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## A Study of Three Contemporary Works of Art with Social Content from a Semiological Point of View: Generative Trajectory of Meaning Approach

Sedigheh Ahmadiyan Baghbaderani\*

Ph.D in Art Research, Faculty member at Islamic Azad University (Central Branch), Tehran, Iran.

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### Abstract

The art and artist play an important role in the conservation of values, human goals and showing social wishes and behaviors. Works of art affected by social and cultural events are important actors. If these works are introduced and investigated in the semiology studies of arts, they can improve the explanation enrichment and achievements of this kind of researches. Also, they can increase the knowledge and understanding of cultural and artistic domains of society.

The presented is an attempt to answer the following question: How one could achieve the study and analysis of a work of art through semiology studies and meaning generative flow method and reach its hidden trueness and concepts?

It is assumed that such studies lead to a better understanding of society's art and culture. This could be achieved by considering the dominant discursive systems and notational style and properties of the works.

The aim of this research is to evaluate and identify sign elements of chosen works, in order to obtain the background and hidden meaning aspects in different layers and to demonstrate how the acts and relationships of different elements can form an interactive and meaningful discourse.

The research is a descriptive-analytic strategy in nature. To this purpose, works with social content were selected. In addition to study the theoretical aspect, this method investigates the most important backgrounds of the production of these works' concepts in the meaning generative flow process based on the Greimas study pattern. It also covers the appearance of meaning in the text through signs, elements relations and the study and analysis of deep structures.

The research results show that artistic discourses and different oppositional relation can be analyzed using a semiological perspective and generative trajectory of meaning and find out their semantic significations. Also, discovering hidden concepts in the works could lead to a better and more conscious knowledge of society and its evolutions. Data were gathered from available resources in the mass media.

**Keywords:** *Work of art, Semiology, Meaning generative flow, Social crises.*

 \*. Ahmadian\_ba@yahoo.com +989123454612

## Introduction

Social events have been the concern of art in different periods and been examined in different ways.

Historical, social and political evolutions are the most important factors influencing the art domain and its styles and execution methods. These types of subjects can be analyzed from different theoretical perspectives. This paper draws upon a semiology system and Greimas theory of generative trajectory of meaning to analyze the dominant discourse of selected works in three layers: deep structure, intermediate level and surface structure. Algirdas Greimas, the founder of French branch of semiology believes that in each work of art, one should discover some of the actional illustrations of persons and obtain the writing logic (of work of art) by relating the ideas (Zeimaran, 2004: 1).

This paper examines the concepts and meanings produced in different discourse layers through semiotics it also investigates the application of each layer. Understanding relations among signs in art and their social application could be explanatory of many cultural and social phenomena. Appropriate methodology and reflection on the layers of works of art could be considered as solutions to achieve a better understanding and knowledge of existing realities. The present paper attempts to use some of the semiology achievements in text analysis and therefore, in addition to the meaning involvement of a work of art, the application of theoretical and abstract principles of semiology could be evaluated and thus a better comprehension of works of art could be obtained.

The analysis of these works with themes like war, family and drugs, was carried out by aiming the depth of emotions, aims and deeper understanding of work's profoundness and social-mental effects, which is shared with the audience through an expressionist statement.

## Review of Literature

Aligned studies with the present paper are often artistic and literary discourses in the semiology domain (such as the "Semiology" by Daniel Chandler) which

introduce different semiology definitions and methods from theorists' point of view.

In addition to the definition of Paris doctrine of Semiology, Babak Moein (2006) proposed Greimas generative trajectory of meaning as a tool for analyzing art works. Abolghassemi (2014) discussed the painting criticism from two lingual and visual semiological systems and their simultaneity and compatibility in a text.

Ilasht Yalam (2005) used a semiological perspective to understand the relation aspects of design.

Ayatollahi (2006) examined concepts and different types of semiology in arts from the point of view of Quran and testimony and signs.

In a comparative study, Shad Qazvini (2017) discussed about the executive structure by emphasizing on expressionism as well as idealism and mythopoeia .

The originality of the present study lies in identifying the hidden meaning and reality in different layers of works through semiology and generative trajectory of meaning. In the mentioned works, social crises are expressed through sign elements, forms, lines and colors in an expressionism frame and thus, they could be considered as challenging and warning-like discussions.

