

A Semantic Approach to Urban Graffiti from Semiotics Viewpoint

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ABSTRACT: City is the most complicated and tangible creature of man. There is a critical mutual communication between human and city; and the effect of one's living environment is beyond question. Graffiti is a new urban phenomenon, which has drawn attention in light of its connection with protestation culture and street art. Thanks to symbolism of graffiti, the artists have added mysterious aspects to their work and distinguished themselves from formal culture. Social protestation is the most notable feature of the graffiti found in Iranian cities. However, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no notable research work in Iran on the relationship of human, society, and existence from of graffiti symbolism viewpoint in particular. The present study is an attempt to survey and evaluate common symbols used on urban graffiti through documentary research. Technique and content analysis in stratified semiology based on Iranian-Islamic culture were taken into account.

Keywords: Graffiti, Street art, Semiology, Symbol, Vandalism.

INTRODUCTION

Cities are centers of cultural and social activities so that one can witness the most disciplined and elegant appearance of cultural and artistic works in cities. These works are strong enough to change the life style and create new life values. Although, cities are manmade, they have their own progress path; they emerge and grow based on the necessities of the social life and social system norms. (Adibi, 1976, 12-13)

The science of studying cities is a holistic and multidiscipline knowledge on one hand, and it cannot be distinguished from semiology, on the other hand, knowing that it deals with urban phenomena that naturally tend to hide and only their effects can be observed in the city. Semiology has become indirectly popular in urbanism since 1960. Urban design focuses on human behaviors and feedbacks in the environment and all fields of urban semiology try to elaborate on such behaviors. Therefore, semiology is an efficient and accurate tool to derive qualitative data from cities. (Jamalpour, 2005, 46)

Vandalism is a delinquent behavior and a social problem that not only threatens security and health in the society,

but also causes heavy costs. Importance of symbols and the main urban elements in readability on one hand, and chaos in urban landscape and mental image of the citizen on the other hand, highlight necessity of studying vandalism. It is notable, however, that not all graffiti in the city reflect vandalism neither does it represents a specific street art with a specific goal.

Graffiti is a novel artistic method that is closely connected to protestation culture and the youth micro-culture in the modern societies. A short review of the history and evolution of graffiti indicates that it has been treated differently in the art and politic worlds.

In his book "Graffiti Arts Sociology" Tenniferi thoroughly examines graffiti. Many artists and art critiques avoid using the title "art" for graffiti works, while the politics do not feel safe about these works. In many cases, graffiti is considered as a sign of crime and deserted cultures due to its connection to such cultures and criminal groups. At any rate, graffiti now is a part of our street and environment art. (Kousari, 2010, 66) The present study is not an attempt to bring in definitions or prove lack of independent identity of urban graffiti, but it tries to examine semiotics of the phenomenon. In this work,

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graffiti is taken as an urban element, concept, or symbol. Urban symbols, like any other symbols, fulfill two functions of “representing the meaning” and “creating identity” (Karimian, 2010). Any sign tries to represent a meaning beyond itself and create a sense of attachment to a specific society. Through frequent appearance in our daily lives, signs create a specific sense of meaning and identity (Lynch, 1992, 8). Cultural signs carry out a considerable portion of cultural identity of a society in architecture and urban development. (Abel, 2008, 301-326)

By considering graffiti as a street art, we need to uncover its signs, symbols, and metaphors that the artist uses. To this end, we need an understanding of the concept of semiology. In the following section, we deal with the signs through defining graffiti works and categorizing graffiti approaches. Afterward, we focus on the layers of Islamic cultural text in this art.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sign

Signs are created and interpreted, as well, in the form of words, images, voices, canvases, motions, and items. However, these elements are not intrinsically meaningful and become a sign only when a meaning is attached to them. Not everything is considered as a sign, unless it refers or signifies something beyond. Signs are comprehended unintentionally through connecting them to similar systems of norms and social contracts. This meaningful use of signs is the focal point in semiology. (Chandler, 2008, 45)

Thereby, a sign refers to an information unit. Configuration of signs, along each other, bears a meaning as well. The preliminary patterns developed to examine structure of signs were introduced by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. The patterns they introduced have kept their fundamental identity and led

the future changes (Majedi & Zarabadi, 2010, 50). Taking into account the recent advances in this field and the studies carried out on semiotics of urban physics, the following table lists the results of analyses of Saussure’s concepts with regard to the city.

