

# Representations of Imaginary, Nonexistent, or Nonfigurative Objects

## *Representações de Objetos Imaginários, Não-existentes ou Não-figurativos*

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**Abstract:** According to the logical positivists, signs (words and pictures) of imaginary beings have no referent (Goodman). The semiotic theory behind this assumption is dualistic and Cartesian: signs vs. nonsigns as well as the mental vs. the material world are in fundamental opposition. Peirce's semiotics is based on the premise of the sign as a mediator between such opposites: signs do not refer to referents, they represent objects to a mind, but the object of a sign can be existent or nonexistent, a feeling or an idea, something merely imaginary or even something false. The paper examines the nature of imaginary, nonexistent, and nonfigurative objects, such as unicorns, phoenixes, or nonrepresentative paintings, and shows why verbal or visual representations of imaginary beings and even nonfigurative paintings, which seem to represent nothing, are fully developed signs with a variety of objects determining their representation.

**Keywords:** Representation. Object of the sign. Referent. Pictures. Charles S. Peirce. Nelson Goodman.

**Resumo:** *De acordo com os positivistas lógicos, signos (palavras e figuras) de seres imaginários não têm referentes (Goodman). A teoria semiótica por trás dessa assunção é dualista e cartesiana: signos e não-signos, assim como também mundo mental e mundo material estão em franca oposição. A semiótica de Peirce é baseada na premissa do signo como mediador entre esses opostos: signos não se referem a referentes, eles representam objetos a uma mente, mas o objeto de um signo pode ser existente ou não-existente, um sentimento ou uma idéia, algo meramente imaginário ou até mesmo falso. O artigo examina a natureza de objetos imaginários, não-existentes e não-figurativos, tais como unicórnios, fênixes ou pinturas não-representativas, mostrando por que representações verbais ou visuais de seres imaginários e até mesmo pinturas não-representativas, que parecem não representar nada, são signos completamente desenvolvidos com uma variedade de objetos que determina sua representação.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Representação. Objeto do signo. Referente. Figuras. Charles S. Peirce. Nelson Goodman.*

## 1. Objects, the Object of the Sign, and the Referent

In everyday usage, the word *object* denotes a solid, visible, tangible, and inanimate thing; the notion of a nonexistent or merely imaginary object must appear as a contradiction in terms. In its philosophical origin, by contrast, the concept of *object* did not really mean an object of material existence but rather a *mental object*. The scholastics, who introduced the term to the vocabulary of Western philosophy, did not conceive of an object as something that had to belong to physical reality; instead, an object was an object of thought, knowledge, or cognition, and “to be objectively” meant “to be in the mind” (cf. FERRATER MORA 1975: 311).

When Charles S. Peirce uses the concept of the *object of a sign* in the sense of something “perceptible, or only imaginable, or even unimaginable in one sense” (CP 2.230, 1910), his concept of object is quite in accordance with the medieval usage of the concept. In fact, Peirce’s usage of the term *object* was directly influenced by 13<sup>th</sup> century scholastic terminology, where, as he reminds us, *objectum* meant “a creation of the mind in its reaction with a more or less real something [...] upon which cognition is directed” (MS 693A: 33; PAPE 1996: 115).

Peirce has a very broad concept of the object of the sign (cf. SANTAELLA 1988, 1990, 1994; JOSWICK 1996; PAPE 1996). The object of the sign is certainly not a “thing,” and it need not be an existent at all. The sign does not *refer to*, it *represents* its object. Only genuinely indexical signs *refer* in the sense that they *indicate* their object, since only their objects are “existent individuals (whether things or facts)” (CP 2.283, 1902); other indices, symbols, and icons do not refer, they represent, for example “something of a general nature” or even something “believed formerly to have existed or expected to exist” (CP 2.232, 1910). Above all, the object of the sign is that information, knowledge, or experience which an observer of the sign must have in order to be able to interpret the sign. The study of signs (words or pictures) referring to “imaginary objects” is hence a natural branch of the tree of semiotic inquiry. In Peirce’s semiotics, *all* signs have objects, even the word *and*. The object of this symmetrical conjunction, for example, is the idea as well as the practical experience of how entities (terms or things) are combined to form a whole (cf. SAVAN 1994: 189).

In the reductionistic framework of 20<sup>th</sup> century positivist semantics of reference, the concept of object (e.g., QUINE 1960), sometimes called the *referent* (Ogden and Richards 1923), or *denotatum* (CARNAP 1942; GOODMAN 1978), became largely restricted to real and material objects with the result that the study of words or pictures referring to imaginary or otherwise nonexistent objects either had to be excluded from analysis or resulted in analytical aporias left to be resolved in a dualistic semantics distinguishing between reference to concrete objects (denotation) and sense as the ideas associated with the sign (signification). The present paper intends to discuss some of these aporias and to contrast the views of the logical positivists on the semiotic dualism between existent vs. nonexistent objects to Peirce’s holistic theory of the object of verbal and pictorial representation.

## 2. Goodman's Cartesian and Positivist Views of Pictorial Representation

The distinction between sense and reference (or signification and denotation) drawn by 20<sup>th</sup> century logical semanticists, following FREGE (1892), has been used to account for the difference between expressions such as *horse* or *dog* on the one hand and *unicorn*, *dog with three heads*, or *the first woman who landed on the moon* on the other (cf. KEMPSON 1977: 13-14). The former expressions have both sense, which can be described by means of paraphrases or definitions, and reference or referents in the form of objects which can be pointed out in the world of existing things. The latter expressions, by contrast, which do not refer to anything that really exists, are without *reference* although they have *sense*, since their meaning, despite their semantic anomalies, can be imagined, paraphrased, or translated into another language.

This Fregean model of analysis implies a split theory of semantics according to which there are expressions with, and expressions without, a fully developed semantics, that is, expressions with both sense and reference, e.g., *horse* or *dog*, expressions with sense but without reference, e.g., *winged horse* or *dog with three heads*, and finally expressions with reference but without sense, such as proper names designating individuals, e.g., *George Washington*. Ultimately, this semiotic split has a Cartesian foundation, since it takes for granted that the cognitive world is divided into two, on the one hand, a material world of perceptual objects which serve as referents of signs and on the other hand a mental world of ideas which constitute the realm of sense or signification. Below, we will see how Peirce's anti-Cartesian semiotics is free of this dualism, but first some of the aporias of the still prevailing Cartesian model will be expounded with special reference to Nelson Goodman's views of pictorial representation.

Goodman's pictorial semiotics extends the positivist semanticists' approach to sense and reference in language to pictures, especially to paintings. In his paper "Routes of reference," Goodman draws the following parallels between verbal and pictorial signs (in his terminology: "symbols") to conclude that both verbal and pictorial signs of fictional and imaginary objects are empty signs without referents:

Some names and descriptions and pictures – such as "Robinson Crusoe" or "winged horse" or a unicorn-picture – denote nothing although each belongs to a system along with other symbols that denote one or many things. To hypostatize a realm of nonactual entities for these empty symbols to denote seems to me pointless and confusing. When we speak of a picture as depicting a unicorn, even though there are no unicorns to depict, what we are saying in effect is rather that the picture is a unicorn-picture; we are saying not that the picture denotes anything but rather that it is denoted by the term "unicorn-picture." And we can distinguish unicorn-pictures from centaur-pictures, as we distinguish desks from tables, with no regards to their denoting anything. (GOODMAN 1981: 125)

Goodman's argument is not only that words and pictures depicting imaginary objects are empty signs ("symbols") without denotation; with his parallelism between chairs, desks and unicorn-pictures, he moreover suggests that the real semiotic function of the empty sign of a unicorn-picture is to be the referent (denotatum) of another sign, the verbal expression "unicorn-picture." The logocentrism of this argument is blatant, and the chain of referents thus established testifies to the priority given to verbal logic over

of visual semiosis: the metasemiotic verbal expression *unicorn-picture* is recognized as a fully developed symbol, while the object-semiotic picture of the unicorn to which it refers and which gives rise to the idea metasemiotically expressed is reduced to the function of an “empty” symbol.

Symbol, representation, denotation, and reference are the key terms in Goodman’s semiotic vocabulary. A *symbol*, in Goodman’s philosophy of art and literature, can be verbal or nonverbal, a word or a picture. In the terminology of Peirce’s general semiotics, what Goodman calls “symbol” is a *sign*, a term which Goodman does not use once. A *representation*, according to GOODMAN (1978: 20) is something that is a sign of, refers to, stands for, or symbolizes, a denotatum. A painting which depicts nothing but a composition of colors and forms, such as a Mondrian, is hence a “nonrepresentational picture which says nothing, denotes nothing, pictures nothing.” Despite this claim that such pictures neither denote, represent, nor “picture,” Goodman goes on to conclude that nonrepresentational paintings are symbols and have a “referential function.” This conclusion sounds enigmatic, for, how can something be a symbol, but “say nothing,” and what can a picture refer to if it does not represent anything?

Goodman’s terms *representation* and *denotation* designate the relation of signs or symbols to their object (*denotatum*), but Goodman’s positivist concept of the denotatum is very narrow: a symbol can only *denote* or *represent* something that exists in a world that is “external or extraneous” (ibid.: 60) to this symbol. The semiotics behind this argument is based on a sharp dualistic distinction between semiotic phenomena intrinsic to symbols and nonsemiotic phenomena extrinsic to them, i.e., between a semiotic and a nonsemiotic world. A symbol denotes or represents either uniquely or generally. For example, “names and such pictures as individual and group portraits denote uniquely, while predicates and such pictures as those in an ornithologist’s guide denote generally” (ibid.: 103), but symbols of fictional or imaginary objects do not denote at all. Hence, