

# **That There Are Many Kinds of Iconic Signs**

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At the end of the tranquil nineties, it may be possible to return with more ponderation to yet another question which caused a furore in the radical sixties. For while young people were trying to free the world, semioticians, such as Umberto Eco and René Lindekens, and philosophers, such as Arthur Bierman and Nelson Goodman, were involved in a more important struggle: they wanted to strip iconic signs, particularly pictures, of their iconicity, and more generally, to deliver the world from all meanings which were not conventional. Bierman and Goodman started out from logical considerations, together with a set of proto-ethnological anecdotes, according to which so-called primitive tribes were incapable of interpreting pictures; Eco and Lindekens, on the other hand, wanted to show that pictures conformed to the ideal of the perfect sign, as announced by Saussure, by being as arbitrary or conventional as the sign studied by the most advanced of the semiotic sciences, general linguistics. Since then, the question has largely gone out of fashion, but the results of those disquisitions have, rather undeservedly, been taken for granted by later researchers.

In my own work on iconicity, which dates from the period of low tide in the debate (Sonesson 1989, 1992a, b, c, 1993a, b 1994a, b, 1995, 1996d, 1997b, 1998b), I have quoted evidence from psychology and ethnology, which tend to show that these conclusions are unfeasible. More importantly, however, I have also suggested that the arguments against iconicity were mistaken, mainly because they construed language and pictures, as well as the world of our experience, i.e. the Lifeworld, in a fashion which is incompatible with our empirical knowledge, i.e. with that which we have good reasons to believe to be true about the world.

To show, against Eco and Lindekens, that iconic signs are really iconic, and, less paradoxically, against Bierman and Goodman, that there are indeed iconic signs, is not, as is often thought, to abolish the semiotics of iconicity. In his unpublished notes, Saussure actually recognises the motivated character of both pictures and miming, but at least in the latter case he argues that the rudiment of convention found in it is sufficient to make it an issue for semiotics. However, I would claim that it is only by the recognition of the reality of iconic signs that iconicity is opened up as a domain of semiotics. This is so at least for two reasons: first of all, since an iconic sign is indeed similar to what it represents, it may be used to manipulate and transform its referent in numerous ways, which is what gives rise to visual rhetoric (cf. Sonesson 1990; 1994b; 1996a, b, c; 1997a). Thus we are faced with the task of separating iconic, indexical and conventional parts of given (types of) sign, and of describing what the latter do to the former. In the second place, a little investigation will show us that iconicity may inhere in signs in several different ways, the main two of which we will call primary and secondary iconicity, but the sub-species of which may be very numerous. It will be useful to start out by revisiting the old iconicity debate, not, however, before having returned to the originator of the term, Charles Sanders Peirce.

### **Iconicity in its context**

The framework of our discussion is unavoidably made up of Peirce's threefold division of signs into icons, indices, and symbols. Within philosophy, many divisions of signs have preceded the one proposed by Peirce, ending up with two, or four, or more categories. In some ways, these divisions may be more justified than the Peircean one. However, there are two reasons for taking our point of departure in Peirce: first, it is within these frames that most of the discussion has been conducted; and secondly, when we look beyond those elements which have usually been addressed in the discussion, we will find that Peirce's theory offers some help for developing a more subtle approach to iconicity.

To many semioticians, the study of iconicity amounts to an inquiry into what Peirce "really said" on the matter. Semioticians taking a more empirical stance will argue that whatever Peirce wanted to tell us, more recent experiences and analyses may force us to conceive of iconicity differently. Yet it could be suggested that some of the usages to which iconicity are nowadays put are fairly different from the one intended by Peirce, and that something has been lost on the way. In particular, since large parts of recent semiotics has been concerned with rejecting the very notion of iconicity, it seems unfortunate that this critique has often begun from a very shallow understanding of Peirce's theory, and that the authors of this critique have hardly bothered to inquire into the possibility of adapting this notion to the present state of semiotic theory.

The iconicity debate has not been immune to simple confusions. It may be clear that, in semiotics, the term icon is not normally to be taken in its most common religious and art historical acception, to refer to a pictorial representation of persons or events derived from the sacred history of Christianity, particularly as used as an aid to devotion. However, the only extant semiotic monograph concerned with

a single pictorial genre is in fact about icons in this sense (Uspenskij 1976). It seems to be less clear that the term is not to be used to refer to all things visible, or to everything whose elements are graphically disposed, as in the jargon of computer programming, or in cognitive psychology (e.g. Kolars 1977). In semiotical parlance, which is derived from Peirce, an icon is a sign in which the “thing” serving as expression in one respect or another is similar to, or shares properties with, another “thing”, which serves as its content. In fact, if we follow Peirce, there are two further requirements: not only should the relation connecting the two “things” exist independently of the sign relation, just as is the case with the index, but, in addition, the properties of the two “things” should inhere in them independently.

Thus, icons in the religious sense are not particularly good instances of icons in the semiotical sense, for they are, as Uspenskij has shown, subject to several conventions determining the kind of perspective which may be employed, and the kind of things and persons which may be represented in different parts of the picture. Contrary to the icons of computer programs and those of cognitive psychology, iconic signs may occur in any sense modality, e.g. in audition, notably in verbal language (not only onomatopoeic words, but also in the form of such regularities and symmetries which Jakobson 1965a,b terms “the poetry of grammar”) and music (cf. Osmond-Smith 1972), and not all visual signs are iconic in the semiotic sense; indeed, many icons found in computer programs are actually aniconic visual signs.

Many semioticians, in particular those who deny the existence of iconic signs, apparently believes pictures to be typical instances of this category. There are several reasons to think that this was not Peirce’s view. Pure icons, he states (1.157), only appear in thinking, if ever. According to Peirce’s conception, a painting is in fact largely conventional, or “symbolic”. Indeed, it is only for a fleeting instant, “when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy”, that a painting may appear to be a pure icon (3.362; cf. 1989;III.1.).

It will be noted then that a pure icon is thus not a sign, in the sense that the latter term is commonly understood (although Peirce will sometimes state the contrary): as something involving an expression which is clearly differentiated from a content. At first, it may seem that although the icon is not a socially instituted sign, i.e. not something which is accepted by a community of sign users, it could at least, for a short time span, become a sign to a single observer. But even this is contrary to the very conditions described by Peirce: he specifically refers to the case in which the sign loses its sign character, when it is not seen as a sign but is confused with reality itself (which could actually happen when looking at a picture through a key hole with a single eye, producing what Husserl dismisses as a “Jahrmakteffekte”), when, as Piaget would have said, there is no differentiation between expression and content

Indeed, it would seem that, at least sometimes, the pure icon is taken to be something even less substantial: an impression of reality, which does not necessarily correspond to anything in the real world, for “it affords no assurance that there is any such thing in nature” (4.447). Thus, it seems to be very close to the “phaneron”, the unit of Peircean phenomenology (itself close to the Husserlean “noema”), which is anything appearing to the mind, irrespective of its reality status (cf. Johansen 1993:94ff). In this sense, the Peircean icon is somewhat similar to that of cognitive psychology, for it involves “sensible objects” (4.447), not signs in any precise sense: however, it still comprises all sense modalities.

In most cases, when reference is made to icons in semiotics what is actually meant is what Peirce termed hypo-icons, that is, signs which involve iconicity but also, to a great extent, indexical and/or “symbolic” (that is, conventional, or perhaps more generally, rule-like) properties. There are supposed to be three kinds of hypo-icons: images, in which case the similarity between expression and content is one of “simple qualities”; diagrams, where the similarity is one of “analogous relations in their parts”;

and metaphors, in which the relations of similarity are brought to an even further degree of mediation. Diagrams in the sense of ordinary language are also diagrams in the Peircean sense, e.g. the population curve which rises to the extent that the population does so. The Peircean concept is however much broader, as is the notion of metaphor, which would, for instance, also include the thermometer. Moreover, no matter how we choose to understand the simplicity of “simple qualities”, the Peircean category of images will not include ordinary pictures (which would actually appear to be metaphors of metaphors), although Peirce sometimes seems to say so: if anything, a Peircean image might be a colour sample used when picking out the paint to employ in repainting the kitchen wall.

Contrary to the way in which icons have been conceived in the later semiotic tradition, diagrams, rather than pictures, are at the core of Peircean iconicity; at least, they are of most interest to Peirce himself. Indeed, mathematical formulae and deductive schemes, which are based on conventional signs, are those most often discussed in his work.

### **On two or three kinds of grounds**

Conceived in strictly Peircean terms, iconicity is one of the three relationships in which a representamen (expression) may stand to its object (content or referent) and which may be taken as the “ground” for their forming a sign: more precisely, it is the first kind of these relationships, termed Firstness, “the idea of that which is such as it is regardless of anything else” (5.66), as it applies to the relation in question. At the other extreme, iconicity has been variously conceived as a similarity, or identity, between the expression and the content of a sign, or as a particular variety of conventional coding.