## Research Method

In this paper, first using a descriptive approach, we examined the key concepts of semiological perspectives and generative trajectory of meaning theory. Then we employed an analytical approach to examine the selected works of art through the lens of mentioned theories, in order to achieve the text reading using their assistance.

Discovering of meanings in the deep layer of works (location of semantics and fundamental categories) and bringing them to the surface (location of foundation of forms, style and objective imagery) was performed through semiology relations and apparent and concrete reality.

## Theoretical Concepts

Semiology is a worldwide knowledge is the result of

researchers and theorists efforts over a century and art semiology is one of its branches. Sosor and Pieros proposed the theoretical foundations of semiology at the beginning of 20th century and following them, the works of researchers such as Jacobsen, Luthman, Bart, Greimas, Derida, Moris and other ones have been the solution of many evolutions in the semiology domain. Semiology in different forms is related to the meaning production and representation. From semiology perspective, signs can be words, images, sounds, postures and objects (Chandler, 2008: 21).

In the study and analysis of a text (work of art), one can use various semiology methods including the proposed theory of Greimas and meaning generative flow. Accordingly, in order to appear on the text's surface, the meaning performs a flow from the deep structure to the surface one (Babak Moein, 2006: 95). The deep structure of text includes the most fundamental categories of meaning. Greimas considers these categories as life and death categories (Ibid : 93). This level includes value-associated, social and identity concepts and also constant fundamental values (i.e. fighting tyranny, consistency, uprising, ravage and etc). In the intermediate layer, that is the narrative semantics level, abstract values and fundamental categories existing in the deep structure are represented in narrative and abstract forms. In this level, there are different narrative roles, they fall into six classes including the nominative actor, the receptor actor, value subject, adjuvant actor, blocking actor and incentive actor. These six units have syntactic and semantic terms. Sometimes all or some of the classes are found in a narration (Ahmadi, 2006: 163).

In this layer, these acting ideas and characters and performances are discovered and studied.

The narrative level brings the procedure level and the mentioned abstract values in sublevel together by introducing narrative frames. The passage from the sublevel to the narrative one is the passage from the ambiguous abstract level to definite narrative forms and identities.

In the highest level, all abstract data in lower and intermediate layers appear in concrete and objective

forms. Forms and people find an objective and definite identity in a certain time and space frame.

In the surface layer of text, acting agents (forms, people, heroes and their acts) appear, and express the subject through various communication elements. In this paper, based on the Greimas pattern and via the identification of constituting elements in works of art (i.e. forms, lines, colors and other sign elements), different layers are analyzed in order to achieve the meanings and concepts and value and comprehensive categories in lower levels, beyond time and space constraints in the surface structure.

In the present paper, the analysis of several discourses is carried out by using the aforementioned tools. The discourses possess social content and are intended to the appearance of meaning from sign elements and symbolic forms received in different layers of discourse. Revealing the meanings of different layers of these works can depict some aspects of the violent reality, catastrophes and human agony.

### **Data Analysis**

The study of works seems to be impossible considering all of its aspects in this analysis, but valuable efforts have been made to study the chosen works from the expressionism aspect and the usage of existing signs with the meaning generative flow approach, and also to discuss about the production and appearance of meaning in the discourse.

This is a work with expressionism style by Habibollah Sadeghi that focuses on war and immigration.. This painting includes two boards, depicting a contemporary disaster that affected the international community. This catastrophe occurred on September 11th 2001 in New York and led to the death of near 3000 persons, and has been assigned to an extremist speedster group in that country. Obviously, this crime was committed by an individual or group and it has been condemned, banned and considered as an inhuman act abominated by the world. But this event has been the source of many further actions, including the attack on Afghanistan on the pretext of arresting the crime actors. Anyways, this inhuman and

unethical event has caused many awful mental and economic effects on the world and has unbalanced many political equations and international relations. Like any other important historical events, this event has generated a deep and also creative impulse in the minds of artists (Sahafzadeh, 2010: 276). Many artists around the world have discussed this topic by various expression methods. Sadeghi's painting is worth to be taken into consideration (Fig. 1).

In this analysis, one could obtain many of the hidden secrets of this deplorable event through a semiology study.

The left picture shows an unprotected land with simple native population abandoning their hometown far away from the burning Twin Towers. The two lands are separated by water. From one side foreigners are entering the land and from other side vulnerable civilians fleeing to save their lives.

