

Exploring Panofsky's Iconology and the Idea of Interpretation

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"As I have said before, no one can be blamed for enjoying works of art "naïvely" - for appraising and interpreting them according to his lights and not caring any further. But the humanist will look with suspicion upon what might be called "appreciationism." He who teaches innocent people to understand art without bothering about classical languages, boresome historical methods and dusty old documents, deprives naïveté of its charm without correcting its errors." (Panofsky *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 1955)

Introduction

Two orthodox approaches have coalesced in describing and classifying objects that may be called art. One an essentialist position that there is something intrinsic to the objects viz. materials, skill invested, formal properties, encoded meaning, didactic power, subversiveness, etc. or especially the problematic 'beauty', which deserve special consideration. These art historians maintain that these visual qualities have almost universal value. The second is the approach¹ that art is a category constituted by particular cultures to encode their beliefs and practices in visual forms. These visual forms in turn are shaped by that other great system of encoding viz. verbal language. The latter approach maintains that the object's significance and value emerge because of the meanings they bear or the functions they fulfil in those particular cultures. Erwin Panofsky's (1892-1968) iconological² approach belonging to the latter was concerned with signification or interpretation. In recent times the approach has been almost replaced by the field of semiotics which forms the basis of structuralism.

Since its origins in the 19th century art history viewed its principal responsibilities as identification, description, and classification of images with a zeal paralleling the organising ambitions of natural sciences. Their objective was to make apparent the fundamental structures, reasons for genesis and change. Some of these theorists have been polymaths with visions that are Hegelian in grandeur. Panofsky is one such among these scholars who include Wolfflin, Warburg, and Gombrich. Unlike them the academic fashion today is for a form of extreme skepticism, which denies the possibility of constructing large-scale explanatory histories of art. The interest in establishing grand stylistic categories or methods of interpretation has waned and the tendency is towards fragmentary, tentative and provisional narratives (see Figure I a&b).

Iconology³ of Warburg and Panofsky

Erwin Panofsky comes from a long and established tradition of biblical exegesis or hermeneutics⁴. He believed that high art images (he like Gombrich didn't consider that any others were worth serious consideration) contain complex meanings which are encoded in the artist's representation. By consulting the rich archive of the culture which gave rise to the image, and by applying an informed intuition, a highly attuned investigator can decipher the original code and recover the meaning. This approach was especially influential in the field of Medieval and Renaissance studies, where his research into the meaning of images involved the development of an incomparable erudition in the words and the images of these cultures.

Panofsky believed that the interpretation of images, whilst an intellectually taxing problem, is not only possible but absolutely necessary. He regarded the elucidation of the meanings of those images which he regarded as lying at the heart of western culture as a central responsibility of the humanities. His was a mission not only to recover the revered values of former cultures but to do so using methods which were scrupulously designed to establish a form of truthfulness in interpretation.

The Hermeneutics of Art

Someone wisely observed that the image allures us to interpretation but it is doubtful that it would ever confide to us the secret of its birth. In order to build the basis for Panofsky's method we could examine the ideas of E. H. Gombrich (1909-2001) who belonged to the same line of scholastic tradition like Panofsky. Gombrich⁵ in his *Art and Illusion* argues that we do not recognize something by accumulating information bottom up but that there is always an initial top down grasp that permits an active and spontaneous making of meaning. It follows that an image is not a faithful transcription of nature on our retina; rather it is we who construct an image of the outside world by extrapolating our imagination from visual information. To Gombrich thus the image has a highly indeterminate status. Interpretation is the act of determining the indeterminate. The participation of the beholder in image making does not mean that a scientific method could not be built for an objective basis for the construction of meaning.

An image tells us about the first determination of the indeterminate by the artist. The image is a trace or an evidence and interpretation or reconstruction would need stable causal relations. Reconstruction of these causal relations should be carried out back to the conditions before the artist first engaged in 'sense making'.⁶ In other words, in order to restore the original event correctly, Gombrich summons as a witness the authorial intention which must have played a decisive role at that time.