As listed in the table above, what is considered as cultural semiotic approach is limited to habits and customs of each culture. Given the content-related interpretation of graffiti and environmental background differences, this table cannot be used as the basis for analyzing semiotics in this study.

Semiotics in Architecture and Urban Development

Amos Rapaport is a renowned culture and architecture researchers who has tried to develop a theoretical framework for cultural and architectural activities. He introduced three approaches to read the meaning of the environment including semiotics, symbology, and behavioristic (Rapaport, 2005). Paul Oliver is another scholar who has done considerable studies on cultural and architectural fields. Like Rapaport, he used indigenous and regional architecture as the centerpiece of his studies. In general, researchers like Rapaport and Oliver believe in semiotics in environment-behavior studies, while there are no accurate studies in this regard.

Semiology is among the novel knowledge introduced into the research fields in the early 20th century, which has also played a key role in many other fields (Sojodi, 2004, 46-51). One of the most comprehensive definition of semiology is introduced by Umberto Eco who stated: “semiology deals with whatever considered as a sign” (Eco, 1979, 7). In his lectures, Saussure defined semiology as a foundation and based knowledge that deals with life of signs in the society (Barthes, 1997, 5). By focusing on lingual signs such as words, he maintained that signs are comprised of “signifier”

Table 1. Types of semiotics in reading the city based on Saussure’s concepts (Jamalpour, 2005, 53)

Types of semiotics	“unit of sign” in city	Signifier in city	Signified in city
Ecologic	Ecologic space in city	Elements of ecologic space in city	Normal cultural concepts in city
Social	Terminology used in city	Social action in city	Normal social concepts in city
Biological	Visual and audio signs that determine urban borders	Signs signaled to the residents	The residents’ response
Cultural	Terms used in city and behavioral habits	Cultural representation of elements in city	Cultural concepts in city
Audio	Words and figures found in city	What is seen in city	Cultural-social concept in city
Visual	Elements of urban design (color, form, and light)	What is materialized and seen in city	Cultural-social concepts in city

and “signified” portions. The former is the form of the sign and the latter is the concept that is referred to by the latter (Chandler, 2008, 42). From Saussure’s viewpoint, signifier and signified are psychological rather than physical.

Charles Sanders Peirce conducted his study on semiology, simultaneous with Saussure, and despite his colleague, he defined the sign based on a triple pattern. Peirce’s model included 1 (Representamen (the form that sign takes, which is not apparent in the material)); 2 (interpretant (one’s perception that is rooted in the sign and it needs an interpreter)); and 3 (object (thing that the sign refers to)) (Chandler, 2008, 60). Peirce’s viewpoint relies on a sort of ontological pluralism; while, Eco’s viewpoint relies on a sort of semantic pluralism (Ghahmighani, 2010, 527). Saussure’s works are limited to verbal signs, which makes his semiology more of linguistic nature. (Ibid, 46)

In fact, what has happened in semiology of architecture and urban development is limited to the duality of Saussure or the triple model of Peirce and expansion of Eco’s theories in some cases.

Content and Sign

Philosophical hermeneutics gives the reader’s perception a central role in its analysis, while it neglects the nature attached to perception (e.g. content). On the contrary, semiology pays attention to the nature attached to perception and signs. Therefore, the former is subjective and the latter is objective (Ghahmighani, 2010, 53). What we follow by reading cultural signs comes from reading the sign in the content. In fact, semiotic analyses are content analyses from the beginning. That is, the semiologist never encounters signs isolated from the content in which the sign is appeared (Sojoudi, 2004, 209). Therefore, any sign extracted from traditional architecture must be read in its content. In fact, content is phenomenological in nature or to put it another way, specific connections are formed through each interaction and based on the constituent layers that some of them are variable, which make it opened rather than closed to changes (ibid, 211). In general, closed content merely transfer information and the message (Eco, 1990, 54-55). For instance, a mathematical content is completely closed and does not allow different interpretations. Thus, the scope of the study is limited to open content (environmental background) and then reading

the sign).