Considerations of iconicity must take as their starting point the iconic “ground”, or what has been described as the “potential sign-vehicle” (Bruss 1978:87). The ground is a part of the sign with the function of picking out the relevant elements of expression and content. It would appear that, in Peirce’s view, two items share an iconic ground, being thus apt to enter into a semiotic function forming an iconic sign, in the parts of expression and content, to the extent that there is some set of properties or another which these items possess independently of each other, which are identical or similar when considered from a particular point of view, or which may be perceived or, more broadly, experienced as being identical or similar, where similarity is taken to be an identity perceived on the background of fundamental difference (cf. Sonesson 1989,III.1-3.).

In one of his well-known definitions of the sign, or rather the sign-vehicle, Peirce (2:228) describes it as something which “stands for that object not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I sometimes called the ground of the representation”. According to one of his commentators, Greenlee (1975:64), the ground is that aspect of the referent which is referred to by the expression, for instance, the direction of the wind, which is the only property of the referential object “the wind” of which the weathercock informs us. On the other hand, Savan (1976:10) considers the ground to consist of the features picked out from the thing serving as expression, which, to extend Greenlee’s example, would include those properties of the weathercock permitting it to react to the wind, not, for instance, its having the characteristic shape of a cock made out of iron and placed on a church steeple. In one passage, however, Peirce himself identifies “ground” with “abstraction” exemplifying it with the blackness of two black things (1.293). That, of course, would be an iconical ground; an indexical ground, in a parallel fashion, would then be whatever it is that connects the properties of the weathercock as a physical thing to the direction in which the wind is blowing. If so, the ground is really a principle of relevance, or, as a Saussurean would say, the “form”, connecting expression and content (cf. Fig. 1 and Sonesson 1989:205ff).

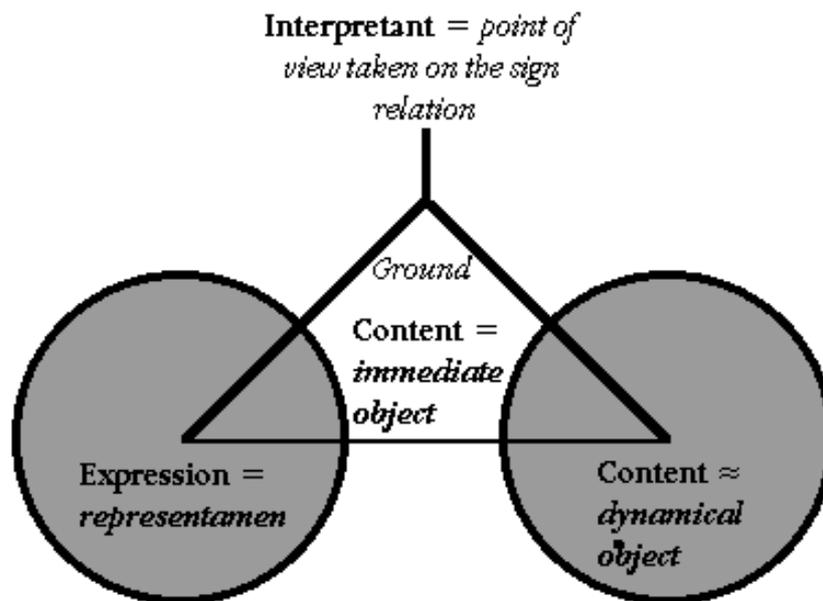


Fig. 1. The Peircean notion of ground

Generally put, an indexical ground, or indexicality, would then involve two “things” that are apt to enter, in the parts of expression and content (“representamen” and “object” in Peircean parlance), into a semiotic relation forming an indexical sign, due to a set of properties which are intrinsic to the relationship between them, such as is the case independently of the sign relation. This kind of ground, which is a relation, is best conceived in opposition to an iconic ground, which consists of a set of two classes of properties ascribed to two different “things”, which are taken to possess the properties in question independently, not only of the sign relation, but of each other, although, when considered from a particular point of view, these two sets of properties will appear to be identical or similar to each other. This is the sense in which indexicality is Secondness, and iconicity Firstness. As for the Peircean symbol, or generic sign, it is literally groundless, as least until it becomes a sign: there is nothing in the thing serving as expression, nor the thing serving as content which explains the sign relation. The principle of relevance obtaining between the two parts of the signs is only produced by the sign relation, which is why it is Thirdness.

Contrary to the indexical ground, which is a relation, the iconic ground thus consists of a set of two classes of properties ascribed to two different “things”, which are taken to possess the properties in question independently, not only of the sign relation, but of each other. Indexicality as such involves two “things”, and may therefore be conceived independently of the sign function. Since iconicity is Firstness, however, it only concerns one “thing”. Indeed, as Peirce (3.1.; 3.362; 4.447) never tires of repeating, a pure icon cannot even exist: it is a disembodied quality which we may experience for a fleeting instant when contemplating a painting out of awareness. Perhaps, then, to use some of Peirce’s own examples, the blackness of a blackbird, or the fact of Franklin being American, can be considered iconicities; when we compare two black things or Franklin and Rumford from the point of view of their being Americans, we establish an iconic ground; but only when one of the black things is taken to stand for the other, or when Rumford is made to represent Franklin, do they become iconic signs (or hypicons, as Peirce sometimes said). Just as indexicality is conceivable, but is not a sign, until it enters the sign relation, iconicity has some kind of being, but does not exist until a comparison takes place. In this sense, if indexicality is a potential sign, iconicity is only a potential ground.

## Similarity and perceptual appearance

Since the iconic ground is established on the basis of properties the two items possess only because of being what they are, the standard of comparison must be something like similarity or identity. Signs based on similarity have been distinguished before in semiotic theory, by Degérando, for instance, in terms of analogy. Indeed, Peirce also says that an icon (more exactly, a hypo-icon) is “a sign which stands for something merely because it resembles it” (3.362) or “partak/es/ in the characters of the object” (4.531). This point of view was pursued by Charles Morris (1946:98ff), who considered that a sign was iconic to the extent that it had the same properties as its referent. According to this conception, iconicity becomes a question of degrees: a film is more iconic of a person than a painted portrait, but less so than the person itself. Abraham Moles (1981) has elaborated on this proposal, constructing a scale which comprises 13 degrees of iconicity going from the object itself to the zero degree epitomised by a verbal description. Such a conception of iconicity is problematic, not only because distinctions of different nature appear to be involved, but also because it takes for granted that identity is the highest degree of iconicity, and that the illusion of perceptual resemblance typically produced, in different ways, by the scale model and the picture sign, are as close as we can come to iconicity short of identity. Although Peirce does mention paintings and photographs as instances of iconic signs, he much more often refers to abstract properties.

The same confusion is found in other semiotic theories involved with iconicity. Umberto Eco's (1968: 1976) critique of iconicity is almost exclusively concerned with pictures. In pictorial semiotics, both as conceived by the Greimas school and in the version of Groupe  $\mu$ , iconicity is supposed to account for one of the two semiotic functions of the picture sign, the one giving the illusion of seeing something depicted in the sign, opposed to the plastic function, which is concerned with the abstract properties of the pictorial surface. However, if a circle, as in one of Groupe  $\mu$ 's (1979) examples, is taken to stand for the sun on the iconic level, and on the plastic level for roundness, which, in turn, as we know from psychological tests, may signify softness, etc., then, what is called here the plastic language is at least as iconic, in Peirce's sense, as the iconic layer: for roundness is certainly a property possessed both by the circle representing the sun in this hypothetical drawing and by the circle prototype; and, beyond that, there must be some abstract, synaesthetically experienced property which is common to the visual mode of roundness and the tactile mode of softness (Cf. Sonesson 1992a; 1993b; 1994a, b).

When conceiving iconicity as engendering a “referential illusion” and as forming a stage in the generation of “figurative” meaning out of the abstract base structure, Greimas & Courtés (1979: 148, 177) similarly identify iconicity with perceptual appearance. However, not only is iconicity not particularly concerned with “optical illusion” or “realistic rendering”, but it does not necessarily involve perceptual predicates: many of Peirce's examples, like those of Degérando beforehand (cf. Sonesson 1989: 204ff), have to do with mathematical formulae, and even the fact of being American is not really perceptual, even though some of its manifestations may be.

## Regressive iconicity and the sign function

We will start out discussion of the critique of iconicity by considering a parable, recounted by Arthur Bierman, which is instructive in a different way from what he intended. A man receives a parcel in the post which turns out to contain something the man takes to be a blueprint. Using metal pieces, he sets about constructing a machine according to the blueprint, but when he switches it on, he is electrocuted.

The next morning, his widow receives a letter, explaining that the figures marked on the paper have to be cut out and put together, to obtain a paper machine (Bierman 1963:249). But is the moral or this story really that there are no iconic signs?