Authorial intent comes from the exegetic lineage of traditional hermeneutics with its two major weaknesses; the problem of psychological over-interpretation; secondly, concerning the problem of the correspondence between interpretation and its object. Gombrich cautions that if we reduce the cause of the original production of a work to the psychological state of mind, such as a private "motivation" or a collective "Zeitgeist," it will tend to bring about over-interpretations that are irrelevant or the relevance of which we cannot prove.⁷ Further an image is susceptible to become a target for 'symbol detectives' who pretend to solve the mystery of meaning hidden in the painting. We have to look for the origin of meaning, not in the psychological state of mind but in the "program," that is, the social context of means-and-ends connections which controlled the artistic image making. This "program" is based on relations which can be objectively reconstructed

by using literary sources. Panofsky's method attempts the reconstruction of such a "program."

The second problem is the correspondence between the interpretation and its object or the missing link between the historical situation of the artist's intent and the art work. Every image is open to a multiplicity of expressional meanings that can be ascribed. The objective is to reconstruct the most fitting meaning or the most probable meaning from within the original function of the "program" which must have been imposed on the artist.⁸ To do so one is to reconstruct the gap between the work as it comes to us and the original cause. So, in practice, the principle of correspondence has to be given up and the principle of coherence, that is, the rationality of the logical connection, becomes the standard for judging the validity of interpretation. This was the idea behind the Panofsky method in iconology.

The Iconological Method

Like the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945), Warburg and Panofsky saw art as a symbolic form that is, as a matrix encapsulating the essential metaphysical and philosophical outlook of a period. Panofsky's system is trilogical: pre-iconography, iconography proper, and thirdly iconology; three successive levels in an interpretative process⁹ (See Figure II).

The first level is a pre-iconological description that encompasses the factual and the expressional in a motif. The equipment necessary for such identification is merely common sense and superficial knowledge of the context. The second iconographic analysis level is more erudite, using a textual basis, the mythological or allegorical connections of the representation. This also meant examining the manner in which specific themes and concepts were expressed through objects and events according to the prevailing historical conditions. Iconology or the third level is a mode of interpreting the data furnished by iconography and establishing the intrinsic meaning and/or symbolic value of an image. At this level the image is seen as a symptom of a fundamental attitude of the human mind. In his words:

It is apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a
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class, a religious or philosophical persuasion - qualified by one personality and condensed into one work.¹⁰ (p.30)

This privileging of personality is contentious in the post Marxist world of art history and its distinct hint of popular psychology. The first two levels of meaning, the natural and iconographical, were phenomenal, while the third, intrinsic meaning, was beyond the sphere of conscious volition.

Iconology and the Formalist Position

Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories. (Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*)

The duality of form and content has beleaguered much of 20th century art. While Panofsky's method seemed to suggest a privileging of meaning or content, much of 20th century art seemed to privilege form. Even if one were to suggest that Panofsky, like classical Indian aesthetics saw, the relation of form and content as indivisible like word and meaning (*sabdartha*), the formalist argument remained strong, contesting the position of Panofsky.

At the same time as Warburg's first usage of the term iconology in 1913, Clive Bell (1881-1964) was promoting the reception of impressionist and post impressionist art which was encapsulated in the little book 'Art'.¹¹ His argument was: sensibility is the precondition of having aesthetic experience; aesthetic experience is the experience of a peculiar emotion; works of art are what produce this peculiar emotion; works of art differ enormously in medium and content; it is only in virtue of something which they have in common that works of art can produce a common response; what they have in common is 'significant form'.

lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call 'Significant Form'; and

'Significant Form' is the one quality common to all works of visual art' (p17-18)¹²

However Bell was insistent in saying that it was not the representative content of a work of art that was important but its pure formal properties. In an utter repudiation of content, he maintained content to be irrelevant and opened up the way to eliminate it to herald the abstract.

if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions.¹³ (p. 27)

Even more uncompromising was the position of Susan Sontag (1933-2004). Resenting the hegemony of the idea that a work of art is primarily its content, she dismissed the idea of content as "a hindrance, a nuisance, and a subtle or not so subtle philistinism."¹⁴ By overemphasizing content we promote the perennial and never consummated project of interpretation. To Sontag, the task of interpretation is translation and appears when the power and credibility of myth has been broken and interpretation invoked to reconcile ancient views to modern demands. Interpretation is a strategy to conserve an old text too precious to repudiate.

