

The Mind in the Picture and the Picture in the Mind: A Phenomenological Approach to Cognitive Semiotics

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Italian title: *La mente nell'immagine e l'immagine nella mente: un approccio fenomenologico alla semiotica cognitiva.*

Abstract: Cognitive semiotics is the name of a project that aims at putting together the knowledge base of cognitive science and semiotics. We will here consider the mental image, which has been an important subject in cognitive science, by contrast to the picture sign, and the sign generally, which has been a basic theme in semiotics. However, both cognitive science and semiotics will here be given a distinct phenomenological slant, in the precise Husserlean sense of the term. We will characterise the picture as a particular kind of meaning, which we will call a sign, applying explicit criteria, such as thematic hierarchy, directness hierarchy, and differentiation. In this sense, the picture is a representation, unlike many other meanings, which may be described simply in terms of selection and combination. Mental images, however, will be argued to be something very different, presentifications, that is, means for making something present, in the sense characterized by Husserl, and by such followers as Marbach and Thompson. We will however argue that Husserl's model of picture consciousness is incomplete, and that Thompson's study of mental images lacks clarity, because the lack of real comparison with pictures.

Key-words: picture; sign; pictorial consciousness; mental images; iconicity.

Cognitive semiotics seems to have been invented several times over in different quarters during the last few decades. It is not clear that it has always been taken to mean the same thing: in all its uses, however, cognitive semiotics seems to be concerned with integrating the stock of knowledge and theories existing in cognitive science and semiotics, often with the aim of creating an overall framework for the human and social sciences, with some grounding in biology. More specifically, however, we shall take cognitive semiotics to put the emphasis on the experience of meaning, as in semiotics and phenomenology, while also using experimental studies and empirical observa-

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tions as in the cognitive sciences (cfr Sonesson 2009). Cognitive semiotics, as it is here understood, will have a distinct phenomenological slant. The reflections pursued in the tradition starting out from Edmund Husserl have important contributions to make to our understanding of consciousness and different semiotic resources including language, and thus to the nature (and culture) of humanity.

We will try to approach the task of understanding what is commonly known as mental imagery, starting out from something which is, on the face of it, similar to it, the picture, which is, in our opinion, a clear instance of a sign.¹ Picture signs have been discussed in visual semiotics. Mental images, on the other hand, have played an important part in cognitive science. Edmund Husserl, but very few of his followers, have considered both.

1. The notion of sign – beyond Peirce and Saussure.

Although semiotics is often taken to be the study of signs, the notion of sign itself, strange to say, is never defined. It is true of both the main traditions of semiotics, the Saussurean and the Peircean one, that they have never really offered any definition of the sign; and the same thing seemingly applies to the notion of representation in cognitive science. This goes a long way to explaining why many semioticians (such as Greimas, Eco, etc.) have rejected the sign, without much of an argument, and why the second generation of adepts to cognitive science now seems to be doing the same thing. When Peirceans and Saussureans quarrel over the presence of two or three entities in the sign, they never pause to ask themselves what kind of objects, defined by what type of features, are involved: but, clearly, before we know what we are counting, it makes no sense to start counting at all. The whole question becomes moot, if there is no reason to analyse meaning into separate parts, as suggested by both contemporary cognitive scientists and old-time existentialists and *Lebensphilosophen*.

¹ This paper originated as a lecture at the Early Fall School of Semiotics in Sozopol in September 2011 as part of the Colloquium on “imaginary/imagery”. The term “imagery” will be taken in the present contribution to refer to mental visualizing and will be discussed in relation to pictures. The lecture also considered the mirror image, but there is no space here for taking up the mirror as a third instance of comparison. An updated version of the paper was discussed at the Centre of Cognitive Semiotics (CCS), Lund, on March 17, 2011.

So, before we even ask ourselves whether pictures, mirrors, and mental images are signs, we have to be clear about what a sign is. This involves not only deciding the criteria for analyzing a phenomenon of meaning into two (or more) separate parts, but also those allowing us to posit an asymmetrical relation between these parts: not only does the expression have to be separate from the content, but the former should stand for the latter, not the reverse (cfr Sonesson 1989, pp. 50 et seq.; 1992; 1993; 2001a, b; forthcoming a). This can be done by combining what Edmund Husserl says about the sign (something which is *directly present* but not *thematic* refers to something which is *indirectly present* but *thematic*) and what Jean Piaget says about the semiotic function (there is a *differentiation* between the latter two instances, in the double sense, we will suppose, that they *do not go over into each other in time and/or space*, and that they are perceived to be *of different nature*).

Let's start with the idea that there is meaning already in perception, first, because different perceptual phenomena can be combined, and second because there are alternatives to some phenomena perceived. We thus have *combination* and *selection*, also known in classical structuralist semiotics as syntagms and paradigms. Not all such relationships are signs. In Husserl's (1939, p. 174 et seq.; 1950, p. 238 et seq.) parlance, they form a *paired association*, or a *coupling*, when both items are directly present; they are an *appresented pairing*, or simply an appresentation, when one of the items is present and the other is not; and an appresentation becomes a *sign* when it is the absent item which is the theme (cfr Luckman 1980, p. 205 et seq. and Fig. 1). The most obvious case of an appresentation is when one looks at an object, necessarily from a particular point of view, but still perceives the whole of the object. The appresentation is that which motivates the experiential positing of something else as present along with the strictly presented object.

In semiotics, we are familiar with couplings and appresented pairings, in the form of iconic relations or *iconicities*, indexical relations

	Directly present	Thematized
Paired association	Both items	Both items
Appresented pairing	One item	Directly given item or both
Sign	One item	Indirectly given item

Figure 1.

or *indexicalities*, and symbolic relations or *symbolicities*. These are not signs, since they only involve two items and a relation between them, thus being instances of Secondness in Peirce's sense. Peirce would say that Thirdness has to be added to obtain a sign. But the distinction of what is thematic and what is directly given offers more useful criteria.

Analogously to the sign, Sonesson (1989 p. 50 et seq.) asked what might be the theme of an appresented pairing: in the case of *retention* and *protention*, the moments immediately preceding and following the present moment, it might be reasonable to say that it is the present moment that is the theme. In case of the hidden side of a perceptual object, it is less obvious that the directly perceived side must also be the sole thematic one. The appresentation of the other, the Alter as another Ego, however, would not seem to fit this scheme: we seem to be as immediately aware, as Husserl also claims, of the other's mind as of his body. Therefore, it seems that an appresentation must also allow for the two items in the relationship being equally in focus. But where then is the limit between a sign and a mere appresentation? In fact, it seems that when there is a double asymmetry, the part which is not directly given being thematic, and the one which is directly given being non-thematic, we are always faced with a sign.

Yet a second criterion may be in order, not to define the sign exhaustively, but to pinpoint the properties which allow it to emerge in childhood and evolution. This is the notion of differentiation, characterised by Jean Piaget. According to Piaget the *semiotic function* (which, in the early writings, was still termed the symbolic function) is a capacity acquired by the child at an age of around eighteen to twenty-four months, which enables him or her to imitate something or somebody outside the direct presence of the model, to use language, make drawings, play 'symbolically', and have access to mental imagery and memory. The common factor underlying all these phenomena, according to Piaget, is the ability to represent reality by means of a signifier that is distinct from the signified.² Indeed, Piaget argues that the child's experience of meaning antedates the semiotic function, but that it does not then suppose a differentiation of signifier and signified in the sign (cf. Piaget 1945; 1967; 1970). In several of the passages in which he makes use of this notion of semiotic function, Pia-

² In the later part of this article, we will suggest that mental images and memory is really different from the other phenomena listed in not being true signs.

get goes on to point out that "indices" and "signals" are possible long before the age of eighteen months, but only because they do not suppose any differentiation between expression and content. The signifier of the index, Piaget says, is "an objective aspect of the signified" (*ibidem*); thus, for instance, the visible extremity of an object that is almost entirely hidden from view is the signifier of the entire object for the baby, just as the tracks in the snow stand for the prey to the hunter. But when the child uses a pebble to signify candy, he is well aware of the difference between them, which implies, as Piaget tells us, "a differentiation, from the subject's own point of view, between the signifier and the signified" (*ibidem*).

Piaget is quite right in distinguishing the manifestation of the semiotic function from other ways of "connecting significations", to employ his own terms. We have already encountered those under the names of coupling and appresentations. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, while the signifier of the index is said to be an *objective* aspect of the signified, we are told that in the sign and the "symbol" (i.e., in Piaget's terminology, the conventional and the motivated variant of the semiotic function, respectively) expression and content are differentiated *from the point of view of the subject*. We can, however, imagine this same child that in Piaget's example uses a pebble to stand for a piece of candy having recourse instead to a feather in order to represent a bird, or employ a pebble to stand for a rock, without therefore confusing the part and the whole: then the child would be employing a feature, which is *objectively* a part of the bird, or the rock, while differentiating the former from the latter *from his point of view*. Nor does the hunter, who identifies the animal by means of the tracks, and then employs them to find out the direction the animal has taken, confuse the tracks with the animal itself in his construal of the sign, in which case he would be satisfied with the former. Both the child in our example and the hunter are using indices, or indexical signs, where the 'real' connection is transformed into a differentiation in the sign.

On the other hand, the child *and the adult* fail to differentiate the perceptual adumbration in which he has access to the object from the object itself; indeed, they will identify them, at least until they change their perspective on the object by approaching it from another vantage point. And at least the adult will consider a branch jutting out behind a wall as something which is non-differentiated from the tree, to use Piaget's example, in the rather different sense of being a proper part

of it. In the Peircean sense an *index* is a sign, the relata of which are connected, independently of the sign function, by *contiguity* or by that kind of relation that obtains between a part and the whole (henceforth termed *factorality*). When these relationships are given together in perception, we have a coupling in Husserl's sense; when only one of them is present, there is appresentation. Two items present together only become a sign, however, to the extent that one of them, identified as the expression, is directly perceived but not in focus, and the other one, the content, is indirectly perceived while at the same time being the focus of the relation. An index, then, must be understood as indexicality (an *indexical* relation or *ground*, to use an old Peircean term) plus the sign function.

But we should take these observations further: since what is at stake is a thematic structuring, and this structuring itself is relative to a subject for whom it is a part of the field of consciousness, the first part of the sign is in some sense a stand that the subject may take on the other. In more familiar terms, the first part of the sign is 'about' the other. Of course, this more readily applies to the relation between the content and the referent, where the latter corresponds in the world outside of the sign to that with which the sign is concerned. Husserl (1980), in fact, makes this distinction clearly only in his study of picture consciousness, where he notes that the depicted Berlin palace is here in the picture, whereas the real palace is in Berlin (cfr Sonesson 1989, p. 270 et seq.; 2006a and below).³ As I have suggested elsewhere (Sonesson 1989: 193 et seq.), we would thus have to suppose some kind of thematic hierarchy going (in the ordinary case) from the expression through the content to the referent.⁴

Thus we can minimally define the sign by the following properties:

- it contains (a least) two parts (expression and content) and is as a whole relatively independent of that for which it stands (the referent);

³ In a more classically empirical way, the necessity of this distinction may be borne home by studies of children interpreting pictures, according to which the identification of an object, present in one picture, in another one is considerably easier than its retrieval in reality (Lenninger in preparation).

⁴ In fact, in all his work, Husserl was very much concerned with the difference between what has here been called the content ("noema") and the referent ("the noematical core"), but he does not seem to discuss it elsewhere in relation to the expression.

- these parts are differentiated, from the point of view of the subjects involved in the semiotic process, even though they may not be so objectively, i.e. in the common sense Lifeworld (except as signs forming part of that Lifeworld);
- there is a double asymmetry between the two parts, because one part, expression, is more directly experienced than the other;
- and because the other part, content, is more in focus than the other;
- the sign itself is subjectively differentiated from the referent, and the referent is more indirectly known than any part of the sign.⁵

2. The picture as a particular iconic sign.

A picture is of course an instance of an iconic sign. An icon must be understood as iconicity (an iconic relation or ground, as Peirce originally called it) plus the sign function. But pictoriality is not just any kind of iconicity. It is of course visual iconicity, but that is not enough to characterize its specificity (cfr Sonesson 1989; 1993; 1994; 1995; 2001a, b; 2003; 2008). Pictures are characterized by what we have elsewhere called *resemantization* (cfr Sonesson 1989, p. 255 et seq.). The parts that are meaningless in isolation become carrier of particular portions of the overall meaning, once they are integrated into the whole. Like the phonemes /m/, /æ/, and /n/, forming the word /mæn/, the strokes and dots making up the picture of a man are in themselves meaningless even when considered in their particular spatial location; however, after having been put together, the phonemes continue to be deprived of meaning as such, whereas the strokes and the dots begin to take on the aspects of different proper parts and attributes of the man they contribute to form. Put simply, the different parts and properties of the man are not distributed among the phonemes /m/, /æ/, and /n/, as they are among the strokes and dots forming the corresponding picture.⁶ This is possible because the picture is the same time an object of perception and a sign.

⁵ The referent will also ordinarily be more in focus than the sign, if we suppose what in Anglo-Saxon philosophy of language is called "opaque contexts" to be the exception. Cfr Sonesson (1989, p. 193 et seq.).

⁶ It will be noted, then, that pictures do not have double articulation, as was once argued by Eco and Lindeken, nor do they lack elements without their own significa-

These properties of the picture are connected to a peculiarity of the picture sign that Husserl (1980) has described by the term *Bildbewusstsein*, and that was taken up for discussion again much later, no doubt independently, by Wollheim (1980), according to whom we 'see in' the depicted object directly into the physical object that is the pictorial expression (Sonesson 1989, p. 262 et seq.; cfr Sonesson 2006; 2008). Two similar things assume the character of a picture only when pictorial consciousness is attached to them, Husserl (1980, pp. 17, 16, 138, et seq.) contends (and, in addition, the similarity must be "*anschaulich*", p. 135). Pictorial consciousness puts three instances into relation: the *picture thing* (originally the "physical picture"), the *picture object*, and the *picture subject* ("*Bildding*", "*Bildobjekt*", and "*Bildsujet*", respectively). When the picture is said to be lopsided, this concerns the picture thing; but when we complain about the failure of the photograph to resemble the person photographed, it is the picture object that is incriminated (cfr Fig. 2). However, it might seem less clear what constitutes the difference between the picture object and the picture subject.

In the photograph of a child, a figure can be seen that is in some respects similar to the child, but differs from it in size, color, etc. The miniature child in a greyish violet is of course not the child that is 'intended', i.e., conceived ("*vorgestellt*"). The real child, the picture subject, is red-cheeked, has blond hair, and so on, but the picture object can only show up 'photographic colors'. The first, then, which is what

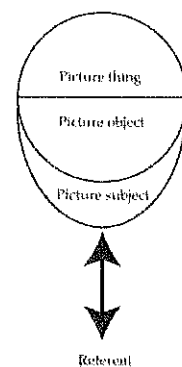


Figure 2.

tion, as has been widely argued since; their case is different again. This argument is given more fully in Sonesson (1989, p. 282 et seq.).

is 'seen-in', in Wollheim's sense, is the *picture object*. The second is the *picture subject*. It should be noted immediately that, although 'photographic colors' do not mean the same thing to us as to Husserl, the distinction is still valid, because even high-quality color photographs, as well as paintings, are incapable of rendering the full scale of colors present in the real world of perception. According to Husserl (1980, p. 18), however, there is also a different kind of difference between the picture object and the picture subject, for whereas that Berlin castle we see is here, where the picture is, the Berlin castle itself, as a thing, remains in Berlin.

It seems to me that the picture subject is made to accomplish a double task, which it cannot really sustain, that of content type and referent. It is in the relation between the picture object and the picture subject that pictoriality, according to Husserl, may be more or less extensive, and more or less intensive, i.e., concern a greater or lesser number of properties, and realize them to a greater or lesser degree ("*Extensität*" and "*Intensität der Bildlichkeit*", Husserl 1980, p. 56 et seq.). Husserl maintains that there must always be a difference, however small, between picture object and picture subject, in terms of the 'extensivity' and the 'intensity' of their respective properties. If so, it should be sufficient to attenuate the 'intensive' and 'extensive' differences between them, in order to have them approach gradually, and then in the end coincide, at least as a thought experiment. But this could never happen, not even in thought, because the picture object is here, where the picture thing is, whereas the picture subject is somewhere else, in the place assigned to it in the Lifeworld (cfr Husserl 1980, pp. 18, 79): indeed, as we have heard, the Berlin castle, no matter where the picture is moved, will remain in Berlin. Moreover, the picture object is perceived, but the picture subject is only something about which information is conveyed (cfr Sonesson 1989, pp. 276 et seq.). But this makes nonsense of the idea, suggested by Husserl himself, to compare picture object and picture subject, as the 'extensivity' and the 'intensity' of their respective properties.

It would of course be an error to identify the triad picture thing, picture object, and picture subject, with expression, content and referent. The picture object is perceived, whereas the content of a verbal sign, for example, is not; and there is a real sense in which the picture object is present here and now, together with the picture thing, whilst the verbal content can hardly be said to be thus. Nor is it feasible to assume that the picture subject is identical to the referent, in the sense

of a concrete object of the world, or even in the sense of being a type standing for a number of such instances. Many pictures may not have referents, in any of the latter senses, but they clearly have picture subjects: such is the case not only of the notorious unicorn, but of all the creatures emerging out of Escher's and Reutersvärd's pictures. Indeed, there may be a difference between the picture object and the picture subject of a unicorn picture, for instance if the unicorn looks grey or even blue, but we know that unicorns are white — although unicorns do not exist.

Thus, in Husserl's work, the picture subject has been made to mean two things that do not need to coincide: a) the picture object as it is really, that is, without its 'photographic colors'; b) the picture object in its right place (cfr Fig. 2). As Husserl observes, the painting of the palace is here, but the real palace is in Berlin. Indeed, it was, at the time Husserl was writing. After 1946 and until recently, however, the Berlin Castle ceased to exist.⁷ This does not mean that the difference between the picture object and the picture subjects disappears from a photograph taken in 1989 and observed at the present. The 'photographic colors' are certainly not those we expect the real castle to have had. The picture object corrected according to our expectations will henceforth be called the *picture subject*. That which may exist elsewhere may be called the *picture referent*.

The whole point of 'impossible pictures' is that they point beyond themselves to something that cannot exist, their equivalents in the three-dimensional world (cfr Sonesson 1989a, p. 266 et seq.). Indeed, their picture things are quite possible, as are in this sense their picture objects (consider the importance of 'recognizability' to Escher). This is, I submit, the most interesting interpretation of the notion of picture subject: *as the potential real-world equivalent of that which is 'seen in' the picture thing, that is, of the picture object*. Husserl (1980, p. 490) could be taken to suggest just this, when he claims that what is seen in the picture is corrected for its deviations from the idea we have of the corresponding type, which imposes constraints on the possibilities of perception: being made of plaster contradicts our idea of a human being, so we withdraw it from the picture object.

The description of this phenomenological analysis, and some corrections proposed to it, occupy an appreciable part of *Pictorial Con-*

⁷ It is now being rebuilt, but according to a new model by Frank Stella, so it is hardly a question of the same referent being re-established.

cepts (Sonesson 1989, p. 262 et seq.; cfr Sonesson 2008, forthcoming). More recently, Husserl's analysis was taken up in a similar way by Blanke (2003) and Stjernfelt (2007, p. 289 et seq.), without adding anything new to Husserl's analysis, nor taking my reworking of it into account (which is somewhat curious, since both quote Sonesson 1989 in their references). Stjernfelt (2007, p. 299) observes that Husserl's notion of picture is much more restricted than Peirce's notion of iconicity, notably as far as sense modalities are concerned, but this precisely misses the point that pictoriality, in the Husserlean sense, is something more specific than iconicity. As we shall see, Thompson (2007, p. 267 et seq.) returns to the same Husserlean texts in the context of a discussion of mental images, without, however, having much to say about real pictures.

3. Mental images as presentifications.

Evan Thompson (2007, p. 267 et seq.) starts out from the Husserlean texts on *Bildbewusstsein* when he embarks on the discussion of the nature of mental images, in order to emphasise something Husserl points out, at least in some of his analyzes, viz. that mental images are not images in a phenomenal sense: like memory, they are just perceptions having a different act character. This observation is convincing: it is difficult to see how mental images and memory could be on a par with pictures, language, and symbolic play, as Piaget claims (see above). However, our own analysis (in Sonesson 1989, p. 275), which did consider the differences between pictures, illusions, doubtful identifications, ambiguities, dummies, and theatrical performances, and many other picture-like phenomena mentioned by Husserl, completely excluded the discussion of mental images.

Within cognitive science, on the contrary, this discussion has played a central part. A distinction is traditionally made between *pictorialism* (represented by Kosslyn), which holds that mental pictures really are (or resemble) pictures; and *decriptivism* (represented by Pylyshyn), which claims that mental images are in fact propositions (i.e. language-like structures). As Thompson (2007) points out, however, this distinction concerns the way mental images are instantiated in the brain ("subpersonally"). According to Thompson, nevertheless, both conceptions agree that mental images are experienced as pictures. Husserl and Thompson, however, claim that mental images are not

experienced as pictures. Indeed, among other things, mental images are not located on a surface; they are not flat; and you cannot turn them over to inspect them (cfr Thomas 2010).

In his exploration of pictorial consciousness, Husserl starts out in 1898 treating pictures — as opposed to signs — as being similar to remembering, anticipation, and phantasy — or rather, he uses his idea of the picture as a model for understanding remembering, anticipation, and phantasy. He denies, however, that pictures are signs. Sonesson (1989, p. 276 et seq.), who, on the contrary, thinks pictures are signs, believed the reason for which Husserl denies the status of signs to pictures is that he sees signs as necessarily being symbols, that is, as conventional signs. This interpretation is born out by Husserl's claim that convention is needed to determine the upright position of the picture that makes it possible to interpret it.⁸ This is, however, certainly not the main reason for Husserl's contention. It all depends on fulfillment (cfr Willard 1995). Only perception is really in presence of its object.⁹ "Signitive intentions" are to Husserl inauthentic, the opposite of intuitive, that is, they have to be fulfilled — if not by perception, then by presentifications ("*Vergegenwärtigungen*"). But, at the time Husserl started reflecting on these issues, he clearly thought that pictures were more capable of serving fulfillment than (conventional) signs, thus being comparable to remembering and anticipation. At a later stage, nevertheless, Husserl (1980, p. 139) established a basic division into proper ("*eigentlich*") and non-proper ("*nicht-eigentlich*") phenomena — also "symbolic" and elsewhere "signitive" intentions. In this division, presentifications such as anticipation, remembering, and phantasy appear together with perceptions, whereas signs and pictures are put in the opposite general category (as illustrated very well in the diagram constructed by Stjernfelt from Husserl's text; cfr Fig. 3).

⁸ As we have shown long ago, however, convention is certainly not needed for this, since it is sufficient to move a picture round until it offers itself to interpretation — something that is in particular well illustrated by the classical comic strip "The upside-downs"; cfr Sonesson 1989, p. 276 et seq.).

⁹ We are at the heart of what made Jacques Derrida criticize Husserl. But, as Paul Ricœur said to me at a 1984 meeting in Toronto, where we were both present: he could not understand what was wrong with presence.

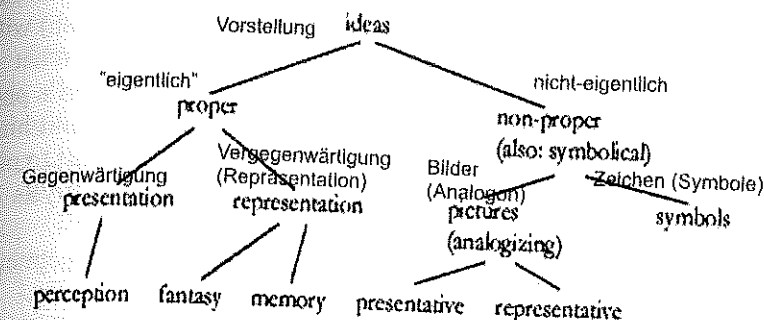


Figure 3.