Semantic Element of Urban Sign

Garison argued that when we talk about sign, figure, or index, rather than objective qualities of the sign, what we focus on is the witness’s experience about the sign. In other words, referring to each type of sign is a function of one’s mentality and perception (Zamiran, 1993, 55). Sojoudi mentions that semiologists do not approach signs in isolation and they take into account formation and transfer of meaning in different contents and discourses at different time intervals. From semiotics viewpoint, “content” may emerge in any media in verbal and non-verbal forms and a mixture of the both. According to this approach, city is the content in which signs carry perceptual meaning over time and in contact with it. Sign can be considered as a localized point; that attains a physical appearance by its expansion in time and spatial aspects and carries out specific semantic codes. (Fig.1)

Rapaport introduces two forms of comprehending the environment – i.e. perceptual and associational. Among the perceptual (received) and associational (reminder) aspects of the environment, perceived meaning is related to the environmental variables that affect the perception and associative meaning is related to social, cultural, tribal, and biological fields (Rapaport, 2005). Therefore, perceived meanings are background of the associative meanings. One may assume a vertical spectrum with perceptual and associational aspects as its two extremes, where perceptual aspects are at low levels and associative aspects are at higher levels. Associative concepts are more tangible and comprehensible, although, they are at higher levels of meaning. Thus, associative aspects of meaning are more important than its perceptual aspects. At the moment that an element becomes a sign, it carries perceptual meaning; while it attains associational meanings when it is placed in identity and collective memory fields. Associational meaning is a more advanced level of meaning and the concept of semantic sign refers to these improved aspects of the environmental meanings. In other words, the meaning of the sign elements are transferred into semantic signs through being dispatched from perceptual level with the help of cultural, racial, and

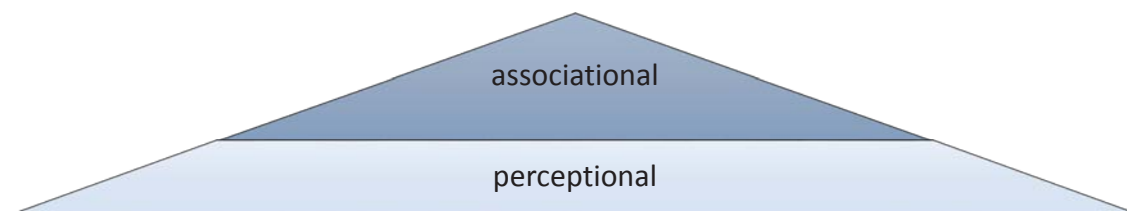


Fig.1: Rapaport’s two perceptions of meaning

biological variables.

Rapoport categorized non-verbal behaviors in social psychology and linguistic fields based on semantic coding methods (as a definite stage in the process of non-verbal communication model) into three categories of ironic (based on arbitrational codes), illustrative (based on visual codes), and comparative (based on complicated codes).

Ironic behaviors are mostly of semantic nature with verbal structure, which are accepted by the majority of a group or a society. These are cultural reflection and due to their limited and non-generalizable nature in cultural and geographical fields, the semantic codes are easily understandable by the member of the society or group (arbitrational codes). One may argue that ironic behaviors occur in urban spaces when people deal with higher levels of meaning, as these behaviors are essentially rooted in associational aspects of meaning of the environment. Because, most of the studies on meaning have been on changing elements and attempted to move toward fixed or semi-fixed elements (Rapoport, 1990, 97), it is possible to move in opposite direction through observing ironic behaviors and specific fields or national culture in particular and find out if there is an associational meaning.

