Mieke Bal*

Meaning-making in the European semiosphere

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to examine how to bring together the general, large area of "semiosphere" (Lotman), the detailed ("close") analysis of cultural objects, and the point of the flexible methodology we call interdisciplinary. The semiosphere I address is the (uncertain) one we call "Europe". The starting point is the semiotic status of the exclamation mark as I have used it to connect two preoccupations in the title of a film I made in 2020. The heart of the analysis is ambiguity, in language as well as in other domains. This serves to enhance the uncertainties that always accompany semiotic analysis, which in my view is for the better. After the comments triggered by my film, I turn to visual art as the apparent "other" of language, but through a reflection on colour, I reject that binary in favour of the more flexible concept of the figural (Lyotard). Throughout the article I also undermine the opposition between still and moving images.

Keywords: colour; cultural analysis; interdisciplinarity; Lotman; Lyotard

1 Entering the semiosphere

With the current precarious state of the world, the post-Brexit turmoil, the militant aggression at the Poland–Belarus border, and the war against Ukraine, it seems unproductive, even hazardous, to look especially to Europe if we seek to understand how meaning comes about in specific contexts. "Europe", instead, seems to be embedded in Deleuze's "Sahara aesthetic", a constantly changing, mobile (non-)form, the instability of which carries political risks of severance rather than aesthetic binding. Europe is no longer a reliable unity, if it ever has been. This raises the question of the borders of the "semiosphere": the delimitation of the cultural area within which meaning-making follows certain conventions that make meaning transmittable, or rather, sharable. This is the primary point of semiotics. The concept of "semiosphere" is, in this sense, a key term of semiotics,

***Corresponding author: Mieke Bal**, Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), Amsterdam, The Netherlands, E-mail: Mieke.G.Bal@gmail.com

since it acknowledges the non-universality of meaning-making, as well as its social-cultural nature.[1]

The first part of the title of this essay is derived from my fragmented autobiographical serial publication, "Moments of meaning-making", in slow progress, of which only the first installment has appeared so far (2021a). There, I argue, on the basis of life experiences of the most diverse kind, that the tools of meaning-making are not simply a solid knowledge of the language. They involve listening, dialogue, the temporal aspect of looking back, and the creativity of imagining other possibilities. Meaning happens in encounters. Semiotics is the theoretical field where this is recognised and theorised, so that it becomes possible to analyse meaning-making without dictionary-like simplicity and rigour, and without eliminating subjectivity, which is neither void nor all-encompassing. The second part comes from an awareness of the spacetime-specificity of meaning-making.

In a very useful volume occasioned by the 100th birthday of one of the foremost semioticians, Russian-born literary scholar Juri Lotman (1922–1993), the renowned Estonian scholar of the semiotics of culture Peeter Torop, who initiated and edited this volume with Marek Tamm, opens his chapter on "Semiosphere" with the statement that this concept "marks his [Lotman's] move towards *dynamic cultural analysis*" (Tamm and Torop 2021). He continues by writing that "the concept has *travelled* from one terminological field to another." And he ends this introductory paragraph with the following remark, "'semiosphere' marks the complementarity of disciplines studying culture, the movement towards the creation of general theory of culture and *flexible methodology*" (Torop 2021: 296, all emphases added). In addition to everything else I can learn from that rich 2021 book, in these opening sentences three terms speak to me in particular: "cultural analysis", "the concept has travelled", and "flexible methodology". The first of these, "cultural analysis" as distinct from "cultural studies", formed the grounding of a research institute I co-founded at the University of Amsterdam in 1994. The insistence on "analysis" is crucial, and congenial to Lotman's commitment to close reading. The second underlies my book on "travelling concepts" in the Humanities. And the third statement has been a long-time directive for my work, both research and teaching. Boundaries between disciplines have never satisfied me, and always hindered the depth of thinking and analysis. This circumscribes my personal-academic "semiosphere".

1 On meaning-making, which he terms meaning generation, as a general issue in semiotics, see Yu (2019a). I use the term "aesthetic" in the sense of Baumgarten (1970 [1750]), extremely succinctly, as 1) binding, 2) through the senses, 3) in public space. This comes close to the concept of semiosphere. For a brief explanation, see Hlobil (2009). On Deleuze's Sahara aesthetic, see Buydens (2005).

I don't even remember if I learnt any of these concept/ideas or all three primarily from Lotman or if, in contrast, recognising these issues is his work endeared it/him to me because I was preoccupied with them. My academic work has always been semiotic-inspired, and the three angles Torop mentions in that first paragraph explain why. Lotman, along with Peirce, has been my semiotic source of inspiration. Lotman insisted on close analysis as a more detailed engagement than what cultural studies propagated. Hence, in the title of our research institute, the reference to "cultural analysis". The fact that concepts, and conceptual thinking, "travel", adapting to disciplinary, geographical, and historical shifts in different semiospheres, was particularly relevant for Lotman in his Russian–European (spatial) and politically transforming (temporal) context. And although he remained primarily focused on literature, that art form was never isolated from the wider context in which he worked.[2]

When I discovered the idea of semiotics, now decennia ago, my excitement about it concerned the integration of philosophy (thinking) and (close) analysis (doing), as well as the resistance against media-essentialism and disciplinary constraints, with their methodological dogmas. Semiotics offered the possibility of facilitating that integration and the tools to do so, so that my passion for both, with teaching as an important third, could ease in as an activity that *made sense* – to use a semiotically relevant phrase to be taken literally as well as figuratively. On the side of philosophy, in addition to especially Spinoza, Bergson, and Deleuze, Theodor Adorno always accompanied my thinking. That attachment is due to his integration of sociopolitical wisdom with philosophical rigour. And recently, just one week before the worldwide lockdown of Spring 2020, I encountered that double integration once more. To my delight, I was invited by the famous Leon Schiller National Film School in Łódź, Poland, to make an experimental "essay film". I had one week to conduct a day-long seminar on the subject of the essay film, to discuss the project with the participants, and to shoot, edit, and finalise the film, in a semi-foreign semiosphere, working with actors, cinematographers, sound engineers, and editors whose language I did not understand at all. Fortunately, English was, as usual, a helpful tool. The word "essay" in its meaning of "trying", in turn in its Anglo-Saxon two meanings of "attempting" and "challenging", was more than appropriate. From beginning to end, ambiguity and its productive side-effects and affects accompanied the process. Trying as it was, the activity turned out, in fact, to be highly exciting and satisfactory. And ambiguity, with the resulting instability of meaning, offered a great contribution. I wish to put

2 Following the respective order of the Torop citations, see my related books: 1996, 2002, 2022. For interdisciplinarity as a "flexible methodology", my earlier book (1988) already made the case for that.

ambiguity at the heart of the concept of semiosphere. This is what makes it, as well as semiotic practice, both stable, in the sense of delimited, and unstable.[3]

Ambiguity is crucial to meaning-making, and specific semiospheres can become prominent as the meanings shift and multiply. To understand, negotiate, and deploy meanings in the European semiosphere, an alertness to ambiguity as productive is of crucial importance. Through ambiguity, we can also be alerted to something like an international semiosphere. To make the case for the beneficial effects of ambiguity, in what follows I first primarily consider the effect of one *sign*, in fact a simple one much used in Europe, which changed everything in the film I made: *the exclamation mark*: "!" It is neither a word, nor a letter; it is neither part of an alphabet, nor a signifier carrying a signified, in the line of Saussure. It is neither iconic nor indexical, as in Peirce's semiotics. Nor can it be considered part of Lotman's secondary modelling systems, because it does not translate language into an artistic text. Yet, it is undeniably something like a sign, semiospherically specific as it is, and as such it is quite powerful. It changes meanings, intonation, and interaction with addressees. To be precise, thanks to the exclamation mark, I must say there are simultaneously two titles to the 2020 film, each carrying their own meaning, semio-situation, and effects. The first is *It's About Time.*, ending on a period, denoting the subject or theme of the film – what the film is "about" in the ordinary sense of that preposition. This is a kind of "third-person discourse", the impersonal language use where the object (the "about") is absent from the scene. This thematic centre concerns my ongoing interest in and argument for revising our sense of history by turning the linearity of chronology into a mutual movement or directionality between present and past. I have argued for that temporal mutuality by proposing the term "pre-posterous" (1999). This term is ambiguous, with a self-ironic wink, alluding to the way I have been scolded for writing about art in a (wrongly) allegedly ahistorical way, considered "preposterous" in the sense of "absurd", whereas I simply ("literally") sought to make the prepositions "pre-" and "post-" dialogic.[4]

But the small sign – a term I will continue to use, if only because it is so simple and short, but without essentialising it – that changes everything in the film's title is the exclamation mark: *!*. The title is, in the final version, *It's About Time!*, with the subtitle *Reflections on Urgency* appealing to a typical phrase current in the Anglo-Saxon semiosphere: It's about time we did something; something must happen! This is the rallying call for climate activism; as such, it is a first–second person discourse, in a personal, interactive language situation. The small sign completely

3 For my views of teaching, specifically in relation to visuality, see the interviews in Lutters (2018). The invitation came from Dr Jakub (Kuba) Mikurda. The genre of the essay film has recently been discussed widely (esp. Rascaroli 2008). Mostly, however, these essays discuss films, so they are highly self-reflexive and relatively difficult to bring to bear on other issues.

4 I won't go into the debate about the possibility of using the term "sign" here. Many replace it by "model", as a "form of meaning". See Yu (2019a), and more extensively Sebeok and Danesi (2000).

transforms the meaning and the communicative situation. That exclamation mark also changes the way we would pronounce the title, becoming a sound figure. It makes us raise our voices and even imaginatively raise a warning finger, with a transformation of meaning and of address as a consequence. It is what turns a film on (about) an intellectual issue into a political one – thanks to the ambiguity of the English – with the result of integrating the two. This integrative transformation through ambiguity is, for me, the most important aspect of semiotics over disciplinary fields – its relevance. But how can this small sign that hardly belongs to a category of signs, be understood in a semiotic framework? This is the question this essay raises.[5]

2 Trying semiotics

The kind of film I was asked to experiment with was called an "essay film". This essay is about the essay, then. But not as a genre. It concerns the essay "as form" (as Adorno puts it), of thought alive that is "partial" in the two senses of that felicitously ambiguous word, i.e. subjective and fragmented. In other words: of thinking as social, performative, and always un-finished, as dialogic. Rather than taking a fixed semiotic theory as my point of departure, as a filmmaker I had to start in practice, from the essay film as a text in the medium of film and its needs, in search of suitable concepts, techniques, and creative ideas. This is also part of semiosis, not easily fitted within Lotman's sequence language–text–culture–semiosphere. To begin with, the film needed a story in order to hold viewers' attention. And, as a film, it needed (audio-)visuality. Specialists in communication theory call this transmediality – a term I decline to use because of the "indifference" implied in the preposition "trans-", but here, indicating a transformation from one medium to another; hence, let's call it "intermediality".[6]

This was my primary challenge. For developing the script, which I wrote before travelling to Poland and encountering the participants, I took on the mythical figure of Cassandra. She could foresee the future but, in an antique *#MeToo* case, when she declined to sleep with him, was cursed by Apollo to never be believed. With Cassandra's story, retold by East German writer Christa Wolf in an updated, "pre-posterous" version from 1983, I tried to "figure" the rallying call implied in the English phrase "It's about time!" (Wolf 1988). The verb "to figure", on which more

5 The film can be watched on my website, at http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/its-about-time/. My 1999 book *Quoting Caravaggio* lies at the heart of the intellectual reflections ("about"). In the film, Cassandra quotes from that book.

6 All terminology and ideas on (inter)mediality are engaged with the two-volume collective work edited by Lars Elleström (2021). His introductory essay is a theory on its own. I wrote a foreword to these volumes.

below, stands for the effort to make a figural shape for the thoughts on the indifference of people towards the imminent ecological disaster of the world. The exclamation mark of the title indicates that side of the film's title. But if Adorno so enigmatically but also inspiringly called the essay a "form", I had to find a corresponding form that would integrate story and image, audiovisuality and language.[7]

For my purposes, along with Lotman's key concept, I was compelled to (intellectually) cross the Atlantic and, acknowledging that he had become a worldwide semiotic master no longer confined to the American semiosphere, to call on Peirce. Especially through Umberto Eco's work, Peirce became semiospherically European. At first sight, Peirce's concept of the "icon", the category of signs grounded in correspondence, relied too much on resemblance, which raises the unanswerable question of the referent. Peirce's index could work but lacked the visuality cinema needs. And "symbol" would remain too close to convention, whereas innovation was my goal. Instead, after much reflection, I temporarily suspended the semiotic framework to end up with French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's concept of *the figural*. This concept is not particularly semiotic, although I find it very fitting in semiotic thinking. The philosopher came up with that concept in his attempt (essay) to overcome the tenacious word–image opposition. In his 1971 PhD thesis, Lyotard argued for language to be seen as more dynamic than it usually is, turning it into a force, a movement. As such, he argued, language is closer to the Freudian unconscious as laid out in *The interpretation of dreams* (1900) than to any Saussure-derived structuralist conception of it: dynamism as opposed to structural stability. And the importance of visuality in Freud's theory of interpretation, with its semiotic implications, has not been appreciated enough, whereas it is crucial for his thinking. Including, especially, *force* in his concept of language, Lyotard describes meaning as sense, in terms that include affect, sensation and intuition, movement, and also spatiality (Lyotard 2020 [1971]). For him, language, and the meanings it produces, is primarily dynamic. This corresponds with Lotman's flexible methodology as described in Torop's opening paragraph. Force, for Lyotard, is inherent in language, and it is