The right picture shows continuation of the land. Traditional Islamic architecture is drawn while partially destroyed. Two armed men, facing the audience, can be seen in two different appearances. One is in army uniform and another one in traditional costume.

We are encountering a type of semantic ambiguity; one of them is wearing traditional costume and looks friendly, and the other one has clearly the military uniform.

The first contrast of this painting is the contrast of the invasive and assailant group, which is entering a defenseless territory and the other side, a family leaving their motherland toward an unknown destiny. These comings versus those leavings have hidden

reasons relevant to this yellow and gray land. The contrariety relation could be observed in the kinesis axes of entering foreigners and escaping families who are the original masters of these lands.

Different graphic signs can be seen in the surface layer than can reveal the main goals of this event. The family picture is in a closed frame, meaning that they have no alternatives solution except for going down deep into the darkness, drawn in front of them, fleeing war to save their lives. The important point of this picture is the dark dominant space. In order to understand fear, violence and escape, death, grief, homelessness and the death of innocent people, signs will lead us to realize different events.

The right picture is part of events in left picture. The bright line at the end of the ground is continuing in the second picture and connects them. The viewer can follow the narration by a linear connection (field line) in the two pictures. In the right picture, in the same territory there are two personages representing two different mindsets. Behind them, there is a bare land with houses devoid of life, fire, smoke and darkness. In this work, the existing signs in the upper level will lead us to the deepest layers in order to study and analyze its identity values.

Graphical signs including colors, lines and forms testify the reality of the work, and guide the audience to underlying layers, where the meanings are formed and the aims are located. Both men have large, expression and exaggerated statues with starring eyes looking at the audience. Both of them have only one eye that representing single facet. There are other signs such as expressive colors and also dualistic space dominating the picture, the calm environment of the other side of the water and crowded space of the lower side, different and opposite locations (e.g. including an industrial city with contemporary architecture versus an old and semi-demolished city). The movement of foreigners who are supported by warships and tanks, is illustrated versus evacuee families escaping from their homeland without any supporter toward an unknown destiny.

By digging down the superficial signs of the work, one



Fig.1. Habibollah Sadeghi/Iran September 11th, 2011. Source: Mirhashemi, 2012.

can reach the deep and fundamental layers where the main goals lie. Contemporary buildings at the upper part of the picture on the left side are in contrast with the simple buildings in the right side. The burning tower whose smoke flowing toward others, representing the fire that is widespread in the region, while the modern city looks fairly calm. The fire occupying the area has its base in very distant lands, on the other side of water. But the modern city environment is calm and the smoke, grey clouds and sunset leading to the darkness are dominating the ancient land. One can discover the fundamental and emotional meanings such as immigration, family and its identity in the depth of the work. In fact, the situation of the family, in a rectangular frame, moving toward the upper part of the picture is indicating a limbo, situation of no life-no death. This circumstance is not fully the death, the child shows the hope for future despite the fact that war pushes them to death, escaping and immigrating to an unknown journey.

Putting the family in a narrow and dark frame shows the death and devastation, but their movement is both forward moving and escape from the death. The child is the symbol of a mighty bright future, because his body is not completely in the dark closed frame. His footprint is still in his homeland and this means he will return and take back his motherland.

In the other picture which is connected to the first one by a continuous bright line between the two spaces. Two mens have left behind many ruins being annihilated slowly in the fire of violence. Sign and symbolic elements show us the depth of disaster; red colored sky, a sunset and a fire and a bloody environment indicating the arrival of an appalling darkness. The advanced arm of one man does the same thing as the dagger of the other man. Their staring eyes indicate their similar opinion and goals and their common benefits. Their forward movement shows the same attitude toward viewers, protesters and the international community.

The contrast between the calm environment at the top and the active space at the bottom (which are connected by boats and ships in water and tanks and

people in the land) denotes the attractive relation between the painting balances. On the other hand, a major part of the pictures includes the dry land where the forces are interacting and this testifies the importance of this location and the benefits coming out from this territory.

