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Attention and Intention

Abstract:

The intentional meaning of an act is the meaning it acquires as an object of stable, shared attention. Such a state is obtained through intersubjective contact through significant time spans. And this is in turn typically achieved in aesthetic contexts. Art teaches us to share attention and thus to make sense of things.

A modest philological observation for a starter. The German translation of *attention* is *Aufmerksamkeit*, whose Old Norse root /merk/ also gives rise to verbs such as *bemerken*, to notice, and *markieren*, to mark out. The French has the same differentiation: *remarquer* (to notice) versus *marquer* (to mark out). English *notice* and *note* reflect the Latin *nota*, written sign, distinction, from the verb (*g*)*nosco*, to study, know, recognize, understand, hence: (cum + (g)*nosco*), *cognitio*, knowledge as process or result: cognition. Underlying this double semantics—whereby the word for attention also refers to demarcation, marking, apposing a mark on some object—there may be a general tendency to associate a graphic act of distinguishing a thing and the event of becoming aware of this thing. The phenomenon of ‘paying attention’¹ to some entity by a conscious effort thus appears to show affinity to the semiotic activity of writing, marking, signifying. A possible interpretation: Our *attention* is conceived of as a mode of signifying by mental *writing* into perceptual space; the result, cognition, is conceptualized as some sort of ‘writing with the eyes’ by looking upon something. The gaze is a pen.

Attention is often ‘shared’; if a person ‘draws’ attention to something, or ‘attracts’ someone’s attention, such events or acts of sharing seem intelligible in this framework of a semiotic phenomenology. The exercise of attention affects dynamically certain other ‘attentions’ present in a given space; it attracts them – to some marked-out object – and thereby creates experiences of mental contact, intersubjectivity. These experiences of joint or shared ‘attending’ to something will further give rise to feelings of sharing

¹ This semantic area is rich in similar figurative data. In Danish, you can ‘ofre opmærksomhed [på noget]’, literally, *sacrificing* [your] attention on something... Paying, sacrificing, and in general: the symbolic act of *giving*, are instances of signifying, making sense in an intersubjective, socio-cultural space.

thoughts, or exchanging information, making possible the concept of *communication*, including the well-known models representing conduits, senders, receivers, and channels through which meaning appears to ‘flow’.

A special effect of this basic dynamics of attention is what we call *intentionality*, in the simple sense of: the quality of the intentional, as in: ‘an intentional act’, ‘he did it intentionally’, or simply: ‘the meaning intended was...’. When our individual attention to an item is ‘shared’, in that other persons are ‘paying’ attention to the same item, and this communal situation acquires a certain stability in time, the meaning of the object of attention tends to stabilize. What we attend to then begins to ‘mean’ something, in itself and to us. If the doing of a person requires the attention of the doer and allows or attracts the attention of others, we will in the same way ascribe intentional meaning to it, to be assumed by the doer, who is thus its ‘intentional’ agent. *The intentional meaning of an act is the meaning it has as object of stable, shared attention; we can even call this its objective meaning; it is this meaning that the (responsible) agent has to assume as the intentional meaning of his own act – even if, for some reason, the actual doer does not do so. If something ‘makes sense’, we cognitively experience this sense to be ‘made’ intentionally, in so far as it is grounded in stable, shared attention. This principle is hard to accept in many philosophies; but in social life, ethics and jurisdiction rely on it, as well as the structure of narratives cross-culturally presuppose it in the very set-up of a third-person perspective.*²

In the world of art, this phenomenon of ‘sense-making’ by the ascription of objective meaning to artifacts, works of art, texts, pieces of music, etc. is particularly salient. Art critique is mainly an instance (or institution) of interpretation, namely of the possible objective meaning of each work. Here, the basic but difficult fact is that the artist does not have to be the best interpreter, even of his own work. The artist or author of a given piece participates in the community of attending (inter-)subjects but enjoys no privileged interpretive authority. The meaning of the item is necessarily experienced as *written into* it through the artistic act (of ‘paying’, ‘offering’, ‘giving’...) of signification, inherent in the primordial attention, again according to the basic marking phenomenon mentioned above. Once thus ‘written’, it no longer belongs to the initial ‘writer’.

² So, as narrators we can say: “Paul promised to marry Jane”, and under certain circumstances, this can be true even if Paul disagrees.

We live in a human world of meanings, that is, of objective meanings ascribed to experienceable phenomena, rather than in an astrophysical or micro-physical world. Our historical meanings refer to intentionality in the radical sense considered here. In so far, it may be easier to understand how religion is grounded in cognition: the sense that things make to us is intentional and can sometimes be ascribed to acts of primordial attention (even without authority over the resulting meaning!), so why not the entire physical world? If meaning is intentionally given, even without a human author, then why not interpolate a non-human author?