I think not. Like all activities taking place in the Lifeworld, the interpretation of pictures depend on certain things being taken for granted, but not necessarily on any particular conventions: “normal” conditions are though to obtain. When a sign differs from what might be expected, it is indeed necessary to have it “anchored”. When opening the parcel, the man will note a number of things: it contains iconical signs, rather than writing or scribbles, etc.; the particular style of the pictures connotes “blueprint”; and the shapes given to the figures suggest they depict machine parts. These observations determine the use to which the man puts the gift: since it appears to be a blueprint, he sets about constructing something; since the shapes of the pictures suggest machine parts, and since machine parts are usually made of some sort of metal, he makes his construction out of metal pieces. Apparently, there must also be some kinds of sign, probably iconic or indexical, which tell the man how to relate the different pieces to each other. But Bierman has been pulling the man on. What seems to be a blueprint is really a cut—out sheet; instead of being pictures, the figures are self-presentations; and what seems to be their borders are really indexical signs for where one has to cut. The murderer is not the butler, this time, but Bierman!

Interestingly, while instructions would be needed to discover that the sheet of paper could be seen as a self-presentation, none was necessary for the man to take it for a picture. If the sheet, considered as an expression, is ambiguous between two readings then one of them, which happens to be incorrect here, would seem to suggest itself more readily. It should also be noted, that there is no hint in the story that the man put the pieces together incorrectly: thus, something was apparently read off from the picture iconically.

The most interesting arguments against iconicity were first suggested by Arthur Bierman (1963), and were later repeated in another form, notably by Nelson Goodman (1970). According to one of these arguments, which may be called the argument of regression (cf. Sebeok 1976: 128), all things in the world can be classified into a number of very general categories, such as “thing”, “animal”, “human being”, etc., and therefore everything in the universe can refer to, and be referred to, everything else. Thus, if iconicity is at the origin of signs, everything in the world will be signs. Pierce himself would probably not be in the least impressed by these consequences: he certainly seems to think that Rumford can be an icon of Franklin since they share the property of being American, which is, if not a metaphysical property, at least a very general one. Nor would Giordano Bruno, or other thinkers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance be shocked (cf. Yates 1966; Gombrich 1972; etc.); neither would the Naturphilosophen of German Romanticism, or Baudelaire and other believers in the theory of “correspondences”, including the surrealist, and even latter-day New Age mystics. Hence, iconical signs of this kind are not only conceivable; they have been conceived throughout the greater part of human history.

Yet, it is true that these are not typical signs, let alone typical iconical signs; and pictures are most certainly not of this kind. The undesirable consequences anticipated by Bierman can be avoided, in his own view, if we introduce the provision that no icon should contain universal characteristics as part of its meaning. Thus, it seems, Bierman is satisfied, but it is obvious that such a provision must be problematical, in particular because it is not clear how we shall establish the limit beyond which characteristics become too general to be included in the meaning of iconical signs. It would also seem that, even apart from the “correspondances”, there are cases in which iconical signs have very general features in their contents, at least if metaphors and symbols in the European sense, are considered to be iconical. It is arguable, that some pictograms stand for relatively universal features, in particular if based on synaesthesia. Such as it stands, the provision is scarcely acceptable.

The import the argument of regression really depends on how we interpret Peirce's theory. If he meant to suggest that there are three properties, iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity, which, by themselves and without any further requirement, trigger the recognition of something as a sign, then the argument of regression will create trouble for his conception. On the other hand, if he merely wanted to suggest that something that was already recognized as being a sign could be discovered to be an iconic sign, rather than an indexical or symbolic one, by means of tracing it back to the iconic ground, then the argument of regression will have no bearing on it.

### **Beyond the symmetry argument**

According to another argument, first voiced by Bierman, which has later been termed the symmetry argument (Sebeok 1976:128), iconicity cannot motivate a sign, for while similarity is symmetrical and reflexive, the sign is not. Pigments on paper, or carvings in a rock, could stand for a man, but not the reverse; nor will they, in their picture function, stand for themselves. This argument is based on an identification of the commonsensical notion of similarity with the equivalence relation of logic. No doubt, the equivalence relation, as defined in logic, is symmetric and reflexive, and thus cannot define any type of sign, since the sign, by definition, must be asymmetric and irreflexive. But to identify similarity with the equivalence relation is to suppose man to live in the world of the natural sciences, when in fact he inhabits a particular sociocultural Lifeworld. Similarity, as experienced in this Lifeworld, is actually asymmetric and irreflexive. That this is true of ordinary comparisons in verbal language and in metaphorical visual displays has now been experimentally demonstrated (notably by Rosch 1975b; and Tversky 1977; & Gati 1978; cf. also Sonesson 1989,220ff, 327ff). Rosch (1975b: 532) starts out from Wertheimer's idea that idealtypes, in the Weberian sense, may serve as "anchoring points for perception". Two tasks, one verbal and the other spatial, were devised. In the verbal task, subjects had to state their preference, in the case of different terms, for either "A is almost (virtually, essentially, etc.) a B", or its inversion. In the spatial task, an object, which was known for other reasons either to be a prototype, or not to be one, was fixed in the middle of a table, and other objects had to be placed at different distances from the central object, according to whether they were more or less similar. Focal colours, determined in earlier experiments of Rosch's (see Rosch 1975c), multiples of ten, as well as vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines were used as prototypes. Both tests clearly showed similarity judgements to be asymmetrical: a non—focal colour is more similar to a focal one than the reverse; a line of 85 degrees is almost a diagonal, but the reverse is not true, and numbers somewhat above or somewhat below every multiple of ten are judged similar to the latter, much more than the latter is to them.

In a task involving comparisons between countries, Tversky (1977: 333 ff.) found that the statement "North Korea is similar to Red China" was chosen in preference to its inversion in 66 out of 69 instances; it was also located higher on a scale. Moreover, other configurations are judged more similar to "good forms" than the reverse, and among "good forms", the least complex were felt to be more similar to the more complex than the reverse. Letters were used as reference points, if their shape included that of the others, as for instance E includes F making F more similar to E. On the whole, that item which is most prominent becomes the reference point, and prototypicality is only one of the factors making an item eligible for the position, others being frequency, intensity, celebrity, information, and so on. Since Tversky refers to Rosch, he presumably intends to use prototypicality in her sense; perhaps we can take him to mean that the reference point is not always an item already established as prototypical in a "natural category", codified, for instance, in verbal language, but can also be negotiated in a more immediate and provisional fashion, in the on—going practice of the Lifeworld.

According to Tversky (p. 329), similarities do not even have to be transitive. While Jamaica is judged to be similar to Cuba (because of geographical closeness) and Cuba is thought to be similar to Russia (because of political affinity), Jamaica and Russia are not at all felt to be similar. Interesting as it is, this observation does not represent such a radical break with common conceptions as that pertaining to symmetry, for obviously the two comparisons concern different dimensions, politics and geography. As long as we consider just a single semantic dimension, it seems that it must remain transitive.

If we generalise this finding to the case of signs, there is every reason to suppose that a three-dimensional object, rather than some lines on a surface, would count as a natural standard of comparison. While this relationship between three-dimensional and two-dimensional objects may well be a universal, it is easier to show the principle at work in cases which vary cross-culturally. Among numerous apocryphal stories of tribes failing to recognise pictures as such, there is one verified case in which the group (the Me' studied by Deręgowski) had never seen paper, and was therefore led to focus on the material *per se*. When pictures were instead printed on cloth, the Me' immediately recognised the sign function and perceived the pictures. To these people paper, being an unknown material, acquired such a prominence that it was impossible for them to see it as a vehicle for something else; on the other hand, it is precisely because paper is so trivial a material to us that we have no trouble construing instances of it as pictorial signifiers (cf. Sonesson 1989: 251ff).

It thus becomes necessary to posit a kind of taken-for-granted hierarchy of prominence among the things of the Lifeworld. For something to be a sign of something else, it must be ranked relatively low on the scale of prototypicality applying to the "things" of the Lifeworld. Such a scale would be similar to the basic metaphor underlying ordinary language which Lakoff & Turner (1989:160ff) call "The great chain of being". Indeed, these regularities of the Lifeworld, together with the similar laws of environmental physics, formulated by James Gibson, stand at the origin of an even broader domain of study, which we have called the semiotic ecology (cf. Figure 2 and Sonesson 1993a, 1994a, b, 1996a, c, 1997a, b, 1998b).

Husserl, Gibson, and Greimas all called for a science of "the natural world", because they realised that nature as we experience it is not identical to the one known to physics but is culturally constructed. Like Husserl's Lifeworld and Gibson's ecological physics, but unlike Greimas' natural world, semiotic ecology will suppose this particular level to be a privileged version of the world, "the world taken for granted", in Schütz's phrase, from the standpoint of which other worlds, such as those of the natural sciences, may be invented and observed (cf. Sonesson 1989, I.1.4, I.2.1, and *passim*). This world is characterised by a particular spatial and temporal structure, by types, and, by regularities, or as Husserl's says, "the typical way in which things tend to behave". The latter are the kind of laws of "ecological physics", in Gibson's sense, which are "defied by magic", and which also forms the foundations for Peircean abduction.