The arm The arm in their both hands denotes power, The existing signs on the superficial layer of picture guide us toward the main aims of narration. From the assignment of a major part of painting to the territory which has been emphasized by golden lines, one can deduce the richness hidden in this land, thus attracting profit seekers to this location. In fact, the final and fundamental goal is the richness of this golden land. The second level or the narrative one provides the possibility of discovering the fundamental values and the main goals of by approaching the expressive form of narration to the surface. In this level (the intermediate level), the discussed semiology topics and categories in the lower level provide the adequate narrative frames, they denote their forms and expressions by connecting the effective roles and elements in the form of narrations. From the narrative structures and flow point of view, one can denote the incensing and causing actor, which are the golden land two mens. The narrative layer of this work is determined in the arrangement of portraits and reports several narrations several narrations in which the most important ones are immigration and escaping evacuee families from war and insecurities. In this meaning generative flow, the fundamental and identity values and the hidden goals of the works take visual and graphic manifestations with the required signs by passing through the narrative semiology level in the surface structure in a frame with expressionism style. In the second picture, the narrative flow continues with an expressionism style, in the work of Sandroccia, an Italian contemporary artist.

In this picture, a family dispute and the burst of family foundation could be observed. In the first contrast, the bulky man with gigantic grandeur is beating and harassing the family. The mother is in a defensive stand and the child witnessing the scene, has taken a



defensive and even offensive posture and has raised up his little hand against the unreasonable man (which may be the family father) to defend his defenseless mother. The picture background is in agitated red color. Sharp, indistinct and insecure rock pieces are beneath their feet, which are demonstrating the instability in families. The family system's collapse is one of the human concerns nowadays and children will face an unknown life in the middle. The child illustrated in red color is the symbol of life, and the hope of future. He is angry and is defending his mother who is his life-giving person.

This child is the symbol of future children who are dealing with family issues in addition to the social problems. The mother is narrating the long tradition of women and mothers harassment with continues nowadays. She has almost collapsed under the man's oppression and tyranny, but her green colored hand symbolizing the hope in life will save her. Mother is the family pillar maintaining family foundation's stability. She is giving life and hope to the family. She is also a refuge to children and she must stay still and stable.

The opposition in this painting is the one between two persons (the man and woman), but there is an attractive relation between them. Despite the red and chaotic environment dominating the scene, green spots promising a good sequence and the child between them could be the actor facilitating communication (Fig. 2).

From the sign semantics point of view, this picture shows the uncontrolled rage force and the family conflict and situation which is the result of family problems causing them to stand face to face. The man's exaggerated heavysset limbs and his aggressive state with an expressionist description, indicate the destructive force of the man. In the other side, the woman is in defensive state and she is falling, but her hand on the ground keeps her from falling. There are uncertain rock pieces on the ground. The mother's green hand is the symbol of maternal life giving love. these dispersed green spots in the air show, that hope still exists. The earth is the symbol of mother in

myths. The artist has chosen a point of view that the aggressive movement is executed from the man toward the family. The rupture movement has also been generated by him. This point of view has highlighted the violence and physical struggle and harassment of family members by tyrant and mindless dark and gray men. The negative myths' statue engraved in the public opinion and families' history are presented by a bully daddy and bogeyman. In the dominant environment on this conflict, red colored spots with unstable and non-smooth rock pieces indicates the rupture of this family's system.

The child signifies the transferred force of mother to encounter the man's violence. He is the symbol and sprout of the future generation. He has a bright red color and represents the life and hope. He defends his innocent mother, upraising his little hands in defense. In addition to be a backup for his life-savior mother, he is also rising to fight the tyranny. He is learning from his very childhood to fight for survival and life and supporting the innocent and his beloved ones. The movement of the two forces of man and child are in contrast and against each other. Green relaxer spots are in opposite of the agitated space which dominates



Fig. 2. Sandroccia, Family hostility, 1984, oil paint on canvas.  
Source: Bonito Oliva, 2012.

the picture and they are here to confront violent environments and to establish the calm. The man is introduced from a dark world and the movement of his dark feet has brought the darkness into the life, and has annihilated the brightness, all in contrast with the gentle moves and the innocent face of the woman who has diffused the life to her surrounding environment. The contrast is also in passive movement and the attractive relation between them. The child is situated between them and testifies for the existence of this relation. The existing signs of this picture are the expressive colors and lines which are presenting a thematic narration severely with an intense expression about the mentioned topics of today's society. The dark giant man has still white spots symbolizing positive forces in his spirit and has still the possibility to return back. These signs indicate the dualistic forces of the human spirit.