However the project of interpretation is not merely those of classicists like Panofsky and Gombrich whose motives are prompted by a piety to the text. Modern interpretation unlike those of Panofsky's which respectfully built layers of meaning one atop another, excavates, destroys and digs behind the 'text' to find a subtext which is true.¹⁵ To Sontag the most celebrated and influential modern doctrines, those of Marx and Freud, actually amount to elaborate systems of hermeneutics, aggressive and impious theories of interpretation.

Panofsky's Method as Precursor to Structuralism

Structures, like language, mediate our way of perceiving the world and organising of experience, rather than objective entities of an external world. It

follows that meaning or significance is not a core essence inside things but always ascribed from the outside. So meaning is attributed to things by the mind. The structuralist approach was defined largely by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-), and Roland Barthes (1915-1980).¹⁶ Their approach took one further and further away from the art object to to the larger abstract questions of genre, history, philosophy, etc. rather than closer and closer to the art object. Thus there is a centrifugal movement away from the art object towards the larger abstract structures that contained them. The later post-structuralist / deconstructionist position challenged structuralism by denying the existence of reality and pushed the hermeneutic circle out of control (see figure IIIa&b).

Since there is no foundation upon which to construct a system of knowledge, the best we can do is the therapeutic task of taking purported systems of knowledge and "deconstruct" them by showing the unmotivated assumptions or arbitrary interpretations upon which they are based. As there is no constraint in reality on interpretation, the hermeneutic cycle, as in the diagram, can spiral out of control.¹⁷

We could examine the idea of signification in the structuralist field of semiotics¹⁸ and contrast Panofsky's third level of iconological interpretation with third order signification of Barthes. According to Saussure "the linguistic sign does not unite a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image" (see Figure IVa). If we referred to the concept as the 'signified' and the sound image as the 'signifier' (see Figure IVa) the signifier and signified coalesce into what we call a 'sign'¹⁹. C. S. Peirce (1839-1914) developed an alternative theory of semiotics. For Peirce a sign is by its nature triadic, since Peirce defines it as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity." Hence every sign has three divisions: "the sign in itself, the sign as related to its object, and the sign as interpreted to represent an object." The elements of Peirce's semiotics that are used are the triad *icon*, *index*, *symbol*. All signs, Peirce says, are partly iconic (they denote by resembling their objects), indexical (they are "really affected" by their objects), and symbolic (they denote "by virtue of a law"). Peirce says all signs are simultaneously iconic, indexical, and symbolic: "Take, for instance, "it rains." Here the icon is the mental composite photograph of all the rainy days the thinker has experienced. The

index is all whereby he distinguishes *that day*, as it is placed in his experience. The symbol is the mental act whereby he stamps that day as rainy²⁰."

Barthes draws an important distinction between what he refers to as different orders of signification. The first order is, for example, the iconic sign which is denotative where the photograph of the car means the car. In the second order of signification there is a whole range of connotations. Barthes argues that for example in photography the denoted (first-order) meaning is conveyed through the mechanical process of reproduction. Connotative (second-order) meanings are introduced by human intervention - lighting, pose, camera angle etc. When we look at connotations we are looking at the activation of meanings deeply rooted in our culture. Second-order signification, then, is referred to as connotation. But it is also what Barthes refers to as myth.

