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*Grounds for Cultural Influence: Visual and Non-visual  
Presence of Americanness in Contemporary Architecture*  
ARCHITECTURE

## **1. Introduction: Who's "America"?**

The anthropologist Yunxiang Yan states about China and its late modern individualization processes, that in the eyes of Beijing consumers, modernization lies in USA-related products (Yan 2000; 2009). In a similar but more popular vein, the journalist Eric Schlosser states that Germany is today the most Americanized country in Europe, and that Germany has become one of McDonalds' most profitable overseas markets (Schlosser 2002). Statements like these about American influence in non-American cultures appear from time to time because of the global American impact on goods, routines, advertising, politics, warfare, etc. Taken together, domains like these influence the content and activities of whole cultures and nations, but often these influences are recognized more as sub-cultural, i.e. as significant for a derived part of a culture, such as group's interest in cars, food or music. The global dissemination of American imagery – whether produced in the eyes of beholders all over the world or as actual wide-ranging policy-making with an explicitly rhetorical agenda – has stood out as an ever increasing and (seemingly) unending force in what we for a little more than a century have recognised as “modernity”. In order to study these processes effectively, we will here leave aside statements about which countries are the most Americanized ones, and instead put the question as a general one, tied to the domain of cultural influence between nations and regions of the world: in what (semiotic)

ways do these types of influence appear, and take root in a receiver culture? Americanisms come in a broad range of varieties, and the conditions affecting their adoption are correspondingly complex. In what follows we recognise the material presence of USA-related matters in other parts of the world, especially as a global issue of architectural design as related to land use issues. This paper is first of all a general and speculative suggestion of how to approach such a study, followed by preliminary observations of cases of architectural development in the city of Malmö in the south of Sweden.

In order to delimit the complexity of the problem we will discuss cultural implementation in terms of a semiotics that have its origin in Peirce's discussion of the ground(s) for sign production. Our approach recognizes the value-based cultural semiotics that departed from Lotman to be further developed by Sonesson (2000), where the comprehension of an "other" culture is regarded as important for the evaluating culture's definition of itself. Our Peirce-based approach could be seen as a complement to this value-based cultural semiotics, by adding the difference between types of cultural impression and their order of appearance in situations where we learn to know more about other cultures. When facing another culture, as a traveller, or in an initial contact at home ground with a foreign religion or a sub-cultural phenomenon, the contact inevitably involves successive procedures of recognition. Added aspects, meetings and interaction provide a deeper understanding that subsequently modifies the first, fragmentary, impressions.

This succession, or process of supplementation, could in terms of semiotics be regarded as a process of signification where factual links and implications (indexes) as well as culturally based habits and conventions (symbolicity) support, modify, or alter the more direct and initial (iconic) impressions. In this paper, it is suggested that by focusing on the semiotic "ground", or as it were, the mutual correspondent needed to constitute iconic as well as indexical signification, we will get a model for separating two different types of cultural influence, namely those with similarity as a ground and those where the ground between two non-similar things is a correspondence by way of proximity. Symbolicity, i. e. signification constituted by habit or convention, does thus not require a "pre"-ground in the motivated sense of

iconicity and indexicality.<sup>1</sup> Our emphasis in the following is mostly on the “motivated” iconic and indexical grounds, both of which can be visual, and both of which may be evoked in rhetorical acts.

