

Semiotic foundations of the study of pictures

Winfried Nöth

University of Kassel, FB 08
Georg-Forster-Str. 3, D-34109 Kassel, Germany
e-mail: noeth@uni-kassel.de

Abstract. Are pictures signs? That pictures are signs is evident in the case of pictures that “represent”, but is not “representation” a synonym of “sign”, and if so, can non-representational paintings be considered signs? Some semioticians have declared that such pictures cannot be signs because they have no *referent*, and in phenomenology the opinion prevails that they are not signs because they are phenomena *sui generis*. The present approach follows C. S. Peirce’s semiotics: representational *and* non-representational pictures and even mental pictures are signs. How and why pictures *without* a referent can nevertheless be defined as signs is examined on the basis of examples of monochrome paintings and historical maps that show non-existing or imaginary territories. The focus of attention is on their semiotic object and, in the case of non-representational paintings, on their interpretation as *genuine icons*, not in the sense of signs that represent most accurately, but in the sense of signs that represent nothing but themselves, i.e., self-referential signs.

Premises

To discuss the semiotic foundations of the study of pictures presupposes that pictures are signs. After all, semiotics is the study of signs, and if the study of signs can contribute anything fundamental to the study of pictures, the premise must be valid that pictures are signs.

The validity of this premise has been doubted.¹ Pictures are not always signs, and even when they are, their sign function is often

¹ Especially by Wiesing (1998; 2001) and Böhme (1999). Böhme (1999: 10) finds it necessary to “overcome the hypertrophy of semiotics” by means of a phenomenology of the picture which would assign an only marginal role to the semiotic approach in the study of pictures. His anti-semiotic line of argument

secondary, has been the argument of a recent theory of the picture founded in phenomenology,² which goes on to claim that it has become more than evident that pictures can no longer be considered as signs since paintings have become non-representational. Abstract pictures do not represent anything, but rather ‘show’ or ‘exhibit’ only themselves (Böhme 1999: 28).

In contrast to such arguments, I would like to develop the thesis that *all* pictures, including the abstract ones, are signs. My aim is to show that the arguments against a general semiotics of pictures suffer from the lack of an adequate model of the sign and have been developed without due consideration of the results and tendencies of current research in the semiotics of pictures,³ ignoring research in the semiotics of painting, which has not been restricted to the study of signs and meanings in representational paintings, but has done much research in non-representational painting.

Exemplary studies in this context are the semiotic analyses of pictures which the Group μ has published in their *Treatise of the visual sign* (Edeline *et al.* 1992) or the semiotic studies in painting by the Greimas School, for which Thürlemann’s (1990) book on a painting by Paul Klee can serve as an example, but we cannot go into further details since the following discussion will be based on a different semiotic theory, i.e., Charles Sanders Peirce’s general theory of the sign.

The crisis of representation as a crisis of the sign?

The view that pictures are no longer signs is closely related to the debate of those who have deplored the “crisis of representation”.⁴ Evidence of this crisis has been seen in modern art, which confronts

cumulates with these words: “The theory of the picture has to do away with semiotics in order to become itself”. See also footnote 10.

² Based on phenomenological assumptions, Wiesing (2001: 193) argues that there are only two semiotic ways of using pictures: pictures as signs of objects and pictures as signs of perspectives of seeing, including pictorial styles. Typical examples of types of picture that are not signs, according to Wiesing, are the classical collage and even the digital image (see footnote 5).

³ For a survey of the state of the art, see Nöth (2000) and Santaella, Nöth (1998).

⁴ Cf. Nöth (2003a).

us with pictures that seem to have lost their referents. A preliminary climax of this development has been discerned in the digital world of virtual reality, and theoreticians of the picture have not failed to declare that digital images are the prototypes of pictures which represent nothing and can hence not be signs.⁵

However, if representing something without a visible referent in a “real” world is a symptom of a crisis of representation, this crisis is certainly as old as the world of pictures in general. Indeed, pictures that represent something invisible in “real” space and time are as old as the history of pictures. If it is true that Leonardo’s painting of *Mona Lisa* does actually not represent any historical person of Leonardo’s time,⁶ this only means that *Mona Lisa* is no faithful depiction like a photograph may be. However, it cannot be concluded that a painting that does not depict a “real” object is no sign. The assumption that only those pictures are signs which depict, like a photograph, an object or a living being suffers from the reductionistic view that every sign must have a material object as its referent.⁷ Consider the logical consequence of such a theory for the semiotics of language.⁸ Words could only count as language signs, if they depict objects such as “apple”, “house”, or “fish”. Words such as “love”, “unicorn”, or “good” that depict no “real” objects could not count as language signs since they depict no real objects.⁹ It is not plausible why the picture of a unicorn should be no sign, while the word that represents what the picture shows is a sign.

⁵ Wiesing (2001: 197), e.g., argues: “The picture of a chessboard on a computer monitor is not a sign of an absent chessboard, but the presence of an imaginary chessboard.” Furthermore: “The computer picture does not refer, but it creates an artificial presence by making the visibility of the picture its purpose.”

⁶ Böhme (1999: 46) gives this example to support his thesis that pictures without a “referent” are not signs and to surprise his readers with his insight that Leonardo da Vinci’s painting is hence no sign.

⁷ According to Boehm (1994: 327), the mistake of reducing pictures to depictions (“Abbilder”) has been characteristic of the “conventional” approach to pictures in general: “The conventional concept of picture [...] is based on the idea of *depiction*. It is the idea that pictures *mirror a presupposed* reality (in whatever stylistic distortion). What we know and what we are acquainted with meets us once more under exonerating visual circumstances. At any rate, the nature of depiction consists in a doubling.”

⁸ See more in detail Nöth (2002b).

⁹ Böhme (1999: 46) ignores this parallel when he argues that words are signs in general, whereas pictures, in contrast to words are not signs but evince a “particular mode of being”.

It is true that the sign model reduced to the dyad of “sign and object” — with which some uninformed theoreticians of the picture operate still today¹⁰ — can be found early in the history of semiotics. *Nomen significat rem*, “the word signifies the thing” was a definition to be found with Roman grammarians, and until Albert the Great, we find the view that the scholastic definition of the sign, *aliquid stat pro aliquo* ‘something stands for something [else]’ was interpreted as a relationship between a sign and an object. However, as early as in the writings of the scholastic semiotician William of Ockham the sign no longer stands for a “thing”. There, the new and more modern definition states that the sign “evokes something in a cognition”: *Signum est ille, quod aliquid facit in cognitionem venire* (Nöth 2000: 137).

Both views of the sign, the one that focuses on the referential aspect of the sign referring to an object and the one that focuses on the mental aspect the sign evoking a cognition have later in the history of semiotics become integrated in models of the sign that distinguish three components of the sign, the sign itself or *sign vehicle*, the *object*

¹⁰ Such as Böhme (1999: 27, 43), who, in continuation of the caricature of the alleged hypertrophy of semiotics quoted in footnote 1, goes on to distort the semiotic approach to pictures as follows: “The simplest reply to the question concerning the essence of the picture is: a picture is a sign. However, what is more trivial than the statement that a picture depicts something that is not the object, but refers to it. A picture makes something present that is not there itself. It refers to something else and has its essence in such reference.” After his discussion of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* as an example of a picture without a referent and hence of a picture that is not a sign (see footnote 6), the author comes to the following conclusion clearly based on a sign model reduced to the sign-referent dyad (Böhme 1999: 45): “What is then a picture? The fact that a picture can be a picture without having a referent obliges us to assume a being of pictures that is independent of the being of the things.”

Whereas Boehm restricts his critique of the interpretation of pictures as depictions to those who have an inadequate concept of picture, Wiesing extends this critique to a critique of the concept of sign in general. However, his own view of the sign as a depiction of an object is clearly inadequate and it is inappropriate to substantiate his thesis that pictures are not signs. Wiesing (1998: 98) argues: “From a phenomenological point of view one can say: pictures are the things whose visibility becomes autonomous. Pictures show something which they are not themselves — in contrast to an imitation which imitates and also wants to be that which it imitates. However, something on which you can see something other than what is present is not necessarily a sign of this other thing.” — Even from an everyday understanding of the German word *Zeichen* (‘sign’) used in this line of argument, it is hard to see why something that shows (German: *zeigt*) something which it is not itself should not be a sign (*Zeichen*).

of reference relating the sign to the world of things, and the *meaning* which relates the sign to the mental or cognitive world of ideas.