"And here is now another example: I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag... I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (*a black soldier is giving the French salute*); there is a signified (it is here purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier." (from *Mythologies*, 1973)²¹

First order of signification is what the photo denotes (see Figure IVb). In the second order the sign of this particular soldier becomes the signifier of the cultural values that he represents in the photograph. That takes us into what Barthes refers to as *myth* (*mythology*-Barthes: the sets of *myths* which operate as organising structures within a culture, organising the meanings which we attach to the signs and legitimises bourgeoisie ideology). Under the operation of this myth, the sign becomes a second-order signifier. The signified is: 'France has a great empire; all her sons, without distinction of colour, serve faithfully under the French flag and that

there is no better answer to the critics of colonialism than this black's zeal in serving his supposed oppressors.' Third-order signification is a matter of the cultural meanings of signs. These cultural meanings derive not from the sign itself, but from the way that society uses and values the signifier and the signified.

This process of signification is a more generic system and a more contemporaneous iconology. However it is important to note that unlike Panofsky the shift in emphasis has been from the 'Why' of signification to the 'How' of signification.

The View from Classical Indian Aesthetics

In this final section we shall contrast the Panofsky method with an outline of trilogic signification from classical aesthetics. Though incongruous due to the West's inherently "orientalist other" in the legitimation of Indological theory, we could also examine three levels of signification in Indian art.

Early in the Indian tradition the stylists (*alamkarikas*) elucidated three modes of meaning namely the denotative (*abidha*), indicative (*lakshana*), and suggestive (*vyanjana*).²² The denotative meaning (*abidha*) (See Figure V) is revealed through an epistemic process of direct perception (*pratyaksha*) and is also called the direct meaning (*sakshatartha*). Indirect meaning (*parokshartha*) is posited at two levels, the 'metaphorical' and 'suggested' and employs all the three classical sources of knowledge (*pramanas*) though there is the preponderance of inference (*anumana*). Aesthetic inference (*parokshanumana*) is the outcome of two processes of knowing the concomitance of the evidence and the inferable feature (*pramana*) and the intellectual judgment justifying the inference (*paramarsha*). The need for inference is prompted by the breakdown of primary meaning of the object (*mukhyarthabadha*) and expectancy (*akanksha*). Deconstructing the primary meaning (*mukhyarthabadha*) is the heart of indicative/connotative meaning (*lakshana*) and is an aesthetic device that provokes the aesthete to a deeper inquiry. Here at this level the shift in meaning is sudden from denotative to indicative (*samlakshyakrama*). Expectancy (*akanksha*) implies incompleteness and a desire to fulfill the meaning. This pervading sense of expectancy born of a further gradual shift in meaning (*asamlakshyakrama*) is termed aesthetic resonance (*dhvani*).

The above theory is sophisticated in its approach and, while its locus is in stylistics, is a comparable interpretative framework to that of Panofsky. Its similarity is not merely in its trilogic composition but more in the symbolic intrinsic meaning at the iconological level of Panofsky. Though the Indian theory is based on an epistemic tradition, its emphasis is more aesthetic than Panofsky's which is more epistemic to interpretative practice.

Conclusion

Panofsky's contribution to the project of interpretation foregrounds the problem of whether we should give priority to the concept of historical reality as a controlling principle, or whether we should permit pluralism into interpretation. In so doing we need to be aware of the fictional character of reconstruction, despite its methodological rigor. As Kato observed "The important thing for the hermeneutics of art is not to reduce all the possible meanings into a single one, but to secure and give an outlet to the unlimited productivity of the aesthetic."²³

Word Count: 3,200

Figure 1a: Rise and Fall of the Art Historians: Citations of Key Historians 1930-2000