Inside "ecological physics", in Gibson's sense, there must be some kind of "social physics", not exactly in the Durkheimian sense, but on the micro-level. Schütz and Mead have talked about the array of "things" of the human world which are peculiar in being "at hand", occupying the "manipulatory sphere"; and Wallon has discussed the "ultra-choses", which are outside this sphere, but are seen from there. Even these humble things do not only have a use, but are also there, as Lévi-Strauss would have said, to think with. In this sense, I have referred elsewhere to the hierarchy of prominence of Lifeworld things, and I have in fact been using such a scale in two different, but complementary, ways. On the one hand, objects, such as the human body itself, in particular the face, but also common objects like chairs, must be so central to the human sphere that they will be recognized with only scant evidence, even though the invariants embodied in a particular picture are found in other objects as well. In this

case, the objects at the highest levels of the scale stand the best chance of being selected. On the other hand, I have argued that only objects low down on the scale will be recognized as susceptible of embodying a sign function, without being particularly designated as such, which in our culture is true of a sheet of paper or a canvas.

One may wonder whether the same scale, with the same ordering, would be involved in the two cases. This is not clear at present. However, a human being, a shape which is easily recognized as such with very scant indications, is perhaps also that object which is most difficult to see as a mere signifier of something else if he is not explicitly so designated, as in the theatre or in a ceremony. On the other hand, the human face, which is probably that object which is most easily identified of all, serves at the same time as support for conveying other signs, the expressions of feelings and attitudes; but then again, it is not the face but its movements which are signifiers of these other signs. It is just that, unlike that of the Cheshire cat, the human smile cannot exist independently.

Contrary to the argument of regression, the symmetry argument may thus be warded off, without introducing a supplementary sign function and without amending the definition of the iconic ground.

### **Primary and secondary iconicity**

The alternative analysis in terms of conventionality suggested by Goodman, Eco, and others is conceived to take care of the case of pictures, but paradoxically, it seems that it would really be needed, not for pictures but for some other iconic signs which rely on identity (and some others, as doodles, as we shall see below). Goodman's and Greenlee's contention that the referent of each picture is appointed individually and Eco's proposal that the relations of the picture are correlated with those of the referent are incompatible with what psychology tells us about the child's capacity for interpreting pictures when first confronted with them at 19 months of age (as demonstrated in a famous experiment by Hochberg). On the other hand, we do have to learn that, in certain situations, and according to particular conventions, objects which are normally used for what they are become signs of themselves, of some of their properties, or of the class of which they form part: a car at a car exhibition, a stone axe in the museum showcase or a tin cane in a shop window, an emperor's impersonator when the emperor is away, and a urinal (if it happens to be Duchamp's "Fountain") at an art exhibition. There is never any doubt about their pure iconicity, or about their capacity for entering into an iconic ground – but a convention is needed to tell us they are signs.

The relative part played by iconicity and conventionality in a sign may be used to distinguish primary and secondary iconicity. A primary iconic sign is a sign in the case of which the perception of a similarity between an expression E and a content C is at least a partial reason for E being taken to be the expression of a sign the content of which is C. That is, iconicity is really the motivation (the ground), or rather, one of the motivations, for positing the sign function. A case in point is a picture, in the sense of a depiction. A secondary iconic sign, on the other hand, is a sign in the case of which our knowledge that E is the expression of a sign the content of which is C, in some particular system of interpretation, is at least a partial reason for perceiving the similarity of E and C. Here, then, it is the sign relations which partially motivates the relationship of iconicity. This is true of doodles, many gestures and most exemplifications.

When used to stand for themselves, objects are clearly iconic: they are signs consisting of an expression which stands for a content because of properties which each of them possess intrinsically. And yet,

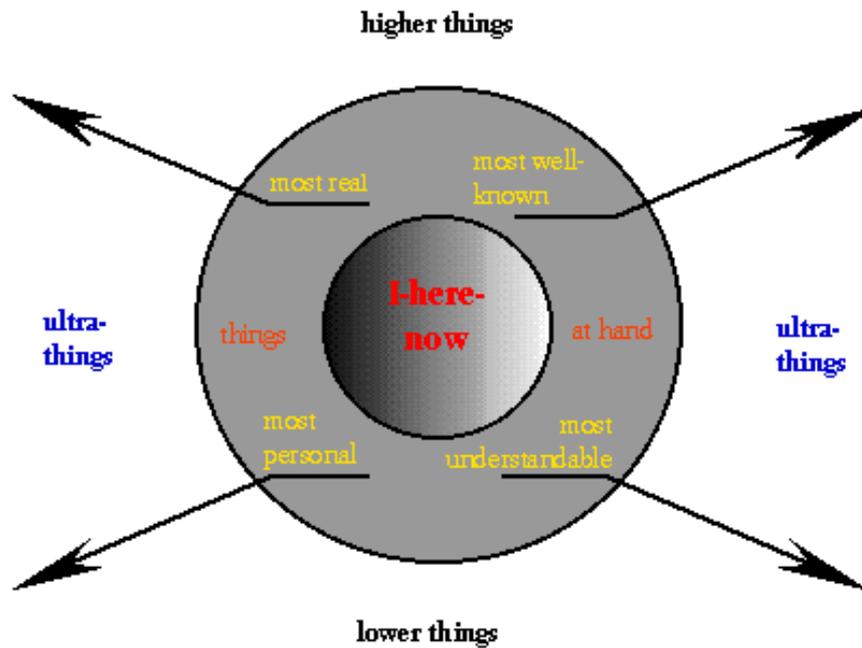


Fig. 2. The Lifeworld core of prototypicality

without having access to a set of conventions and/or an array of stock situations, we have no possibility of knowing either that something is a sign or what it is a sign of: of itself as an individual object, of a particular category (among several possible ones) of which it is a member, or of one or another of its properties. A car, which is not a sign on the street, becomes a sign at a car exhibition, as does Man Ray's iron in a museum. We have to know the showcase convention to understand that the tin can in the shop-window stands for many other objects of the same category; we need to be familiar with the art exhibition convention to realise that each object merely signifies itself; and we are able to understand that the tailor's swatch is a sign of its pattern and colour, but not of its shape, only if we have learnt the convention associated with the swatch (cf. Sonesson 1989,II.2.2. and 1994a, b).

Goodman also argues that a painting is actually more similar to another painting than to that which it depicts. However, similarity should not be confused with identity: indeed, between two pictures (two canvases, etc.) there is identity, according to a principle of pertinence, and on the basis of this property a picture, just as any other object, may be used as an identity sign or an exemplification (as, for instance, in an art exhibition, or in front of the artist's workshop; cf. Goodman 1968). On the other hand, there is similarity only on the basis of a fundamental dissimilarity. It is certainly not in their "important" properties, if that means the attributes defining them as "selves", that the picture and its referent (or content) are similar. In fact, the hierarchically dominant categories of the picture and its referent must be different; for a picture which is just a picture of the picture-of-X is indistinguishable from a picture of X (cf. Sonesson 1989:226ff).

When Man Ray makes a picture of a billiard table, we need no convention to recognise what it depicts. However, if Sherrie Levine's (real, three-dimensional) billiard table is to represent Man Ray's picture, there must be a label inverting the hierarchy of prominence of the Lifeworld. This shows that among the properties determining the probability of an object functioning as the expression of an iconic sign is to be found three-dimensionality rather than the opposite. If anything, present-day technological devel-

opment has accentuated this difference between potential signifiers, and potential signifieds: the hologram may be three-dimensional, but it lacks solidity and perdurability; and while it may be true that the traditional photograph, unlike the film, has sufficient thing-character to suggest a fetishistic usage, as Metz (1990) claims, this no longer applies to photographs stored on CD-ROM. The realm of signifiers becomes ever more elusive.

## Pictures and doodles

However, identity signs may not be the only case in which the sign function has to precede and determine iconicity. In other cases, the sign function must precede the perception of iconicity because there is too little resemblance, as in the manual signs of the North American Indians, which, according to Mallery (1881:94f), seem reasonable when we are informed about their meaning. There is one kind of picture which is really a limiting case, the “doodle”, i. e. a picture which needs a key, as Carraci’s mason behind a wall (cf. Fig. 3b). In one doodle, which we borrow from Arnheim (1969:92f), an ambiguity is noted immediately in the title: “Olive dropping into martini glass or Close—up of girl in scanty bathing suit” (cf. Fig. 3a) While both scenes are possible to discover in the drawing, both are clearly underdetermined by it. There are two ways in which we can try to avoid such an ambiguity. One is to fill in the details, in particular the details which are characteristically different in an olive and a navel, in the air and a pair of thighs, etc. At some point the doodle will then turn into a genuine picture. The other possibility, which is the only one considered by Burks and Bierman, is to introduce an explicit convention, such as Carraci’s key. According to Hermerén (1983:101), it is only because of “the limitations of human imagination” that we see Fig. 3c. as a human face, for it can equally well be perceived as “a jar from above, with some pebbles and broken matches on the bottom, and a stick placed across the opening”. Thus, it should be ambiguous in Bierman’s sense. It all depends on what is meant by the limits of human imagination here: Gestalt principles, the face as a privileged perceptual object (cf. E. Gibson 1969:347 ff.), and so on, all conspire to make one of the readings determinate. While it is possible to find the elements Hermerén suggests should be there in the picture, it is impossible to see the interpretation as a whole without being disturbed by the other reading. Thus, it seems that when an expression has similarities to different contents or referents, one may be favoured because of properties of the expression itself, and is not overridden by convention.

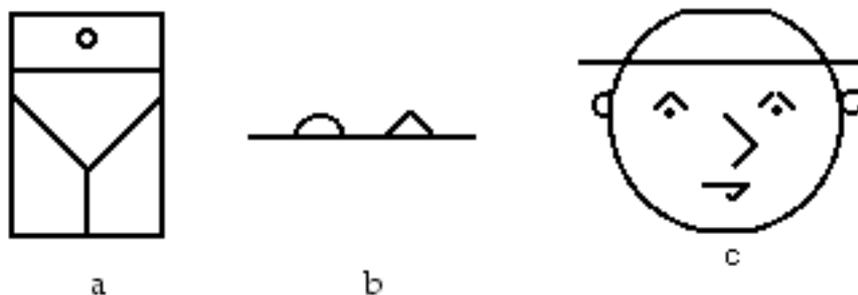


Fig. 3. Two doodles and a picture which can be read as a doodle: a) Olive dropping into Martini glass or Close-up of girl in scanty bathing suit (inspired from Arnheim as adapted in Sonesson 1992). b) Carraci’s key (Mason behind wall); c) face or jar (inspired by Hermerén 1983:101);

Consider one last argument of Bierman's: if the whole world but the sign changes, the properties C1 and C2 of the expression are no longer shared with the object X, but instead, the properties C3 and C4 are common to the expression and the object Y, so the sign has changed meaning (Bierman 1963:248 f). This is of course difficult to imagine: but nothing in the argument would be modified, I presume, if we just supposed that those parts of the world directly relevant to the sign have changed. Then there is nothing implausible about the idea: the same pictogram used today to mark the location of the women's toilet appears on Carthaginian tombs to represent the god Ball At least that which now appears to be similar to the woman's frock must once have had a resemblance to something else. This means pictures can change their meaning. Of course, it would be pointless to argue that because such a sign means a woman today, it must also have meant that to the Carthaginians; just as pointless as when von Däniken (1973) maintains that spacecrafts can be seen on Mayan inscriptions, or that there are astronaut's helmets, wrist—watches, etc., which are depicted on ancient rock paintings. It is true that the world has changed: nimbi are no longer around, but astronaut's helmets are. It must be granted to von Däniken that a contemporary boy could very well make a drawing which is identical to the rock paintings, and which is a picture of an astronaut's helmet. Von Däniken is wrong because he ignores what is known, or what can plausibly be supposed, about the conventions, and the things taken for granted in the cultures to which his pictures can indexically be attributed. He is wrong, not about the sign types, but about the pictures as particular occurrences. This is because his pictures are at the level of doodles. In the case of such a detailed picture as that of the Mayan sarcophagus cover, however, the picture itself is enough to prove von Däniken wrong (cf. Story 1976). At least, if we do not suppose that most of the details of the cover are due to plastic language. But in that case, the space—gods would have landed only to serve as an artistic pretext.

At this stage, then, it would seem that the picture could be defined by the sign relation, together with similarity; where the second serves to motivate the first; whereas the opposite case accounts for secondary iconicities, whether the need for conventionality arises from too much similarity, as in the identity signs, or from too little, as in the doodles. However, Eco rightly observes that, on closer inspection, there is really no similarity between the painted nose and the nose of a real person. The same observation is even more obviously valid in the case of the stick-figure, whether it is drawn on paper, or carved in rock. However, it has no bearing whatsoever on iconic signs which are not picture signs (or doodles), and the argument really shows the confusion between pictures and iconic signs in general: indeed, the Americanness of Franklin and Rumford is identical, as far as this goes, as is the roundness of circles and other round things, and the pattern and colour of a tailor's swatch and the cloth it exemplifies.

Eco would have been better advised to use his insights in order to criticise the Peircean division of icons into three types: the images, which relies on simple qualities, the diagrams, which concern similarities between relationships, and metaphors, which involve relationships between relationships. For if we take this categorisation seriously, ordinary pictures are not images, but rather some curious case of diagrams or, rather, metaphors. Indeed, perceptual psychology has shown us that what is similar between the expression plane of a picture and reality as depicted can only be found on the level of relations between relations between relations (cf. Gibson 1982; Sonesson 1989). The only candidate for an image in Peirce's sense would seem to be a colour sample, of the kind you bring home to verify whether a particular shade of paint will combine adequately with the rest the furnishing of your apartment: here the simple quality of colour is, or at least is hoped to be, the same. Yet a picture is of course different from a diagram in the ordinary language sense of the term, which is included among the Peircean diagrams: perhaps we could say that the picture, as well as the diagram and the metaphor, are caused by the perception of relations between relations of some or other degree, but that pictures are experienced as statements about similarities of simple qualities,

while diagrams and metaphors are seen as statements about relationships. Thus, the similarity which serves as a condition upon the perception of the picture signs, is not of the same order as the similarity which is part of the meaning of the self-same sign.

Apart from the reasons mentioned at the beginning of this essay, there is another sense in which pictures are far from being central instances of icons. As was noted above, the fact that an object serving as the expression of an icon and another object serving as its content possess, in some respects, the same properties should not be a result of one of them having an influence on the other. In the case of an icon (contrary to the case of an index), “it simply happens that its qualities resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness” (2.299). Since both Franklin and Rumford are Americans, Peirce claims, one of them may serve as a sign of the other; but the fact that Franklin is an American is quite unrelated to Rumford’s being one. But there is at least one sense in which this is not true, not only in the case of a photograph (which Peirce often pronounces to be an index), but also in the case of a painting or the image on a computer screen: in each case, the “thing” serving as the expression is expressly constructed in order to resemble the “thing” serving as the content, although a direct physical connection only exists in the first instance. Leonardo painted the canvas known as Mona Lisa in order to create a resemblance to the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, and, although the resemblance is of a much more abstract kind, the same is true of Picasso painting Gertrude Stein or Kahnweiler. And it is as true of a synthetic computer picture showing a lamp correctly illuminated from above right as of a photograph with the same subject. Peirce’s claim that the properties of expression and content pertain to them independently seems more relevant to identity signs (like Franklin representing Rumford) than to pictures.

### **The night of all iconicities**

Very special circumstances must obtain in order for a human being to function as a mere signifier. A convention would be needed for Franklin to represent Rumford, or the opposite. This may happen if Rumford appears on the stage playing the part of Franklin, or the reverse; it may even suggest itself spontaneously to someone acquainted with Franklin but not with Rumford. The latter would be a case of prominence by familiarity, as when we compare the identical twin being presented to us with the one we knew before.

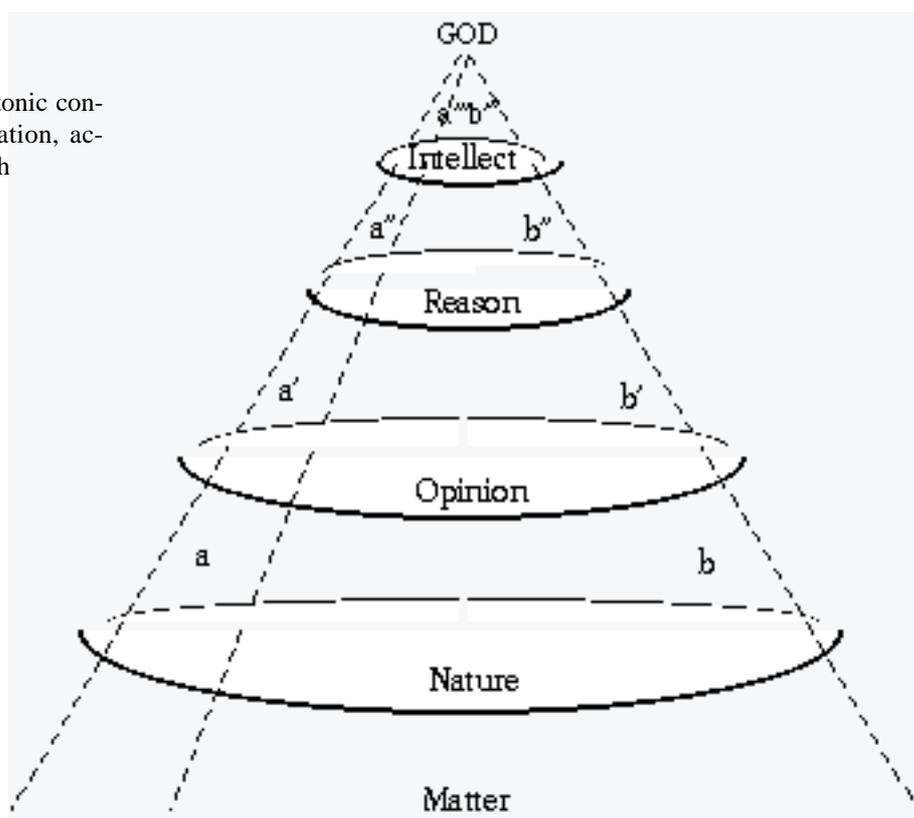
Even so, the case seems strange because the iconic ground is supposed to reside in the common Americanness of Franklin and Rumford, which is not in itself a property which can be seen. The ambassador more officially and clearly represents Americanness, but he does not represent any particular other American. The case of any blond girl being made to represent Marilyn Monroe is much more straightforward: blondness is iconic, but still a convention is needed, since it is also endemic. The iconicity of Franklin and Rumford, as well as of the ambassador, is not visual or even sensual: it is a case of a shared abstract property. But since it is a very common property, the two parts entering into the sign relation must be determined by convention or habit.

But Peirce’s example may be interpreted in quite a different way: the iconicity obtaining between Franklin and Rumford may well be symmetric, and it may actually involve the general category of Americanness. This means that not only are Franklin and Rumford signs of each other, but they are also signs of all other Americans which have ever existed and which will exist, and each one of these is equally a sign of all the others (and possibly also of themselves). This cannot happen in our sociocultural Lifeworld; it can probably not be the case in any actual Lifeworld; but it is certainly true of the

Neoplatonic conception of the world, as expressed, for instance, by Ficino during the Renaissance; and it was true more recently in the art and literature of Symbolism.

Gombrich (1972:170) describes the Neoplatonic conception in the following way: “The microcosm as well as the macrocosm must be envisaged as a series of concentric circles surrounding the ineffable unity in ever widening distance. Thus a relationship which is palpable below is more contracted and condensed nearer the centre. The proportion  $a:b$  will equal  $a':b'$  and  $a'':b''$  in each of the spheres, but in the centre all are one and all are equal. God, in the famous words of Nicolaus Cusanus, is a *coincidentia oppositorum*“ (cf. Fig. 4.). The concentric circles of Neoplatonism constitute a particular interpretation of the terrestrial environment, with its upwards and downwards directions. Gombrich considers the particular case of diagrammatic iconicity, but the same could be said about “simple properties” like Americanness (which, although simple in itself, may determine an extensive set of lower-order properties).

Fig. 4. The Neoplatonic conception of signification, according to Gombrich



In the literature of the Middle Ages it is possible to encounter the nightmare dreamt by Bierman and Goodman, where everything might be a sign of everything else because of general properties they have in common. In “The Quest of the Holy Grail” (c. 1125), meaning is often iconic: the sun is shining just like Christ, the tents are round just like the world; the black knights represent sin, the white knights virtue, etc. Even in the Grail world, however, there is a rudiment of a hierarchy of prominence: as Todorov (1971) observes, it is normally the ordinary, trivial acts, e.g., events such as sitting down to eat, which signify higher values, not the reverse (asymmetric iconicity). On the other hand, some

adventures from the Grail story are symmetric: the passion of Christ represents the Grail story, and vice-versa, and the three tables, that of the Lord's Supper, the Grail table of Joseph of Aramathea, and King Arthur's round table, all refer to each other.

When Bors sees the Phoenix nourishing her offspring with her own blood, he does not understand the meaning of the apparition, but "he knew sufficiently to understand that it was a sign of great importance". This scene is clearly at another level than the reality in which Bors' moves: it is set off from the Lifeworld. Even Bors, who does not understand it, realises that it has a character of unreality – or "other-reality" – which singles it out as a sign. In contrast, the "adventures" in which the knights are involved, and which are interpreted as signs by hermits, do not have this obvious sign-character: they are segments of reality; embedded in the Lifeworld, enmeshed in the continuous chains of causality that make up our lives – until a signs functions (projected backwards by the hermit) picks them out..

It seems impossible to distinguish a signifier from something which is not. Apparently nothing in the properties of the signifier itself would justify such a distinction. Perhaps a world view ("the Grail world") may constitute a system of relevancies which serves to pick out certain iconic traits of reality, starting out from the signified instead of the signifier: thus, white and black being identified with virtue and sin in the celestial realm, all things in the Lifeworld which are white and black are susceptible to serve as sign vehicles. Like the symbolic play of the child, this interpretative net thrown on reality may even be able to survive for shorter moments of time

Starting out from my notion of a Lifeworld hierarchy, Anders Marner (1996) claims to discover a double discourse in Surrealism: on the one hand, Breton and his disciples follow a "via ascensus", which takes us upwards from the terrestrial environment, the objects at hand, to the ultra-things above; on the other hand, Bataille and a few others start out from the "via descensus", which goes downwards from the manipulatory sphere to the ultra-things below, or rather, to unorganised matter. Between them, Breton and Bataille rediscover the Neoplatonic cross-section, each carving out a part for himself: everything potentially iconic of "high" or "low things" respectively will then be able to serve as a signifier.

Marner rightly concludes that nobody could really live in the surrealistic Lifeworld – which is tantamount to saying it is not really a Lifeworld. The Grail world may have had more reality, because it relies on a much wider social consensus. If the Grail world was, in some sense, historically real, we would have to conclude that it was more indirect, more of a life at a distance, than our own "imploded" information society, contrary to what is suggested by the prophets of postmodernity. For a person looking at television, itself shown on his television set, or using a computer which is simulated on another computer, there must still be one screen, and an environment in which it is placed, which is a zero-level world, a world which is not indirect, at least not as indirect as the other parts.

### **The judgement of similarity and the iconic sign**

The similarity judgement is described by Tversky (1977:329) as a kind of "feature matching", where the latter do not have to be binary or nominal (i.e. voiced vs voiceless; eye colours) but can also be dimensions (e.g. different pitches); we have, it would seem, the equivalents of Trubetzkoy's privative, equipolente, and gradual oppositions. The similarity between A and B, Tversky suggests, may be considered a function having three arguments: the intersection of A and B, the features appearing only in A, and the features present only in B. In the case of a similarity judgement, common features would

then be taken to carry most weight, but in the case of a dissimilarity judgement, the features making the difference would be more heavily weighed (p. 339 f). This would explain that prominent countries may be judged to be both more similar and more dissimilar to each other than other countries. Thus, 67% of those receiving the similarity task considered East and West Germany to be more similar to each other than Ceylon and Nepal, while, at the same time, 70% of those receiving the dissimilarity test thought the former countries were more dissimilar to each other than the latter.

The subject of comparison is also, in Tversky's opinion, more emphasised in the similarity judgements than the reference point, which means that those features present only in the former carry comparatively more weight (p. 333). Thus, a toy train is judged to be rather similar to a real train, for most of the features of the toy train are present also in the real train; the reverse, however, is not true (p. 333; cf. Tversky & Gati 1978: 85). In sum, then, Tversky seems to hold that in a similarity judgement, common features carry most weight, secondly those features which characterise the subject of comparison to the exclusion of the reference point, and thirdly the distinctive features of the reference point.

The picture, of course, is not an explicit act of comparison, but it does seem to presuppose something of the sort as one of its constitutive properties. It is also easy to accept the idea that the referent of the picture is somehow more prominent than the picture itself, but it is certainly not clear which criterion of Tversky's, or of Rosch's, would permit us to arrive at that conclusion. In spite of the differences between a picture and three-dimensional objects functioning iconically, e.g. a dummy, it is conceivable that Tversky's toy train, which is clearly an instance of the latter, may be of some assistance in understanding the former. The question is, however, how far we can go along with Tversky in his characterisation of the toy train as an object having fewer distinctive properties than the real train; for it is not too difficult to think of properties possessed by the toy train which the real train does not have (its size, its portability, all the details of its motor, etc.), and it is by no means obvious how the counting of the properties would be accomplished. Again, we could agree that a picture of the toy train is even less prominent than the toy train itself, and yet the picture does not necessarily have fewer properties.

Tversky's theory may well be correct for ordinary similarity judgements, but the picture and the dummy seem to be very different; in the latter case, the subject of comparison is also the expression plane of the sign, and thus directly present to perception; and this means that, given enough time, we can discover any number of distinctive properties of the subject of comparison. Moreover, at least in the case of the picture, the differences between the terms compared are undoubtedly much more numerous than the similarities, once scrutiny has begun. The child, in any event, usually knows much more about the toy train than about the real train; and there are cases, in which we know a lot about the picture, and very little about the referent; and yet no inversion of the asymmetric relationship ensues, not even to the child, if he has attained the Piagetian stage of the semiotic function. Thus it seems that neither the picture, nor the dummy, which Tversky did claim as an instance of his theory, really do fit in with the explanation.

### **The dummy as a simulacrum**

This impression of similarity as the motivating force is common also to the dummy, and to the symbol, in the sense (or the senses) which this term has most commonly received in Europe since Romanticism, if we ignore the more recent incidence of Peircean terminology, or more generally, of American parlance. Both the dummy and the symbol seem to involve what Goodman calls exemplification: their sign function consists in referring to (some of the) properties which they also possess.

However, the dummy is a limiting case of exemplification, because it only possesses few, and actually inessential, properties of that which it exemplifies; or rather, it is a limiting case of self-identification because, although it is another, and indeed an entirely different object as to general type, its own identity is completely exhausted in the process of signification (cf. our remarks about Franklin and Rumford as Americans above). In my discussion of Prieto's semiotics, I conceded that both signs and tools are alter—functionally determined, but I rejected the idea that signs were a subclass of tools (as well as the inverse conception), essentially on the grounds that signs are defined by appresentation, while tools take their meaning from situations and action contexts of which they are a part (cf. Sonesson 1989, 11.2.1.). Interestingly, the dummy is, in this sense, partly a sign and partly a tool. In some of its properties, it is identical to what it stands for; and there is a set of situations, in which it may be used as if it were the object it refers to. Thus, from the point of view of the child, the hobby horse is as good for riding as the real horse; the artificial food stuff made of plastic or wax in the show—window of the Japanese restaurant serves as well as the real food in the show-window of the Greek restaurant to indicate the range of dishes accessible to the client of the establishment; and Olympia accomplishes the function of making Hoffmann love—sick as well as a real girl could have done it (at least up to a point).

In sum, the dummy shares some of the tool—like properties of the object for which it stands proxy. But the whole point of the dummy is that, at the same time, it is a sign for those properties of which it does not partake, and indeed a conventional sign for them. The wax food only has meaning to the extent that it stands for edible food, not made of wax, having less unappetising colours, and so on. The similarity is asymmetrical: the wax food resembles the real food, but the real food — hopefully — does not resemble the wax food; and indeed, if it does, we will feel that we have been deceived. It also seems clear that the owners of the restaurant do not believe we will perceive their food to have become any more wax—like, because of the wax—food in their show—window, so, unlike in the case of the metaphor, no transference of properties from the vehicle to the tenor is thought to take place. It is not true, however, that the dummy does not possess any more properties than those shared by the object signified; indeed, some such properties are essential to its function as a dummy. The wax food, for instance, does not decay, or deteriorate in any other way, in the window, and the hobby horse is cheaper to fodder and easier to handle than any real horse; while Olympia more willingly lends herself to Spalanzani's machinations than most real girls, at least in the sense of being entirely predictable, as long as she is wound up.

Two additional, related points should be made here. The conventionality of the sign part of the dummy does not necessarily mean a referent has to be individually appointed; and there is no tension between the categories involved, as we found there to be in the metaphor (cf. Sonesson 1989, II.6.3-4. and 1998). To understand this, we must again have recourse to the idea of a Lifeworld hierarchy of core objects, in which dummies are comparatively low—ranking, although, like the objects they stand for, they are normally three—dimensional, independent objects when considered in themselves. But they are never considered in themselves, and thus, unlike the objects they refer to, they lack folk ontological independence. What they share with the “real” objects is essentially perceptual predicates (not only visible properties: Olympia's voice, as well as her lifelike eyes); such properties, however, are often used for recognising objects as members of particular categories, but they are rarely central to the definition of the categories themselves. In an ordinary self—identification, the former properties would ordinarily be used as the expression, while the latter would dominate the content hierarchy; but the dummy only possesses the former. Just as a bat is not even an untypical bird, but no bird at all, so Olympia is not felt to be an untypical girl, but no girl at all (except, of course, by Hoffmann at the beginning, but that is because she is no dummy to him). There is tension, however, in the bat metaphor, because the bat has its own prototype, to which it is normally referred, and so there is a transgression of

ordinary category limits; but nothing comparable happens in the Olympia case, for while there may be a doll prototype, this prototype is itself defined in relation to the human being prototype. Since it shares at least some perceptual properties with its object, the dummy does not always have to be specifically appointed as such; and since it does not have any independent category prototype, its sign function does not give rise to any tension between categories.

This is a way in which the dummy is very different from the picture sign. According to Janet (1935: 214 ff.), the portrait in part provokes the same behaviour as the person which it represents, and in part quite different behaviour. Thus, we may smile at the person, as well as at his portrait, but it is only the latter that we can then put away in a drawer. If Janet were right, pictures would thus be like dummies. Indeed, such an identification is explicitly made, with this property in view, by Angenot (1994:76ff): both are, in his view, cases of simulacra. No matter how we choose two objects, there will probably always be one set of behaviour that we could, or would normally have, in relation to both, and other sets of behaviour that differentiate them; and there is behaviour that we could have vis-à-vis any object, without this behaviour being in any way characteristic of the objects. As far as I understand, it is not a characteristic function of the portrait to be smiled at, nor, perhaps, of the real person (though the latter may at least respond to the smile). Hence, apart from such behaviour as we may have with anything, no characteristic function of the picture seems to exist which is also a function of its subject matter; just as in the case of verbal language, the Fido-Fido theory of meaning must fail. It seems to be true, however, in some modified version, of the dummy.

That which is common to all kinds of dummies, in the wide sense in which the term has been taken here, is that they are meant to provoke in part the same set of behaviour as that of which they are signs, and in part some quite different set of behaviour. In many cases, the behaviour set which is identical between the sign and its referent is involved with perceptual predicates, i.e. with that which allows an identification to take place: we identify Olympia as a girl, just as we do a real girl (though, of course, as some point our hypothesis that she really is a girl will be disconfirmed, as is was for Hoffmann). In other cases, the set of identical behaviour may include some more tangible type of behaviour. Thus, in the case of the hobby horse or the tailor's dummy, we may accomplish some of the actions which we would do with the real thing, but only some subset of them, and only in a very rough way. With the hobby horse, we may execute some movements which are somewhat similar to the act of riding; but we cannot feed oats to it. The tailor's dummy serve just as well us a child are a spouse to carry up the clothing which we like to watch; but it will hardly accomplish any other of the acts which we expect from the latter. The toy trains es excellent for going round and round on the rails; but it wont carry of from Copenhagen to Milan. In none of these cases does the dummy possess any of the properties which are essential to the referent as an object of the Lifeworld, but is does possesses a number of properties which are not really unessential, but rather at some intermediary level of importance. In this sense, we should oppose the simulacrum (which would also include self-identifications) to the picture sign.

A requirement for something being a simulacrum, as I will use the term, of an ordinary, detached, three-dimensional object of the Lifeworld, is that it is itself an ordinary, detached, three-dimensional object of the Lifeworld. That is to say, for something to be a simulacrum, it must be of the same order of things as that of which it is an object. On the contrary, ordinary signs, such as pictures, are never of the same order of things in the Lifeworld as that of which they are signs. Apart from being dummies, simulacra can however also be self-identifications, that is, objects which represent the class of objects of which they are members, or some class of properties which they possess, or, as a limiting-case, the unique object which they are. But we have seen that self-identifications are secondary identities. What then about that other kind of simulacra, the dummies?

As was noted above, there is an essential difference between the way in which the capacity of the kitchen is conveyed in a typical Greek restaurant, and in a typical Japanese one: in the first case, real food is used, and it is only because we see the food in the shop-window, and because we are familiar with the habits of Greek cooks, that we identify the sign-function of the food; in the second case, wax imitations of food-stuff are used, so that the identification of the material may be enough to suggest that these objects are on a position lower on the Lifeworld scale than the real thing: that they lack the property, fundamental in food, of being edible. The difference between the display food of Greek restaurants and that of Japanese ones is comparable to Duchamp's urinal, which is a real object which must acquire its sign function out of a context, and Sherrie Levine's paraphrase of the former, made specifically for the purpose, and out of bronze, which is not a real object but only a sign of it. Indeed, we said that what characterises the dummy, as opposed to a real exemplification, which picks out an object of the kind it signifies, is that, in spite of all similarities, it lacks the properties most essential to the definition of the target object. The difference between Olympia and a real girl, and between Sherrie Levine's bronze urinal and a real one, if it is perceived, already announces the sign character of the sign. Contrary to what one may think, this is not enough to make the dummy into a primary iconicity. Rather we should perhaps say that it is a primary generic sign: it is because, together with all the resemblances, the dummy manifests general properties which are opposed to those known to characterise the objects to which it is similar, that it appears to be a sign rather than just a member of the class. And as it never seen as a member of a class, its sign-function does not have to be appointed specifically, as in the case of self-identifications. The Japanese display food made of wax is not a member of the class of food, which has to be edible; but the Greek food is, so its needs the show-case convention to function properly. And Duchamp's urinal is a member of the class or real.-world urinals, so it needs the gallery convention to function properly; but Sherrie Levine's urinal is not only not a member of the class of urinals, but that fact of its being made of bronze suggests it might be a member of the class of art objects in the most traditional sense of the term.

When a man dresses a woman, he is certainly trying to be a sign of something which he is not – although this implies that he is a sign of a human being, of a living being, and of a number of other things which he really is. Thus, the aniconicity of the sign function relies on a background iconicity. But as such, the sign function of a man masquerading as a woman is entirely conventional (although it works by inversion of contraries). In Strömholm's photographs of transsexuals, however, where we see, at the same time, the fictive characteristics of womanhood, and the actually primary characteristics of manhood, the sign character of the former is projected back to the latter, at the same time as the iconicity of the latter exposes the conventionality of the former (cf. Marner 1998).