According to this triadic model, a picture, for example a photo of Sir Winston Churchill, is a sign vehicle, its object of reference is the politician who died on January 24, 1965 in London, and its meaning is the sum total of our cultural and historical knowledge about the life of this politician.

Although the model of the semiotic triangle had advantages in relation to previous dyadic models, it suffered from a number of weaknesses. For example, the triangle was often not really taken for a genuinely triadic model of the sign. Instead, the reduction of the triad to two dyads used to be taken for possible or even necessary. For example, the picture of an apple or a fish, according to this view, are signs with both an object of reference *and* a cultural meaning. A picture of a unicorn, by contrast, is a sign with a meaning, but without a referent, while proper names are signs with a referent, but without a meaning.

Such reductions of the semiotic triad to two independent dyads are not possible in the framework of Peirce's semiotics, as will be seen below. Every sign, and hence every picture, both has meaning and refers to an object. However, this theory of the genuinely triadic nature of the sign does not mean that the object of a unicorn, according to Peirce, is a really existent being with some similarity to the picture that depicts it. Rather, the object of the picture of the unicorn and the object of the sign in general is defined in a way that differs greatly from the realist tradition, which claims that only things can be objects.

Pictures as signs

In order to define pictures as genuinely triadic signs according to Peirce and thus to come closer to a solution of the nature of their objects, a short account of Peirce's sign model is necessary. One of the many definitions of the sign which Peirce gives is:

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The

sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea. (Peirce, CP 2.228)

In our context, the sign, that which “stands to somebody for something in some respect”, is the picture. To be a sign, it is not necessary that the picture be on paper or canvas. A sign, according to Peirce, can also be a mere thought, an idea. Hence, a mental image can also be a sign. What is important is that the sign as a picture on paper or as a mental image be “a first”, something that comes *first* to a mind that then relates it to an object as its “second” and an interpretant as its “third”.

The *object* for which the picture stands “not in all respects” can be a concrete object, such as an apple or a fish. However, it can also be a mere idea or something purely imaginary to which the sign refers, since the object, according to Peirce, is not necessarily some “real” object. Peirce says nothing about the ‘reality’ of this object at all and describes it as something “perceptible, or only imaginable or even unimaginable in one sense” (CP 2.230). He even goes so far as to speculate that “perhaps the Object is altogether fictive” (CP 8.314). Hence, not only really existent, but also merely imaginary beings, such as unicorns, can be objects of the sign.

The *interpretant* of a pictorial sign are the ideas, thoughts, conclusions, impressions or actions the picture evokes. It is important to point out that the distinction between the object and the interpretant is not the distinction between a material and a mental correlate of a sign. All three correlates of the pictorial sign can be of a mental kind and thus a mental image, as we have seen. The difference between a mental picture that is a sign, one that is an object and one that is the interpretant of a sign has to do with the temporal sequence of these three mental images in the sign process. When the mental image is the object of a sign, it precedes the sign as something that evokes it. When it is an interpretant, the mental image is the effect that the sign has created in a mind. When it is a sign, it is a mental image which comes to a mind in a sequence of thoughts in which it refers back to other ideas and leads to a new interpretant. While the pictorial object relates to a *past*, which precedes and causes it, and the sign itself refers to the *present*, in which it is perceived, its interpretant unfolds in the *future*, in which it creates its semiotic effects.

Both existent things and non-existent, merely fictional or imaginary ideas can thus be the objects of a picture. The object of a picture

is not necessarily something existing in space and time, it can be anything that has determined the sign to represent what it does, a legend, a vision, another picture, or some real experience, whether the painter was aware of these determinants or not.

In order to investigate *all* pictures as signs according to these premises, two kinds of pictures will be examined in the following that have often been given as examples of pictures without referential objects, namely imaginary pictures of things that do not exist and pictures that seem to represent nothing at all.

Imaginary pictures and their objects

My example of pictures that represent nothing in our visual universe is from historical cartography.¹¹ Medieval and early modern maps abound with representations of imaginary territories which were mapped without empirical evidence because of false, erroneous, legendary, or mythical reports.

A striking example is the representation of non-existent islands, such as the islands St. Brendan and Brazil, which were traditionally shown west of Ireland. Reports about the existence of these islands come from Early Celtic legends. Waldseemüller's map of the *British Isles* of 1522 shows one of these two imaginary islands (Moreland, Bannister 1983: 53–54).

Another kind of cartographic representation of nonexistent territories are “unknown” or “not yet known” territories. For example, Ortelius's world map of 1587 shows a northern continent designated as *terra incognita* and represents a huge southern continent as a “not yet known” continent (Moreland, Bannister 1983: Plate 2).

Notice that from the point of view of logic, such cartographic representations constitute a semiotic paradox, for, if the territory is unknown, how can it be mapped at all? On the other hand, *terra incognita* can also refer to an existent country about which knowledge is only insufficiently available, and Ortelius's representation of the huge southern continent called *Terra Australis* seems indeed to be a representation of the continent today better known under the name *Antarctica*. However, Ortelius's affirmation that this continent is *not*

¹¹ Cf. more in detail Nöth (2004).

yet known must be taken literally. In his time, there was no empirical evidence whatsoever of the existence of the Antarctic continent, which was only discovered in 1820. The early cartographers' conviction of the existence of this continent was founded in mere geographical speculations published by Pomponius of Mela in the first century AD (Moreland, Bannister 1983: 58).

Nobody can deny that maps which represent accurately existent territories are complex signs. However, the idea that maps of non-existent, imaginary, or merely speculative territories are signs must seem unacceptable to those who maintain that imaginary pictures are no signs. Nevertheless, in contrast to the naïve realist view of the referent of a picture, the object of the sign, according to Peirce, does not exclude imaginary or even false territories. Imaginary territories of maps have their object both in the world of geographical facts and in human minds.

The object is rooted in the empirical world insofar as every imagination is somehow also influenced by experience. For example, the shape of the imaginary island Brazil on Waldseemüller's map is not only rooted in imagination, but also in the cartographers' knowledge of what "real" islands look like and how it is mapped. In this sense, even a map of a non-existent territory is affected by geographical facts, which constitute part of their object. After all, these territories are at least geographically possible, as the example of *Terra Australis* on Ortelius's map shows, which was imaginary in 1587, but became real in 1820. Notice that the geographer's negation of the knowledge of a territory, which is expressed by the adjective *incognita*, presupposes at least the possibility that this place exists. In this way, the world of geographical facts is also influential in the drawing of a map of an unknown territory, but at this point the empirical object merges with the mental object of the imaginary map.

The mental aspect of the object of an imaginary map consists in the cultural, mythical, or legendary knowledge which preceded and thus caused the drawing of this map. In the case of our imaginary island Brazil, this aspect of the object of the cartographic sign has changed and even disappeared with time since the cultural knowledge that motivated the earlier early cartographers is no longer valid today.

Non-representational pictures and their objects

Let us now consider non-representational pictures as signs and investigate in how far they can be said to stand for an object. The answer is complex, and only a rough outline can be given here.¹² It has to do with Peirce's theory of the genuine icon and the category of firstness.

A genuine icon is not a sign characterized by similarity to its object but by its undistinguishability from it. (Similarity between sign and object is the characteristic of what Peirce defines as a *hypoicon*.) The genuinely iconic sign constitutes a kind of degree zero of semioticity since it is reduced to the category of firstness, "the mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else" (CP 8.328). Such an icon is a sign merely by virtue of qualities of its own, and since it is not yet distinguished from its object, it does not *refer* to or "stand for" it at all (CP 2.92, 2.276). Peirce says that the genuine icon "does not draw any distinction between itself and its object" since it is a sign by virtue of its own particular qualities (CP 5.74, 4.447). He calls such an icon, which is a sign merely of its own qualities, a rhematic *qualisign*. As a sign undistinguishable from its object in this way it is a self-referential sign.

Genuine icons are not a class of objects, they are phenomena that create a particular way of seeing without relating the object of attention to something else. Peirce describes how in the contemplation of a representational painting the picture may lose its referential nature and become transformed from a sign with reference to a genuine icon without:

Icons are so completely substituted for their objects as hardly to be distinguished from them. [...] So in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream — not any particular existence, and yet not general. (Peirce, CP 3.362)

Once a picture is thus contemplated in total disregard of its referent, it is no longer a hypoicon, but a genuine or pure icon. The process comes close to what the tradition of aesthetics has defined as the autonomous or self-referential function of art. The painting that loses

¹² For more details see Nöth, Santaella (2000), Santaella (2001: 206–226), and Nöth (2002a; 2003b).

its power to refer to anything but to itself opens the eyes of the beholder for the seeing of colours and forms as such, and in fact, elsewhere, Peirce identifies pure icons with pure forms, when he states that “Icons can represent nothing but Forms and Feelings” and that “no pure Icons represent anything but Forms; no pure forms are represented by anything but icons” (CP 4.531).

The shift from a hypoiconic seeing of pictures to seeing pictures as pure icons is evidently what has happened in the historical revolution of modern art, where abstract and otherwise non-representational pictures have become liberated from the bonds of their referential objects to function as autonomous compositions of colour and form in which the difference between sign and object has been obliterated and meanings have become mere possibilities.

Prototypes of pictures that have become iconic qualisigns are monochrome paintings and minimal art. These are probably the works of art which have negated most radically the referential object of the pictorial sign. Any reference to the world of material things, living beings, and symbols is programmatically eliminated. The pictures are reduced to pure forms and colours that refer to nothing but to themselves.

A monochrome picture, such as the yellow composition by the minimalist John McCracken of 1967 (Fig. 1) either “means” nothing or it has an unlimited referential potential, since it may be taken to refer to all yellow and rectangular things in the world. Since such a picture is referentially both empty and completely open, it is best to abandon the illusion of reference and to focus on its pure form, and in fact, this is what the minimalists propose.

Besides monochrome paintings, a very different kind of picture belongs to the iconic qualisigns, pictures that evince complete chaos without any recognizable principle of composition. Such pictures with lines, forms, and colours never seen before are free from any stylistic principle of visual coding and exhibit nothing but their own qualities. What such pictures have in common with monochrome pictures is that nothing is similar to them, and precisely because of this, they can be similar to everything.

Once more the question arises whether and how such pictures can be signs or whether it is a semiotic contradiction to consider pictures without referents in the traditional sense as signs.¹³ In the framework

¹³ See also Edeline *et al.* (1992: 114).

of Peirce's semiotics, such a contradiction does not arise, since it takes into account the possibility of self-reference in signs.¹⁴ As we have seen, a sign can be its own object (CP 2.274). According to these premises, non-representational paintings are self-referential signs whose objects is in their own structure, colours, light reflections, and shadings, which constitute a system of chromatic and formal references existing between the pictorial elements only.

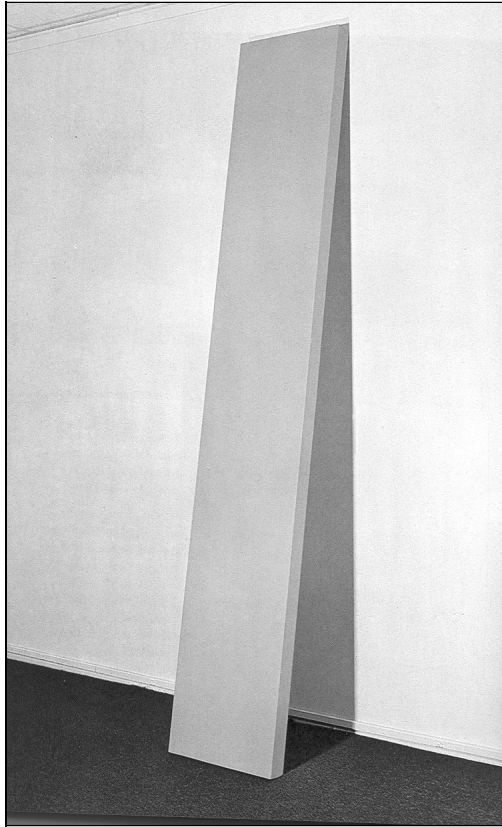


Figure 1. John McCracken (1967), *There's no reason not to*. (The colour of the panel is yellow.)

