

Introduction

TON KRUSE

The late founding editor of the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, Prof. Ananta Charan Sukla, thought of doing an issue on ‘textual strategies for understanding and interpretation’ way back in the eighties. At that time the philosophical movement of *Structuralism* was popular and had led to a more integral approach of understanding and interpretation in hermeneutic studies. The meaning of texts and other cultural artefacts was now explicitly approached in relation to their context(s), instead of being treated as autonomous, moreover, a-historical artefacts. Based on insights of Ferdinand de Saussure, structuralist approaches stepped away from a dualistic or dichromatic thinking about the sign or the case and its meaning. The *signifier* (the sign or the case) and the *significance* (the meaning) were now not only approached as related in an inextricable manner to one and another, but to their context and their interpreter as well. The grammar shapes the context in which words both receive and give their meaning. In the same manner, any artefact is always approached in and from a specific context, in which it is and becomes meaningful. Structuralist thinking led to the realisation that language is an integral part of thought (idea, concept, belief) – language and thought are both there ‘at once’ and cannot be disentangled. Language was now understood not as *the medium* of thought, but was revealed as the shape or form of thought. The word and the meaning are both there at once, and cannot be approached separately. Consequently, the relations that are found between the language and the case, the text and its meanings, were seen as a *structure*, where all parts are meaningful of – and where all parts constitute ‘meaning’ or significance in. To be understood, each part of this structure must always be approached from different angles, mapping the rich web of relations that are found internally – but that also reach out externally.

As Paul Ricoeur said it: all saying is always about something. And only because man has language, he can have ‘a world’. (Tekst en Betekenis, Ambo, Baarn, 1991, p. 98/99) A world in contrast to having merely a ‘situation’ – the immediate that appears to us unmediated. *A world* that is made up of everything there is – and of everything that was said and thought about what is there – and that somehow is understood as meaningful. Structuralism has added this fundamental insight: not only what is there is understood, but what is understood is also ‘there’. So, by the way we understand things, the case itself is somehow ‘changed’. It becomes *seen* in that particular light. The understanding is itself part of the structures that interpretation strives to unravel, and all meaning is in that manner construed.

In this special issue, I have aimed to show the rich range of contemporary approaches of understanding strategies and insights that Structuralism has developed into today. Scholars and artists from different countries have contributed to it, all of whom I am very grateful to. To honour the great work that Sukla did with his long-running and influential Journal, and to honour the important work that contributor Prof. Charles Altieri has done for the Arts and Literary Studies, we have included a contribution that Prof. Altieri made for the fifth issue of the Journal in 1982. Unexpectedly, it fits the theme of this special issue exactly and adds relevant insights to what contributors to this issue have found and proposed, as well as that it elaborates on issues that Altieri brings forward in his new contribution to this issue.

Lastly, but not in the least, I would like to thank Basudhara Roy, Bowen Wang and Beatriz Contreras for reading the proofs with me.