## 2. Visual Rhetoric: From Panzani to Guantanamo

The fundamental changes currently going on as part of ecological, political and cultural processes of globalisation have an impact on the discourse of semiotics: its theoretical multiplicity and didactic complexity, but also its ability to handle the weight, charge, and intensity of the real situations studied. Cultures bear connotations that carry different intensity at different times. Signification thus fluctuates: images and clichés that had an original bond to a specific culture may either disperse and circulate later as a neutral load of properties, or on the contrary gain a common interest, thus a greater life world impact and cultural intensity. In Barthes essay about a Panzani Pasta advertisement in *Rhetoric of the Image* from 1964 “Italianicity” was suggested as a connotation of a specific food culture and a specific colour combination, etc., and these connotations probably still have a certain common validity, even today when the national and EU politics of Berlusconi have marked in somewhat new ways the common comprehension of what represents Italy. Both Barthes and Italy have so to say undergone changes as common cognitive instances, even if our preconceptions about nations – as well as well-known theorists – for the most part are only slowly renewed. To reflect on Americanness today, without considering the contemporary political role of the United States, with associations to Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, would simply be to neglect what comes to peoples’ minds. Compared to Barthes’ original notion of “Italianicity”, as it was once figuratively presented in connection to a nice food arrangement, the idea of what constitutes “Americanness” seems, apart from raising other types of cultural associations, to bestow a different set of political, ontological and rhetorical values, values that any pragmatic presentation of Amer-

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<sup>1</sup> It can of course be discussed if “habit” is the life world ground upon which “symbolicity” is constituted, but we leave that discussion here, in order to concentrate on iconicity.

icanness must deal with, as well as any semiotic analysis of American cultural exchange. An inter-cultural relationship inevitably mirrors also political temperature. The question is whether these values can be separated from what is thought of as the basic – and supposedly “neutral” – types of signification. A way to discuss these issues would be through the ground, or grounds, by which a sign functions, and without which rhetorical figures would not carry any meaning.

### *2.1. American Influences in architecture – on iconic and indexical ground*

None of the three concepts “American”, “influence” or “architecture” – can be delimited in a self-evident way. We may, for instance, ask ourselves: Is “Americanness” defined by the fact that an idea or product originates from USA, or is “Americanness” first of all produced in the receiving culture as a typical style or principle of organisation? (Not to mention the geographical dilemma that we do not here speak of the whole continent, or the “original” American culture). Architecture, in its turn, could be seen as confined either to the construction of (a specific choice of) houses, cities and landscapes, or being a general principle of organisation, applicable to other artefacts too, even language. And “influence” – does that appear as deliberate visual fabrication and appropriation of images, styles, and manners, or is it something that makes itself present in more silent and perhaps less visible, links of, for example, a political or economic kind?

To take these three concepts – “American”, “influence” and “architecture” – a bit further, one could invoke a cornerstone of Peircean semiotics, namely what Peirce and some of his interpreters have termed *the ground* for signification. In congruence with this stream of interpretation, here represented by the contemporary semiotics of Sonesson (1999), we may also take account of the difference between *iconic ground* and *indexical ground*. A ground, in this particular sense, is not an empirical or epistemological background against which a sign (such as an icon or an index) appears. It is rather, as Peirce stated it some hundred years ago, an “abstraction” – or perhaps better – an *excerpt* from a perception that is shared with another perception. Peirce (1931-1958: 1.293) exemplified the notion of ground

in this sense with the blackness that connects two different black things. Evidently, two black things, however different they may otherwise be, could represent the same quality, such as invisibility during a dark evening. They may even represent each other in this aspect (A is as invisible as B in the night). But what should we say about entities more culturally complex than colours? In one of his discussions of the concept of iconicity Peirce brought forth another example (coincidentally serving aptly our present interest in Americanness) in which two well-known Americans, Franklin and Rumford, are seen as not only representing America in a declared (or symbolical) way. They also iconically represent each other (and Americanness), in an immediate cognitive comparison, as opposed to a mere pictorial aspect of iconicity.

If, by the term *ground*, we accept what Peirce and various interpreters of his work have suggested, namely that in any sign production one particular aspect of the reference is active (i.e. one aspect of an object corresponds to one aspect of a sign representing that object), then we will automatically accept also a type of semiotics that is based on recognition in a very broad sense. We will, as it were, automatically enter a cognitive comprehension of sign production as being the result of correspondences shared between any two entities.<sup>2</sup> Peirce (1931-1958: 2:228) suggested that we are not able to comprehend a correspondence between two things except as a correspondence *in some respect*. We will here not dig further into the specific problem, in Peirce's distinctions, of when a correspondence of this type approaches the more culturally conditioned, thus also more epistemologically loaded notion of "convention", an approach that would raise the issue of when an iconic sign should instead be regarded as a symbol.<sup>3</sup> It is only too obvious that when dealing with Americanness we cannot avoid symbolic meanings and actions, and it can of course, in line

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<sup>2</sup> As always in Peircian semiotics, we are dealing with a number of possible semiotic worlds. Thus, "correspondence" may occur between two parties in a social world, but could also be an establishing moment in any perceptual or cognitive event.