The picture is close to a theater scene, representing the confrontation of two positive and negative forces inside the human being and also in the narrative scene, the realization and the surrounding environment. The existence of spot lights and brightness on the man's dark statue can be the signification of the clear spirit of a person. The human's encounter with positive and negative forces show the confrontation of struggling statues and in the presence of persons themselves. This encounter could be interpreted as the dominant culture and civilization on today's society which is arguing with themselves and also with others and take away the life peace from themselves and even the creators of next generations. The rupture of family foundation and the agony and problems of children and damaging their spirit are complex problems that are forced to the world and will have dangerous consequences in the future. The international community is anxious and this will lead to crime and young's violence. The annihilation of values, cultural believes and social behaviors have created disturbances, anarchy, agitation, disregard, violence and misconduct in the family system (McCarthy, 2011: 569) and all the societies are dealing with these problems.

In the following section different layers of meanings

are analyzed. A major part of a woman's body is bruised due to the endured beatings. According to the green color of her hand which is positioned as support and prevented her from falling and complete death, she is in a no-life no-death situation and the green spots in the space and the one connected to her body indicate that the hope still exists. The interactive movement of child (who is the symbol a new birth and the life) emphasizes its presence. The rotational movement of statues' arrangement promises returning to a common family gathering.

The third work is a graffiti by the American painter, Keith Haring, concerning a worldwide problem, the drugs. This work is addressing the audience by the graffiti method (Fig. 3).

Graffiti is known as street painting, or spray painting. This work by Keith Haring is achieved on the wall of New York City and treats health and ethics messages such as crack. Keith Haring spent more than the half of her life on voluntary works for various charity projects. This work is a powerful declaration against the catastrophic circulation of crack. She has been harassed and faced difficulties by authorities for illegal practices (Stahl, 2010: 115). This work is on the Roosevelt highway in New York.

The surface layer of this work is in red and is used to warn viewers about the danger. The work "crack" is written in bold, violent and expressionist angled letters, helping the work to be seen. The skeleton, skulls and death symbol with the cross sign on the cavity of emptied eyes draw attention to the devastating problem that is caused by this drug and its usage, and also indicates the persons dealing with it unknowingly and with closed eyes. The crosses on the eyes draw the attention to them and seeing wisely. The dollar sign showing zero indicates the probable economic situation. A large number of bones, skulls and indistinctive half-dead or dead statues can be seen who are fully or semi falling. Some of them have raised their hands to ask for help or probably wish to be seen. The dominant color and line on this work show horror, violence, dirty money, death and crushing of the youth power to the viewer.

This work attracts the viewers by signs in the deep level and, i.e. the third layer including effective elements. The word “crack is wack” in a red environment, with skulls and dead bodies bones among affected humans who are like crushed puppets beneath hands and feet,



Fig. 3. Keith Haring, Crack, 1986, Roosevelt Highway, New York. Source: Stahl, 2010.

is a warning for the concrete and obvious reality in our surrounding world. In order to achieve the main and fundamental identity of this warning, one should penetrate the lower and abstract structure concerning the society, family and social systems. The origins of this corruption are drugs being used in the society and the life of people trapped unknowingly by mafia gangs dominating economically on the culture and all the social and familial values. The sign of dollar indicates the important role of massive capitals.

The consumption of drugs including crack from drugs and smuggling mafia networks kills thousands of young people. Their youth and life are ruined in order to increase the monetary capital of mafia gangs. The illustrations of many semiconscious or semi-dead statues with raised hands are calling the world to help them. The existing signs including writings, symbols and numbers are all warning the viewers and announcing the fact that crack is “wack” and its consumer will be also wasted like garbage in a dumpster with skeletons, fear, horror and death. The intermediate layer is the narrative level which gives the opportunity to approach the fundamental goals in the lower level to the procedure level by giving them a

suitable narrative frame. The intermediate layer is the narration of atrocious massacre and transformation of humans to the garbage of something like that, as told in the main slogan: “crack is wack”. But a second layer has been opened in the picture. The “crack transforms human into the garbage” is the narration of usage of a dump named crack and drugs, which affects millions of people around the world.

