

## Review article

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# Peircean visual semiotics: Potentials to be explored

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## 1 Visual semiotics 2013

Visual semiotics is a lively branch of semiotics. A quarter of a century ago, the *International Association of Visual Semiotics* was founded to bring together scholars in this field of semiotic studies and soon after, the visionary Thomas A. Sebeok, with Jean Umiker-Sebeok, already identified *Advances in Visual Semiotics* (1995). Meanwhile, the research field has gained profile. The year 2013 saw the publication of two monographs under the title “visual semiotics,” which testify to a considerable diversification and expansion of the research field. One is Tony Jappy’s *Introduction to Peircean Visual Semiotics* and the other Wolfgang Wildgen’s *Visuelle Semiotik*.

What is the scope of visual semiotics? The two authors present the outlines of a huge but fuzzy research field, whose boundaries are neither clearly delimited nor fully explored by either of them. Jappy sets out by suggesting that visual semiotics is concerned with the study of “visual culture, a culture that has witnessed enormous growth in the devising and deployment of vision-based technology” and in which “information is deserting the traditional print media and is coming more and more to be framed in screens of various sorts” (p. ix). However, in contrast to this immense research field, the field of study presented in Jappy’s introduction is much narrower and more traditional in its scope. Among the examples by means of which the author introduces visual semiotics to his readers are drawings, engravings, block prints, frescoes, paintings, photographs, posters, diagrams, maps, and emoticons. He also includes nonverbal communication within his range of topics (cf. p. 217) and incorporates thus within visual semiotics a field of study that established itself as an independent field of semiotic research many decades ago.

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Wildgen, by contrast, conceives of visual semiotics as a truly “global” study of “visual spaces” (2013: 317–321). His own research deals with drawings, sculptures, paintings, photographs, images in general, literary imagery, films, clothing culture (“vestimentary semiotics”), material culture, architecture, and urban spaces. In addition, the author mentions scientific imagery, the fictional worlds of comics, and fantasy literature as further topics of the field (2013: 9). Is visual semiotics coextensive with the study of visual signs and even mental imagery? If so, studies in visual cognition, imagination, nonverbal communication, and even writing, all which are studies of visual signs, should also be part of visual semiotics. Although most scholars would object to extending the scope of visual semiotics to include semiotically established research domains such as cognitive semiotics, film semiotics, literary semiotics, the semiotics of architecture, design, maps, or the semiotics of nonverbal communication, the boundaries between visual semiotics and its neighbors within the larger research field of semiotics in general remain certainly vague.

As much as Jappy and Wildgen differ with respect to the scope of their fields of study, they also differ with respect to the semiotic foundations of their approaches to the study of visual signs and their acquaintance with other studies in visual semiotics. Jappy’s approach is “Peircean,” as the title of his book announces, that is, it is based on the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce. More precisely, it is based on Peirce’s theory of semiosis, his triadic definition of the sign, and his general typology of signs. Wildgen’s approach to visual semiotics is pluralistic. His theoretical background ranges from Arnheim’s gestalt theoretic psychology of art and Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms to René Thom’s catastrophe theory, systems theory, and the theories of self-organization and morphogenesis. The author declares that semiotics, according to this pluralistic conception, “is not conceived as a rigid theoretical framework, but rather as a holding frame for the study of a plurality of sign theoretical problems” (2013: 10).

Jappy’s *Introduction to Peircean Visual Semiotics* is the first of its kind in English. In French, the author introduced the same topic earlier, under the title *Regards sur le poème muet* (Jappy 2010). In Portuguese and Spanish, Peircean visual semiotics have been introduced by Santaella and Nöth (2003, 2012). As far as other approaches to visual semiotics are concerned, Jappy seems to be convinced that besides the Peircean one only the Saussurean approach is worth mentioning, although the only scholar in this tradition to whom he gives substantial credit is Roland Barthes (p. 215). Jappy goes even so far as to declare that “these two theories of the sign” can be found as theoretical bases of “hundreds or more...studies in theory and methodology...devoted to the complex interplay of vision, images, and culture” (p. ix). The claim that research in visual

semiotics since Roland Barthes has been either predominantly Saussurean or mainly Peircean is certainly not an adequate account of the diversity of this field of study. There is no reason to ignore all other approaches to visual semiotics (cf. Nöth 2011), such as the one inspired by M. A. K. Halliday (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Kress 2009), Group  $\mu$  rhetorical visual semiotics (Edeline et al. 1992), approaches based on A. J. Greimas (Floch 1990; Thürlemann 1990; Fontanille 1995; Hébert 2007), and still other “paradigms of visual semiotics” (Constantini 2010; Nöth 2011). It is true that Jappy does not disregard all of these alternatives entirely. At least he mentions Greimas and Group  $\mu$  visual semiotics, but only to “bracket them as irrelevant” to Peircean semiotics (p. 168), which is rather superfluous after having declared that Peircean and Saussurean semiotics are “totally incommensurable” (p. 168) because “Saussure’s semiology is based upon a theory of language, [whereas] Peirce’s semiotics is a form of logic” (p. x). What the critical reader does not learn is why linguistic, logical, and rhetorical foundations should not be able to serve visual semiotics in complementary ways.

## 2 Jappy’s Peircean visual semiotics

The present review article has its focus on Jappy’s *Peircean Visual Semiotics*. Does it advance Applied Semiotics? The reviewers do not pretend to answer this question in comparison with studies elaborated within the frameworks of other paradigms of visual semiotics. Instead, they want to throw a critical eye on Jappy’s book from a strictly Peircean perspective in order to see whether the tools of analysis offered in this *Introduction* are adequate and appropriate with respect to the tools available in the original Peircean toolbox.

Jappy’s book is dedicated to the memory of Gérard Deledalle (1921–2003), the founder of the Perpignan School of Peircean semiotics. The book is the fruit of classes given by Jappy at the University of Perpignan first published in book form in 2010 under the more poetic title *Regards sur le poème muet*. The “Mute poem” – also the title of the sixth chapter of Jappy’s *Introduction* – was Simonides of Ceos’s (c. 556–468 BC) designation for the images of painters, as Plutarch tells us, when he attributes to Simonides the dictum that “painting is silent poetry and poetry painting that speaks” (*De gloria Atheniensium* 3.346–3.347). Jappy argues that there is an echo of Simonides’s ancient thesis of the muteness of images in Peirce’s “claim that icons assert nothing” (p. 138).

The book is divided into seven chapters, followed by a conclusion. The first has the rather un-Peircean title “Signs and Things,” which Jappy borrows from

the title of the equally un-Peircean psycholinguist Roger Brown (1958) (p. 199). The “thing,” in Jappy’s title, can only be an allusion to Peirce’s object of the sign, which is certainly anything but a “thing.” The second chapter, “How can a sign be called,” introduces the distinction between verbal and nonverbal signs and the qualisign-sinsign-legisign trichotomy. Chapter 3, simply entitled “Peirce,” introduces Peirce’s doctrine of categories. Chapter 4, “Modes of Representation,” introduces the icon-index-symbol trichotomy and deepens the distinction between the immediate and the dynamical object first introduced in chapter 1.2.2. Chapter 5 has the McLuhanite title “Medium Matters.” It extends Peirce’s theory of iconicity to its subclasses of the image, the diagram, and the metaphor. However, the “medium,” which Jappy has in mind, is not McLuhan’s medium, but the term *medium* that Peirce occasionally uses as a synonym of the term “sign.” Chapter 6, “The Mute Poem,” completes the survey of the nine subclasses of the sign by introducing the rheme-dicent-argument trichotomy and deals with the paradox that pictures, on the one hand, “assert nothing,” but on the other hand “have a virtually unlimited information potential” (pp. 138–140). In this context, the author postulates a somewhat problematic distinction between verbal and visual signs. In a comparison of Pieter Brueghel’s *Tower of Babel* (1563) with the biblical narrative it represents, Jappy concludes: “If we had seen Brueghel’s painting before us for the first time without having collateral experience of its relation to the Bible...and if, furthermore, it had neither caption nor artist’s signature, we would no doubt have a problem interpreting it” (p. 140). What this means is that icons need indices to become informative and that collateral acquaintance with the object cannot be furnished by the sign itself. The object can only be indicated by the sign, but the sign presupposes the reader’s acquaintance with the object, be it a picture or a verbal narrative. However, not only Brueghel’s painting (as shown by Jappy), but also the biblical narrative needs indices (proper names, deictic words specifying time and place, etc.) to make sense to its readers. Collateral acquaintance with the objects of the signs is prerequisite in both media, the verbal and the pictorial one. Neither the painting nor the verbal narrative can furnish acquaintance with the object of the signs, says Peirce: “No sign can be understood – or at least no *proposition* can be understood unless the interpreter has ‘collateral acquaintance’ with every object of it” (CP 8.183, 1909), and: “The Sign can only represent the Object and tell about it. It cannot furnish acquaintance with or recognition of that Object; for that is what is meant...by the Object of the Sign; namely, that with which it presupposes an acquaintance in order to convey some further information concerning it” (CP 2.231, 1910).

The general outline of Jappy’s book is inspired by the three grand domains of semiotic research distinguished by Peirce, *Speculative Grammar*, *Critical*

*Logic*, and *Speculative Rhetoric* (pp. xii, 64–65, 169–174). The first, *Speculative Grammar*, is Jappy's main topic, namely, "the classification of signs and what is essential to a given kind of sign" (CP 4.9, c.1906) or "the general theory of the nature of meanings of signs, whether they be icons, indices, or symbols" (CP 1.191, 1903). The second, which Peirce defines as study of arguments "and the validity and degrees of force of each of them" (CP 1.191, 1903), is hardly within Jappy's scope, although he introduces some of the elements of Peirce's diagrammatic logic with examples of verbal, but not visual signs (pp. 152–158). In a study of visual semiotics, it would have to address such questions as deductive, inductive, and abductive reasoning by means of images. The third, *Speculative Rhetoric*, is Jappy's alleged topic in chapter 6, but Jappy's rhetoric is not the one Peirce has in mind when he defines it as "the doctrine of the general conditions of the reference of Symbols and of the other signs to the Interpretants which they aim to determine" (CP 2.93, 1902). Instead of this Peircean theory of the interpretant, Jappy's third branch of visual semiotics offers a theory of visual metaphors and other tropes or figures.

Jappy's *Introduction* has three main merits besides being well-written, didactically structured, and well-illustrated. The first consists in its extension of Peircean visual semiotics from the icon-index-symbol trichotomy, which classifies signs in relation to their objects, to the qualisign-sinsign-legisign trichotomy, which concerns the signs as such, and the rheme-dicent-argument trichotomy, whose criterion is the kind of relation between the sign and its interpretant. Step by step, and with didactic skills, Jappy introduces and exemplifies the resulting nine subclasses of the visual sign. However, what is missing in order to complete the Peircean typology is the introduction of the rules of semiotic grammar that teach how these nine subclasses can be combined and how not. In fact, only ten of the twenty-seven possibilities of combining the three times three subclasses of the sign are possible (cf. CP 2.254–2.263, c.1903). Signs in general can only be (1) (rhematic iconic) *qualisigns*, (2) (rhematic) *iconic sinsigns*, (3) *rhematic indexical sinsigns*, (4) *dicent indexical sinsigns*, (5) (rhematic) *iconic legisigns*, (6) *rhematic indexical legisigns*, (7) *dicent indexical legisigns*, (8) and legisigns which are *rhematic symbols*, (9) *dicent symbols*, and (10) *arguments*. The other seventeen possibilities of combining the nine subclasses are excluded because, for example, rhemes cannot be arguments, symbols cannot be qualisigns, or sinsigns cannot be symbols. In Jappy's analyses, we find examples of visual signs that belong to the main sign classes (1) to (9), but it remains an open question whether the pictures he studies may also serve as arguments. Can nonverbal visual signs be used to deduce, induce, or abduce conclusions from premises, and if so, in how far?

Nevertheless, since Peircean visual semiotics has too often been reduced to the applications of the icon-index-symbol trichotomy, Jappy's extension from these three to Peirce's nine subclasses of signs is the first merit of his *Introduction*. The second is that Jappy advances further in subdividing the icon into its three subclasses, image, diagram, and metaphor, and goes on to apply this additional trichotomy of the icon in the study of pictures. The third merit of Jappy's primer is that it introduces the principle of iterativity or recursivity of the subclasses, by which the three sign classes of each of the three trichotomies of signs are interrelated. According to Peirce's principle of *prescission* (CP 1.353, 1880), signs of thirdness (i.e., legisigns, symbols, or arguments) may, and usually do, include signs of the subclasses of secondness (sinsigns, indices, dicents) and firstness (qualisigns, icons, rhemes). Signs of genuine secondness may include signs of firstness but not of thirdness, whereas signs of genuine firstness occur without any admixture of elements of signs of secondness and thirdness. The principle is of practical relevance to the application of the nine subclasses of signs as can be illustrated by examples from the code of traffic signs. Traffic signs are legisigns *par excellence*, signs that function as such by virtue of a legal convention, a law (thirdness) enforced by the police (secondness). If we consider the principle of inclusion from this perspective of the first trichotomy, we can see that legisigns include sinsigns and qualisigns from the following evidence. First, each single stop sign at any street corner is a sinsign, a singular instance of the legisign that formulates it as a law. Peirce also calls such a sinsign a *replica* of the legisign. Second, since this stop sign, just like any other visual sign, needs to be embodied in visual forms and chromatic qualities, such as colors (red, white, etc.) or shapes (circular or octagonal, depending on the country, in the case of the stop sign), it necessarily also contains several qualisigns.

From the perspective of the second trichotomy, traffic signs are symbols, i.e., signs related to their objects by means of a system of conventions, a traffic code that needs to be learned and a habit necessary to associate it with the instructions it gives to the road user. Traffic signs are *symbolic legisigns* only insofar as they are general rules. As soon as a traffic sign is installed at a specific street corner, it functions as an index, for it says, "Stop (or turn right) *here* and now." Furthermore, there is also an element of iconicity in symbols, which is stronger in some and weaker in others. A strong iconic element is characteristic of the "turn-right" (or "-left") arrows. These are constitutive parts of the traffic code and hence symbols because they act through habits, but the curve of the arrow to the right is similar in shape and therefore iconic of the curve the traffic users will follow when they turn right.

From the perspective of the third trichotomy, traffic signs are usually dicent signs, i.e., signs that correspond to a proposition, such as "All road users turn

left.” All traffic signs include one or several rhemes. For example the traffic light for pedestrians, which combines a green light with the picture of a pedestrian, contains two rhemes, the color green, which represents “proceed” or “permission to walk,” and the image of the pedestrian, which specifies that it is valid for pedestrians. Can traffic signs also be arguments (which include dicents and rhemes)? They certainly involve instances of deductive reasoning of the kind, “The fine for not stopping is 50 \$. I did not stop. Therefore, I have to pay the fine.”

After the reviewers have found, in a good Peircean fashion, three reasons to praise of Jappy’s *Introduction*, they unfortunately find it equally necessary to discuss three other reasons because of which the book is less convincing or even incompatible with Peirce’s thought. These reasons concern (1) the claim that Peirce’s semiotics is divided by a watershed into two different periods, (2) the proposed diagram of Peirce’s model of the sign, and (3) Jappy’s distinction between the iconic and indexical elements of visual signs in conjunction with his views concerning the two objects represented by them.

### 3 Jappy’s watershed theory of Peircean semiotics

Jappy begins his *Introduction* by declaring that in view of the diverse definitions of semiotic key terms given by Peirce during his lifetime, it would be best to take the period of 1902–1903 as the basis of an introduction (p. xii). According to Jappy, these two years were a “theoretical watershed” in Peirce’s semiotics, a time when “Peirce established his first full-fledged system and classification of signs” (p. xii). The question of whether Peirce’s semiotics is indeed divided into two periods of theoretical thought is rather controversial in Peirce scholarship. It is true that there was a significant growth in Peirce’s semiotics after 1902. For example, no less than sixty of Peirce’s seventy-six definitions of the sign collected by Robert Marty (1997) are from the second of the two periods postulated by Jappy. However, it does not even seem to be clear to the author himself in which respect the earlier definitions of Peirce’s semiotic key terms should differ essentially from the later ones. Otherwise he would not have abandoned his intention to restrict himself to the years after 1902–1903 so soon in his book, for two of the first three definitions of the sign he presents on p. 3 are actually from ca. 1893 (CP 1.339 from MS 717; cf. NEM 4: 309–310) and from ca. 1897.

A primer in Peircean visual semiotics should not impose, without necessity, controversial or even unfounded research positions on its readers, such as the

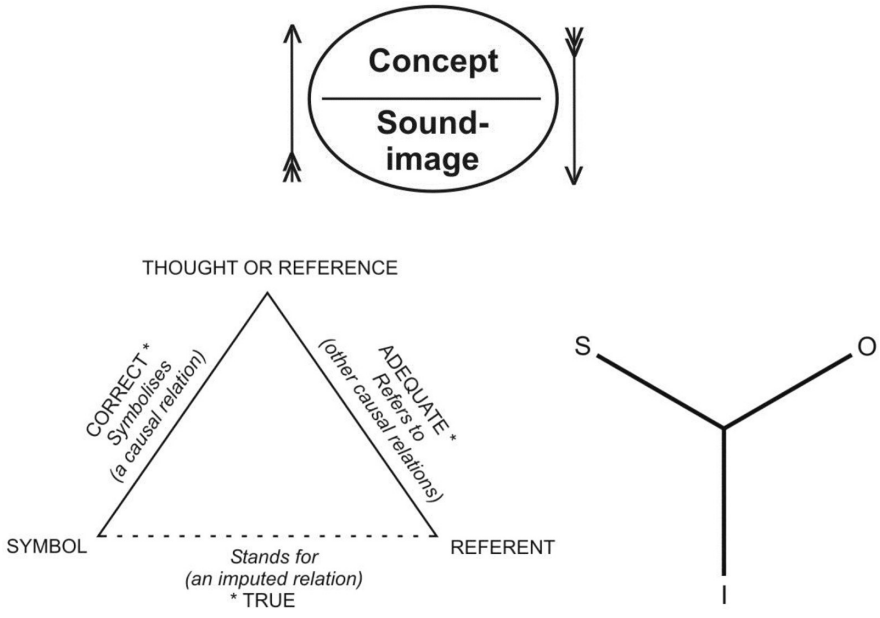


one of the thesis of the “two Peirces.” The current state of the art in Peircean scholarship with respect to the question of the continuity or discontinuity of Peirce’s thought (see also Murphey 1961; Parker 1998) has very well been summarized by Houser (1992: xxv–xxix). Houser reminds us that the thesis of the “two Peirces” dates back to 1950, when it was first stated by Thomas Gouge. While Goudge (1950), whose thesis is no longer accepted today, does not claim that his distinction between the one and the other Peirce can be associated with any specific year, Max Fisch (1986: 227) distinguishes three periods in the growth of Peirce’s philosophy, the Cambridge period (1851–1870), the cosmopolitan period (1870–1887), and the Arisbe period (1887–1914). At the same time, from a different point of view, he also sees reasons to distinguish between two periods only, the pre- and the post-*Monist* periods, from 1872–1890 and 1890–1914 (cf. Houser 1992: xxvi). Jappy’s teacher, Gérard Deledalle (1990: xxxi), adopts Fisch’s first periodization under different designations. Thomas L. Short (2007) sets up an even more detailed model of “the development of Peirce’s semeiotic,” whose periods, with some overlaps, are 1865–1866, 1867, 1868–1869, 1859–1877, 1877–1885, and “after 1885.” In sum, none of these commentators corroborates Jappy’s watershed of 1902–1903. Furthermore, Jappy ignores the large number of important Peirce scholars who have emphasized the *unity* as well as *continuity* of Peirce’s thought (Savan 1981; Parker 1998). A strong voice in this tradition is the one of Murphey (1961: xx), whom Houser (1992: xxviii) quoted in this context as follows: “Peirce regarded each phase of his thought as merely a *revision* of a ‘single over-all architectonic system’ and always preserved as much as he could from each earlier phase. His philosophy might be likened to a ‘house which is being continually rebuilt from within’.”

## 4 Jappy’s Saussurean-Peircean sign model

Despite his seventy-six or more definitions of the sign, Peirce has never presented his concept of the sign in the form of a diagram. With Ogden and Richards (1923: 11), many early commentators adopted the model of the triangle (Figure 1, center) as a diagram of Peirce’s definition of the sign as a triad of sign (S) or representamen (R), object (O), and interpretant (I). Marty and Marty (1992: 40) as well as Merrell have substituted the triangle for the tripod as a more adequate model of the sign according to Peirce (Figure 1, right). As Merrell puts it, with reference to CP 1.345–1.359 (of 1903),

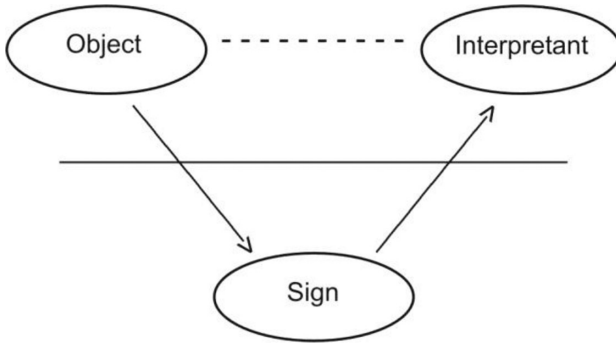




**Figure 1:** The Saussurean sign model (above, center; Saussure 1969 [1916]: 66), Ogden/Richards triangle (bottom left; 1923: 11), and the Peircean tripod model (right) of the sign (S) in its triadic relation with the object (O) and interpretant (I).

The Ogden-Richards triangle (purportedly inspired by Peirce) links R to O and I, but as a triangle the relation between any pair of terms of the triad remains beyond the sphere of influence of the third element. In other words, what we have is a mere set of three dyads, R-O, R-I, and O-I. In contrast, our genuine triad, a tripod that includes the node, ties all elements together by means of a focal point such that the relation between any pair of elements depends upon the relation of each of these elements to the third one. (Merrell 1997: 13; in Figure 1, read S for Merrell’s R)

Incorporating the oval of Saussure’s and the triangle of Ogden/Richards’s diagrams, Jappy (p. 6) presents a syncretistic model of the sign according to Peirce (Figure 2), which introduces elements rather incompatible with Peirce’s original definitions of the sign as a genuine triad. The elements of Jappy’s model are the following: “The arrows indicate the direction of determination – the semiotic ‘determination flow,’ so to speak, from the object to the interpretant via the sign. The broken line between the object and the interpretant indicates an impermissible immediate relation between object and interpretant (i.e., a relation not mediated by the sign)” (p. 6). The flaws of this Jappian triangle are numerous.



**Figure 2:** The Peircean model of the sign as Jappy (2013: 6) sees it.

First, there is the flaw foreseen by Merrell: the connections between the three constituents of the sign represent dyadic and not triadic relations. The two arrows represent only two of three relations of determination, the one between the Object and the Sign that represents the object and the other between the sign and its interpretant created by the sign. The idea that the relation between the Object and the Interpretant is essentially different and needs therefore to be graphically distinguished (by means of the dotted line already introduced by Ogden and Richards, with a different justification, as representing a merely “imputed relation”) is utterly incompatible with the Peirce’s idea of a genuine triad. The interpretant cannot be isolated from the object within the triad of the sign because there is also a relationship of determination between the Object and the Interpretant, about which Peirce says that the sign or “*representamen* determines its interpretant to stand in the same triadic relation to the same object for some interpretant” (CP 1.541, 1903). It is natural that a single arrow can hardly represent this genuinely triadic mode of determination, but it is also clear that two arrows plus a broken line create the wrong model. Furthermore, none of the two arrows shown in this model represents the dyadic relation that it suggests. It is true that the object determines the sign that represents it, but this is only two thirds of the whole truth. The full truth only becomes apparent when we consider how Peirce’s definition goes on. After stating that the object determines the sign, Peirce continues as follows: “The essence of a sign, (stretching the word to its widest limits, as *anything which, being determined by an object, determines an interpretation to determination, through it by the same object*), leads to a proof that every sign is determined by its object” (CP 4.531, 1905). Hence, it is not enough to state that the object determines the sign. It determines its interpretant, too, through the mediation of the sign.

The second major flaw of Jappy's sign model is the introduction of the famous Saussurean *bar* that separates the two spheres of the signifier (or "sound image") from the one of the signified (or "concept" in Figure 1) into Peirce's triadic model. In Figure 2, we see it as the horizontal line above the "Sign." Jappy explains the function of this bar as follows: "The solid horizontal line separating the sign from both object and interpretant illustrates the fact that the sign has, at some point, to transit through the existential world as the troughs and peaks of the air waves, for example, while the object and interpretant belong to the altogether more complex and general world of thought and desire" (p. 6). If we assume that "what is traveling through air" is a verbal sign, we must conclude that Jappy is referring to the replicas of symbolic legisigns. However, just like Saussure's acoustic image is not the physical manifestation of a verbal sign, Peirce's sign cannot be reduced to its replicas. Instead, a symbolic legisign is a sign "whose special significance or fitness to represent just what it does represent lies in nothing but the very fact of there being a habit, disposition, or other effective general rule that it will be so interpreted" (CP 4.447, 1903). As a legisign, the verbal sign is a law, "not a single object, but a general type which, it has been agreed, shall be significant" (CP 2.246, 1903). It is true that symbols need their replicas to survive and remain in circulation (cf. Nöth 2014). However, Peirce leaves no doubt that a replica of a sign is not an "ordinary sign." "Every Legisign requires Sinsigns. But these are not ordinary Sinsigns, such as are peculiar occurrences that are regarded as significant. Nor would the Replica be significant if it were not for the law which renders it so" (CP 2.246, 1903).

The third major flaw in Jappy's theory of the Peircean sign consists in his thesis that the object "determines the structure of the sign by imparting to it aspects of its own structure" and that "for this reason, within Peircean semiotics, signs are said to be 'motivated'" (p. 6). With this formulation, Jappy generalizes a criterion that is only valid for the iconic sign and applies it to indices and symbols, too. Only icons are signs by "likeness," which is another way of saying that the object "imparts aspects of its own structure to the sign." Only the Icon is "determined by its object...by partaking in the characters of the object" (CP 4.531, 1905). Indices and symbols have other characteristics. The Index is "really and in its individual existence connected with the individual object," whereas the symbol is "interpreted as denoting the object, in consequence of a habit" (CP 4.531, 1905).

Jappy's term "motivated" is from the Saussurean and not from the Peircean vocabulary. It may perhaps be somehow appropriate to apply it to iconic as well as to indexical words, but symbols, as long as they do not form diagrammatic (syntagmatic) patterns, are certainly never motivated in any way. No simplex

word shows traces of its object in its phonetic form. Both for Saussure and for Peirce, words such as *ox* or *tree* evince nothing that links them to the object they represent. However, Jappy is right in teaching that there is an iconic-diagrammatic element in syntactic structure, when he gives the example of the colonel who addresses his private as follows: “You will go immediately and deliver this letter to Captain Hanno” (p. 102). The traces of the reality represented by this verbal sign, that is, of the traces of the object of this sign, can be found in the three agents of this scenario who are represented syntactically in the form of the sentence subject and its two objects (*You, this letter, Captain Hanno*). The syntactic structure is a diagrammatic icon of the scenario represented by the utterance, which involves these three agents. Jappy is also right when he applies this model of a Peircean semiotic syntax to the visual syntax of pictures, for example, to the scenarios of agents represented in a comic strip (p. 102), which constitute a diagram of the fictional objects represented by them.

## 5 Jappy’s theory of the two objects of the visual sign: Pictures, reality, and fiction

A recurring theme of Jappy’s *Introduction* is the theory of the two objects of visual signs, which the author derives from Peirce’s distinction between the Immediate and the Dynamical, or Real, Object of the sign (pp. 14–17, 96–102). The Dynamical or Real object is the object “as unlimited and final study would show it to be” (CP 8.183, EP 2: 495, 1909; CP 4.536, 1906). It can therefore only be incompletely represented by its sign. The Immediate object is what we know about the Dynamical object, a mental representation of the latter, an idea, knowledge, or a mere notion that we have of this object as it is independently of what we think of it. It is “the Object as the Sign represents it” (CP 8.343, 1910) or “the Object as cognized in the Sign and therefore an Idea” (EP 2: 495, 1909). In other words, “the immediate object is simply what we at any time suppose the real object to be, but of course what we think to be so will usually in some way be inadequate as a representation of that object,” as Ransdell (1977: 169) puts it.

Against this theoretical background, Jappy commits the mistake of confounding Peirce’s dynamical or real object with a “really existing” object (pp. 15–17) since he seems to believe that Peirce defines the dynamical object “to be an object of experience, an existent entity” (p. 166). He thus concludes

that only photographs and realistic images, such as “human and architectural portraits” (p. 15), are visual signs that represent, or are determined by, a dynamical object. Visual representations of nonexistent and fictional objects, such as pictures in comic strips or paintings of the *Tower of Babel* (p. 139) only have an immediate, but not any dynamical object, says Jappy: “Although sketches and paintings don’t necessarily have real dynamic objects,...they nevertheless have an immediate object” (p. 17).

However, Jappy’s line of argument in this respect is not altogether clear or consistent since the author later also acknowledges that “the sign’s dynamic object can...be located in worlds of possibility, actuality, or necessity” (p. 99). This statement is much more compatible with Peirce’s notion of the reality in which the dynamical object is located than the idea of reality as the existent. Peirce’s concept of reality is not restricted to the reality of the existent, let alone to material things. For Peirce, the possible and the general are real, too. The statistical possibility of contracting a disease from smoking has real effects on many people’s decision to quit smoking or not to smoke at all, and the general, in thoughts and symbols, is one of the three “essential ingredient of reality” (CP 5.436, 1905) besides the possible and the existent.

Jappy seems to revise his earlier position concerning the real as the existent when he reformulates his first interpretation of the signs of a comic strip as follows: “What we see in the frames [of the comic strip] are really only the immediate objects of *possible* dynamic objects” (p. 102). However, what is a “possible dynamical object,” an object that may possibly not really exist or one that evinces the reality of the possible? A few lines later, the author goes on to leave this question unanswered, when he speaks again of the “not necessarily existent dynamical object” (p. 102). The formulation is unfortunate because it does not state clearly enough that *all* signs represent, and are determined by, dynamical objects and that dynamical objects of signs may, but need not, be existents. They may also be objects that only belong to the category of possibility or to the one of generality. The possible reading of Jappy’s inconsistent formulations, according to which some signs have only an immediate and no dynamical object, misjudges Peirce’s doctrine that “every sign has *two* objects” (MS 499s, n.d.; cf. Bergman 2009: 103; first emphasis added).

What is then the dynamical object of a visual sign that represents the myth of the *Tower of Babel*? This object cannot be one that actually exists or has once existed since fiction and myths are, by definition, about people and events that have never actually existed. However, the real is not only the existent. It “is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you” so that it “essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY” (CP 5.311, 1868). This includes

not only the existent, but also the possible and the general. What the three have in common is that they exert a real influence in experience and cognition. The possible is real, for “it is sheer insanity to deny the reality of the possibility of my raising my arm, even if, when the time comes, I do not raise it” (CP 4.579, 1898), and the general, including thoughts and symbols, is real, too, since nobody can deny that symbols are determinants of real thoughts.

The reality of a symbol “consists in the real fact that...it will influence the thought and conduct of its interpreter” (CP 4.447, 1905), and it is in this sense that Brueghel’s *Tower of Babel* represents a real object. Reality may even “be in some sense a creation of the mind,” although “once created, it must be in a measure independent of thought” (MS 463: 9–10, 1903). This is why fictional signs represent real objects (cf. Jéha 1991; Nöth 2006). The difference between fiction and nonfiction is that in fiction the dynamical objects have been created through a sign. Whereas nonfiction “does not depend on what you or I or any man thinks” (CP 5.408, 1877), “the fictive is that whose characters depend upon what characters somebody attributes to it; and the story is, of course, the mere creation of the poet’s thought” (CP 5.152, 1903). Fiction “acquires a degree of reality once it has been imagined or presented to be in a certain way” (Bergman 2009: 105), which results in triggering further thoughts and interpretations but also in restricting arbitrary ones. This argument for the reality of fiction is perhaps best elaborated in a passage in which Peirce ponders on the reality of Scheherazade:

It is true that when the Arabian romancer tells us that there was a lady named Scherherazade, he does not mean to be understood as speaking of the world of outward realities, and there is a great deal of fiction in what he is talking about. For...the story is, of course, the mere creation of the poet’s thought. Nevertheless, once he has imagined Scherherazade and made her young, beautiful, and endowed with a gift of spinning stories, it becomes a real fact that so he has imagined her, which fact he cannot destroy by pretending or thinking that he imagined her to be otherwise. What he wishes us to understand is what he might have expressed in plain prose by saying, “I have imagined a lady, Scherherazade by name, young, beautiful and a tireless teller of tales, and I am going on to imagine what tales she told.” This would have been a plain expression of professed fact relating to the sum total of realities. (CP 5.152, 1903)

Peirce’s semiotics offers another theoretical tool for the understanding of the differences and similarities between fiction and reality, the concept of a “universe of discourse” (CP 2.536, 1911). In a comparison of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* with biographical writings on Napoleon I, Peirce distinguishes between the discourse universe of historical facts and the one of fiction. Both the biography and the drama consist of signs with dynamical objects, but they differ with respect to their discourse universes. The real or dynamical object of *Hamlet*’s biography is the

“Universe of Shakespeare’s Creation so far as it is determined by Hamlet being a part of it” (CP 2.231, 1910). The real object of the signs of the time about which Napoleon’s biographers give us information, by contrast, “is the Universe of Existence so far as it is determined by the fact of Napoleon being a Member of it” (CP 2.231, 1910). The fictional events about which we learn in Hamlet’s discourse universe illustrates Peirce’s insight that the object of a sign can be “created by the sign” itself (CP 2.231, 1910). The historical scenario created by Shakespeare becomes real because it has real effects on its interpreters’ minds. That both fictional and nonfictional signs are fully developed signs is also evident when we consider that fictional discourse uses the same vocabulary as nonfictional when it narrates its story. Imaginary events are simply events imagined to be real: “A historical romance connects itself, more or less definitely, with real time; but that is because it “makes believe” they [the imaginary events] are real events” (CP 1.492, c.1896).

## 6 Conclusion

Jappy’s *Introduction* testifies to the great potential which Peirce’s semiotics has for Applied Visual Semiotics. Undoubtedly, further advances in Peircean Visual Semiotics are possible and desirable. Since not all ramifications of Peirce’s complex system can be introduced in a course for beginners, paths of didactic simplification must indeed be trodden. However, although some of the more complex tools may be left behind in the larger Peircean toolbox, the simpler tools offered to the beginners in Visual Semiotics must fit well their purpose without compromising any of the more complex semiotic constraints set by Peirce’s full doctrine of signs.

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**Note:** Tony Jappy, Introduction to Peircean visual semiotics. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.