On the other hand, visual and complicated codes that actively correspond with comparative and illustrative behaviors have less cultural features. That is, such behaviors are displayed with less conscious. Semantic codes and the related behavior are less arbitrary. Consequently, the corresponding behaviors are either illustrative (merely based on extrovert codes) or comparative (merely based on introvert codes). In such cases, witnessing illustrative or behaviors in urban space indicate perceptual nature of spatial meanings.

This method of categorization does not mean that every moment in a specific space is featured with specific type of non-verbal behaviors; neither does it mean that there is a clear

cut between these types of behaviors. (Rapoport, 2005, 105) noted that the variables that convert semantic codes are partly global and partly cultural. It appears, however, that such categorizations are helpful for surveying types of behaviors and special semantic analysis. (Fig.2)

By accepting Rapoport's viewpoint about meaning, the meaning of urban sign is influenced by associational and perceptual meanings; and both of which can be analyzed by verbal and non-verbal approaches. However Rapoport's focus was non-verbal approach in non-verbal behavior studies. Studying such behaviors in the fields of changing elements and analyzing associational meaning is more fruitful. Part of associational meanings in verbal field can be obtained through face to face interview and filling out questionnaire.

The three elements of the environment are urban space include physic, function, and meaning. (Pakzad, 2012, 96)

Vandalism

The term "vandalism" is derived from "vanda", which is the name given to an ancient German-Slavs tribe that were renowned as belligerent, aggressive, and bloodthirsty who would invaded their neighbor territories and destroyed villages. This historical background is used to name any intentional destruction of public assets, others' properties, art and industrial works as vandalism. In general, the term, in the field of social damages and problems, is used to refer to any intentional damage to public assets, installations, and belongings. Examples of damages caused by vandals include writing slogans on walls, affixing flyers and other advertising contents in unauthorized places, and marking memento by paint spray (Mohseni Tabrizi, 2004, 21-42). Some believe that graffiti are another form of vandalism known as graffiti. However, this argument is acceptable when the graffiti are made to damage private space of other individuals or urban landscape.

