

SEMIOTICS OF THE DOOR

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Jacob von Uexküll (1982) noticed that every organism has its surroundings which it apprehends, depending on its semiotic abilities, with its sensory apparatuses. The process consists in drawing borders, reducing the perceived objects to objects with meaning, that is to signs. The surrounding world which results from the transformation of the surroundings into the surrounding world in Uexküll's terminology is called *Umwelt*. And the process of human construction of the *Umwelt* is the process of construction of culture, relying on moving from mere perception to signs. One of the most important principles taking part in the process, as Karl Bühler (1990) states, is the principle of abstractive relevance (primarily relating to phonology). This means that from the bombardment of sensory impulses we recognize only those which unite into a familiar whole or serve a particular purpose. From the multiple significations of an object appearing in a text the observer is made to select only those which refer to the preferred understandings. The observer's perception is coaxed into the preferred readings of the image by disciplining the polysemy, by among many such elements as context, repetitions, verbal signs, juxtaposition and others, which are defined by R. Barthes (1977) in "Rhetoric of Image" as anchorage.

The film "CUBE" directed by Vincenzo Natali, presenting six ordinary people (an ex-convict, a doctor, a student, a cop, an engineer, and a mentally handicapped) trapped in a maze of interlocking cubes and searching for the exit door, may be read as a film presenting multiple significations of the image of doors and therefore various understandings of the concept of space. Though the doors are identical in their appearance, they differ with respect to who and how uses them and to their position in the whole time-space structure. The doors in the cube have as many meanings and understandings of space as there are people there.

The door as a blockade to freedom; panoptical space

We are first presented with Rennes for whom the door is a blockade to freedom. He is an ex-convict who has escaped from seven best-guarded prisons in his country. We meet him for the first time when he enters the cube in which there are already: Worth – an architect, Quentin – a cop, Halloway – a doctor, and Leaven – a student. He firmly enters the room in silence, does not talk to others, unlaces the shoe, climbs to the door and throws the shoe into there, checking the presence of any traps. Only when he spots one (fire burner), does he say:

“Rennes: ... electric eyes. Most of them are hidden in the walls.”¹

He perceives and understands the space of the cube in the same terms as the space of the prisons he has escaped from. Jeremy Bentham² claims that panopticon is organized in that way in order to place the inspector in the center, that he can see everything without being seen. Consequently, the eye of the supervisor can always watch over the prisoners. For Rennes, the spatial organization of the cube is based on the same rule, as he says:

“Rennes: I feel we are being watched.”

Freedom means to him getting free from the eye of the inspector; it is the visual control he has to get rid of. He is not threatened by the power represented by Quentin, who gives him commands, who strives to control his body and will. Then Rennes moves to another door to check the presence of traps there. He appears to be a determined character; for him the door is an obstruction on the way to freedom which exists in the outside world. He regards the cube as another type of prison, a labyrinth that he must escape from. The door encourages him to being active, as he says:

“Rennes: By sitting here we will not find out anything. Each labyrinth has its end.”

He talks to others only when it is necessary. His basic rule is to save energy, which he has to spend on forcing the door, and he teaches others to do the same; he tells the doctor to suck a button in order to produce saliva. It is a paradox that it is the ex-convict who tells the doctor how to cope with physical exertion. When the rest learn about his past they put hope in him, he is the key to the exit door for them. His destination is clearly set:

¹ All quotations are my own translations from the Polish version of the film.
² Zygmunt Bauman, *Freedom*. Open University Press: London 1988. pp. 20-21.

“Rennes: You are interested only in what is in front of your noses. That’s a real challenge!”

He focuses his attention on the exit, and everything he does should lead to that. The door appears to him to be a demanding blockade, which requires not only energy but also some equipment; in his case these are shoes, time and experience. He admits that he takes them only because he needs their shoes.

“Rennes: I took you with me because I need your shoes, but I do not have time to waste, so enough talking, no more guessing.”

He bases the explanation of the surrounding world on his experience; his experience elucidates the noises:

“Rennes: it’s a machine, the noise is regular.

Leaven: and maybe ventilation?

Rennes: No, there is no inlet and it is as hot as in an oven.”

Later in the film we learn he was wrong because it was the sound of the movable cube – the noise resulted from the structure of the cube Rennes was not familiar with.

He can also explain the principles of some traps according to the rules that were used in previous prisons:

“Rennes: The air is too dry; a molecular sensor.