> […] nothing other than the energy that folds and wrinkles the text and makes of it an aesthetic work, a difference, that is, a form […]. And if it expresses, it is because movement resides within it as a force that overturns the table of significations with a seism that makes sense […]. (Rodowick 2001: 9–10)[8]

7 The Cassandra story came to my attention again through the brilliant artwork by Nalini Malani, who mobilized it in several works of painting, video shadow plays, and animations. See my study of her video shadow plays (2016), the first chapter of which is devoted to the Cassandra work she made for the Kassel Documenta in 2012.

I find the word "seism" particularly powerful in this revision of what language is and does. The word re-introduces iconicity in the figural view of language. These words affiliate language with, specifically, cinematic language, based on the etymological sense of "movement" (*kinetic*) rather than any technical specificity. Both languages, in their great diversity in Europe, and the cinematic as an informational tool, a mode of communicating and an art form are prominent in the European semiosphere.[9]

I also found it remarkable that Adorno's extensive writings on literature (two volumes in English) begin with an essay on the essay, thus giving that category pride of place in literature, before poetry, prose, or theatre, but unexpectedly, as "form". I interpret that term in Adorno's essay title as congenial with Lotman's sense of "structure", as a "secondary modelling system", although without the rigour Lotman attaches to structure (probably in line with Saussure) (Lotman 1977 [1970]). Adorno does not define his key word "form", however. Would he have difficulty defining it? I suppose so. What form is that if none can be fixed? In line with Deleuze's "Sahara aesthetic", I decided to give the film, as well as the essay I published in the wake of it, the formless and unfixable form of short fragments, which could be seen with the period/third-person discourse, and the exclamation mark as the sign of second-personhood. Adorno devoted a large part of his essay on "The essay as form" to bridging the gaps that binary oppositions tend to dig, which he did by means of nuancing, even if he does not foreground that verb. This resistance against binarism is one of the reasons for my ongoing interest in this philosopher. The following passage characterises the philosophical *tone* – a nuance that goes well with Adorno's use of "form":

> The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character ("The essay as form", Adorno 1991: 9).

Along with the series that ends on the rejection of reductionism, of these words of wisdom, "partial" – mind the ambiguity of that word! – and "fragmentary" in particular seem to bring us closer to what an "essay" can be or do. Both words resist the idea of the total, of the encompassing whole, but also, in its shadow, the

8 I quote from film and philosophy scholar D. N. Rodowick's rendering of Lyotard's concept. To grasp the concept more fully, it is rewarding to read Rodowick's first chapter, "Presenting the figural", 1–44.
9 For another solid explanation of the figural in relation to and distinction from "figure" and "figurative" within the context of art history in its relation to psychoanalysis and philosophy, see Vlad Ionescu (2018). This author discusses ideas of influential theorists of images. I discuss the conception of the cinematic as kinetic apropos of the paintings by Edvard Munch and Flaubert's prose in *Madame Bovary*, making an implicit case for the figural (2017b: 24–43).

totalitarianism that seems to have many places of the current world in its grip. Adorno contrasts binary thinking with an endorsement of ambiguity, as do I in this text.[10]

In addition to the opposite of totality, "partial" also means "subjective" in the sense of acknowledging that what the essayist brings forward cannot pretend to be an objective, factual truth but, instead, lies close to her or his heart. This accords well with semiotic thinking, where the acknowledgement of the indispensable role of the act of interpretation is always a key element. Elleström (2021) calls it "cognitive import": the transfer of the message/sign/"media product" – to use a media-unspecific term – to the perceiver, who transforms it into their own semiospheric habits. For, interpretation is social, responding to what others have advanced on the text or image, the "media product" under consideration. Partiality also means "passionate", in that the holder of the view brought forward cares about it. And then, there is the element of "rational", since partiality also encompasses the wish to persuade. And this can only be done through rational arguments. As for "fragmentary", this accords well with the non-total (itarian). Please keep these two words, "partial" and "fragmentary", in mind, with their multiple meanings, together foregrounding even more strongly that nothing can be whole. Following Adorno's thinking, my semiotic reasoning, here, is geared towards ambiguity as a key to cultural complexity. This is always bound to particularities of semiospheres, and therefore undermines any ambition of universalism.

"Essay", in addition to taxing, difficult, means "trying", attempting to say something for which no ready-made (literary) form or genre exists as yet. This is the Sahara aspect of the semiosphere. And "genre" is not where we should look to understand the essay, then, but rather, keeping the words in movement, we should explore the word name itself. The modesty that word includes is crucial: trying is attempting, groping towards, fumbling, even floundering. Modesty itself acknowledges that nothing is perfect nor finished, and also that no one does anything alone, that making something is collective and social, and always in process. This accords well with Lotman's view of semiosis as social. It also has a temporal consequence, since it intimates the idea that "things", such as artworks or in the case at hand, films, are never completed; they are, as the Deleuzian saying has it, "in becoming", since "trying" is never over.[11]

10 I published an essay on the experimental film in the journal *Text matters* (2020a). Mark the productive ambiguity of the journal's title. I recycle some of the ideas laid out here from that essay. Ambiguity, crucial in my analysis here, is a kind of uncertainty of the kind Cobley advances (2016: 88).

11 For a lucid and succinct explanation of Deleuze's "becoming", see Biehl and Locke (2010).

But "essay" also includes "thought". You don't try something without, first, or during the process, thinking about it. As it happens, one of my films that Kuba Mikurda considered essay films and which had enticed him to invite me for this experiment, *Reasonable Doubt: Scenes from Two Lives* (2016), concerns precisely thought: the social, collective, performative aspects of the activity and the resulting ideas. The narrative strand of that film consists of scenes from the life of René Descartes, Western modernity's primary rationalist who, as my film suggests, was by far not as exclusively rational as we have made him out to be. According to the essayistic thrust of that film, thinking itself is tentative. Thinking, then, occurs in the essay mode. This makes the essay an important, indeed, crucial cultural phenomenon.[12]

3 Relationality

There is one other aspect of the essay that I consider as fundamental as modesty, because it is as social as it is semiotic, one that derives from it. That is reciprocity, mutuality, reversibility: dialogue, not monologue. This is the socially crucial aspect of relationality. Whether or not essayists are alone when making/writing it, they are already responding to other ideas that are around; an essay is bi- or multilateral. As convinced as the essayist is likely to be when embarking on making an essay, the fact that nothing can be done in isolation – even sitting in a study in front of a computer, one is intellectually, mentally surrounded by others – entails a responsive attitude to the call and contribution of other people inhabiting the same semiosphere to the topic of the essay and the essayist's argument. This is the dialogic nature of thought, and of the subsequent "trying". In this sense, the essay "as form" is a model of thinking in general, and its figuration (its form) is exemplary in this sense. This holds not only for the other people directly or indirectly involved, but also for what, in our binaristic mode of thinking and considering the world, we take too easily to be the "object". In my work on visual and literary art I have frequently advocated an open ear and eye for what the object, so to speak, has to say. In this line of thought I have put forward one of my academic catchphrases, "The object speaks back." By that phrase I mean that the object of analysis must be given the opportunity to resist an interpretation the subject, the

12 On this and my other films, see http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/. This film, on René Descartes and Queen Kristina of Sweden, premiered in the Muzeum Sztuki MOCAC in Kraków, at the film and philosophy festival in 2016. Professor Roma Sendyka made this possible. Simultaneously, the Museum of Photography displayed the 5-screen installation that I made on the same subject, curated by Roma Sendyka and Curatorial Collective, with an Open Access catalogue (in Polish): http://jagiellonian.academia.edu/KolektywKuratorski. A book on this project appeared later (also in Polish).

academic, comes up with. This can be done by means of a simple procedure: whenever we cite or quote something, or use an image to "illustrate" an argument, it pays off to look back and cheque the alleged example against what we just wrote about it. The point is this. If it doesn't quite match, so much the better; thinking that non-matching through, we learn from the object.[13]

This bilateral collaboration also holds for thought itself. The most effective formulations of this I know come, not coincidentally, from a psychoanalyst and from a cultural analyst, both brilliant and original in their respective fields. Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas wrote in one of those sentences that became an enduring guideline for my work: "I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it" (1987: 10). Not only does this phrasing express modesty – the author acknowledges that he does not yet know exactly what he is busy thinking about or thinking out – but it also qualifies the intensity ("engaged") and the liveness of the thought-in-becoming. Most importantly, the idea Bollas is trying to think up itself collaborates with him. This should not be taken as an unwarranted personification. Instead, it signifies the limit of the thinker's power, as well as the dynamic quality of thought as an activity. The author and his "object", the idea he is working on, the idea-in-becoming, do it together. The idea "wishes", strives to be thought; it even struggles to achieve the status of idea. Rather than personifying the idea-in-becoming, the phrase acknowledges the need for collaboration; the integration of tentative process and "second-personhood".[14]

In a strikingly comparable formulation, the cultural analyst, semiotician, and film scholar Kaja Silverman formulated her theory of the image of, or *as* memory, in the following way:

> If, in trying to make sense of this strange account of unconscious memories, I am unable to avoid attributing to them the status of a subject, that is because subjectivity itself is in its most profound sense nothing other than *a constellation of visual memories* which is *struggling to achieve a perceptual form*. (2000: 89, emphasis added)

That struggle is not only bilateral; given that both Bollas the author and the idea-in-becoming are connected to many other beings, issues, and things, it is multilateral. Silverman's word "constellation" intimates that same multiplicity. This is also a feature of the essay as form, approach, or genre if we endorse the following summing up in a reflection on Adorno's essay:

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13 For a more detailed explanation, see the interviews in Lutters (2018).

14 I borrow the very useful term "second-personhood" from the feminist Canadian philosopher Lorraine Code (1991).

> Nearly all the familiar topoi are here: the apparent spontaneity of presentation, the emphasis on rhetorical sophistication, the exaltation of the incomplete, the rejection of a purely deductive logic, the eschewal of heavy-handed profundity, the antipathy toward systematic dogmatism, the treatment of non-scientific, often unconventional subject matter, the central importance of play, the insistence on human fallibility, the image of a meandering, exploratory journey. (Pourciau 2007: 624)

If we continue to read for intermediality, this can be read in a way that brings the visuality in more strongly. This list reads like an impressionist painting, Sahara-like instable. The features are like the dots that, without line drawing, end up figuring something. There is nothing systematic about it, which, in positive terms, helps to characterise the essay even better. It assists us in avoiding any prematurely fixating attempt to define the essay as a genre. It also helps to renounce efforts, on the part of the essayist, to fulfil all these expectations, since incompleteness is part of the essay-as-attempt. So, if only as a tactic, it is useful. But how, then, could I begin thinking an essay *film*? From the awareness of the importance of bilaterality and without fear of contradiction, let me briefly enter into the fictional world, which is undeniably an element of the semiosphere. I now reflect on my primary interlocutor, who is a fictional being – one of those struggling ones.[15]

4 Figuring characters as signs

In my search (attempt) for semiotic forms that could make the thoughts I wanted to propose and convey, the ambiguity had to remain intact. Hence, the "about" and the rallying cry had to stay paired, even intertwined. The characters had to figure meanings as signs, no matter what (Peircean) category exactly is the principal one. Iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity are always merged, in any sign use, albeit in different proportions. The primary issue is the interaction between the figures, which is where narrativity comes in. I figured the "about" idea through the enactment of a tableau vivant of Cassandra's lover Aeneas as Caravaggio's *John the Baptist in the Wilderness* (1604), with an allegedly abstract but in fact, highly sensuous contemporary painting by American painter David Reed shifting over it and by interactions of Cassandra with two paintings by South African-Dutch

15 The genre of the essay film has recently been discussed widely (esp. Rascaroli 2008). Mostly, however, these essays are films on films, so, they are highly self-reflexive, and relatively difficult to bring to bear on other issues. The concept of "tactic" as distinct from "strategy" has been developed by Michel de Certeau in the introduction to his 1984 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In a brilliant recent study, Tingting Hui brought it to the present world (Hui 2020). Exceedingly briefly put, a strategy is for the powerful who seek to win a battle; a tactic for the ordinary people who seek to live (Certeau xix).

Figure 1: The enactment.

painter Ina van Zyl, which precariously balance on the sharp and impossible distinction between reality and fiction; and through semiotic utterances and "real life" (for the former, see Figure 1).

In both instances, the characters become figures, and as such, figurations of ideas. The living body of the actor playing Aeneas, and the photocopy of the seventeenth century painting – a still of a still – intermedially produce a media product: the *tableau vivant*. Then, during a history lesson in which Cassandra (now acting as a teacher) explains pre-posterous history to her lover-student, dressed up as a Walter Benjamin look-alike, the media whirl around (see Figure 2). In a discussion with his teacher, Aeneas quotes a passage from Benjamin's fifth thesis on the philosophy of history, which has been deeply influential for my thinking on history: "[E]very image of the past that is not recognized by the present *as one of its own concerns* threatens to disappear irretrievably" (emphasis added). Theory – here, philosophy – participates as a medium in itself.[16]

It is after this quoting-reading, with the staged copy of the Caravaggio painting, with the *tableau vivant* just seen still in the perceiver's mind, that this is literally and concretely turned into an intermedial product when the painting by David Reed shifts over it. For a moment almost – but not quite! – this contemporary painting hides the

16 Needless to say, this Benjamin quote supports the idea of "pre-posterous history". To preserve the past, it must be made actual in the present and have relevance there. An epigraph to my work on art.

Figure 2: The lesson.

older work, or "pre-text" as I like to call such precedencies. In the same vein, "figuration", here, is a more precise and specific term for a particular kind of intermedial sign. These figures are also needed as a controversial, slightly polemically entangled couple of lovers. Cassandra, in one of these cases – the other one concerning the precarious distinction between sign and thing – also acts as a teacher of history, which is key to her later decisions. In that role, she explains the concept of "pre-posterous history", in a slightly pedantic tone. And Aeneas, allegedly her student, responds to her teaching in the (quoted) words and with the looks of Walter Benjamin. These two figures are thus themselves figural instances of pre-posterous history, as its personifications. Whether you wish to call them in that capacity signs, figurations, or models is up to you. This depends on your theoretical semiotic framework.[17]

For Cassandra (played by Magdalena Żak), I had to develop ideas about how to visually figure stubbornness and despair. In that context, I also thought about something that seems banal but in its materiality is also firmly anchored in the semiosphere: costumes. As a teacher, she looks proper and serious, in a black suit, her hair in a bun. For the scenes in the palace, but also a scene where she explains her position and vision to a public, I brought a shapeless and colourless (off-white)

17 Cassandra reads the key passage from the introduction of my 1999 book on pre-posterous history, and the enactment of the Caravaggio, with the Reed painting shifting over it, is an example, or embodiment, of it.

silk dress, underneath which she wore her own contemporary "punk" half-boots. I also brought a necklace consisting of large links, a chain that, coming close to merging iconicity with indexicality, would bring in the idea of captivity. This brought the serious historical (alas, non-fictional) topic of slavery into the temporary European semiosphere. Is that historically justified? Unfortunately, it is. Slavery is a theme I had been intensely focusing on in the video project I had made in 2019 and am currently showing, *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*. And, although Cervantes created Don Quijote after five and a half years of suffering slavery in Algiers, hence, outside of Europe but captured within the Mediterranean, we know only too well that slavery also continues to occur within the European semiosphere. And in Wolf's novel, from (then) East Germany, Cassandra reflects on her captivity, even if it is in the rich palace of her parents. This poignant contrast had to be figured as well, and the location in the Herbst Palace, part of the Museum Sztuki, was perfect for this contrastive figuration.[18]

For the role of Aeneas, Kuba's creative expertise found the actor Adrian Budakow – like Magdalena Żak, a true find. To make a somewhat banal point, which does, however, concern the semiosphere: a preliminary question I had for him was if he would mind appearing half-naked in a figuration I had conceived but not yet written. This was the impersonation just mentioned, as a *tableau vivant*, of Caravaggio's 1604 *John the Baptist* – an act I had been nurturing for some time, even before I embarked on filmmaking, as a demonstration of my concept of "pre-posterous history" as well as my conception of Baroque as both philosophical and artistic. Such mundane-seeming issues are all part of designing a film. No strictly delimited semiotic theory can obscure it; the semiosphere is also a sociopolitical sphere. Thankfully, Adrian didn't mind.

Then, as another banal-seeming issue, a title was needed which would have to harbour the allusions to the many aspects of the Cassandra figure and of time. Semiotics does not easily signify time. Determined to bring together, not in harmony but as a "discussion", my many concerns about time, the ambiguous title *It's About Time!* came up, with the exclamation mark as the shifter between the two sides of the sign's meanings. As mentioned above, I have developed and put to work a notion of time that acknowledges that not only the past influences the present, hence, also the future, but also the other way around. But the title contains a warning, too – Hurry up! – figured through the exclamation mark. Hence the subtitle, *Reflections on Urgency*. But there is more to temporality, and semiotic figuring of that is not so easy. Another figural aspect of time is rhythm. This has a

18 The 16 screens of the Don Quijote project can be found on my website, at http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/installations/don-quijote-sad-countenances/. An extensive catalogue of the Don Quijote project has been published in English and Spanish (see Bal 2020b). On slavery in Cervantes's case, see the incisive, well-documented award-winning study by Colombian literary scholar María Antonia Garcés (2005). On contemporary slavery, see Bunting and Quirk (2017).

bodily side to it, which is important if we want to recognize the importance of the body as not separate but at one with the mind. This was a strong issue in the film on Descartes I mentioned above. In the essay film, rhythm is always important, but especially in one primarily concerning time. In view of the second meaning of the title, the rhythm is almost hectic, becomes stronger as the film progresses, and closes on a frantic dance by Cassandra. She ends up saying: "the future is now", perverting chronology even more strongly, but with a real-sounding urgency.

Indeed, the backbone of the essay film is Cassandra's temporal awareness. Her repeated call for urgency is key, both to the ancient myth and Wolf's subjectivation of it, as well as to my attempt to make an essay film on this issue. Aeneas's interest in participating in political power, his rationality, and his resistance against Cassandra's wisdom figure the other side, the impossibility of Cassandra's wisdom winning the upper hand in a semiosphere where men have more influence than women and (official) politics rules over, and overrules, the (social) political. And in addition to the three aspects of temporality – traditionally, in narratology, called order (sequentiality), duration, and frequency – the one that falls under "duration", rhythm, is figured in Cassandra's frantic disco dance towards the end. The most personal, intimate moment in the film, I thought, should be one when the near-future infringes on the figures' personal lives, and the power relations are put on hold.[19]

This became the moment when, walking in the rainy city streets, holding hands with Aeneas, Cassandra dumps him as her lover, because he remains too close to the powers-that-be, resulting in a near-future in which he would become stultified. Whereas he asks her to come with him to escape from the dangerous place wherein they are caught, she simply, and still, affectionately, refuses. This, in her wording, concerns the future – one she rejects. She abandons him with the poignant words: "I cannot love a hero. I do not want to see you being transformed into a statue." This wording can be comparable to the exclamation mark: a gear-shift of meanings. The metaphor of "a statue" suggests rigidity, stultification, death. This is the ending of Wolf's novel. Cassandra's words cited above, "the future is now," spoken after her frantic disco dance, mark the end of my essay film.

5 Diffusion

One of the primary reasons for the relevance of semiotic thinking is to expand the realm of meaning-making beyond language-only. This is as obvious as it is difficult to

19 The three aspects of temporality were first systematized by Gérard Genette (1973). See my *Narratology* for succinct explanations (2017a: 66–103), and for examples of analysis based on them, Bal (2021b: 100–124).

theorise and to fit into a methodology. To make the case for this "other" of language, remaining with the Lyotardian concept of the figural and engaging the communication theorists mentioned above, I will now turn to the least language-like medium for meaning-making, which is colour. Not even as a support for visual art, but in and of itself. Can colours be considered as signs? Like languages, colours and the meanings attached to them have a history of diverse, in other words, diffused interpretations, effects, and affects. From the late Middle Ages, in Europe colour became symbolic in a way we now take for granted. In other semiospheres, these symbolic readings of colours were very different. While before society was simply "colourful", now specific colours gained the status of signs when they came to stand for certain social groups and the moral values they sought to represent, for moods, and event-occasions, such as black for mourning and white for virginity. This is most certainly not universal but bound to the borders of particular semiospheres. Precisely for this reason, colour and its effects and interpretations became a strongly sociopolitical force, even a language of sorts. And as in all languages, the sociopolitical aspects are included in the meanings attributed to them. In the classical seventeenth century, a debate began to rage according to which drawing was manly and colour was effeminate. This turned these colours into signs.[20]

But the diffuse meaning-making through colour also drew scientific and philosophical attention. The eminent scientist Isaac Newton (1642–1727) relieved the excess of interpretation when, in his *Opticks* (1979 [1704]), he devised a colour wheel with three primary colours: red, yellow, and blue. For Newton, these are the primary colours: colours that can be mixed to make other colours but cannot themselves be made through mixing. In 1810, Goethe further elaborated on Newton's theory with a colour theory of his own making. Seeking to understand and map the perceptual effects of colour, he devised an entire terminology for these effects: a language – or should I say: a semiotics – of colour. This is how diffusion, comparably to linguistic ambiguity, must become a serious epistemological issue, with its own semiotic concepts. Moving inward or outward, warm or cold, mobile or still, all categories of perception also became tenets of individual colours. Since the early nineteenth century, speculation has abounded about the impact, movement, directionality, and temperature of colours. The word "speculation" is meant, here, not as derogative ("not scientific") but to mark the participation of the people doing the speculating, the sociality of this kind of theorising. More often than not, these speculations were, however polemical, still in interactive (preposterous) continuity with these two early theories.

20 See Jacqueline Lichtenstein (1993) on this gendering-evaluating of colour versus drawing. For a very useful introduction to colour thinking, see Theo van Leeuwen (2011).

Soon, especially the emotional effects of colour became the object of the speculation. This had a great impact on the emergence of abstract art. In the absence of figurativity – but not of the figural! – in abstract art, colour became a prominent issue. When one attempts to eliminate all the aspects that are part of the great negative of standard view of abstraction – narrative, meaning, representation, language, illusionism – it is useful to acknowledge that meaning is the hardest to get rid of. We are semiotic animals; we function through meaning. When form is no longer the subject of mimetic representation, all that is left to gather meaning is colour. Important for the connection between *It's About Time!* and the time-colour-visuality imbrication is Swiss painter and art theorist Johannes Itten (1888–1967). He included temporality in his theory of colour. With the term "successive contrast" (1970: 19) he proposed that the brain creates complimentary after-images of the colours we see.[21]

Let me give one example from a contemporary artwork. This temporality of colour becomes prominent in the work of Belgian artist Ann Veronica Janssens, who, in her installation *Flash Film* (2000), explores and extends this idea. In contrast to what the title suggests, there is not a film in sight in this work. Instead, a number of coloured discs of paper are simply glued to a wall in irregular constellations. If you look at one of these coloured circles for a certain time, its colour begins to move. It develops a halo in a contrasting colour. This doubles the number of colours you see and blurs the line of the form. This is diffusion in its strongest sense. It also gains duration, staying in your vision even after you have detached your gaze from it. The idea is not only to create an inner palette by means of these after-effects, but also to play with form. The edge of the circle becomes fluid, so that the circle begins to look like a blot. It is no longer a separating line. Nor does it stay still. The halo flickers around the edges. This halo has the complementary colours that Itten had theorised, so that it accumulates and diffuses colour. It allows colours to "interact" in Joseph Albers' sense. But it also produces the movement that flickers so fast that, whatever we try to hold, it is impossible to master. Both duration and movement are involved in this process, of which the viewer is the agent. The viewer makes not only her own palette, but also her own film. This work demonstrates that the image is by definition in movement, as French philosopher Henri Bergson had it.[22]

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21 Itten taught at the Bauhaus until 1923. Hubert Damisch (2009: 4583) discusses this issue through the art and writing of Joseph Albers (1963). Albers develops the concept of "interaction of colour". For an illuminating Deleuzian view of abstraction that eschews the negatives, see Rajchman (1995).

22 These paragraphs are spin-offs from passages of a book I devoted to Janssens' work as a case of the integration of abstraction and the political (2013a). Bergson's theory of the image as by definition in movement is my starting point for the examination of figurative images (Bal 2013b).

Flash Film "argues", visually and experientially, that this fundamental movement can be and needs to be brought into visibility. This becomes a Foucauldian condition of seeing, which depends on the viewer's willingness to look intensely and duratively. This time, it is not speed that makes the case, as it does in my essay film, but still images that can be made to move only if the viewer is willing to make the effort and spend the necessary time. This suggests there is a stake involved. For now, that stake can be put simply. In these theories, colour is given more and more agency in relation to a viewer who is individually engaged with it. More agency to colour, more work for the viewer, but more reward for the latter, too. In Peircean semiotic terms, the intense collaboration between iconicity and indexicality achieves this.[23]

The principle of activity is the production of complementary colours by the viewer in response to what she sees. Self-made colours are much more varied and richer than prescribed, "objectively" produced ones. This is comparable to the ambiguity in language, which can also resonate in many directions. Because the iris widens and narrows according to the light, the pulsing seems much more rapid than it actually is. These works operate through the combination of (fast) rhythm and colour.[24]

I bring this reflection on colour in for two reasons. One is the question of its semiotic status. Can colour be compared to words as listed in dictionaries, and thus be considered signs? The other is the "thinking" aspect of the artistic play with colour. Janssens is known as an abstract and strongly political artist, and this makes additional sense of the question of the semiotic status of colour. This cannot be fixated, but nor can it be eliminated. To get a clearer grasp on this question, I must call on the semiotic theory of Peirce. This brings in an important concept that brings semiosis in proximity to what might seem to be its opposite: chance. Peirce contended that there can be no law without chance, indeed, that laws originate in chance. This idea is congenial with the "flexibility of method" Peeter Torop mentioned in his opening paragraph of the chapter on semiosphere I have quoted above. In what follows I try (in line with the "essay") to argue for the semiotic status of colours without falling back onto the traditional symbolic readings of them briefly discussed above.

6 By chance: can we read colours?

In an explanation of his three primary categories, Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness (for which the concepts icon, index, and symbol are better known to most), Peirce wrote:

23 On Foucault's conditions of seeing, best consult Rajchman's lucid article (1988).

24 The optic examination and theorization of the light–colour collaboration has a long history. It goes back to Aristotle, according to a thorough study by Alloa (2021: 53–104).

> If the universe is thus progressing from a state of all but pure chance to a state of all but complete determination by law, we must suppose that there is an original, elemental, tendency of things to acquire determinate properties, to take habits. This is the Third or mediating element between chance, which brings forth First and original events, and law which produces sequences or Seconds. (Peirce 1992: 234)

To historicise Peirce's thoughts, it is useful to consider modernism. In a brilliant study of the modernist novel, Robert Caserio argues that any attempt to understand modernism itself as a totality and hence, to sum it up and surpass it "goes against the grain of what modernism 'stands for'" (1999: 3). The most relevant element in this discussion of colour in the European semiosphere, however, is the paradox we cannot avoid running into. Here we need to include Freud, who also kept wavering between law and chance in his theorisation of the psyche. On the one hand, the psyche is self-divided and thrives on the haphazard wanderings of Aeros, "which plays havoc with the attempt to render desire uniform and intelligible" (Caserio 1999: 20). On the other hand, Freud insisted just as strongly on the fact that nothing the psyche does is accidental. The psyche is both plural and unified, but not coherent. The insight that chance, with its agency, is always around the corner makes any attempt to prescribe how art should be and how it should be received futile by definition.[25]

Surrendering entirely to chance, however, would be a disempowering attitude that might even lead to cynicism and to giving up on the possibility of communication, which is the ground for the concept of semiosphere. But denying chance in an absolutist belief in laws risks leading to destructive sciences and totalitarian politics, which is equally disempowering. The solution is to be found in the tension between the two – a tension that is unstable and subject to a heterochronic temporality. This is productive to the extent that it provides agency and at the same time compels modesty. It is a case of temporal ambiguity. Here lies the power of art, not to compel viewers to open themselves up to the potential emergence of new forms, and subsequently new social existence, but, paradoxically, to allow that to happen when chance meets habit.

In the face of totality, chance is both an opportunity and an obstacle, argues Caserio (1999: 6). He proposes the term *tychisms* (from the Greek *tychè*, meaning chance) for the different conceptions that not only admit chance, but also its dual capacity to preclude totality and to offer an alternative for it. In other words, tychism allows for the *agency* of chance. The insistence that chance is not just an occurrence, but one that has agency so that it can cause things to happen, is key to

25 In addition to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, for this integration of language, text and culture, I rely in this section on Caserio (1999) and Doane (2002), as well as Carlo Ginzburg's fundamental article on the index (1980).

understanding its philosophical importance. William James and Charles Sanders Peirce both struggled with chance in its opposition to the totality of law. In this guise, chance is an alternative subject for the second half of our slogan: man proposes, chance disposes.

When Goethe developed his extensive theory of perceptual effects, he insisted on the "temperature" of colours: the effect of warmth, brought about by red and orange, and of coldness, emanated by green and blue. Much as we must take such associations with a grain of salt if they are used mechanically as translations, there is something to them that makes the associations stick in everyday parlance about colours; they have modified our experiences of them. This is the effect of the delimitations of semiospheres. What the early abstract artists, such as Kandinsky, were up against was the idea that a colour had inherent meaning, effect, and value that ran parallel to the linguistic production of meaning. Yet, while shunning the conventional ways of talking about it, they continued to search for the meanings of colours. They felt limited by the predominance of symbolicity and wanted to get iconicity and indexicality back in there. Hunting for ways out of the restrictive effects of these conventions, they looked to music and the language of poetry.

There were good reasons for painters to question the conventions surrounding the meanings of colours while remaining invested in interpreting colours. Colours are the painters' primary tool, along with line drawing and composition. This is the major theoretical ambiguity that semiotics put on the table, which demonstrates the semiotic untenability of fixed (symbolic) colour meanings. This impossibility is generated by the productive ambiguities in Peirce's categories of signs and the grounds of their meaning production. In Peircean semiotic terms, the meaning that is usually attributed to colour is based on a naively simplified semiotic notion, however. Colours are said to have meanings on the basis of *iconicity* – one of three "grounds" for meaning production. Iconicity is based on "Firstness" and, through that principle, appears inevitable, even "natural". His definition of "Firstness" is an entrance into the understanding of colour as such. Peirce wrote in a letter to philosopher and friend Victoria, Lady Welby how she was to understand Firstness in relation to the other two categories, Secondness, and Thirdness. This explanation is utterly useful for our understanding of these "abstract" categories, and the fact that Peirce wrote this to a friend may help us feel intellectually closer to the philosopher-semiotician:

> I should define Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness thus:
> Firstness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else.
> Secondness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, with respect to a second but regardless of any third.

> Thirdness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third into relation to each other. (Peirce 1958: 328)

This "mode of being of that which is such as it is" without reference to anything else makes it easy to believe colours have inherent values, meanings, and effects. But that would turn them too rigorously from iconicity to symbolicity.[26]

However, Peirce's categories are never absolute and always relate to one another, with grounds overlapping. Ambiguity rules here, too. As soon as the colour is spoken about in terms of temperature, this inherent meaning is no longer possible. Now, it *resembles* its meaning, something we call iconicity. Although this is hard to consider as "positively and without reference to anything else," Peirce categorises iconicity as Firstness. This semiotic principle of iconicity, better known as "likeness", "analogy", or "similarity", then, has long been an unquestioned basis for the interpretation of colours, whether used in or out of the context of figurative art. When abstraction became an outspoken movement in art – after having been much discussed in the decades before – there was already an entire language of colour in place.[27]

However, these iconic readings were never so simplistic; at least, they were staggered, indirect, or connotative. Red, for example, would stand for blood, and blood for passion or violence, green would stand for coldness, and coldness for a lack of empathy, and hence, among other sentiments, envy. These symbolic meanings are not at all explainable as Firstness. If red stands for blood, this is not merely because blood "is" red; it is also the other way around. Because red is considered a "hot" colour, and hot blood is a sign of passion, this interpretation is taken to be "natural". The latter interpretation is, however, not based on iconicity, but comes closer to indexicality.