<sup>3</sup> It is worthwhile to be noted that iconicity may, in fact, itself be considered as a ground, namely a ground in any production of signs. This, since iconicity in the Peircian semiotic universe constitutes the primary ground without which the second and third forms of signification – namely indexicality (based on actual junction between two things) and symbolicity (based on the virtual existence of a third confirming convention) – could not exist.

with Peirce, from case to case be disputed to what extent sign production is charged with symbolic meaning. We will however in the following, despite the obvious connection between culture and symbolicity, try to stay with the issue of the ground of iconicity and its difference from indexicality. When it comes to indexicality, and indexical ground, the corresponding entities are instead proxemically connected and of a dissimilar type.<sup>4</sup> In our cultural approach this means for instance that images may be produced because there are “invisible” (indexical) links between the two cultures, like agreements, personal contacts, etc.

## 2.2. *Influencing forces*

Within contemporary architecture one may run into the recognition of an American “avant-garde”: influential American architects such as Frank O. Gehry, Peter Eisenman and Greg Lynn, and the way their methods have established various principles of design in which new “form families” have emerged.<sup>5</sup> Formal experiments like these have been launched and discussed as having a transgressive relation to earlier architecture. In some cases they have also been recognised as meta-architecture, or featured in discussions of architecture as preferably non-metaphoric, or even as non-representational, in the specific sense that new architecture may deliberately try to avoid a transferred literal meaning, or refuse to recall an architectural style tradition. These American schools have recently influenced the practice, and sometimes to a significant extent the education, of architects.<sup>6</sup> However, when we set out to address the issue of Americanness in architecture

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<sup>4</sup> Sonesson makes, in an interpretation of Peirce’s example, this distinction between iconic and indexical ground. Cfr. G. SONESSON, (1999), “Iconicity in the ecology of semiosis”, in T. D. JOHANSSON, M. SKOV, B. BROGAARD, eds., *Iconicity*, Aarhus, p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Speaks discusses the contemporary importance of American and Dutch “schools” of architecture, and their roles as avant-garde. M. SPEAKS, (1998), “It’s Out There: The Formal Limits of the American Avant-Garde”, in R. RITTER, B. KNALLER-VLAY, eds., *Other Spaces, The Affair of the Heterotopia* (Dokumente zur Architektur 10), HDA, Graz.

<sup>6</sup> The term “avant-garde” seems today to be usable only in a specific traditionalist and “statistical” perspective as describing the fact that certain movements influence others. The term is otherwise misleading because of the difficulty of postulating a first and a second “garde” in an incalculable world experienced as a network of influences.

we must not think solely in terms of formal experiments. What about, for instance, the spatial arrangements – camps, roads, fences, vehicles, etc. – conditioned by the American military forces, and recently established in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq? These are examples of a kind of spatial ordering that not only has direct consequences – intended or non-intended – for the region where they are imposed. Such military architectures may also, as we know, function as a figure to imitate, or even become prototypes in the organisation of terrorist (or “terroristic”)<sup>7</sup> activities. Moreover, they may work as models for the organising of strategic activity in general, outside war sites for anyone in daily life exposed to a media account of training-camps, warfare and occupation. History, not least design history, show several examples of transferred military “looks” and principles such as compactness and transportability.

The strategy of probing into another territory for the sake of establishing military bases may result in spatial production that is not necessarily a *resemblance* of the probing part, but rather a fact conditioned by proxemic existence of the probing activity itself. The architectonics of camps, for instance, would thus in a geographical-semiotic framework probably be easier to associate with indexicality than with iconicity, more with actual traces from the presence of a foreign nation, than with a resemblance with the artefacts of that nation. However, if we focus on the common ground from which an iconic signification can be drawn, in the manner of Peirce and several of his interpreters, then Americanness could be found in various disguises, images and architectures, as long as there is an analogy “in some respect”. One may for instance hypothetically think of acts of geographical segmentation, financing politics, or military training programs where correspondence might occur, without it being plain likeness.