¹⁴ Cf. Schönrich (1990: 113).

However, non-representational pictures are not only signs insofar as they are self-referential. There are other respects in which they are signs. First of all, they are signs insofar as they belong to the genre of painting. In this respect, they want to convey, so to speak, the message: “I am a work of art (and not some other rectangular surface that happens to be yellow).” Furthermore, such paintings inevitably refer to previous and current styles or trends of art, even if they are opposed to all of them. Finally, if nothing seems to be meaningful, at least the title of an abstract picture certainly conveys meaning to the painting.

John McCracken’s monochrome work in yellow, for example, has the title *There’s No Reason Not To*. The declaration of this title is open to many interpretations, since the verb of the predicate is omitted. Nevertheless, the negation expressed by *no reason* suggests a distancing from previous compositional principles in the minimalist tradition. Unlike other works in this tradition, as for example Barnett Newman’s *Eve* (in red) of 1950, McCracken’s yellow composition is not a canvas, but a hybrid of panel painting and sculpture. Instead of hanging on the wall, it leans against it as if to visualize and to supplement the incomplete title and to convey the full message: “There is no reason not to *lean against, instead of hanging on the wall*”. This conceptual and visual reference to the codes of traditional canvas painting, to which it is in opposition, indicates the object of McCracken’s hybrid sculpture, the knowledge of previous paintings that we need to have in order to understand the present work of art.

Peirce’s category of the iconic sign, of which we have so far applied the subcategory of the iconic qualisign, comprises two further variants of the iconic sign which are relevant to the semiotic study of non-representational art, the iconic sinsign and the iconic legisign. While an iconic sinsign is predominantly a singular and unique sign, the iconic legisign is determined by a law or, as we would say today, by a code.

Both categories of iconicity are characteristic of two further trends in non-representational art.¹⁵ The prototype of pictures which are predominantly iconic sinsigns is probably Action painting. Jackson Pollock’s Action paintings evince singularity and individuality insofar

¹⁵ Insofar as it is an original and refers to its painter as an individual, every single painting, whether representational or non-representational, evinces singularity. Insofar, every original painting is a sinsign.

as they show indexical traces of the painter's presence in the picture. His expressive pictorial gestures visualize the movements of his hand, his paint brush, and they show the traces of his paint pots in the process of painting.

The traces of singularity of a work of art are not only restricted to the expressive gestures of the painter's hand, but they can also consist in an invisible demonstrative gesture of choice and presentation. Such gestures characterize the singularity of the *objet trouvé* of the Dada artists. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* is an example. It is an object selected from an everyday context and placed into the radically new context of an art gallery. There it loses its reference to its ordinary use value and becomes a self-referential genuinely iconic sign instead. It is self-referential insofar as it denies its reference to its original use value. After all, to understand it in terms of its use value would mean to misunderstand its aesthetic value. The dramatic gesture of Marcel Duchamp's choice at a particular moment in the history of art, which was the main cause of its aesthetic value, makes it predominantly¹⁶ an iconic sinsign, which lets the beholder feel the artist's presence without whose signature the found object would be mere rubbish.

The third class of iconic signs of relevance to the analysis of non-representational pictures is the iconic legisign. Instead of its mere quality or striking singularity, this category of sign is characterized by a law that determines its composition. In painting, such laws can be symmetry, balance, polarity, tension, contrast, opposition, invariance, geometrical form, or chromatic complementarity. Prototypically, such laws are apparent in the compositional principles of Constructivism and Suprematism — for example, in the paintings of Mondrian.