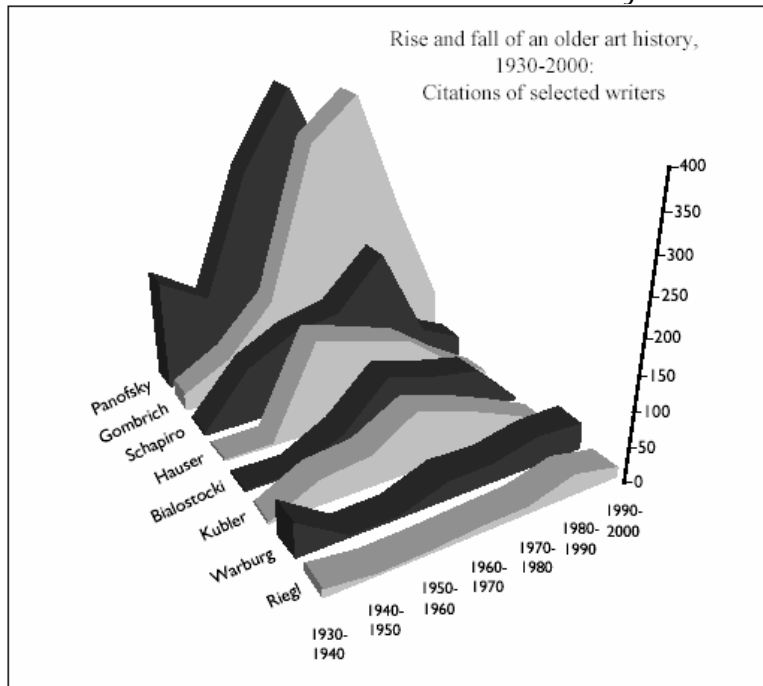
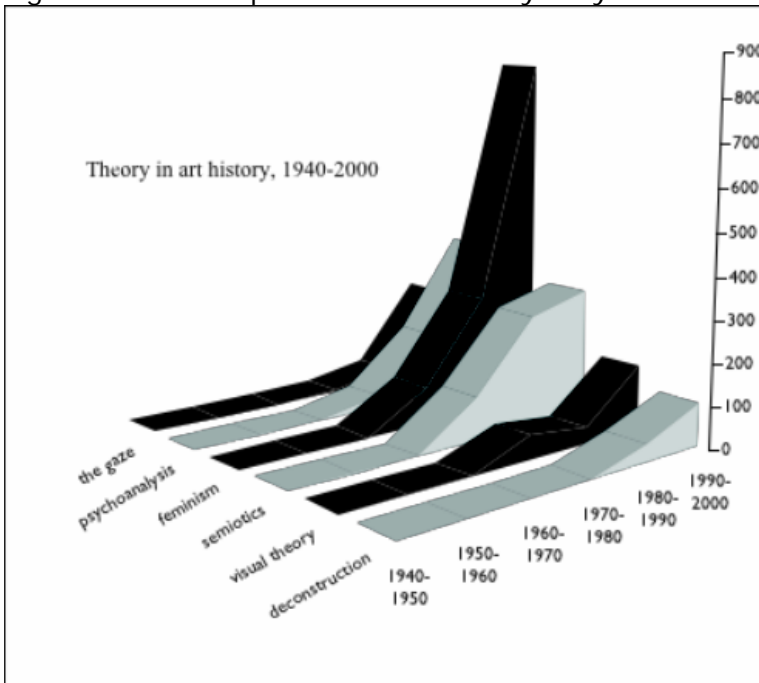


Figure 1b: Preoccupations of Art History: Keyword Incidence Citations 1940-2000



Source: Series Preface "The Art Seminar" University of Cork.

Figure II: The Method of Panofsky

OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION	ACT OF INTERPRETATION	EQUIPMENT FOR INTERPRETATION	CORRECTIVE PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION (Hist. of Tradition)
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<p>I <i>Primary or natural</i> subject matter - (A) factual, (B) expressional - constituting the world of artistic motifs</p>	<p><i>Pre-iconographical description</i> (and pseudo-formal analysis)</p>	<p><i>Practical experience</i> (familiarity with <i>objects</i> and <i>events</i>).</p>	<p><i>History of style</i> (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, <i>objects</i> and <i>events</i> were expressed by <i>forms</i>).</p>
<p>II <i>Secondary or conventional</i> subject matter, constituting the world of <i>images</i>, <i>stories</i> and <i>allegories</i>.</p>	<p><i>Iconographical analysis</i></p>	<p><i>Knowledge of literary sources</i> (familiarity with specific <i>themes</i> and <i>concepts</i>).</p>	<p><i>History of types</i> (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions specific <i>themes</i> or <i>concepts</i> were expressed by <i>objects</i> and <i>events</i>).</p>
<p>III Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of "symbolical" values.</p>	<p><i>Iconological interpretation</i></p>	<p><i>Synthetic intuition</i> (familiarity with the <i>essential tendencies of the human mind</i>), conditioned by personal psychology and "<i>Weltanschauung</i>"</p>	<p><i>History of cultural symptoms or "symbols"</i> in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, <i>essential tendencies of the human mind</i> were expressed by specific themes</p>