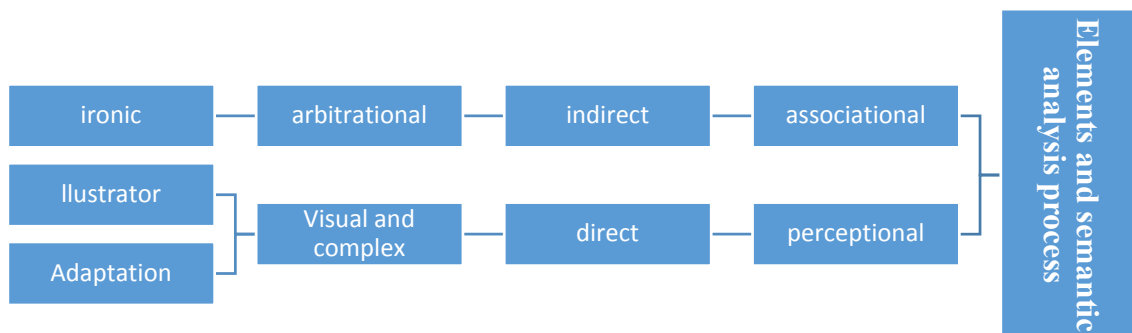


Fig. 2: Non-verbal behaviors based on semantic encoding method

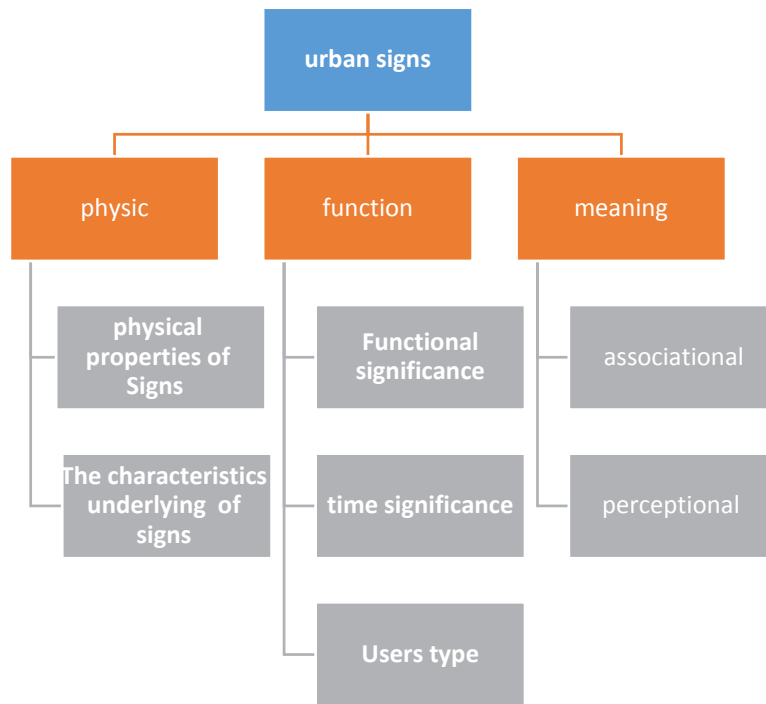


Fig. 3: The three elements of urban signs and the variables (Linch, 1992; Rapaport, 2005)

Graffiti

The term graffiti (singular: graffito), from Italian root, refers to pictures or works painted in public spaces on walls or bridges so that they can be easily seen by the public. Graffiti works can be traced back to ancient civilizations such as Greece and Rome Empire. At any rate, the term now is used to refer to its modern form. In fact, graffiti has changed over time and

what we now know as modern graffiti is about demolishing appearance of a surface using inerasable paints and markers. Graffiti is case of vandalism, when the work is performed on surface of property without prior permission of the owner, is an offence in many countries that can result in prosecution. In addition to this type of graffiti, which is known by the public and urban authorities as vandalism, graffiti can be as a

Table 2. Types of graffiti vandalism in Iran.

Types		Content	
Advertisement	Commercial	Educational	Political
Religious	Holy names	Religious saying and narration	-
Political	Aggressive statements	Political problems	-
Social messages	Polite expression	Violent expression	Neutral expression
Sport	Sport team names	Athlets' names	Sport clubs
Names and memento	Memento	Girls' names	Boys' names
Romantic	Failure	Expression love	-
Nature and green spaces	Cavity development	Preserving the green	-
Educational	Sayings from scientist and scholars	Educational points	-






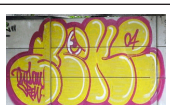



way to convey political, social, and commercial messages. In addition, graffiti is considered as a modern art form and many graffiti works are on display in galleries all around the world. These different and contracting viewpoints about graffiti have drawn more attention to the phenomenon over the last two decades.

Graffiti in Iran

Two types of graffiti are found in Iran, graffiti by the public and graffiti by the state. The former is in turn categorized into

promotional and attractive forms and designs. Promotional graffiti mostly represent political issues, a job opportunity, or availability of a service/product. The latter types of graffiti is used to promote ideological goals of the state. Graffiti, by definition, is placed in the second category of the former type. In the 1990s, rap music entered Iran and caused a revolution in Iranian music and the youth's taste. Iranian youths showed more interest in hip-hop music, and expectedly, graffiti appeared on public spaces of Tehran city. Graffiti was born in Iran-Tehran in the first half of 2000s. However, no one knows

