The ecological foundations of iconicity

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Some themes:

The critique of iconicity, as formulated by, for instance, Nelson Goodman and Umberto Eco, has been shown to be based on invalid arguments and false assumptions, whereas the proposed alternative, the conventionality of iconic signs (which turned out to be something more limited: pictures), is unfeasible (Sonesson 1989). Although most semioticians now claim to have abandoned the linguistic model, it is still necessary to understand *why* this model is not adequate for analysing pictures, in order to grasp the specificity of the picture sign.

The refutation of the critique of iconicity resolves one problem while engendering another: it forces us to delve deeper into what may be termed the *hierarchy of prototypicality*. This could be taken as a sign of the maturity of our science: that a solution to one problem creates new issues for debate is precisely what characterises more developed sciences, the natural sciences, linguistics, etc.

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 of these relationships, Firstness, the idea of that which is such at it is regardless of anything else (5.66), as it applies to the relation in question.

Putting together Savans and Greenlees interpretations, we will take the ground to be a part of the

sign having the function to pick out the relevant elements of expression and content, similar, in that respect, to the form (the principle of relevance) of the Saussure/Hjelmslev tradition (Cf. Sonesson 1989: 202ff).

Contrary to the indexical ground, which is a relation, the *iconic ground* 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, but iconicity should be possible to conceive independently even of the second thing involved.

The blackness of a blackbird, or the fact of Franklin being an American, to use some of Peirces own examples, 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*. Just as indexicality is conceivable, but is no 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 (cf. Sonesson 1994a,b).

Pure iconicity, i.e. a potential ground (Firstness):	perceived properties of a thing (which may serve as a signifier or a signified)
Iconic ground, i.e. a potential sign (Secondness):	perceived similarity between properties attributed to a thing which may serve as a signifier and a thing which may serve as a signified
Iconic sign (Thirdness):	iconic ground the constituents of which are joined by a sign function

During the renewal of semiotic theory in the sixties and seventies, most semioticians were eager to abolish the notion of iconicity, often taking pictures as their favoured example, while claiming that pictures were, in some curious way, as conventional as linguistic signs. Some of these thinkers, such as Bierman and Goodman, were mainly inspired by 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, in addition, wanted to show that pictures, conforming to the ideal of the perfect sign, as announced by Saussure, were as arbitrary or conventional as the sign studied by the most advanced of the semiotic sciences, linguistics (cf. Sonesson 1989:201-341; 1993, 1994a,b).

The most interesting arguments against iconicity were adduced by Arthur Bierman and were later repeated by Nelson Goodman (cf. Sonesson 1989: 220ff). According to the *argument of regression,* all things in the world can be classified into a set of very general categories, such as thing, animal, human being, etc., and therefore everything in the universe can refer to, and be referred to by, everything else. Thus, if iconicity is at the origin of signs, everything will be signs.

This may not be so far from what Peirce thought: at least Franklin and Rumford are, as we know, potential signs of each other. It is certainly a conception of the world common in the Renaissance,

and among Romantics and Symbolists. In the case of other iconical signs, such as pictures, a conventional sign function must either be superimposed on the iconic ground, or the iconic ground must itself be characterised by further properties. Even in the former case, iconicity is still needed, not to define the sign, but to characterise *iconic signs* (cf. Sonesson 1989: 220ff).

Differently put, if Peirce meant to suggest that there are three properties, iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity, which, by themselves and without any further requirement, trigger off 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 iconical 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.

A convention would be needed for Franklin to represent Rumford, or the opposite. Curiously, the iconic ground is supposed to reside in their common American-ness, which is not in itself a property which can be seen. The ambassador more officially, and more clearly, represents American-ness, 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.

In The Quest of the Holy Grail (c. 1125), a knight having an adventure will ask a hermit to explain to him what it means. This is explicitly presented as something different from the causes and intentions behind the event (the meanings discovered in Ricìurs hermeneutics). This meaning is often iconic: the sun is shining just as Christ, the tents are round just as the world; the black knights represent sin, the white knights virtue, etc. Unlike some visions which are also found in the Quest, these adventures have no spatial and temporal borders to ordinary reality. Thus we encounter the nightmare dreamt by Bierman and Goodman, where everything might well be a sign of everything else, because of general properties they have in common.

According to the *symmetry argument,* iconicity cannot motivate a sign, for while similarity is symmetrical and reflexive, the sign is not. This is true if similarity is identified with the equivalence relation as defined in logic; as it is experienced in the Lifeworld, however, similarity is certainly asymmetric and irreflexive (as has been experimentally demonstrated by Rosch and Tversky; cf. Sonesson 1989: 220ff, 327ff). 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.

Asymmetric similarity applies to pictures, and also, for instance, to the ambassador as representing all Americans. 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 Lords Supper, the Grail table of Joseph of Aramathea, and King Arthurs round table, all refer to each other.

The alternative analysis in terms of convention suggested by Goodman, Eco, and others, is conceived to take care of the case of pictures, but paradoxically, it seems that is would really be needed for some other iconical signs. Since a child first confronted with pictures at 19 months of age can readily interpret them (as demonstrated by Hochberg), it is impossible for pictorial referents to be appointed individually (cf. Sonesson 1989: 251ff). However, 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, the stone axe in the museum show-case, the tin can in the shop window, the emperors impersonator when the emperor is away, and a urinal (if it happens to be Duchamps Fountain, or Sherrie Levines paraphrase thereof) at an art exhibition. A convention is needed to tell us that they

are signs and what they are signs of (cf. Sonesson 1994b).

We shall use the term *secondary iconicity* to designate an iconic relation between an expression and a content, which can only be perceived once the sign function, and a particular variety of it, is known to obtain (cf. Sonesson 1989137ff); that is, our knowledge about the existence of a convention is a condition upon the discovery of the iconic ground. The problem then becomes how to account for the possibility of there being a *primary iconicity,* that is, a case in which it is iconicity itself that is the condition upon the discovery of the sign function, that which must be perceived for the sign relation to be known to exist (cf. Sonesson 1994a).

Primary iconicity	the perception of an iconic ground obtaining between two things is one of the reasons for positing the existence of a sign function joining two things together as expression and content
Secondary iconicity:	the knowledge about the existence of a sign function between two things functioning as expression and content is one of the reasons for the perception of an iconic ground between these same things

Among numerous apocryphal stories of tribes failing to recognise pictures as such, there is in fact one verified case in which the group (the Me studied by Deregowski) had never seen paper, and was therefore led to focus on the material *per se*. When pictures where 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 between the things of the Lifeworld. For something to be a sign of something else, it must be relatively low-ranked 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 *ecology of semiosis* (cf. Sonesson 1993, 1994a,b).

In the Grail world, 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). Even here, then, there is a rudiment of a hierarchy of prominence.

When Man Ray makes a pictures of a billiard table, we need no convention to recognise what it depicts. However, for Sherrie Levines billiard table to represent Man Rays 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.

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. There is never any doubt that what is seen on the screen is a sign of something else (i.e., a

signifier), not the reverse. In contrast, in the Grail world, everything might turn out to be a signifier. Not even the knights and the hermits are necessarily zero-level. In the adventure with the black and white knights, Lancelot himself is a signifier of sin. And in another adventure, one of the hermits giving a interpretation turns out to be the devil, and his interpretation becomes a false one, which is then interpreted by a true hermit which makes even the last true hermit somewhat precarious.

The question is whether anybody really lived in the Grail world: is it a cultural text or is it only a meta-text about a cultural text? Literary texts give a framework, single out certain parts as being of relevance, which reality couldn't do itself, without a hierarchy of prominence. If the Grail world was, in some sense, historically real, however, we would have to conclude that is 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.

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