Source: Iconography and Iconology -Synoptical table from Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 1974 ,pp. 40, 41 (originally published in 1939 in *Studies in Iconology*)

Figure IIIa Hermeneutic cycle out of control
Hermeneutic cycle

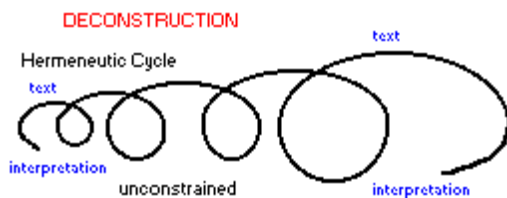
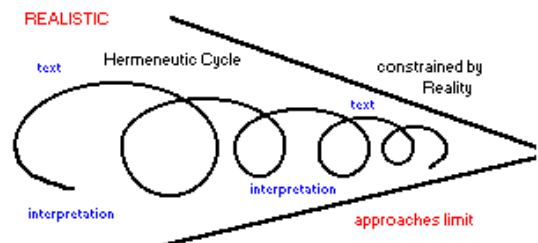


Figure IIIb Convergent

Figure IV a: Saussure's Sign
Figure IV b: Barthes Signification



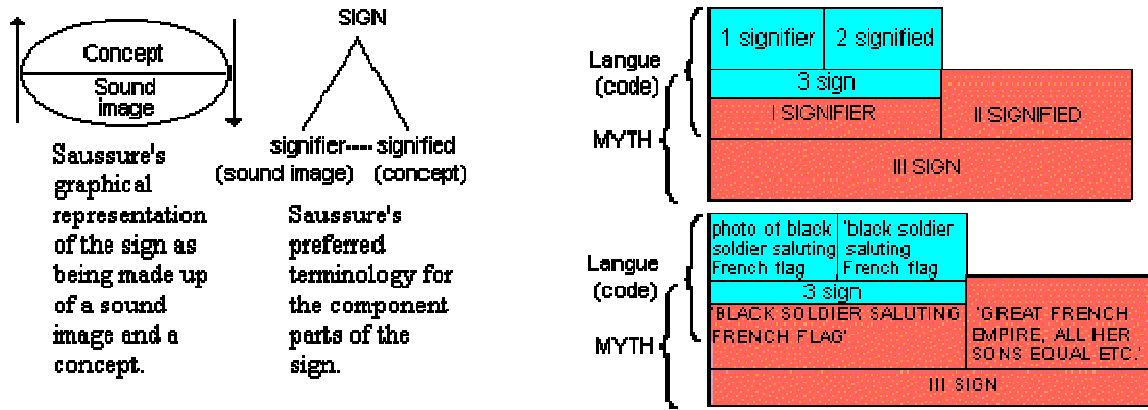
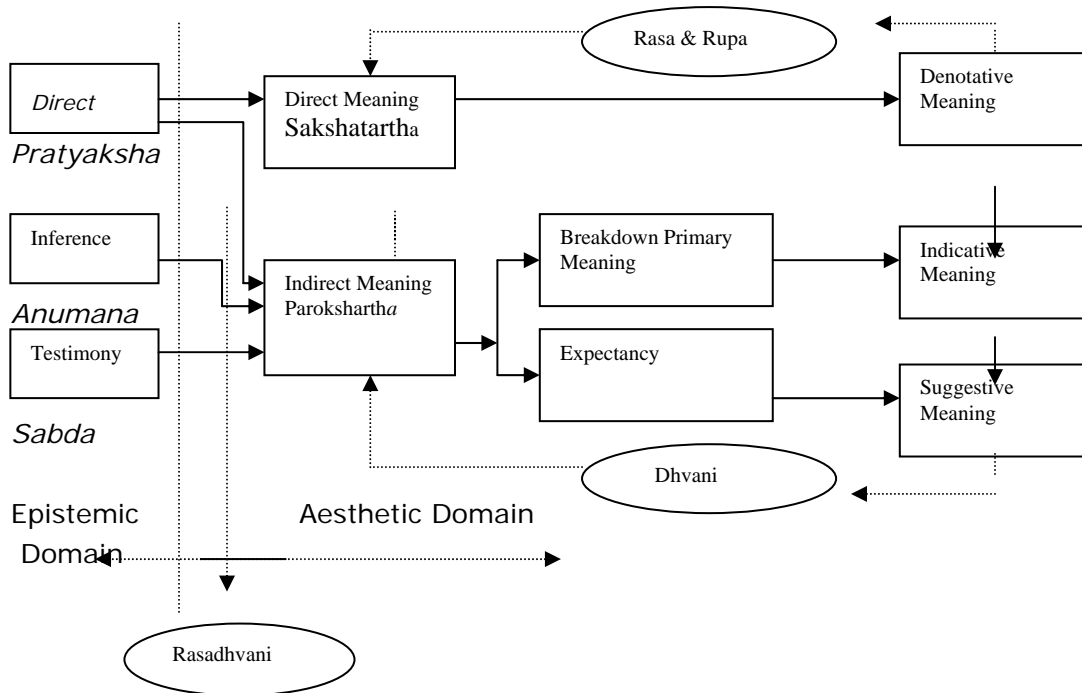