The structure of Piet Mondrian's paintings, for example, his *Composition in Red, Black, Blue, Yellow and Gray* (1920), obey the geometrical laws of the construction of rectangular forms, being radically reduced to coloured squares and rectangles divided by black lines. A square forms the visual centre around which the rectangles are

¹⁶ There are many other semiotic aspects of this complex works of art. Today, that the scandal which Duchamp's work once caused has become a mere historical reminiscence, this work of art has also acquired the status of a legisign, the class of signs associated with habit and convention, insofar as it belongs to the canon of the classics of art history. Furthermore, since the original is lost and only reconstructions of the original can be seen today, these reconstructions can no longer be called sinsigns, since they lack singularity and are mere replicas of the original sinsign.

displayed in quasi-symmetrical arrangements, and the colours are chosen to create a harmonious balance without being in perfect symmetry. Forms and colours are not determined by their mere quality or the artist's spontaneous intuition, but by a chromatic and geometrical morphology and syntax, whose validity is not only restricted to this particular picture. The picture is a sign related by visual laws to the colours and forms which constitute their object.

Conclusion

Let us summarize. Pictures are signs, but to study them from a semiotic perspective requires an adequate sign model. Our discussion was based on Peirce's semiotics, and the focus was on imaginary maps and non-representational pictures, whose sign nature has been questioned. We have shown that the concepts of genuine iconicity and self-reference are necessary and useful tools in the study of non-representational pictures. The subdivision of genuine pictorial icons into qualisigns, sinsigns, and legisigns, which focuses on the nature of the pictorial sign as such, made it possible to distinguish three major trends in non-representational painting.

The third semiotic dimension of pictorial analysis, the study of the pictorial interpretants, had to remain largely excluded from this paper, not only because of lack of time, but also because there can be little doubt about the fact that pictures exert aesthetic, emotional, and rational effects on their beholders, whose result is, last, but not least, the interpretative discourse to which this paper has tried to be a modest contribution.

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Семиотические основания к изучению изображений

Является ли картина знаком? Если картина “репрезентирует” нечто, очевидно, можно говорить, что картина есть знак. Но если “репрезентация” есть синоним “знака”, то можно ли считать значащей абстрактную живопись? Некоторые семиотики полагают, что такая живопись не может считаться знаковой, поскольку она не имеет референта. Эта точка зрения преобладает в феноменологии: такие изображения не есть знаки, это самостоятельные феномены. В своем подходе я следую семиотике Ч. С. Пирса: и фигуративные, и нефигуративные произведения, и даже ментальные картины суть знаки. Как и почему произведения с отсутствующим референтом могут быть определены в качестве знаков, прослеживается на материале монохромной живописи и исторических географических карт, представляющих несуществующие или воображаемые территории. Основное внимание уделяется выявлению семиотического объекта. Не-фигуративное изображение интерпретируется как *аутентичный икон*, не в том смысле, что оно представляет объект наиболее точно, но в том, что оно является знаком саморепрезентации, то есть автореферентным знаком.

Kujutiste uurimise semiootilised alused

Kas pilt on märk? Kui pilt “representeerib” midagi, siis võib ilmselt öelda, et pilt on märk. Kuid kui “representatsioon” on “märgi” sünonüüm, kas siis võib tähenduslikuks lugeda ka abstraktset maalikunsti? Mõnede semiootikute arvates ei saa sellist maalikunsti lugeda märgiliseks, kuna ta ei oma referenti. Taoline seisukoht on valitsev fenomenoloogias: sellised kujutised ei ole märgid, vaid iseseisvad fenomenid. Käesolevas käsitluses järgin ma Ч. С. Peirce’i semiootikat, kelle järgi nii figuratiivsed kui mittefiguratiivsed teosed ja isegi mentaalsed pildid on oma olemuselt märgid. Kuidas ja miks puuduva referendiga pildid võivad olla määratletud märkidena, vaadeldakse monokroomse maalikunsti ja niisuguste ajalooliste geograafiliste kaartide baasil, millel kujutatakse olematuid või imaginaarseid territooriume. Põhitähelepanu pööratakse semiootilise objekti eristamisele. Mittefiguratiivset kujutist interpreteeritakse kui *autentset/olemuslikku ikooni*, ning mitte selles mõttes, et ta kujutab objekti kõige täpsemalt, vaid selles, et ta on eneserepresentatsiooni märgiks, so autoreferentseks märgiks.