Quentin: But you threw the shoe.

Rennes: The shoe is not alive. The sensor responds to hydrogen sulphide emitted by our skin.”

He is not afraid of traps, as he thinks he knows how they work; for him people are the source of threat:

“Renes: You must protect yourselves from each other.”

And then he enters a room with a trap that he has not traced. A sensor in a shape of an eye burns him. He does not reach the door to freedom – does not set free from visual control. He dies at the door leading to the next cube; he is killed by what he has been most afraid of – the visual control.

The door as the source of protection from responsibility; parcelled out space

Worth, an architect who has designed the shell of the cube is Rennes’ opposition, as he is not interested in what is behind the door, on the outside. The door is a symbol of security for him; it protects him from the dangers of the outside world. He is the first character we meet in the film. He is already there, lying on the

floor. He wakes up by an open door, but he shows no interest in it. Others would call him a cynic but his behavior results from the conviction that there is no exit from the cube:

“Worth: They haven’t built it to let us get free from it. There is no way out of here.”

Later he associates the cube with the project he has worked on, and realizes there is only one gap that he calls “the door” – it is the exit door:

“Leaven: The outer shell, you say. Is it also a cube?

Worth: I think so.

Leaven: Is there any door?

Worth: One.

Leaven: Where?

Worth: Only the one who designed it knows where. But it is only opened from the outside.”

The holes in the walls, which some people would call the doors, to him are identical; there is no difference between them.

“Worth: This or maybe this?”

He is not afraid to go backward, to rescue the handicapped man, Kazan, as for him the direction is not important. Searching for the exit does not necessarily mean walking ahead. The doors within the cube are only an encouragement to the endless game in finding or avoiding traps. Being aware of the presence of a trap sensitive to sounds in one of the rooms he risks and enters it because it is his turn. Fortunately, he succeeds in getting through the room and ‘wins a point’. Bauman³ says that game is an activity characteristic of free people; it disappears when freedom disappears. It does not aim at helping to survive; it is the other way around – life is worth living because of the useless games. People play games being conscious that they voluntarily have adopted the rules and they have the choice to quit the game at any time they want. I believe that in Worth’s case it is only his wishful thinking. He regards himself as a victim of the bureaucratic chaos:

“Worth: We are both victims of a system. I’ve got my cubes, and you have your district. You do your work and I do mine. Nobody wants to have a big picture. Life is too complicated.”

He believes that people are unable to have the whole picture of the universe, reality or the surrounding world. And if they got one they would not bear the absurdity of it and responsibility for what they might unknowingly contribute. It

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Etyka Późnowoczesna*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN: Warszawa 1996. pp.228-230.

is for their sake to enjoy the situations they are in and to live in the world being a collection of small images, without getting the big picture.

Worth worked on the project of designing the shell, but he does not know anything about the whole structure, about the traps. He even does not know whom he was working for because he did not have to cross the door of his office. He solved all the problems through the phone. He did not know what the others were doing. He believes that the cube is a result of an accident, of a big bureaucratic chaos. There is no ideology behind that. There is no Big Brother, as the doctor would suggest. Worth might have been convinced that he was contributing to something positive, as the associations with the word CUBE would indicate. In 1983, with the help from architects, preservationists and educators, Ginny Gravers established in the US the Center for Understanding the Built Environment (CUBE). Its aim has been to bring together educators with community partners to effect change, which will lead to a quality built and natural environment, one and independent. This means cities which work for adults and children; buildings and spaces which are healthy and aesthetically pleasing; streetscapes and landscapes which reach to the future while celebrating the past. The ultimate goal of CUBE is not simply to enable children to learn to value the built environment, nor is it just to improve their problem-solving and social skills. The fourth “R” in the CUBE education model is Responsible Action. Unfortunately, Worth is afraid of the responsibility for his action. He calls himself poison, but he blames for that the door built by the system he lives in; the door existing between people and cutting up responsibilities:

“Quentin: Who hired you?

Worth: I didn’t ask. I even didn’t leave my office. Everything through the phone; only technical details. Nobody knew what it was. Nobody cared. (...) Nobody asked questions. All we wanted was money and clear conscience. I was working on the projects for months. It was an excellent order.”

But now he is a victim of his work; he has to take on the responsibility for his action:

“Worth: I feel better now.

Holloway: So that is why you are going with us, to confess.

