consequently diminishes their role in the theoretical concept of art. Second, a sympathetic view of the scientistic and empirical apprehension of knowledge promotes the opinion that artistic artifacts are, in fact, objects that possess sensory, perceptible, and formal properties. This attitude often allows a researcher to largely neglect the semantic factors related to the process of artistic creation and to the functioning of artworks. Third, a certain indifference to the interpretive nature of a person's perceptual relationship to artworks, together with an inclination to reify them, implies the erroneous view that works of art can be understood as artifacts not involved in the process of functioning. This circumstance inevitably leads to some inattention to the semantic dimension of art. Fourth is the absence of a clear understanding that works of art do not function outside the act of interpretation. Fifth, and finally, there is a lack of due attention to the communicative and semiotic aspects of the creation of artistic artifacts and their functioning.

The general concept of an artifact and the characterization of the particular features of artistic artifacts, both of which are provided in this part of the book,
permit us to reveal the significance of the semantic dimension of art in greater
detail. The artistic artifact is created as an object of interpretation with a view to
its potential interpretation by users. It functions as an artistic artifact exclusively
in acts of aesthetic interpretation. The interpretive purpose determines, to some
extent, the essential traits peculiar to the creation and functioning of an artis­
tic artifact: the creation of the artifact itself as an object of possible aesthetic
interpretation; its semantic component (meaningfulness), communicative and
semiotic aspects; and the need to view it as a functioning entity and to take into
account the aesthetic aspect of its interpretation as well as the process of inter­
pretation itself. The interpretive nature of artistic artifacts allows us to explain
the close connection between all the elements involved in the functioning of a
work of art, e.g. the artist, the circumstances influencing an interpretation, and
the subject of the interpretation; a person's withdrawal from everyday practical
life; the semantic power of an artistic artifact not to duplicate a person's gen­
eral experience, but to enrich or change it; the various meanings that emerge
during the interpretation of an artifact, including the value meanings without
which aesthetic experience and a person's emotional response would be unim­
aginable; etc.

A more detailed picture of aesthetic experience as understood from a seman­
tic point of view is presented in the chapter devoted to an analysis of the rela­
tionship between the interpretation of artworks and their meaning. There is a
separate discussion of the cognitive and value meanings on which the semantic
segment of an aesthetic experience is based as well as of their relationship to a
person's emotional reaction. Some remarks are also added in order to elucidate
issues concerning the cognitive possibilities of art and the relationship between
art and moral values. Special attention is devoted to the so-called paradoxes of
fiction and tragedy. In point of fact, a semantic approach to artistic phenomena
permits us to offer a more convincing explanation of these paradoxes.

A person's emotional response to fictional characters, events, and situations
is caused, in essence, by the fact that the world of a work of art is interpreted in
the context of that person's general experience, including his/her value system,
and acquires those meanings that are significant to the interpreter of the work of
art. Thus, the decisive factor that determines a person's emotional response is a
semantic one. It is not the fanciful or fictional nature of the characters and events
depicted that matters, but the urgency of their meaning, their significance, close­
ness, and similarity to the everyday experience of an individual.

The paradox of tragedy is explained in a similar manner. Current concepts of
this paradox consider, for the most part, only the usual, intersubjective value
meaning fixed in people's general experience. This meaning is given by an
interpreting person to the scenes of violence, killing, or suffering depicted in
tragedies. It is this meaning that forms the basis for any negative, unpleasant, or
painful reaction to the portrayal of evil in a tragedy. However, these usual or literal meanings are only one and not the chief semantic layer in tragedy. They do not exhaust the entire value content of tragedy. A crucial role is played by such value meanings as the struggle against evil, love, fidelity to truth, devotion to the welfare of a person or society, and other factors that are involved in the scenes of violence in a tragedy. These meanings are the chief source of a person's positive emotional response – provided he or she shares them. It should be noted that none of these value meanings exist before an act of interpretation. All of them arise through this act.

Until now, aesthetic theory has faced a complicated problem of correctness or validity in the interpretation of artworks. Many proponents of analytic and postmodern aesthetics disagree about whether the author's intentions are relevant or irrelevant to the interpretation of an artwork. The arguments of the proponents of both intentionalism and anti-intentionalism are subjected to semantic analysis in this research. We conclude that neither semantic monism nor semantic pluralism, in their extreme forms, can be accepted. In addition, we should note that the question of validity of interpretation arises in art criticism and other types of meta-analysis, not in the aesthetic interpretation of artworks.

The last chapter of the third part of this research is devoted to an examination of the aesthetic value of artworks. This value is mainly related to the two components of aesthetic experience *hie et nunc* – the semantic and the emotional – which come into existence during the interpretation of an artwork. The aesthetic value of an artwork really manifests itself only during its functioning, i.e. interpretation; the rest of the time it can be seen, at best, only as a potential value. The chief source of artistic value lies in the semantic component of aesthetic experience. Apart from aesthetic experience here and now, which should be considered the sphere of direct manifestation of the aesthetic value of an artwork, there are two other planes of indirect manifestation: a person's general experience and his/her practical activities. By itself, no one component of the interpretation of an artwork – not the author's intention or meaning, not aesthetic attitude, not an interpreter's general experience – determines the aesthetic value of a work of art. Value is a relational feature acquired by the semantic component of aesthetic experience. It depends on the nature of the interaction (positive, negative, or indifferent) between the author's meaning and a person's general experience. We should note, once again, that the question of the aesthetic value of an artwork does not arise in the area of its aesthetic interpretation; it arises in the area of its critical evaluation. The changes in a person's general experience that arise from the aesthetic experience of an artwork and are related to its aesthetic value can be evaluated in various idealized semantic contexts: for instance, the general experience of the interpreting individual; the intersubjective experience of a certain interpretive community; the author's general experience
as reflected in the entirety of his/her creative work; the sociocultural experience
dfixed in the artworks of a certain genre, style, artistic movement, historical or
aesthetic epoch; etc. The value of an artwork will be different in each of these
cases. A variety of evaluations permits us to achieve a fuller and more adequate
concept of the aesthetic value of an artwork.

This book concludes with a summary of the main results of our research:
contemporary aesthetics is undergoing a certain developmental turn from the
art object to its meaning. In the larger context of today's social and humanistic
studies, this turn could be equated with the shift from a limited, scientistic ap­
proach to phenomena to one that understands the objects it examines as enti­
ties or facts endowed with social and cultural meanings (Dosse, Geertz, Margolis).