

Is it Real?  
Structuring Reality  
by Means of Signs



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Edited by

Zeynep Onur, Eero Tarasti, İlhami Sığırıcı  
and Papatya Nur Dökmeci Yörükoğlu

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## PREFACE

EERO TARASTI

### **Metamorphoses of the real – Preludizing thoughts about the symposium on “Is It Real?”**

Çankaya University in Ankara, Turkey, organized a symposium on 8-10 October, 2013 on the most challenging, provocative – and profound - topics that one could imagine in the field of semiotics. Under the presidency of Professor Zeynep Onur, many scholars from her home country, Turkey, as well as its closer or more distant neighbours convened to ponder fundamental topics of every area of semiotic research. There was no school, no theory, no methodology, nor any empirical approach in semiotics which was not forced to take a position, whether implicitly or explicitly, in answering this question.

What came first to my mind when I saw the title of this symposium was what Thomas A. Sebeok said in Imatra (in 1997) in an interview for Finnish Television when he was asked to reply to the question: “What is semiotics?” To his mind, what is involved is the relationship between illusion and reality. Yet, he did not specify where the semiotic point was, in illusion or in reality. It is commonly thought that if we say of something that it is a “sign”, then it is something ‘less’ real than the thing itself to which it refers. On the other hand, if one is a Peircean ‘realist’ semiotician, the origin of semiosis is in the ‘dynamic object’ which launches the whole process of signs.

Altogether, this is a philosophical question - or rather: one has to make an epistemological choice. There is strong pressure from the side of contemporary reality, dominated by modern technology, computers, electronic media, and communication, to consider the virtual reality they have created which is even more cogent than the ‘old’ view of reality. However, the entire Kantian tradition which was behind structuralism, and re-appeared on stage as neo-structuralism, taught that we can never know what is the real because it is all filtered to us via our sensory categories in perception i.e., by time, space and subject. This doctrine took its form originally in Greimassian semiotics: still active and living; Greimas spoke



about three categories of temporality, spatiality and actoriality. Then more recently biosemiotics, stemming from the Baltic biologist Jakob von Uexküll, claimed that even in biology – which we consider to be ‘natural science’ and hence dealing with ‘facts’ i.e., something ‘real’ – there is no such thing as objective reality. Each organism lives in its own world accepting from its *Umwelt* only those signs which belong to its species. In this selection the organism follows its inner *Ich-Ton, Me-Tone*, a kind of score determining what signs enter from the object to its endosemiotic world. This he called in German *Merken* (an almost untranslatable term meaning to signify). The feedback to the environment was then called *Wirken*, or acting. He admitted himself to the field of metaphysics with this statement, but he did not care.

In the Paris school also, the objective reality is almost denied, evidenced in the famous slogan “*Aucun salut hors du discours*” (Beyond discourse no salvation). Greimas, even when studying texts of natural scientists, focused on textual mechanisms and metalanguage whereby the ‘meaning effect’, *effet de sens*, of reality in such a discourse was created.

In fact, we find all these issues emerged as early as in the dialogues of the Platonian academies in antiquity and have been passed on to subsequent centuries. If for Plato the ‘real’ was in the universe of ideas which were imperfectly and imprecisely reflected on the earth, this idea was akin to that of Pythagorean mathematicians for whom number was the ultimate reality. Yet, it was typical that in the culture of dialogue and conversation of the sophists of the 4th and 5th centuries BC, anything could be questioned. One was rather left in aporia, ignorance about what is the real. For the first time in the history of ideas and philosophy it happened that when reading, for instance, Parmenides dialogue, we did not know in advance what would be the result of the talk. The debate goes on around the question of whether reality is multiple or one, but at the end the answer is not revealed. Were the sophists, in fact, the first semioticians in the world?

When the Greek culture expanded as hellenisation to the whole hitherto known world via Alexander the Great, it also influenced the Orient. In Rome the two philosophy schools, the Epicureans and Stoicians, gave their own explanation to the problem of the real. To the former, all was accident, based on the movement of atoms. So there was no point in worrying about anything, about one’s fate, God, health, death, immortality of the soul etc.

The most eloquent manifestation of this thought we find, of course, in *De rerum natura* by Lucretius. But on the other hand, the texts of Cicero and Seneca reveal how strong the Platonian idea was of a double sided

reality; the real reality was ‘transcendental’ as we would say nowadays in existential semiotics. i.e., something which was not present but absent, or rather, absent but present in our minds.