Table 3. Category of graffiti works

Freeform Graffiti are performed faster than those in other categories; except for stencils, other works are not very interesting and the artists mostly do these works to gain reputation	Tag	The simplest form of graffiti. Although, this is the first type of graffiti, it is not considered as a good art work in urban art society. This is mostly considered as vandalism.	
	Poser	Posters are first developed on a paper and the artist attaches it to a wall or other surfaces. Despite advertising posters, these works try to have artistic expression	
	Stickers	Stickers are small pieces of papers that are used by graffiti artists in more crowded neighborhood where time and situation do not allow using other techniques.	
	Stencil	Graffiti works that are performed using stencil technique. The stencil can be monochrome or have several layers. Creative artists use this technique to create novel and artistic works.	
Masterpiece Artistic works with higher visual value and notable from artistic viewpoint. Such a work is featured with several colors and designed in a creative and attractive fashion; which are in some cases hard to read.	Wild style	Comprised of flashes, flowers, and bended forms that might be understandable only by the expert. These works are represented in 3D form and represent one of the most complicated graffiti styles.	
	Throw-up	Large scale design with one or more simple and fast background color and an out-light (peripheral life) with diameter of 5-20cm. These works can be very attractive and creative. They are considered as an example of urban art.	
	Roll ups or Block style	Very simple, without a specific beauty, black and white works using construction paints and even plaster. They are created in large scales using rectangular forms and broken lines (usually no bended lines)	
	Wheat Paste	This type of graffiti is performed like poster and sticker. The most renowned graffiti artist who uses this technique is the American artist Oubi. In this technique, the artist attaches the work, which has been performed by the artist beforehand, on a wall.	
	Graffitis	Probably this type of graffiti is the most welcomed graffiti and it was soon used by municipalities in urban landscaping.	

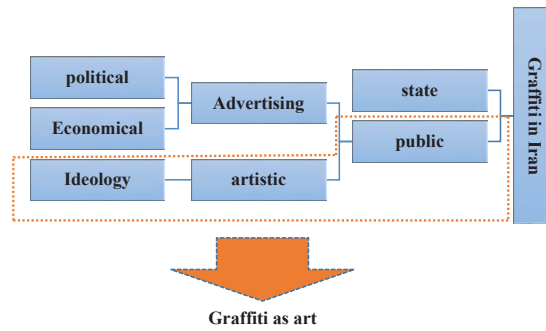


Fig. 4: Types of graffiti works in Iran

how the first graffiti work appeared in Iran. Some believe, however, a person under the alias “Tanha” was among the first graffiti artists in Tehran-Iran. Maybe Tanha is not the first graffiti artist in Iran, however, he made a great contribution to promotion and introduction of graffiti and graffiti art in Iran. In a few years, graffiti works appeared in other Iranian cities such as Mashhad, Tabriz, Kashan, and Shiraz. Most of graffiti works in Tehran are located in Shahrak Ekbatan. The artists and municipality of the neighborhood still have unsettled disagreements and the municipality has cleaned the graffiti for several times. (Art and Literature, 2015, 4)(Fig. 4)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are different theories in semiology and among them, experimental viewpoint (adopted by Peice) and rationalism

viewpoint (adopted by Saussure), structuralism, and reductionism are notable. Semiology is a mixture of aesthetic based on emotion, structural semiology, and phenomenology with combined nature that can be generalized in conceptual urban spaces. A specific type of semiology that tries to examine content at different levels to find its meaning is called stratified semiology. This type of semiology follows a theoretical approach in content analyzing and examines content in its extensive form within a network of layers (Sojodi, 2004; 15). Given the cultural expanse of Iranian society, we tried collective religious and cultural layers of the majority of the cultures. What was taken as the basis for categorization of content was the way of perceiving environment by the man. According to foundation of perception, anthropology is the bedrock of practical wisdom (Noghrekar et al., 2008). Among