In this meaning generative flow, one can find out about the fundamental concepts and effective actors in the deep structure and lower level of the work through existing graphics and concrete signs in the narrative level such as denoted and expressive colors, statues, symbols, skulls, dollar sign, bones and exploding bombs. But the hope in life still exists in the upper level. The contrast between life and death is obvious by statues, the raised hands like drowning people crying for help in order to escape the trap of drugs. Sociologists such as Olricht believe that the awareness of people from worldwide problems by mass media increase the ethical responsibility of persons to solve the problems (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2012: 258).

Graffiti is an art expressed in alleys and streets which introduce the artist’s aims to the passing viewers. Graffiti is referred to any kind of scrawled writing and forbidden and illegal visual expression on the walls and surfaces of public places which have integrated the artists’ works with expressive and narrative goals (Oxford Dictionary, 2006: 351). Graffiti has seen a worldwide development in the last decades and as a cultural micro product, it has raised versus official forms of governmental media, by conserving the unofficial messaging properties (Erin, 2008: 2). Keith Haring is one the artists who has always criticized the contemporary America and social conditions and diseases. She created designs of animals and humans with chalk on the black paper and paste them on the billboards posters and subways (Archer, 2008: 166). She kept always herself in touch with people and refused the presentation of her works in galleries. She realized designs in advertising and helping incurable patients, drugs, and specially the Aids. She warned and informed the people and she passed away due to



HIV infection in 1990. New York artists have not been safe from the HIV virus and many artists have worked under different organizations to fight this disease and increase people's awareness. They also organized events and manifestations (Ibid : 167).

### Findings

The findings show that many artists seek to express human and warning-like subjects on their works. investigation and analysis of these issues through various methods of semiology and different theories such as Greimas pattern leads to a better understanding of signs, meanings and concepts. Many crises have invaded today's world and affected the production and evolution of works of art. The selected works in this paper reflects the deep influences of the events on artists. Such effects are expressed by the expressionist method. Expressive elements and various forms are considered as signs. The relation and continuity of these sign are following the appearance of meaning in the discourse by a method from art semiology entitled the meaning generative flow. It reveals the deep layers of work of art and wide dimensions of humanitarian crises and poor values in today's societies.

As the semiology is an approach which deals with the semantic signification, painting works provide a suitable discourse for analyzing -signs. In these works, various sign systems are interrelated and indicate semantic totality and to help audience with discovering the concepts.

As art and life are associated, a wide range of today's works of art present human problems. Like other people, artists are more than ever deal with problems. This study shows that the sign elements used in these works reveal many realities, ruptures and ethical recessions of contemporary society.

### Conclusion

No doubts, various elements contribute to the formation of a discourse process and one of the most important ones could be found by the meanings' signs. In this paper, the study and analysis of selected works are performed via the identification and

perception of graphic signs and the relations of other elements in the surface. In order to reconstruct deep and hidden concepts, we used Greimas theory to investigate different layers and in doing so, abstract fundamental and worthy concepts and categories are revealed through the passage from the deep structure to the surface structure of visual and deterministic forms' location. Also, the meanings of signs and different aspects of the work appeared and this led to a transactional and meaningful discourse. Time and space constraints of levels were removed and the subject and concepts of the work of art found a wide, comprehensive and general form. Considering the cultural and social backgrounds and contexts of works of art, the attention to the relations of structural elements and signs in different layers, has direct effects such as different aspects of aesthetics and innovative creation of artists. This approach also reveals how the continuity in art domain is associated with society evolutions and cultural, social and political issues. In fact, understanding the work of art through the knowledge of signs relations in different layers can be a solution despite the expression type, and it could also provide the possibility of better communication with semantic indications of the work of art.

As the works of art are constituted of signs and different graphic and written elements, one could deduce that one of the most adequate solutions to study and analyze works of art is the use of semiology methods and the Greimas' meaning generative flow theory in order to obtain deeper realities and concepts. Based on the mentioned theory, one could discuss about the decryption and analysis in different layers and achieve the understanding of evident and hidden concepts and meanings.

Due to their special structure, expressive colors and lines, expressionist works possess many specific forms and characteristics for the expression of artists' opinion, emotions and concerns. Overall, the comprehension of intended concepts and aims in works of art is possible through the analysis of signs and relevant theoretical studies and could be effective in disclosing many hidden aims of the text.

In addition, the study of these works is an affirmation and reverence of committed artists who create warning and effective works.

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