Deus in cognitione? In fact, human cultures equipped with conscious attentional resources have across many millennia explored the epistemic richness of the basic semiotic tendency to interpret the universe by ascribing intentional meaning to it, before reaching the state where the involved objectivity became the objectivity we assign to knowledge in areas we now call history, philosophy, science. The basic principle, however, remains: the author, in cases where such an instance can be identified, is not the master of meaning, just one of its interpreters. To interpret natural regularities, and to let the concept of objective meaning include ‘laws of nature’—to let the Grand Book of Nature be written, with or without writers, in the language of mathematics, as the classical rationalists suggested—is to continue what the cognitive phenomenology of the minds of our species has always done, as long as there have been inter-subjective sense-making and ‘communication’. All forms of knowledge are based on intentionality. The main difference between religious beliefs (‘faith’) and profane beliefs may be that the interpretive *communities* establishing the stable contents of phenomena as meanings, are closed and esoteric in the former case and open and exoteric in the latter. Closure leads to dogma and dogmatism, that is, rigid and inconsistent beliefs, while openness leads to unbounded curiosity and negotiable theory. It could be said that religion is an attentional illness; but we will have to add that due to its structure and functions, it is likely to stay ubiquitous or imminently present within human civilization.³

The cognitive and semiotic study of attention, its forms and its ‘grammar’, and the relations of these aspects to the rather complex semantics of human experience, as

³ For example, most or all ethnic communities or ‘cultures’ that claim to possess an ‘identity’ also present a religious profile. Closure is structural in the case of ethnicity.

developed theoretically, technically, and empirically for the first time in Oakley 2009⁴, represents an important new step in the exploration of human consciousness. By lifting the inquiry out of the philosophical discourse – where it was born and raised, thanks to classical rationalism and modern phenomenology – and installing it in the open discourse of systematic collaboration, this work accomplishes a remarkable feat. It invites debate, problematizations, and contributions from the wide field of studies spanning from aesthetics and linguistics to biology and neuroscience. This is, I think, the way in which a cognitive semiotics works.

Attention is particularly relevant to linguistics, in so far as language is our main medium of ‘pointing’ to things among things, especially to absent things hidden among other absent things in the crowded archives of human reference. Let me mention one elementary dimension of attention-driven linguistic organization. Any language offers a lexical stock structured independently of its phrase and clause grammar; while a phrasal articulation of a scenario implies a vantage point, a scaling of objects, indications of experiential intensity, salience, epistemic value, etc., a lexical abstract of the same scenario, a word that summarizes it, will allow speaker and hearer to ‘attend away from it’, to lift off their attention from its episodic drama, and move the attentional ‘marking’ to other, maybe less explored themes. Sentences made of words thus play a game of attending and ‘dis-attending’, of thinking in the direction of or away from things and thoughts. In this sense, introducing or learning a term for a concept allows us to ‘forget’ it, that is, to ‘keep it in mind’, to hold it without attending to it – a capacity that must have had an important role in human evolution of perception, signification, and thinking. When we translate, a word in the source text’s language often becomes a phrase in the target language; this fortunately heightens the degree of translatability between the two languages, but to the price of changing the ‘economy’ of attention. Thus, ‘having a word for’ an entity in a cultural group does not indicate a structural revolution in its cognitive semantics but indeed a determination of its degree of attentional freedom, its resources for unbound thinking; with a poorer vocabulary, attention must work harder... This effect corresponds to what has often been established through brain scanning of expert versus lay treatment of mental tasks; widespread cortical activity in the latter case, and

⁴ This short essay was a foreword to Oakley's highly interesting work on the rhetorics of attention.

more local and reduced activity in the former.⁵ The working of attention is of course both an immaterial operation and a material process.

One of the most prominent features of the expressive behavior we call art (incl. literature and music) is to produce and present compositions for which we do not have words ready; we therefore have to ‘pay’ so much more attention, and thus will perceive slowly, carefully, in one sensory modality at a time, while enjoying art.⁶ Beauty is the classical name for the emotional value of doing just that. Here, we are apparently facing the opposite of the attentional freedom mentioned above. In art, the esthetic goal seems to obtain *anti-expert* perception and processing of the object.

With an expression coined by Danish musicologist and philosopher Carl Erik Kühl, the particular, slow, and often erratic, hesitant style of perception we use in front of works of art is a genre of perception: not epistemic but instead *epimonic* perception (from the Greek *epimone* (from the verb *epimeno*, I continue) lingering, hesitation).⁷ Why do humans cultivate this genre of attention, *epimonic attention*?

I think this question is relevant, because it leads us toward that of the origins of symbolization. Only when we experience an item epimonicly do we separate it from the context of manifestation and instead place it in a foregrounded position that forces it to make sense—to symbolize. Symbols are famously ‘conventional’, but their users do not have to ‘convene’ in order to establish them; however, their *attention* has to experience mutual reinforcement, to generate the intentionality that transforms them—from marks to symbols. Human semiotics, the basic condition of human culture formation, is a cognitive process built on the affordances of human attention.

Reference:

Oakley, Todd (2009). *From Attention to Meaning. Explorations in Semiotics, Linguistics, and Rhetoric*. Bern: Peter Lang

⁵ The expert uses an expert terminology and – internally – an inventory of mental symbols or diagrams, either directly or indirectly linked to – external – terminological lexemes.

⁶ A figurative painting of course represents what a human eye would view in very few seconds: a landscape, an agglomeration of objects, a human face, etc. But in the framed and painted canvas window, we are offered a frozen view bound to stay showing forever what a human being may have glanced in an instant. A curious contrast occurs between fast and slow perception.

⁷ The distinction goes back to Roman Jakobson’s view of our perceptive attitudes (*Einstellungen*), which in his terminology could be pragmatico-functional or aesthetic.

C. E. Kühl, “Epistemisk og epimonsk sansning” [epistemic and epimonic perception], manuscript, Aarhus 2007.