### **The symbol in the Saussurean sense**

For anyone trying to profit from both the Saussurean and the Peircean tradition in semiotics, one of the most immediate problems is the opposite meaning of the term "symbol" in the writings of both founding-fathers. While Peirce uses the term to describe the conventional, or otherwise generic, sign function, Saussure employs it to refer to what Peirce calls an icon. From the point of view of the European tradition, Saussure's usage seems more reasonable. However, the symbol, in the sense of the European tradition, is certainly not simply identical to the icon. Even excepting the quite different American usage, there have been numerous, and in part contradictory, definitions of the symbol, by such important thinkers as Goethe, the Schlegel brothers, Creuzer, Schelling, Hegel, Vischer, Johannes Volkelt, and so on, and we cannot pursue their analyses here. Instead, we will concentrate on the examination of some examples of what, following the remnants of this tradition, are considered symbols today. To

begin with we will still accept Goethe’s suggestion that a symbol is a particular standing for something more general, and we will add that the symbol is felt to be a motivated sign. This being so, it is reasonable to suppose that the universal for which the particular stands is represented in it as one of its parts or attributes, which means the symbol is a kind of exemplification.

According to Wallis (1975: 21f), a symbol is “a sensually perceptible object, made by man or not, which is able to evoke in a recipient a thought neither on the basis of resemblance, nor on the basis of a custom or convention, but on the basis of some analogy between it and the object symbolised, an analogy not seldom vague and difficult to grasp”. Interestingly, “resemblance” and “analogy”, often more or less identified, are here opposed to each other; later, however, rephrasing his point, Wallis (p. 28) tells us that “there is no resemblance of appearance between power or courage and the lion” (my italics); and yet, he pursues, the relation is not conventional, for the lion cannot arbitrarily be exchanged for something else (Saussure 1968: 155ff makes the same point about the scales and justice). One may have doubts about the force of this argument, since even conventional links may be felt to be necessary (as shown by Benveniste’s 1966 argument against Saussurean arbitrariness); and yet I think Wallis has a point, for whatever “analogy” there is between the symbol and what it stands for, in the examples so far considered, there is nothing “perceptible” (in the sense of Husserl’s “anschaulich”) about it, and there is no “density”, in Goodman’s sense at least if the “continuous aspect” referred to is the spatiality of the Lifeworld. It will be noted that these are differences to Goodman’s favoured examples of exemplification, not only the samples, but also at least some cases of “metaphorical exemplification”: Yves Klein blueness, for example, is clearly perceptible and dense; and even sorrow may be perceptible, if not dense, if Arnheim (1966) is right.

Now let us examine Wallis’ lion case (cf. Fig. 5.). It is important to observe here that Wallis makes a clear distinction between the symbol, which is the lion, and the picture of the symbol, in this case the lion picture; and we are going to follow that distinction, although, as well shall see, there is an intimate relationship between symbols and pictures. Just like the metaphorical operation, the symbolic operation amounts to a cross—classification of reality. However, there are at least two important differences. While the metaphorical operation is essentially a reclassification of signs, the symbolic operation applies to things (as implied by Wallis’ distinction). In the second place, whereas metaphors transgress borders between established categories, symbols rather seem to invoke a secondary but at least as traditional organisation of the world of our experience as that of the official categories. Neither power nor courage are properties contained in the zoological characterisation of the lion; and yet, when the lion is established as a kind of prototype of a category, which will also normally contain human beings, there is no sense of transgression. What we have is a parallel but secondary organisation of the Lifeworld, not a revolutionary one.

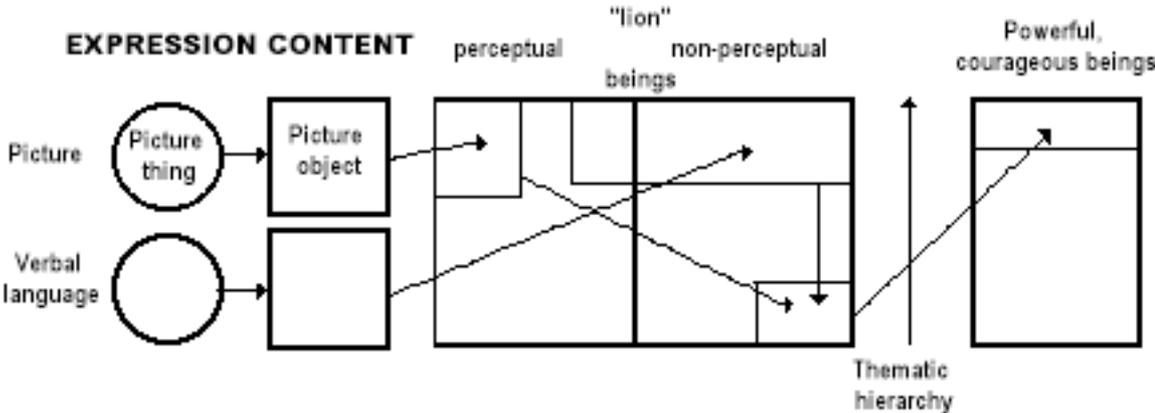


Fig. 5. The functioning of symbols

The metaphorical revolution takes place at the level of signs; symbolism, since it is not subversive, may inhere in things. Like the dummy, the symbol is based on independently existing objects; but unlike the dummy, it makes use of objects which have their primary justification elsewhere, and which are valued, first of all, as “selves”. So far, Wallis is undoubtedly right when he distinguishes the symbol and the picture of the symbol. And yet, it is, I believe, only through the intermediary of some other sign that the symbol will function as such. It is not when we encounter the real lion that the symbolic operation, causing it to represent power or courage, will take place; not any scales will represent justice, but only those that have been manufactured in some special way to invoke it; and so on. Of course, the symbol may also be embodied in words. The picture, and any other kind of visually based sign, must thus use visual properties of, for instance, the lion, to invoke some subset of the lion’s non-perceptual properties. Similarly, the verbal sign must use the “pertinent” semantic features, or, as we would say, those features highest on the thematic hierarchy of the word, to refer to properties of the lion which are low—ranking in the thematic hierarchy, or even of doubtful existence.

No matter if the symbol begins from perceptual attributes, as in the symbolic picture, or from thematically high—ranking, mostly conceptual properties, as in the symbolic word, in both cases it makes a semantic connection to low—ranking, conceptual properties of the corresponding cultural object, and these are then used to create a prototype of a new category. In the Goethean symbol something more is required: perhaps that the prototype should be treated as if it exhausted the class, reducing all other members to its likeness, and thus giving the class an appearance of absolute necessity. Otherwise, symbols would seem to be asymmetrical in the same sense as metaphors; and apart from the fact that they produce no tension between the categories, they differ from pictures in the same way as metaphors.

Although Todorov (1972; 1977) seems to use the term “symbol” in a very peculiar sense, it may be worthwhile investigating whether there are any real symbols in Todorov’s (1972) putatively symbolic sentence “Les personnes nées a la lune rouge deviendront rois”. Todorov, opposing the symbol to the (conventional) sign, treats this sentence as a series of consecutive equivalencies, but that hardly does justice to its complex symbolic import. First, there is a spatio—temporal contiguity between the new—born child and the red moon (astrologically reinterpreted as a causality); but, of course, numerous other things were contiguous with the child at the moment he was born, so the moon is chosen, first, because of its great visibility in the sky (which in itself is a very important “semantic domain”), and second, because it is red, which both makes it deviant as a moon and intrinsically conspicuous a second time. The moon, therefore, is redundantly marked as a conspicuous object of the world, and thus it is used to form the class of conspicuous things, or, more exactly, of red, conspicuous things, for the red colour remains with us, as we shall see, although it has already been translated into conspicuousness. Inside the class of red, conspicuous things, there is then a projection from the sky to something closer at home, the central Lifeworld object, which is the human body, and there, redness and conspicuousness are represented by the blood. But it so happens that blood, besides being conspicuous to human beings and red, is also reputedly powerful; and so it is used to form a new prototype class, that of powerful things. We have already been out in cosmos and inside the human body, and now we pass on to a third, intermediate domain, that of human society, where power is represented by the king. In conclusion, then, it is rather by means of a series of partially overlapping prototype categories than through mere equivalencies, that certain new—borns are associated to kings. Of course, the “logic” of all this is heavily “figurative”, not to say, in Levy—Bruhl’s terms, “participative” (cf. Blondel 1926) — but that is another story.

We have seen that the dummy is based on an independent object, in the sense of not being entirely derived from the principle of relevance defining the sign; but, at the same time, on an object being so

low—ranked in the categorical framework of the Lifeworld that it could only serve as a sign.. Thus, the dummy is opposed, on the one hand, to signs, which are objects only having meaning in relation to other objects, and to signs made out of other signs, the most obvious case of which is the metaphor. Symbols, however, operate on things rather than on signs, and yet they are characteristically conveyed through other signs, in spite of the fact that, unlike the dummy, they are based on objects which are in themselves high—ranking in the Lifeworld.

Thus it may be seen that concepts such as primary and secondary iconicity, picture sign and simulacrum, symbol and dummy, and so on, only serve to open up the vast domain of a future semiotics of iconicity.

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