Passion makes the blood boil, as the saying has it. Regardless of the medical (in)accuracy of this saying, as the word "makes" demonstrates, in this case the ground for meaning production is not iconicity but *indexicality*. The boiling blood is the *result* of the passion; it does not resemble it in the least. To complicate matters even more, it is the *convention* of calling a passionate person hot-blooded that makes the indexical "diagnosis" appear true. This conventional character of meaning production is Peirce's third category, "Thirdness," or, as a ground for meaning production, "symbolicity", which he refers to as a kind of law or rule, a

26 In contrast to Freud, Peirce was ambivalent about his relationship to the visual. On the one hand, he opposed visual art to the logic so dear to him, and with which he identified; on the other hand, he understood the similar role of creativity in both. See Leja (2000).

27 For a history of (the language of) abstraction, see Roque (2003). Marin systematically uses the words *icon* and *iconic* wrongly for *visual* throughout his work, including in his otherwise brilliant book on Caravaggio and Poussin (1995). This is confusing semiotics with mediality.

convention. Hence, the most worn interpretation of a colour based on Goethe's theory was already the result of a tangled mess of the three grounds, not one. The value given to "pure" red in abstract painting, then, is a misunderstanding of meaning production, resulting from a blindness to the tendency to produce meanings all the time, and the ambiguity and diffusion that comes with it.

7 Dynamism in the European semiosphere

Let us, then, suspend attempts to interpret (symbolically "read") colours and instead look at how they function. This is where the semiosphere is alive, where its dynamic nature plays itself out. The famous passage where Peirce defines the three categories of signs according to their *grounds* has suffered from overciting and underreading. Therefore, after reading the passage from the letter to Lady Welby, as a more philosophical explanation it deserves to be quoted once more. This is useful, first of all to remind us that there is no special affiliation between iconicity and visuality; second, to allow us to take a closer look at the implications of each category:

> An *icon* is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometrical line. An *index* is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant. Such, for instance, is a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as a sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole; but there is a hole there, whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not. A *symbol* is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant. Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification. (quoted in Innis 1985, 9–10; emphasis in text)[28]

In the case of the icon, it is the sign itself that possesses its ground. Far from leading to the kind of realism that informs the equation of icon with image, the definition, based as it is on resemblance, stipulates that the object – the signified or the meaning rather than the referent – does not need to be anything at all ("even though its object had no existence").

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28 Alternative publication in Peirce (1932: 304). Peirce's term *ground* is close to the term *code*. The two cannot be equated, however, because the first is broader and less rigid than the latter. For nuances concerning code, see Yu (2019a: 430–431), and for a more extensive discussion, see Yu (2019b). Cobley (2016) makes a useful but flexible distinction between codes that are automatic and those that require interpretation.

What defines the "streak" as an icon is the fact that we give it a different name: a line. To give another example: the signature is an icon because it is self-enclosed; it owes its ontological status to nothing but itself. It is an effective sign because it enables one to *lie*, as Umberto Eco's famous definition has it (1976: 7). It is simultaneously an example of the index ("a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as a sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole"). This is what makes lawyers pore over a signature with a magnifying glass to assess its visual resemblance to the "authentic" signature, the guarantee of the existential origin in the body of the person it signifies. According to Peirce, no *interpretant* is necessary for the indexical sign to exist. Yet, one is necessary for the sign to work as a sign.

Is iconicity bound up with resemblance, analogy, conformity? Although it has been widely taken in this sense, Peirce does not say this. But it is a sign that possesses a quality of its meaning. In the case of a visual meaning, this can lead to resemblance if, and only if, that quality is predominantly visual, even if the sign as a whole is not. The example Peirce gives of an icon is neither more nor less visual than the example of an index. But, without the existence of the object, the person interpreting it has no other standard than a *presumed* resemblance – one which is neither ontological nor total, and which does not overrule difference. This is why colour symbolism is so hard to avoid. It is already assumed; hence, the reasoning goes backwards. The question is if the quality that renders "red" significant as "hot" converts the sign from the visual to the tactile domain. Its ground remains iconicity, though.[29]

The important element in Peirce's definition of the icon is primarily its existential negativity, for it suspends the ontology of the object. This entails the notion that the "icon" is constructed or conceived by the viewer or reader. In other words, what makes the notion of iconicity important for reading is not the fact that it leads to some pre-established, allegedly real and fixed model, but that it produces the deployment of the imagination, hence, *fiction*. It does so by both subjectivising – through deixis, hence, indexicality – and culturally framing the object – hence, through symbolicity – which is iconically signified. We would be unable to make the "streak" signify anything if we did not live in a cultural environment – in other words, a semiosphere – where drawing, geometry, and handwriting circulate and are based on lines.[30]

29 See Eco's relevant critique of the motivated signs (icon and index), which, however, defines resemblance more on the basis of ontology than I think is warranted in terms of Peirce (1976).

30 See Sonja Neef's brilliant study of this aspect of meaning-making (2010). Her recently posthumously published last book examines the "contagious", porous, and changeable nature of the semiosphere, without mentioning the term (Neef 2021).

Hence, in addition to its negativity, the second important feature of the icon thus conceived is that it can only emerge from an underlying indexicality as well as symbolicity. It is like the trace that the pencil leaves behind when it is guided by the hand that projects it. But it becomes a sign only when the cultural frame – the semiosphere – acknowledges this. The overlap of the categories is inherent in their definitions. It is the equivalent of linguistic ambiguity. In this sense Peirce's basic concepts can be useful for an analysis of, among other media, visual art, not in spite of but thanks to the tangle of grounds always activated. But this can only work within a specific semiosphere, such as in this case, the European one. In that sense they are congenial to the key one in this essay: ambiguity. My interest in ambiguity as well as Adorno also prevents me from ending this text with a conclusion.

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Bionote

Mieke Bal
Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Mieke.G.Bal@gmail.com

Mieke Bal (b. 1946) is a co-founder of the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis. Cultural theorist, critic, video artist, and curator, her interdisciplinary research interests include cultural analysis, literature, art, gender, migratory culture, the critique of capitalism, and political art. Her books include *Image-thinking* (2022), a quartet on political art (2010, 2013, 2016), and an award-winning trilogy on the Hebrew Bible (1987, 1988, 1988). Her films include experimental documentaries about migratory situations and "theoretical fictions" in which fiction helped to develop difficult ideas. www.miekebal.org.