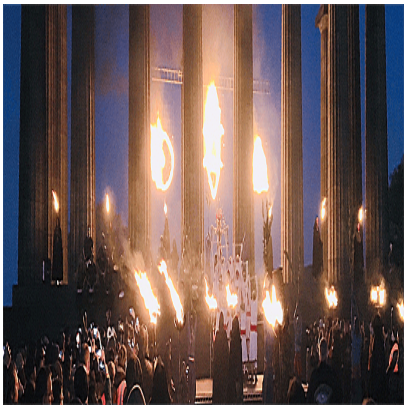


Signs in architecture and music

Description

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Architecture is an art of signs. C.S. Peirce introduced the idea of the *sign vehicle,* that encourages the architectural scholar to think beyond standard architectural elements as channels of communication.

The communicative elements of a building are not restricted to components such as columns, chimneys, windows, staircases, and doors, but the aspects and qualities of those things, their assemblies, positioning, and contexts. Nor do the signs in architecture pertain purely to a buildingâ??s visible elements, but include its operations, functions, systems, and sensory modalities.

I like the way Peirce uses the weathervane on a rooftop as a simple illustration of a sign system. The weathervane is a sign of the wind direction. The *sign vehicle* is the angle of the blade viewed from the ground, not its material, colour, texture, smell or the sound it makes when a rusty bearing pivots as the wind changes direction, though of course they may serve as interesting signs of something other than wind direction. (I have elaborated on Peirceâ??s example here.)

The latter brings me to sound, or at least, music and semiotics. Iâ??ve caught up with the writing of former colleague in our Music Department (The Reid School of Music), Raymond Monelle.

He provided a helpful account of how music fits within Peirceâ??s classification of signs. Like architecture, it seems music carries the burden of the *icon*.

> â??Perhaps because some musical features are obviously icons (the imitation of a cuckoo or nightingale by an orchestral instrument, for example), this type has proved most attractive to musical writers; Peirce himself, â?¦ regarded music chiefly as an iconic signâ?• (101).

Contrary to this naive matter of resemblance, Monelle thought of music within Peirceâ??s rich panoply of sign types.

> â??The musical work, in its most typical form, is a *rhematic indexical legisign*; the actual performance, or a copy of the score, is a *rhematic indexical sinsign*. Within its texture are to be found *qualisigns* of theme, rhythm, harmony, style, evocation, some of which may function iconically or symbolicallyâ?• (107).

To recap on Peirceâ??s arcane terminology:

- A *rhematic indexical legisign* is technically a sign that fits within a convention (*legisign*), that emerges from its object (as if caused by it), and is a component that depends on other signs around it to deliver meaning. Peirceâ??s main example is that of a pronoun in spoken and written language. Had Monelle characterised this musical aspect instead as a *dicent indexical legisign* then that would make us think of a cry that draws attention by convention, e.g. street sellerâ??s cry, which is often in the form of a musical cadence. See post: The kingâ??s speech impediment.
- A *rhematic indexical sinsign* is a raw spontaneous cry or gesture outside of a language convention. I think of an audible sigh on encountering a melancholic space or circumstance, exclamations and gestures on entering a cathedral or other sublime space, or our varied response to the chaotic, disorienting or unusual.

I like the latter characterisation as it relates music directly to architecture and the emotions, or at least the potential of our embodied, visceral responses to places. Also see post: Why music reaches the parts that architecture canâ??t.

Hereâ??s a space defined by performance, heritage, fire, drumming, exclamations, and the digital gaze: Edinburgh Beltane Fire Festival last week.

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Reference

- Monelle, Raymond. 1991. Music and the Peircean Trichotomies. *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, (22) 1, 99-108.

Category

1. Architecture
2. Podcast

Tags

1. music
2. Peirce

3. semiotics
4. sign

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