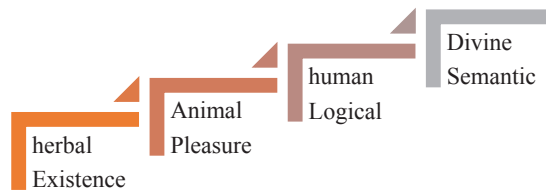


Fig. 5: Anthropology from Imam Ali’s viewpoint

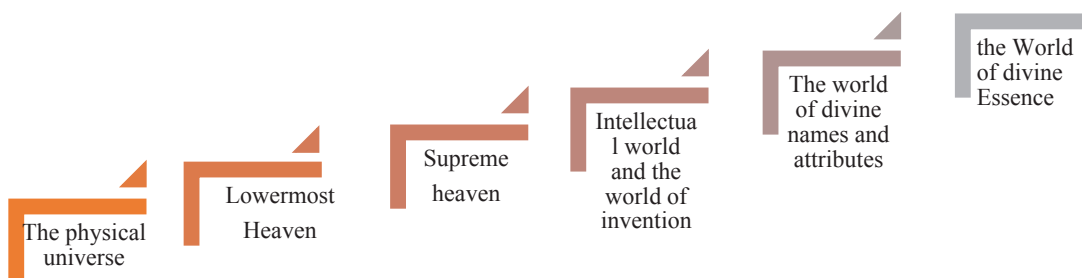


Fig. 6: Islamic gradations of existence

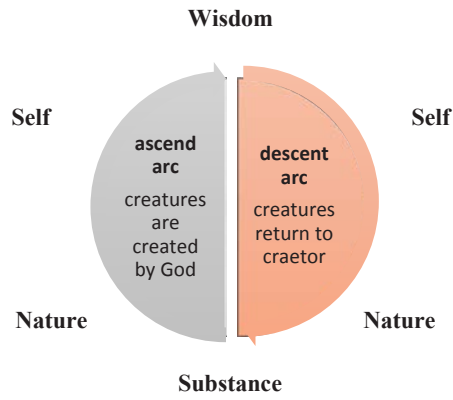


Fig. 7: Gradations of existence from Mulla Sadra viewpoint

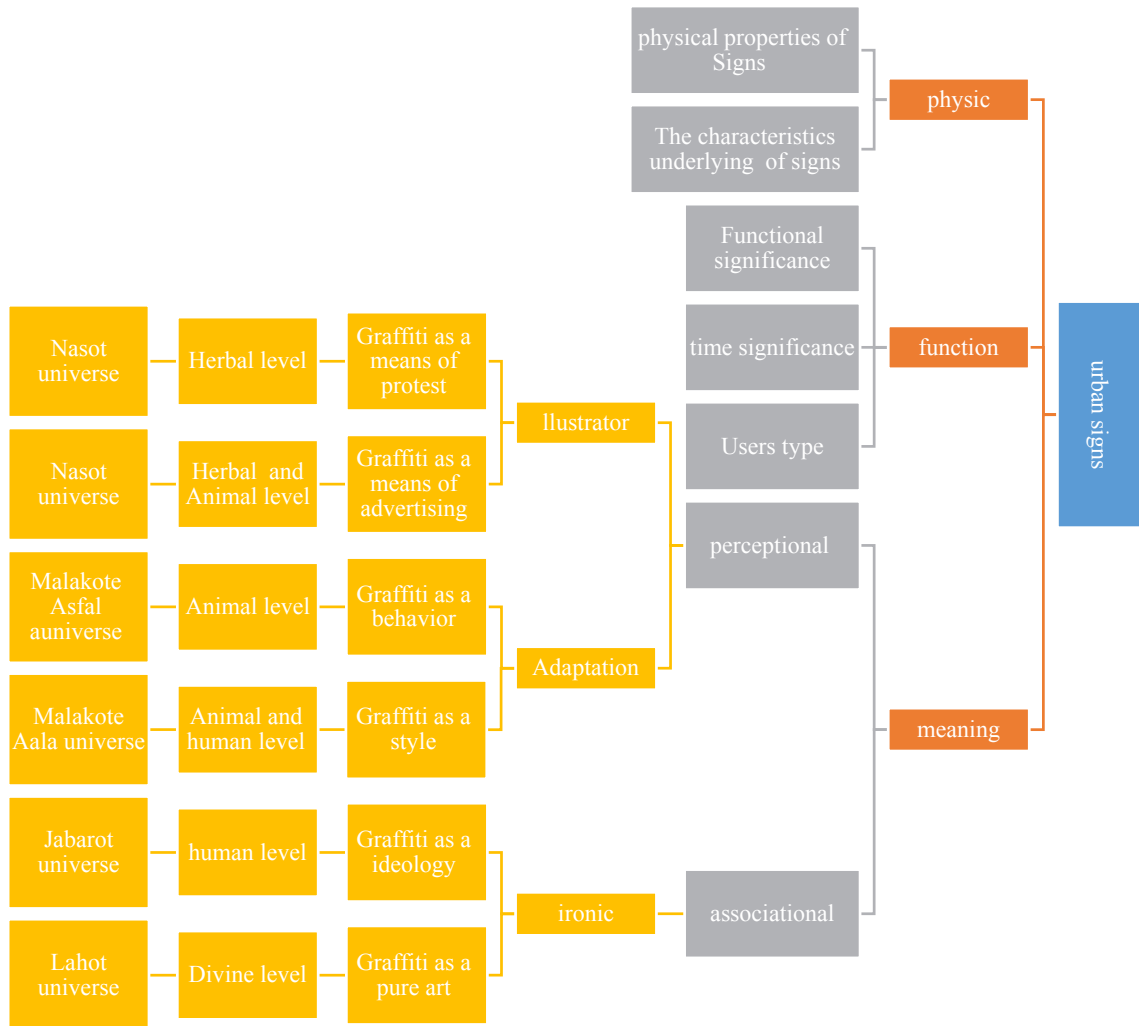


Fig. 8: Final model of graffiti semiotics

variety of approaches to foundations of anthropology and man's perception consequently, Iranian-Islamic urban identity was under focus here and, therefore, Islamic anthropology was followed. In addition, gradations of existence from Islamic theosophy were taken into account.

Layers of the Content of Iranian Graffiti Art

In his famous saying, Imam Ali names four layers of anthropology (Javadi Amoli, 1996). These layers can be generalized to all perceptual areas of man's perception. Therefore, emergence of graffiti were approached to from four plant, animal, rational, and spiritual layers. In fact, representing a comprehensive and precise definition of man and his needs creates the proper ground for detecting and reading signs in the content.

Theosophists and divine philosophers have defined different levels of the existence. By having a comprehensive definition of man's position in different levels of existence, man's relationship with the background was uncovered and then signs were read in the content.

According to Mulla Sadra, existence is a circle with two arcs; descend arc and ascend arc. Along with being the Agent of things, God is the end reason of them as well (Alshirazi Sadredin Mohammad bin Ebrahim, 1981, 205-206). The descend arc refers to creation by God and ascend arc means creatures' return to God. These two arcs point opposite directions. Level of creatures in descend arc include intellect, celestial soul, nature, and material. These levels begin with primary substance at the top followed by object, plant, animal, and human that possesses intellect.(Fig.7)

CONCLUSION

Based on what was noted in the above, it is clear that graffiti in cities must be something beyond urban vandalism. One may say that every graffiti work represents an urban sign or a cultural/ideological content of which, even the painter, might be unaware. According to Mulla Sadra, human and existence are completely interrelated and one's being level is equal with his perception of the existence; that is, act of being of an individual depends on his knowledge. Therefore, universe of each man is in his soul and man cannot see anything beyond his world and being. When he reaches to the final perfection level and united with active intelligence, all creatures would become part of his being. There is an entailment between gradations of human and existence –i.e. existence has different levels- because being a human is of different levels and these levels are rooted in different levels of existence. There is also an entailment between human and his perception; that is, human is as the way he perceives and actualizes as the way it perceives, as human is nothing but his perception.

As noted earlier, despite what is possible in its theoretical form, disaggregating the three elements of physic, function,

and meaning is not possible in analyzing the signs. Like any other urban sign, graffiti must be evaluated with these three elements. Based on the cultural layers of the content, the following model is proposed. It is notable that graffiti semiotics content is not limited to the layers mentioned in this work and the authors admit that, along with Iranian and Islamic layers, cultural and social layers of each work need to be taken into account, which was of course, beyond the scope of this paper. (Fig. 8)

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