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<sup>7</sup> Irit Rogoff has made an attempt to distinguish between a “terrorist” activity (tied to the doings of actual terrorist groups) and “the terroristic” (as a principle more general, and transferable, which still have its origin in factual terrorist activity). Cfr. I. ROGOFF, (2003), “Engendering Terror”, in *Geography and the Politics of Mobility*, Vienna Generali Foundation and Walter Koenig Books, Cologne 2003, retrieved July 4 2010 at <http://www.kein.org/node/63>.



When dealing with contemporary architecture, the question is often asked whether the object of architecture is to be delimited to the construction of buildings, roads, cities, fences, etc. – or if it should also include organisational bodies such as governments, companies and economies. In today’s political climate, when we say “American-influenced architecture”, questions like these inevitably arise, since designed artefacts of all kinds – from soda cans to court rooms – tend to become charged with the significance of dominance. In the end the symbolic value might get intensified and polarised: is it ours... or is it American?

One of the most disputed geographical areas of our times shows an example of architectural influence on remote territory: the building of infrastructure in connection to the Israeli settlements in the Gaza strip and the West Bank. Without here raising the political question of whether there is both support and resistance from the USA in these cases, one may still point to the general issue of remote strategic financing of architecture. These settlements have a direct governmental financial support that is significantly larger than the local support given to settlers (Weisman 2004). The construction of new super-modern roads and highways, and the consequential blocking of old ones, serve here as a warfare strategy (run without lethal arms).<sup>8</sup> An established general fact of planning is here, due to the explicit nature of the political conflict, taken to its extreme: architecture is used to destroy one culture for the sake of building another. In our semiotic context, this seems above all to be an example that lays stress on an indexical type of reference: one fact (national strategic aims and governmental financing) point to another fact (a certain type of architectural structure). On the other hand, iconic references may also exist – the formal features of design (i.e. the type of extension, inflection, straightness, flatness, etc.) take a shape that depends on the technologies of who finances the projects. These comparisons are not put here to get any deeply analysed answers, but rather for the sake of illustrating the semiotic complexity of the issue of “influence”.

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<sup>8</sup> This type of land-use based warfare strategy was illustrated in the exhibition “Territories”, that was shown in Berlin Kunstwerke 2003, Rotterdam Witte de Wit 2003, and Malmö Kunsthall 2004. Catalogue editors A. Franke and E. Weisman.



If we return to the daily mechanisms of influence, not necessarily conditioned by military domination or fatal conflict, but by the fact that a foreign circumstance pervades a certain existing state-of-affairs or certain manners of life, we should examine the reciprocal wills involved when one culture makes itself manifest in/to another. Mechanisms of influence, including the susceptibility and responsiveness of the receiving culture, are a central concern of the branch of cultural semiotics that builds on descriptions of how, for instance, French culture, or “text” (here denoting any matter of semiotic significance) was absorbed into Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century culture. Without here entering deeply into the semiotic modelling of cultural interaction, it suffices to say here that when trying to catch sight of what an influence is, we will inevitably run into processes of interchange, where cultural “texts”, “non-texts”, “extra-texts”, and “intra-texts”, all play a part.<sup>9</sup> We will, as it were, find ourselves dealing with accepted cultural matter, with Nature’s (or Barbarian) matter, with matter based on the projection of oneself into another culture, and with matter based on the projection of the other into oneself.<sup>10</sup>

When it comes to the everyday presence of Americanness in Sweden there is, of course, an abundance of McDonalds, Pizza Huts and Subway restaurants – just as there is everywhere else. These are evidently designed to convey the particular kind of look-alike Americanness that goes with these brands. But there is also a certain kind of receptivity involved. In a culture-receptive framework, such as Sweden’s, certain American messages seem to be approved of instantly – the popularity seems to be present almost before the imported artefact. Could this receptivity, this virtual in-fill mechanism in a culture, be the prerequisite “abstract”, or ground, that Peirce saw as necessary for an iconic sign to occur? Do these types of instant cultural presence suggest linkages other than plain likeness, and beside all the symbolic

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<sup>9</sup> These notions are drawn from the cultural semiotics of Sonesson (2000), which is an interpretation and an expansion of the Tartu model of cultural interchange developed by Y. Lotman and others. Cfr. G. SONESSON, (2000), “Ego Meets Alter: the meaning of otherness in cultural semiotics”, *Semiotica*, 128, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin.

<sup>10</sup> In the case of American architecture of warfare, these types of reciprocal cultural intertwinements should also remind us that it contains elements of other, earlier, warfare cultures, such as European or Arabic ones (as commonly referred to by military generals when they discuss their choice of strategy).

values and indexical links that are involved in any mediation process? Those are the open semiotic questions asked here, questions that may inform further cultural studies.

### 3. Modes of Americanness in a case study

In a recent study of ours, the City of Los Angeles and some of the writings/discourses connected to this city were used to inform a study of the Malmö region in southern Sweden. We will here briefly mention three areas of interest in this project, linked both to immediate impressions and to chains of political and economical decision. Americanness (or as it were here: LosAngeles-ness) appears in three different modes: 1) as analogies in a comparison of buildings for the police force, 2) as a transferable discourse concerning the exploitation of land for building projects, and 3) as a factual link of consultation in the case of a theme park.

First, let's consider the two main offices of the police forces in LA and in Malmö, respectively. Both of them are currently (and constantly) in a process of reconstruction on the basis of security.<sup>11</sup> The police headquarters in both Malmö and Los Angeles are quite "neutral" buildings, somewhat office-like, but they do bear traces of police-specificity, stemming from, for instance, the increasing demand to navigate radio communication, the need to be able to keep people locked

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<sup>11</sup> When it comes to issues of security, the flow of ideas seems to go from USA to Sweden – the opposite direction would be almost unthinkable, since Sweden is often considered as a rather naive nation as far as security issues are handled. This presumed naiveté is, in comparison, perhaps not only a rumour, but could hypothetically be a consequence of the fact that the nation has not been fatally involved in severe conflicts for more than a century. During WW2, for instance, the Swedish government maintained a dubious balancing act to avoid conflict, when closing a treaty with Germany admitting a transportation of arms through Swedish territory. More recently, there has been an increasing concern with security policies – beginning with the murder of the Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986, but more intensely so in connection with the violent confrontation between police and activists in connection with a G8 meeting in Gothenburg 2001, as well as with the murder of foreign minister Anna Lindh in 2003. In the aftermath of the Gothenburg riots, the trial of the commanding chief officer of the Gothenburg Police Force was held, during which, among other accusations (of an insufficiently organised response), it was indirectly suggested that his over-reaction against large groups of peacefully demonstrating young people was due to the pressure on him occasioned by the visit to Gothenburg of George W. Bush.

inside the building for different periods of time (ranging from minutes to approximately a year), the politics of how to approach a prisoner, etc. The rather open and neutral character of the exterior of these two buildings hides interior activities with a strictly regulated security grammar, the rules of which require specific design.<sup>12</sup> In this first example, signification and rhetoric power is built on iconic ground (Fig. 1).<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 1. Police Head Qarters, Los Angeles, 2004, and Police HQ Malmö, 2004

The second type of influence, the transferable discourse, can be illustrated by the interest in exploiting open green spaces and recreation areas south of Malmö, where protests and actions against the local government of the City of Malmö (and its decision to let this area be turned into an area for housing and business) have taken place over several years. This process may be analysed through a similar discourse in Los Angeles. Over a period of thirty years, a wetland area, Ballona Wetlands, in the southern part of the City of Los Angeles has been the subject of architectural suggestions (and protests).

<sup>12</sup> The degree to which policemen in Sweden are actually influenced by the American police force (in terms of technology, strategies, etc.) has not been investigated here, but it comes perhaps as no particular surprise that a well-known Swedish criminologist claims that “American police movies are part of the common pattern of identification among a number of Swedish policemen” (Leif G. W. Persson, in Swedish Television, fall 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Illustrations, sources. Fig. 01: Photo by L. Mogel and G. Sandin; Fig. 02: Unsigned drawing in “The developer’s dream come true...”, folder, published by Heidelberg Cement, 2003, and unsigned drawing Published in D. CUFF, *The Provisional City*, 2000, courtesy Maguire Thomas Partners; Fig. 03: Photo by Lars-Henrik Stahl and Annelie Nilsson.

Initially dominated by proposals in the spirit of New Urbanism, it became concretely manifested as a large scale housing development area known as Playa Vista. This second example shows iconic ground (the design role models) as well as indexical ground (the public and research discourse) (Fig. 2).

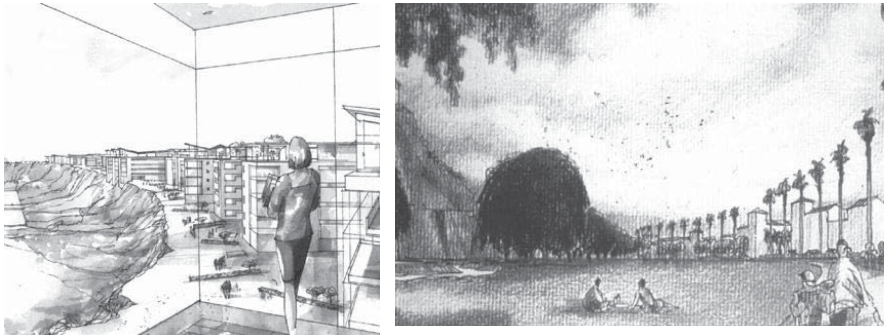


Fig. 2. Architectural proposal, Kalkbrottet, South Malmö, and Architectural proposal, Playa Vista, Los Angeles

Thirdly, and finally, there are at present plans to establish a theme park in Malmö, close to a bridge connecting the city to Copenhagen, Denmark. The consulting for this project has been handed over to a Los Angeles-based company, Economic Research Associates, which specialises in theme parks and works for instance with the Disney Company.<sup>14</sup>

ERA stated in 2002 some «Preliminary ideas/themes [which] have been grouped into the following: Scandinavian Kingdom; Viking World; Five Worlds/Holy Wood; Human Factor/Fantastic Factory; World of the Car; Film/TV Studio Tour; Music/Music; Other Attractions (Sky Tower, UN Plaza, Sculpture Park, World Train, International River, Visitor's Centre, among others)».<sup>15</sup> ERA's investigation was completed and presented to a small group of politicians in 2004, but was not made public, due to purchasing regulations (not-yet-completed-agreements) that made it possible to resist the principle of

<sup>14</sup> ERA was established by Buzz Price, Walt Disney's closest companion, in the 1950s.

<sup>15</sup> See the ERA – Economic Research Associates Memorandum report, preliminary market assessment of Malmö theme park opportunity – Phase 1, available at Malmö City Planning office in March 2002.

public access to official records. The ERA report was followed by suggestions and design programs made by two other American Companies, the BRC Imagination Arts, and Jack Rouse Associates. Enough have been published about this in the daily press, and on the home page of BRC, to suggest that there are a number of types of iconic Americanness to be awaited here. This third example shows above all indexical ground (political and economical links), but is complemented with iconic features too (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. ERA (Economic Research Ass.), Main Office, L A, 2004 and Excavation Site Hyllie, Malmö, 2004

#### **4. Conclusion**

Through the notion of “ground” and a few architectural objects of study, cultural influences has here been shown to depend, apart from style, also on the less visual mechanisms that establish abstract bonds, or actual links. Resemblance, important as it is in the rhetoric of cultural influence, has here been shown to depend also on a basic establishing of correspondences not necessarily similar, but close, such as decision procedures based on political contacts and contracts, as well as the temporary chains of corporeal relations.

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