Peirce repeated the same idea in his thought of two types of universes, tykchistic - close to the Epicurean world of accident and serendipity - and synekchistic – i.e., a universe in which *tout se tient*, all is interlinked and dominated by the principle of evolutionary love (something he may have borrowed from the history of philosophy and even from Hegel).

Nowadays, such reflections may seem to be far afield from what is the 21st century view of the real and issues such as ‘augmented reality’ etc. However, we should not underestimate what the great spirits of earlier centuries said. They have perpetuated their undiminished actuality. It is no wonder that when people in Iran read their great poet Hafiz (d. 1390) – who also enchanted the old Goethe - and search for solutions to the real problems of their lives by opening at random some of his books and putting finger on a line, that one could well find the solution there! The antique tradition was inherited in Persia and blended together with Zoroasterianism, for which reality was divided between two entities: Good and Evil, actorialized by two deities Ahuramazda and Ahriman. From this moment on one cannot avoid the question of value in reality. Reality is an axiological issue as well. Should we thus always accept reality, such as it is? Even when it does not correspond to the value we believe in? Certainly not, if it is unbearable for subjects living there. So the reality can be resisted and it can be changed, corrected and improved. The task of semiotics is certainly to elaborate theories, concepts and reading models whereby we interpret and understand our complicated and often conflictual reality.

The realm of simulacra is so overwhelmingly large and extensive that one easily loses the sense of reality, i.e., the distinction between the artificial and original. People do not even care about it – before the real as the First grasps them rudely like in Peirce’s doctrine: if the justice is Thirdness, the law is Secondness, then the hand of a sheriff on the shoulder is Firstness. The phenomenologists too accept the idea of the immediate phenomenal reality as the decisive epistemic moment. The spectacular virtual reality which surrounds modern man in all forms of electronic communication is persuading us to accept this reality as something which does not have anything more behind it. All the information appears digitalized, books pictures, music – but then - if one pushes the wrong button all vanish at once! This is the fictive situation of the movie based on the novel *The Year of Rabbit* by the Finnish writer Arto Paasilinna.

What can we do with those young ‘Werthers’ of our time who shut themselves in their rooms and play video games day and night, refuse to go out to meet real people and at the end are unable to do so because they can live only in the precodified and certain world of games, unable to face the chaotic Firstness of the reality outside. Is this not the malady of our time? Addiction to virtual electronic reality. Albeit, the discovery of play, as Spiel Friedrich Schiller once put it, was likewise a great progress of mankind. Cinema creates illusory reality which is all basically artificial, of course, but when looking at film we imagine ourselves being there. That is why violent movies are so dangerous: they have a direct impact on spectator. Hence the eternal question is whether such forms of reality should be censored because they may instigate evil actions and aggressivity. One sociologue spoke about ‘symbolic violence’ we meet daily in the TV programs.

Behaviours in social media like in FaceBook are another reality. People get used to short messages and reproducing events which the unwritten rules of behaviour allow them to do there. Straightway the reality shrinks into cats, dogs, delicious meals and announcements “I was there and there.” For many solitary persons - and the majority of postmodern subjects and citizens, the Heideggerian *das Man*, are lonely – this may be the only human contact. So the technology can essentially make us more limited and non-intelligent. The more mankind puts and objectifies its mind into machines, the more stupid it becomes. Therefore, as Emerson argued, the spirits of old times were wiser. Goethe said “*Das Wahre war schon längst gefunden, hat edle Geisterschaft erfunden, das alte wahre fass es an.*” (The truth was found long time ago, the noble community created, the old truth, take it again).

Yet, undeniably the real is dominated and regulated by what we call ‘culture’. However, this self-evident fact can also become very restrictive depending on what we think to be culture. If culture is like it is depicted in British cultural theory then in contemporary media culture is certainly left much in oblivion. Culture can be said to be tradition. The real is that which has always been like that, as things have always been done before. It has become a heritage. But heritages have to be kept alive, they have to talk to us. Some think the real is in memories, like Marcel Proust. But even there we may encounter a war of memories, namely when disputing who has the right to write the history? Most often history is the narrative of the winners, others are marginal. So the real becomes now an ideological issue. In ideology it is typical, as Terry Eagleton said, “I am never ideological”; what I say is real, it is others who are ideological, i.e. untrue.

So, we see that the field of problems which opens from the theme “Is It Real?” is almost endless - but also relevant. We are in the core of whole semiotics. We are looking at problems to which there are perhaps no definite answers but only an ongoing dialogue.

# INTRODUCTION

A. ZEYNEP ONUR

## **Is it real? Structuring reality by means of signs.**

“Did you ever wonder if the person in the puddle is real, and you’re just a reflection of him?”

Bill Watterson, Calvin and Hobbes

When the International Semiotic Conference was held in Çankaya University, Turkey, between 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2013 with the topic “Is it Real?” the aim was to bring together theoreticians, scholars, artists, researchers and students from all discipline areas to discuss the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s reality.

The dictionary defines *reality* as "the quality of being real or having an actual existence" and supplements this with a definition of *real* as "having objective existence" and finally, *to exist* as “having a place in the domain of reality.” Although the concept of reality has been questioned since Plato and Aristotle, the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with its advanced post-modern societies, with the explosion of new media technologies, plus the rise of objects having no material, the increase in information production, rise of capitalism and consumerism where one experiences a world that was created with information having no references, deeply deserves to be questioned about the concept of reality.

We perceive the “image of reality” via television, film etc. as more real than actual being. The life of a large part of the world’s population is determined by a media offer that is almost everywhere, permanently and simultaneously available, and barely controllable. This vulnerability of everyday life has a significant impact on our perception of reality. Characters on television might seem more alive to us than their flesh-and-blood equivalents. We relate to video game characters better than to our own friends and family. Images related to a building do not have any association with a real building. Computer-simulated environments can reflect the physical presence of places in the real world, as well as imaginary worlds. We are watching paintings in virtual museums, and

wars in our living room. Now, researchers and engineers are pulling graphics out of television screens or computer displays and integrating them with real-world environments. This new technology, called augmented reality, blurs the line between what is real and what is computer-generated by enhancing what we see, hear, feel and smell. All these technologies have the effect of breaking down the boundaries between real and imaginary. It is 'real' without 'being real'.

As semiotics is a discipline that is deeply connected with the human experience, the articles of this book are discussing the theme "real" with the subtopics; What is real? Constructed Realities, Imagery Realities, Textual Realities, Visual Realities, and Virtual Realities.

I feel indebted to numerous colleagues in many countries. My particular thanks go to Prof. Dr. Eero Tarasti for his support in every respect, I am also grateful to Prof. Dr. Farouk Seif and Prof. Dr. Niculae Mihaita for their valuable plenary speeches and supports during and after the Congress. Special thanks to Prof. Dr. Driss Ablali, Prof. Dr. Aysu Erden, Prof. Dr. Rengin Küçükerođan, and Prof. Dr. Iřıl Özyıldırım for their contributions. In addition, the editors would like to express their gratitude to Dr. Barbara Maclean for her support and guidance during the proofreading process. The editors would also like to thank all the authors who have diligently prepared their papers for this publication. In particular I would like to thank to my Institution, ankaya University for its support before, during and after the Congress.

**SECTION I:**  
**VISUAL REALITIES**

# A QUESTION OF SEMBLANCE: ICON VERSUS INDEX

SUSANNE RAMSENTHALER

## Visual Differences

We are all aware of photography's foothold in “reality”.

The medium of photography is generally understood to be an *index of the real*, a representation as close to reality as possible.

In this paper I conduct an inquiry into the semiotics behind the photographic image and the accepted common notion of photography as an “indexical” medium. I look into how the index becomes a close-fitting description not for the photograph but for the photogram, a photographic technique based on touch.

A photogram is made by contact. An object is placed on light sensitive material such as photographic paper and exposed to light. The density or translucency of the object will result in varying shades of grey once the paper has been developed.

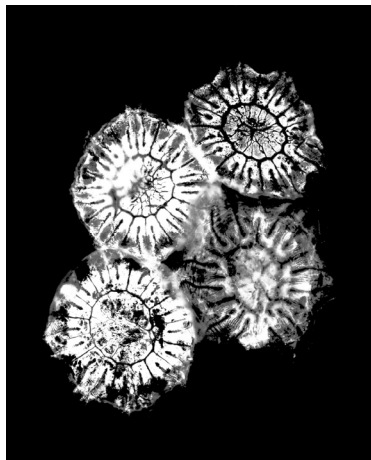


Figure 1. Susanne Ramsenthaler: from *Bloom*, Photogram.



The photogram operates in a space which is visual and haptic at the same time: without physical contact in the act of creation, there would be no image. On the border between direct touch and vision, it makes the contact visible. Given that vision is a sense that operates at a distance, as does our ability to read photographs, photograms (which could also be described as *pictures without distance*) fall into another register of perception: namely that of traces.

A trace is something left behind on something else. It makes no pretense of a three-dimensional representation but challenges the viewer instead to conjure up an image of what made the imprint. Seen in this way, the photogram is far less accessible than a photograph, but it carries within itself the certainty of a point of contact having been made.

The photogram shares with the photograph the physical process of rendering the image visible, but differs greatly in the way it visualises the encounter of subject matter and sensitised surface. The “footprint” analogy is commonly quoted as an example of photographic indexicality by numerous authors such as Susan Sontag, Rosalind Krauss and Geoffrey

Batchen. In his essay *Ectoplasm* Batchen states:

“Photography’s plausibility has always rested on the uniqueness of its indexical relation to the world it images, a relation that is regarded as fundamental to its operation as a system of representation. As a footprint is to a foot, so is a photograph to its referent...”<sup>1</sup>

Except, not quite:

This footprint example surfaces continually throughout writings on photography and may illustrate the point at first glance. But, on closer inspection, does the footprint resemble the foot in anything but shape?

The only information it can give is its outline and, if made in sand, possibly some information about the weight of the body that created it and whether that body was walking slowly or running (Figure 2). All this is information not pertaining to the visual image of the foot, but to an event.

No footprint will ever be able to give us an image of the appearance of the foot itself, far less the colour and texture of its skin or the shape of its nails.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, “Ectoplasm,” in *Each Wild Idea* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001), 139.



Figure 2. Photograph courtesy of the author.

This is the domain of the photograph.

I have to conclude that only a photograph of the foot looks like the foot, providing all the surface information we need for identification and comparison with the original; the reason why photography is frequently employed as “proof” (Figure 2).

I am not trying to disprove what seems like a fitting metaphor and, yes, light “traces” the subject to be photographed and “writes” itself on light sensitive material to create the image, but it does so from afar.

It is only the photogram with its requirement for contact which can truly lay claim to the footprint metaphor. The idea of the “imprint”, be it foot or otherwise, carries a different set of readings and meanings than does the photograph.

A point in case may be the souvenir from nursery school: the hand print in Plaster-of-Paris. The first reaction when looking at this artefact would *not* be to try and visually reconstruct the image of the hand of the child. The signification of the imprint works in a different manner, one not immediately related to the visual.

The first and foremost message of the imprint is that of authenticity: the small hand really made this imprint; the place and time are secondary considerations; other than it was made when the hand was small, thus indicating a state, rather than a “where and when”.

The fact is that photographs and photograms exist in different perceptual spaces. The hand- or footprint addresses the aspect of touch in a very direct way and speaks of presence. Presence which, while defying classification as to its age and circumstance, proves to be powerful and undeniably ‘real’.

In our reading of photographic images, the “depictive” is always the first expectation. It is universally understood that, in photography, what is depicted has been photographed and is there for us to view, albeit presented in two-dimensional form.

It is for this reason that photograms tend to be not instantly deciphered and, therefore, cognitively distant. It is a case of making the leap from, for example, expecting to see a leaf (the shape in the photogram is reminiscent) to the realisation that a leaf was present in the making of the image but is now absent; allowing us to see the trace it left but not the visual representation of the leaf itself. The point is not the visual appearance of the object but its once-presence having had contact with the surface in question.

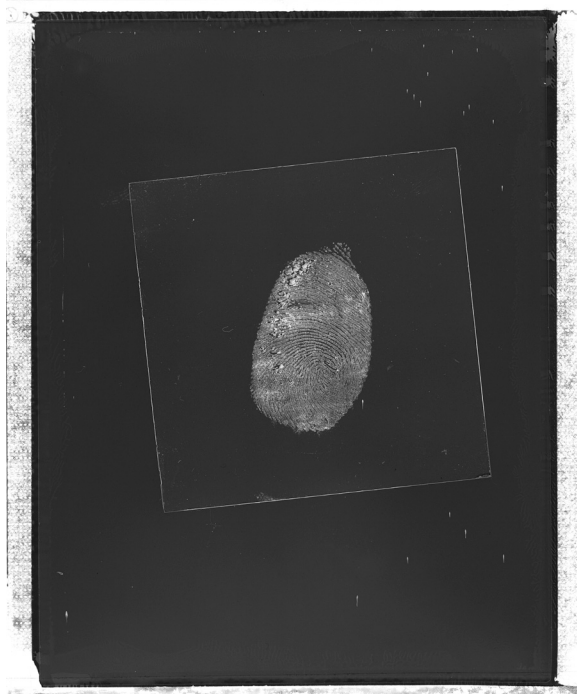


Figure 3. Susanne Ramsenthaler: from *Household Forensics*, Photogram.

This absence/presence aspect of the photogram, the notion of “imprint”, necessarily conjures up the famous example of the Turin Shroud. Although the visible imprint on the Turin Shroud in no way represents a supposed image of Christ’s body, it literally “embodies” something much more powerful: the implication of direct contact and all the fetishistic and auratic connections implicated therein.

Staying with the Turin Shroud for the moment, Georges Didi-Huberman suggests that its authenticity relies on a lack of figuration, because a lack of figuration means that contact has taken place:

“When contemplating the function and ways of signification of the photogram, the absence of the object becomes a significant part, the absence being indicated by the image itself, while signifying that there was presence in the form of contact.”<sup>2</sup>

In terms of power to conjure up memory, both Deleuze’s concept of the fossil and Benjamin’s idea of the fetish apply here, both definitely require a certain type of original contact in order to successfully function as such. The notion of the fetish is particularly powerful because it constitutes a physical, rather than mental, contact between objects; it is not a metaphor. In fetishism, as Laura Marks suggests, “power does not inhere in beings or objects but flows among them”. Fetish objects can encode meanings that become buried in the process of temporal displacement but are volatile when reactivated by memory. As with the fossil, fetishes get their power not by representing that which is powerful but through contact with it: Marks notes:

“...Benjamin's fetish and Deleuze's fossil have in common a disturbing light, an eerily beckoning luminosity. In the fetish it is called aura, in the fossil it is called radioactivity. Aura is what makes the fetish volatile, because it incites us to memory without ever bringing memory back completely. Similarly, when a fossil is 'radioactive' that is because it hints that the past it represents is not over, it beckons the viewer to excavate the past, even at his or her peril.”<sup>3</sup>

This experience corresponds to Walter Benjamin's examination of Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, where he clearly compares it to his definition of the aura: “...These data...are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them. Thus they lend support to a concept of the aura that comprises the ‘unique manifestation of a distance’.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)," in *October: The First Decade*, ed. Krauss et al Mitchelson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1987), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Laura Marks, U., *masses - see IK The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 84.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 188.

This designation has the advantage of clarifying the ceremonial character of the phenomenon: “The essentially distant is the inapproachable: inapproachability is in fact a primary quality of the ceremonial image.”<sup>5</sup>

It is my assertion that Benjamin’s aura is reinstated in the photogram because of its unique contact aspect and because the resulting image is cognitively ‘distant’, in other words: not easily read.



Figure 4. Susanne Ramsenthaler: from *Bloom*, Photogram.

### Icon versus Index

At this point I would like to give a brief and therefore necessarily minimalist overview of the principles of Peircean semiotics, on which this whole debate rests.

Broadly speaking, there are two schools of semiotics: Saussurean and Peircean. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a Swiss linguist, based his system of semiotics squarely on language as the overarching structure of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 188.

signs, whereas for the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) any perception or sensation could be suitable as an indicator of “Firstness”, the first step in perception and interpretation of any sign. *Quality*, *Feeling* and *Sensation* qualify as first points of signification in the realm of Phenomenology (i.e. how the body perceives its surroundings)<sup>6</sup>.

Unlike Saussure, Peirce seemed to be more concerned with the physical aspect of material signs than in signs as abstract elements in a system of discourse. Because Peirce’s system is not built on language as such, his theories have become the first port of call for anyone concerned with visual imagery, since images feature in the Peircean system as entities without necessarily being twinned with language, as opposed to its Saussurean counterpart.<sup>7</sup>

Peirce notes three particular functions of the **Icon**.<sup>8</sup>

- a) Where there is a resemblance in respect of simple qualities, as in the case of a photograph of a person, the icon is an *image*.
- b) Where the relations of the icon’s parts are matched by analogous relations on the object’s part, we have a *diagram*. The blueprint of a completed building is an obvious illustration.
- c) Where there is no precise matching but more general ‘parallelism’ of relation or characters, we have an icon functioning as a metaphor.

The sign of the **Index** also has three distinctive characteristics:

- a) It bears no significant resemblance to its object
- b) It refers to single units, single collections of units, or single continua
- c) It directs attention to its object by blind compulsion

For Peirce, the index constitutes a dynamical or causal connection both with what it signifies and “with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign”.

The photograph can only ever possibly satisfy one of these conditions, namely its functioning as a sign for the viewer, and subsequently is firmly classified as an **icon**. Again, it is only the photogram which satisfies the above conditions to qualify as an **index**.

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<sup>6</sup> See table in; Thomas A. Goudge, Peirce *The Thought of C. S. Peirce* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 109.

<sup>7</sup> While the ‘linguistic turn’ and its theories of structuralism and post-structuralism dominated critical art theory in the 70s and 80s, the ‘visual turn’ staged a comeback with the writings of Hal Foster, Jonathan Crary and Martin Jay from the 80s onwards.

<sup>8</sup> Goudge, *The Thought of C. S. Peirce*.

The Peirce scholar Thomas Goudge notes:

“On perceiving the index one is led directly to a cognition of the object. Hence the sign is ‘evidence for’ the object or the event it represents. A bullet-hole is the index of the passage of a bullet; a plumb-bob is an index of a vertical direction; a weathercock is an index of the direction of the wind; a barometer indicating moist air is an index of rain ...”<sup>9</sup>

Having digested all this information, one would assume that the greater the likeness to the referent, the more iconic the object. In fact, according to Richard Zakia:

“... an iconic representation can have various levels of iconicity. On a scale of 1 to 10, a colour photograph would be a 10, a black-and-white photograph about a 5 and a line drawing about a 1 or 2.”<sup>10</sup>

Zakia explains the Icon / Index / Symbol categories thus: (I have left the Symbol out due to space restrictions, but Peirce defines it as “where the sign relates to its object by means of convention alone, e.g. a word or a flag.”<sup>11</sup>)

“In an iconic representation the representation looks like the object. A photograph of a car looks like the car. An indexical representation is an indirect reference such as the shadow of a car or the wet treadmarks of tires left on a dry road. A symbolic representation would include the car’s logo.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Richard D. Zakia, *Perception and Imaging* (Boston: Focal Press, 1997), 238.

<sup>10</sup> Richard D. Zakia, *Perception and Imaging* (Boston: Focal Press, 1997), 238.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Cobley and Litza Jansz, Peirce Saussure *Semiotics for Beginners* (Duxford: Icon Books, 1997); *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Zakia, *Perception and Imaging*.p. 238

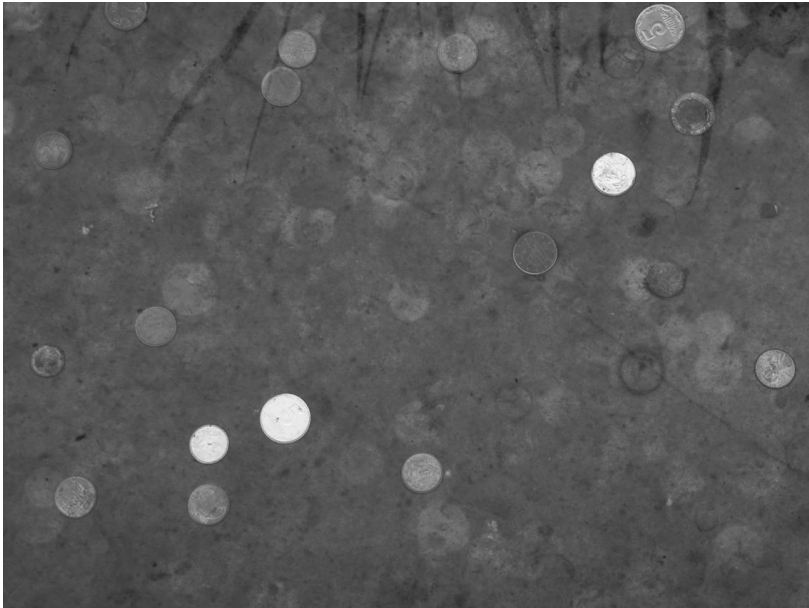


Figure 5. Photograph courtesy of the author.

In this photograph (Figure 5) I am illustrating the difference between Iconic and indexical representations. The coins are icons, representing themselves, complete with surface and material indication and numerical denominations. The rings and circular marks are indices, marking where coins have once been, complete with rust circles as trace evidence. These are the equivalents of the photogram.

To complete Pierce's triad of Icon / Index / Symbol in this image, the 'symbol' would be represented by the reflection of vegetation at the top of the image, indicating that we are looking at a pond or a fountain.

Other examples of indexical representations, Zakia notes:

"are a person's fingerprints, the smell of smoke, a fragrance in an empty room, an empty chair on the porch of an old home, footprints on a sandy beach, an arrow or finger pointing to something. In short, an indexical representation is an index to something else."<sup>13</sup>

...Like a telephone directory, for example.

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<sup>13</sup> Richard D. Zakia, *Perception and Imaging* (Boston: Focal Press, 1997), 238.



Yet Zakia, who approaches photography from a phenomenological and psychological position (he cites Robert Arnheim as a mentor and friend), represents a minority voice with his straightforward interpretation of the iconic versus the indexical, while the 'photograph-as-index' bandwagon rolls on, to the point of being unquestioningly accepted as fact.

However: - I take heart in the fact that the photographic processing chain 'Snappy Snaps' in my neighbourhood are advertising their line of black-and-white photographic posters of film stars, such as Audrey Hepburn, as 'ICONIC ART'.

In conclusion, I have examined the fundamental differences between two seemingly similar imaging methods: the photograph and the photogram.

*Visual Differences* interrogates the Visual and the Haptic, both ingredients in the photogram process, and the dissolution of spatial and perspectival boundaries inherent in the process. Through the non-signification but authentic touch-related aspects of photograms, the notion of Deleuze's fossil and Benjamin's fetish are evoked as the implications of both depiction and manifestation are scrutinised.

*Icon versus Index* puts the myth of the photograph as 'indexical' medium to rest and seeks restoration of its iconic status through a careful re-reading of Charles S. Pierce's triadic semiotic theory.

In a final reversal, it is only the photogram which qualifies as an index on all fronts.

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# IS THERE ANY STILL UNKNOWNABLE STRATEGY OF SEEING?

DAINA TETERS

## **The Problematic Tandem of Sight and Understanding**

Shakespeare gave Lancelot these words: “O heavens, this is my true-begotten father who, being more than sand-blind, high gravel-blind, knows me not. I will try confusions with him” (Shakespeare 2010, Act 2, Scene II).

Being in love with language, the great playwright is deceiving us without the slightest pang of conscience. Not only does he pretend to overlook the first part sam- being turned into sand- in the folk language (Crystal 2002, 384), but, to achieve the desired effect, he emphasizes blindness with an even ‘heavier’ and more impressive attribute: high gravel-blind. The moral message implied by all this is: if one tidies up one’s vision so that “sam”, “semi”, i.e., the sandless part of one’s eyes prevails, the sand no longer gets in the way of the mind, so to speak. With one half of each eye remaining, one-eyed creatures with their singular vision appear in this new, but also deviant, even monstrous—and interestingly so!—scenario.

It is based on the suggestion that one’s vision, at least in the ideal case, would be singular and that this is—perhaps monstrously so—achievable. And then one’s mind would not be confused. But is this really true?

I would like to start by saying that we live quite agreeably with several illusions. The first of them has to do with the most frequently emphasized general truth that so-called Western society is based on a single sense – sight, which simultaneously acts as the guarantor of understanding. The tandem of sight and understanding makes for all our self-evidences to be visually obvious simultaneously.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This illusion is supported by such an impressive legion of metaphoric expressions: to see (in the meaning ‘to know through first-hand experience), to foresee, to oversee, to view (in the meaning ‘to think of in a particular way; to regard’), to see (in the meaning ‘to consider to be; to regard’); Show me what you

The second illusion makes us 'see' sight as an ability to perceive the world, which is natural, innate to the human being and principally identical to all of us.

Our aim is to undercut these assertions by reflecting on the following:

- Whether the ability to see is innate or rather a phylo- and ontogenetically developed manner, "a cultivated historical sensibility" (Sandywell 2011, 527),
- Whether the ability of sight and its significance to understanding is not exaggerated and if sometimes its apparent omnipotence might conceal its impotence and constraints,
- Do we all really look and think in a manner alike enough to treat seeing in a privileged manner?

## Conditions of Seeing

One can see and understand as a result of the act of seeing that which is localized somewhere, namely, in one's field of vision. Running ahead of linguistic elaborations, we could assert that this field has to basically coincide with the space of understanding, with that which is 'self-evidently', i.e., obviously regarded as true.

The field of vision defined by a specific linear border is *something*.

Since this field is not formed accidentally, just by casting a superficial glance at something, but by carefully selecting the objects to be planted in it, such a field has a specific architecture, and it also complies with certain conditions. Let us discuss them sequentially:

Just as this defined field itself is something, *somethings* are being located in it.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, an ontology of things rules in this field of vision: the eye selects for seeing something from something, consciously or unconsciously, 'overlooking' the rest. In other words, the background for some-thing is formed by that which is 'unseen' by the eye, 'un-understood' by the mind, and which, as it has no shape, is called *no-thing*.

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mean!, Speak, so we can see what you know!; Give us an insight!; Look over, look through this budget estimate!; Doctor, see if something is wrong with me; or even in erotic connotations, such as to look for a wife (compare, how Adam got to know Eve!), to have an eye on someone etc., or What do you mean? I can see through you! Look at this thing from my perspective!

<sup>2</sup> This field appears, so to say. See in German ent-steht means 'emerges', literally 'comes to a standstill'.

The architectural reality of the field of vision is determined or constituted not only by the aforesaid *some-things*, but also by their ‘newly created’ relationships or convergences.

Like any formation cultivated in a culture, the field of vision is accessible from the perspective of its maker, i.e., from the starting position of the observer’s eye, which subsequently provides for the following consequences:

The vision is intentionalized, or in other words, there is ‘a path leading’ from the seer to something that is seen;

Things – *some-thing* – just as their mutual relationships are seen from some perspective – most often, from the front-side. Or, to be more exact, we determine which their front-side is.<sup>3</sup> However, it would be a fallacy to think that, for envisioning, it is sufficient to select things.

A further selection presumes that in the range of things selected in the field of vision, only some aspect of them is accessible.<sup>4</sup>

Based on the aforesaid, we may conclude that in a normal case, we can see:

something which has shape – consequently, which has been denoted and semiotized and which is objectified, made into a *Gegenstand* (German)<sup>1</sup>; somehow – in some mode, for instance in a scene of reminiscing while being awake, but without a sufficient ‘purity of the field of vision’, in reveries, visions of the future etc. Moreover, while seeing, we foresee that we ourselves are an object of such a vision: we are concerned about our looks, so that we would look like something, i.e. would be recognizable by some generally accepted characteristics. In fact, an essential quality of things or their sense of existence, therefore, is to be an object of vision in a specific combination of time and space, for example, enduringly, quickly, instantly, from a large distance, which changes the appearance of objects etc.

In this staged theatre, the seer is not the passive party of the vision, but rather its active participant who is both the scenographer in the performance of his or her egocentric field of vision – the chooser of things, and the stage director – the mover of things.

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<sup>3</sup> This resonates in the German language: *Stell Dir vor!*, meaning ‘Just imagine!’ literally ‘Place this before yourself’; *Vorstellung*, meaning ‘notion’, literally ‘placing in front of’ (most likely someone); *Gegenstand*, meaning ‘object’, literally ‘placed in front of, in a counter-position to (most likely someone)’.

<sup>4</sup> This problem has been thematized both in art and philosophy: in cubism, vision was regarded to be a synthesis of visions from various times and spaces or a combination of facts of vision in one’s mind; Wittgenstein, in his later works, traced the aspectual vision (Wittgenstein 2009).

In this set of jobs, the seer can produce various genres of vision – the theatre of real vision, dream vision or the future – in a way, an avant-garde vision. In other words, the seer can achieve an extension of the field of vision. Possibly, setting up one's field of vision is the primary and major human activity, especially, if we remember the asymmetrically developed human abilities of activity in Plato's allegory of the cave: the body is chained, practically immobilized, yet, the eyes are searching for the truth 'in the world of shadows'.

In his or her theatres of vision, a human being does not alter artificial nature: it seems that everything, including the inanimate world, functions in the same manner, as in such accepted grammatical constructions like *in front of the house* or *the moon hiding behind the tree* or in the animation of objects, such as houses.<sup>5</sup>

Possibly, the aesthetics of the finishing of vision is responsible for this corporeal quality – the attire, coating or colouring of the vision. After all, according to our knowledge about things, they are substantial and non-transparent.

The technology of furnishing the objectified field of vision which has been outlined above, or the vision of vision, which reminds us of vision as a necessary precondition for understanding or perhaps the other way round, permits us the following:

- 1) to view or consider vision, due to its self-evidence, i.e. self-visibility, as truthful;
- 2) to believe in the orderliness of the world (because it is self-created);
- 3) to abstain from questioning the extensions of other people's visions, and to do so even if we see nothing in them and do not really believe in them.

## **The Capacity for Theoretical Judgement**

The understanding of the capacity for theoretical judgement, built in the Western tradition, might be the twin sister of vision:

- 1) it always has to do with a theoretical vision in some specific field – discipline. It must be emphasized that, in the linguistic construction 'theoretical vision' we are not in the least perplexed by its lack of logic: the parched Greek term, which means *vision*<sup>6</sup> is enhanced by

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<sup>5</sup> See OKHO in Russian meaning 'window = eye', to the English, on the other hand, the windows are the eyes of the wind – windows etc.

<sup>6</sup> Theoria comes from Gr. thearos or the+horao – to look at, to think about, to be pointed at... (Peters 1970, 194).