Thus, in Husserl's mature conception, the remembered object stands before our eyes itself, whereas in the picture, something else is there 'in person', as Husserl says, although we are conscious of it as being the representation of something resembling it. In the case of remembering, anticipations, and phantasy, there is nothing "in-between" the subject and the object, only a modification of the act directed at the same object (cfr Fig. 3). Husserl rejects the "image theory" of remembering, anticipation, and phantasy, as he had early on done in the case of perception. The editor of Husserl's posthumous texts on pictorial consciousness, Eduard Marbach (1993) rephrases this distinction as being between being in one environment and experience what has happened before, what will happen later, and what is merely possible in another environment, on one hand, and being in the presence of something that indirectly gives access to something being somewhere else in time and space, on the other. Thompson, on the other hand, describes anticipation, memory, and phantasy more resolutely as being some kind of vicarious perception, some kind of "off-line" perceptual processes that are so close to real perception as to be facilitated by movements in the same sense and hindered by movements in the opposite sense.

Before we can even discuss Marbach's and Thompson's interpretation, it would be useful to establish a distinction between *presentifications* and *representations*. Representation is the same as sign: there should be differentiation and double asymmetry. Presentification means that something is present in a modified mode: as imagined, as past, etc. Presentify means making something present. Unfortunately,

Marbach uses “representations” for both (as did Husserl at first), and Thompson’s talks clumsily about “re–presentation” (with a dash) with special reference to anticipation, memory, and phantasy. What is worse, Thompson has no theory of signs. He mentions Husserl’s phenomenology of the picture sign in passing but does not commit himself to it. He never discusses signs at all. But without a contrast to pictures and other signs, Thompson’s otherwise excellent analysis of mental imagery and memory is not very informative.

Cognitive semiotics has to account for both signs and enactments — in other words, for both representations and presentifications.

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On Imaginary Entities or Chimeras and their Relation to Reality

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Italian title: *Sulle entità immaginarie o chimere e la loro relazione con la realtà.*

Abstract: I discuss the nature of imaginary entities and argue that, although they inhabit possible worlds, they interact with us in the real world by means of language and narrative. I sustain a non-pictorial view of mental images and I argue for this claim by way of Quintilian's theory of *enargeia*. I then reconstruct two relatively unknown semiotic theories, formulated by B. Bolzano and A. Meinong, who contribute to the contemporary discussion by examining the problem of how the referential relation can obtain when the *relatum* does not exist. They argue that imaginary entities stand in a signifying relation to reality — which is projected or assumed by a narrator and an addressee. Like Bolzano (1837) and the early Meinong (1894–9), I remain ontologically parsimonious: by assuming that 'there are chimera', we do not have to assume a separate universe for characters that do not physically exist in our actual world, in order to imagine them or talk about them. I take my lead from them, as well as from linguist and Gestalt psychologist K. Bühler (1934), semiotician and linguist R. Jakobson (1975), and linguist J. Lyons (1975), and distinguish between three levels of existence: a virtual or possible level for ideal, mathematical, and logical objects, an actual level for perceived objects, and a real or linguistic level of signification that grounds the other two.

Key-words: imaginary entities; chimeras; mental images; possible; real; existing.

* New Bulgarian University. My thanks go to Vladimir Marinov, Georgi Gochev and Dimitar Trendafilov who have stood by me through real and imaginary worlds. I also thank the anonymous referee for his or her comments and valuable suggestions, although I beg to disagree with his or her neo-Meinongian stance. I focus on the early Meinong (1894) and I reconstruct his views in regard to the signifying relation and the problem of objectuality (*Gegenständlichkeit*), which do not require ontological commitments because, in that text, the problem of existence is semantic and semiotic. Last but not least, I thank Peter Dimitrov for his astute critical comments on the penultimate version of this paper, which helped me to re-think and re-formulate some important issues.