Figure V: Tripartite signification in Indian Aesthetics



¹ The second approach forming a kind of orthodoxy in art history departments draws on ideas developed by social historians, cultural anthropologists, and linguistic semioticians.

² Many have debated whether Panofsky's pioneering contributions have been in the field of iconography, the history of perspective, the linkage between artistic style and changing world views, photography and motion pictures. His vast erudition and detailed study seems to have made him iconic in art history.

³ From the Greek *eicon*, image logos, discourse, thus: the discourse, or science, of pictures; the term iconology probably first appeared as *Iconologia* by the Italian Cesare Ripa published in Rome in 1593. Iconology was simply the classification of images as signifiers, according to the symbolic system of the baroque period. Aby Warburg, then Panofsky replaced this term, implying chiefly classification and classificatory procedures by that of *iconography*, while reserving *iconology* for methods of investigations, concerning the meaning of images.

⁴ "Hermeneutics," from Greek *hermêneuô*, "to interpret or translate" (from the messenger of the gods, Hermes), is the theory and practice of interpretation, originally the interpretation of texts, especially religious texts.

⁵ Gombrich, E. H. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. 2nd ed. Princeton UP. 1960.

⁶ Kato Tetsuhiro, *Picture Reading?: Gombrich and the Hermeneutics of Art*, *Aesthetics* (4) 1990,25-34

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Panofsky, Erwin, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, Oxford University Press, 1939

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Bell Clive, *Art*, Rupa & Co, 2002

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Sontag Susan, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Picador, 1961

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Barry Peter, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Manchester UP, 1995

¹⁷ Ross Kelly, *Foundationalism and Hermeneutics* [www document]
<http://www.friesian.com/hermenut.htm> 3/9/05

¹⁸ Semiotics is the theory and study of signs and symbols, especially as elements of language or other systems of communication, and comprising semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics. It was developed separately by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce.

¹⁹ Chandler, Daniel (1994): *Semiotics for Beginners* [WWW document] URL <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/> [3 Sep 2005]

²⁰ Elkins James, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction*, Routledge 2003;

²¹ Barthes Roland, Lavers Anette (Tr), *Mythologies*, Harper Collins Canada 1972

²² Dehejia Harsha, *The Advaita of Art*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1996

²³ Kato Tetsuhiro, *Picture Reading?: Gombrich and the Hermeneutics of Art*, *Aesthetics* (4) 1990,25-34