Worth: Are you going to arrest me, Quentin?”

Worth does not want to leave the cube as the door to it protects him from criminal responsibility. Being in the presence of others, especially the doctor, helps him to see that he involuntarily contributed to self-destruction:

"Holloway: That's how they work. You keep everything separate. No one knows what the rest do...you do one job and the next you know it is two miles under the desert the essential component of the death machine... You have opened me eyes.

Worth: David.

Holloway: Helen."

They introduce themselves by names, which he lacked in the outside world; he did not know for whom and with whom he was working.

When he learns that there is an exit from the structure he asks: "What will we do when we reach the exit?" And it is not a rhetorical question. For him the door does not imply a function – crossing it. He prefers observing it. When they get to the outside shell it is Worth who climbs up to the door, however he does it only to see the result of his work:

"Worth: My shell. It does exist. Morning, morning, morning ..."

When he finally reaches the exit door he does not want to cross it. He says he has no reason to live up there because there is a multitude of human stupidity. The door protects him from the system; he feels safe inside the cube, where he does not have to take on responsibility for this action, and where he can be passive. He holds back the cap from escaping from the cube; he saves the world from another 'stupid man', as the black man falls into the gap between the outside and inside of the cube.

The door as an abstract gate to human hearts; mental space

It is the same place where Helen, the doctor, dies but the meaning of this place is different for her.

Helen is not concerned with the physical door present in the cube but with the door to human hearts – in the gap between what people reveal about themselves and what they keep hidden. As her name 'Hollow' would indicate, she is interested in the empty space within something, in the hole cavity, which is separated by the door. She is interested in the gap between the outside and the inside. The door means to her a border between those two realities; but it is not in a shape of a line, but there is an empty space which absorbs all those who enter it. When the group discovers the shell of the cube it is her turn to go first and examine the gap between the shell and the outside reality. She is the lightest, which helps her to come down into the void on a thin and fragile rope made of their shirts. She crosses the door, swings and explores the border. She loses eye contact with Quentin, who directly holds the rope. She is in the darkness of the shell – 'of the soul'. And when she swings, the rest tremble – are they scared of her insight? Finally, they cannot stand that and let the rope go off. Only Quentin has enough strength and reflex to catch the end of the rope. However, he is

threatened by her exploration of his soul as she has discovered the truth about him and his family, so he drops her into the darkness of the gap. She dies where she belongs. He punishes her for having let slip:

"Holloway: Leave, you fascist...no wonder your wife has left you. Did you also smack your kids? (...)

Quentin: She has made a mistake, she has slipped out."

That is the line she should not have crossed, and she pays the price of her life for that. The door is to her a question of limits. She, however, aims at disclosing the truth about people and about the system.

"Holloway: They always come in the middle of the night.

Leaven: Who?

Holloway: The government. Only the government could build something like that.

(...)

Holloway: When we get out of here the whole world would know about it!"

The door hides the truth, both about human souls and about the system we live in. She aims at crossing it to disclose the truth hidden behind the door.

The door as a gate to getting independence from others through physical power; topological space

The cop, Quentin is desperate to find the exit door. For him the door means freedom. First of all, it is freedom from social control, from discovering the truth about him. Helen has done that, and he has punished her for it. The exit door means also freedom from dependence on others. Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Freedom*⁴ states that freedom has always been a privilege, which has divided and differentiated. It assumes the existence of two social classes. To get freedom means to set someone free, to be promoted from the lower social class to the upper one. To be able to talk about freedom we need at least two people, where one is free and the other is not. Freedom means, then, the asymmetry of social classes. In that light, we may read Quentin's behavior. He is aware that his social position in the group of the architect, the student, the doctor is weak and that is why he dreams of escaping their company. The door gives him hope to escape the dependence on others that makes him feel inferior. He does not understand the mechanisms he is in, and the keys to the traps. He depends on the knowledge of the student, and later of the mentally handicapped man. He cannot stand the fact that he is also dependent on the weakest character in the cube, Kazan. In order to reach his aim he resorts to power interpreted both as 'power to' and

4 Zygmunt Bauman, *Wolność*. Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak: Kraków 1995. pp.14-16.

'power over' (Kim Dovey⁵). The first type of power is understood as capacity to achieve some end and the second one as control 'over' others. Quentin meets in his person the two types. He concentrates his power on the door by performing the physical work of opening the doors. The door appears to him as a physical blockade, which can only be forced by the power of his muscles. He, however, does not possess the knowledge, that would enable him to find the exit, and that is why he resorts to 'power over' other members of the group, which would give him control. Quentin takes control over the door, others' behavior, their speeches, the time, the roles they should perform and also directions they should go in. He is sensitive to the dangers, which can be hidden behind the door. When he hears Holloway opening the door, in one of the first scenes in the film, he lies in wait for her. He forces the doctor into the cube, which obviously threatens her a lot:

Quentin: "I'm sorry, it's all right. I won't hurt you."
It is also him who decides who can cross the door.
"Leaven: help, help, help, help.
Quentin: Stop.
Leaven: Why?"

He does not give her any explanation, but instead walks out to give her a hand. It is him who chooses who can enter his room, and the door gives him the opportunity to perform that role.

Quentin controls also conversations as he grants and takes the floor:

"Quentin: Does anybody remember how he got here?"

And he sets the order of speeches:

"Quentin: And you?" – Addressed to Leaven
"Quentin: What about you, Worth?"
"Quentin: What do you think, Rennes?"

Quentin controls also their behavior. He does this in two ways. First, by giving commands: "Open the door", "Pull", "Figure it out!" Second, by using physical power. When Worth stops Quentin from abducting Leaven, the cop kicks the architect, throws a shoe at him, hits him with the shoe, and finally throws Worth into another room. Or when Quentin feels helpless, he kills Holloway for discovering the truth about his private life and he also kills Leaven for evoking the desire in him impossible to come up to.

Quentin even controls the time:

⁵ Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*. Routledge: London and New York 1999. pp.9-15.

"Holloway: How long does it last?
Quentin: Nine or Ten hours.
Holloway: How do you know that?
Quentin: I shave for the second time at about five p.m. (...)
Leaven: I cannot think any longer.
Worth: Let her get some sleep; we also deserve that.
Quentin: O.K. One hour.
Worth: How would you know when it passes?
Quentin: It will pass when I say so."

He assigns them to certain roles which are useful in finding the exit door. The doctor is to look after the mentally handicapped, Leaven is to count and figure out where the exit is and if the cubes are free from traps. He raises her to the doors and opens them for her. He expects knowledge from the student and he does the physical work. He adopts the role of the leader, which Worth objects to.

"Quentin: Somebody has to be the leader.
Worth: Does it have to be you?"

Quentin takes advantage of the authority integrated with the function of a policeman he holds in the society, and which grants him with a form of 'power over'. Kim Dovey writes that "authority is marked by the absence of argument, it relies on an unquestioned recognition and compliance. Based on socially acknowledged rights and obligations, authority is the most pervasive, reliable, productive and stable form of power. It embodies the power to circumvent argument and to frame the terms of reference of any discussion."⁶

"Quentin: We've got a chance. We only have to keep calm and always work together. ... I'm a cop. Trust me.
Leaven: You are a cop?
Quentin: Yes. I'll get you out of here, but you have to help me. O.K?
Leaven: O.K."

"Yet authority rests upon a base of 'legitimation'."⁷ Dovey explains that "legitimation is what connects authority to the 'public interest'. We recognize authority as legitimate because it is seen to serve a larger interest, in the case of the state this is the public interest. Yet legitimation is one of the means by which might is transformed into right; the inefficient exercise of force is transformed into unquestioned authority."⁸ That is probably why Worth, who is generally against the authoritarian power of Quentin, after having admitted that he is responsible for creating the cube, asks Quentin, being the guard of the public interest, if he arrests him. Quentin, however, does not rise to the occasion as he

⁶ *ibid.* pp.13
⁷ *ibid.* pp.13
⁸ *ibid.* pp.13

replies with force and boxes the architect. The last field where Quentin stretches his power is giving the direction of movement, despite the fact that he has no idea about their position in the cube. He understands the space around the physically present subjects and the objects perceived by him, and the constructed of simple binary oppositions such as away from/next to. That space is known as topological space. Quentin's ignorance of the restrictions imposed by the space results from that understanding of space:

"Quentin: Let's go! ... Fuck the traps... If only we would not miss the bridge!"

Quentin appears in the film to be the character determined to find the exit door. To achieve that he uses force both over others and towards the doors. For him the door implies force which has to be used in order to open the door. And that is where he dies; at the exit door, held back by force by Worth in order to refrain him from escaping from the cube. He dies from his own weapon; from power which for him was hidden under the sign of the door.

The door as a challenge to find the truth about the universe; conceptual space

Leaven concentrates her attention on the doors; she treats them as a challenge to discover the truth about the structure they are in. The whole group walks from one room to another empirically checking with the help of a shoe the presence of traps. They do not pay attention to the door but they focus on the cubes. It is only Leaven, who relying on analytical knowledge, can estimate the presence of traps:

"Leaven: Prime numbers. (...) If there are prime numbers in the room there is a trap."(...)

"Quentin: You base that on one prime number trap.

Leaven: No, the room with the fire burner was 083, the one with the molecular sensor 137, the acid 149.

Holloway: How do you remember all that?

Leaven: I have facility."

The doors evoke her interest in them and provide her with answers concerning the codes, the traps, and the space of the whole cube. We see her climbing to the door and reading the numbers; it is Quentin or Worth who do the physical work of opening the door. Thanks to her first discovery of prime numbers marking the presence of traps, she explores the neighboring cubes without entering them. When the code stops working she realizes that they are in the space defined by Cartesian theory.

"Leaven: Coordinates. Coded coordinates; the position of points in space.

Quentin: In English and slowly.

Leaven: It's like the longitude and latitude on a map, which tell us where we are in the whole structure.

Quentin: And where are we?"

She holds a clear picture of the cube in the mind and all the movements she first makes there. The physical movement is performed in order to verify her assumptions.

"Leaven: We started from this room. I was right we shouldn't have moved from here."

For her, space has an Euclidian, where space is quantified using varying yardsticks, entirely independent of objects and subjective positions. She walks not only to find the exit but also to gain knowledge. The next discovery adds one more aspect to the nature of the space they are in. Worth and Leaven find out that the cube is in a constant movement, and to estimate their position there she has to employ permutations. Her discoveries resemble the discoveries made about our solar system. It is not only us who travel on the globe but also the Earth which travels around the Sun. Obviously, that discovery is the key to the door opening a different perspective on the world. It raises the question of reliability of the truth; it extends our imagination by breaking a priori, for example defining the shape of the door. Leaven realizes that the exit door is in a shape of a room and not in a shape of a flat board. And moreover, the room works like a gigantic coded lock. Leaven ascertains another code to trace the traps. This time the code is more complicated, as it is based on complicated numbers that have to be raised to a power. The problem is that the numbers are astronomical and Leaven cannot conduct the operations in memory: she needs a computer or a genius. She receives the latter – Kazan. Thanks to his abilities they can walk through the rooms with no dangers of traps.

Leaven reaches the exit but she does not manage to go through it as Quentin kills her in front of the door. It is his revenge for betraying him – as she promises at the beginning of the film to cooperate with Quentin. And moreover, she receives what has been ascribed for her – she has gained the knowledge, she has reached the door to the truth about the structure. She does not need to perform the physical movement.

The door as the gate to self-fulfilment; empirical space

Only Kazan, the mentally handicapped character, leaves the cube. He describes the space of the cube in terms of colors, likes and dislikes.

"Kazan: This room is green. This room is green. I want to go to the blue one. I like blue."

He cries and does not want to go to another room.

"Holloway: Quentin, don't make him go there." (...)

Worth: He does not like red."

The doors separate him from the rooms he is scared of or deprive him of the comfort coming from being in the room he likes. He does not search for anything; he is pleased with where he is unless it is a red room. That is also why we do not see him opening or looking through the door. He concentrates on his present mood and that is the key to his decisions. He has to be forced or bribed to join the group in their search. In the final scene, they reach a red cube and the color motivates Kazan to open the door as he hates red. In fact, this is the only door he opens in the whole film, and this is the exit door. He penetrates into the brightness of the outside world only thanks to his intuition, which tells him which way to go, and which door to open. The doors in the cube guarantee his comfort or lack of it.

The crosses what the rest have seemed to be searching for, but in fact there is no difference to him whether it is the exit door or any other. What matters to him is the fact that it is the door to comfort, as he hates red color.

The film ends with an optimistic conclusion boiling down to the statement that although people's existence is somehow controlled by the materialistic reality of commodities, it is human beings who decide about the meaning and ascribe it into the objects they are presented with.

I hope the present article has only opened a future discussion on the possible meanings of the door and that it will inspire its readers to add new contributions to the understanding of the concept of the door.

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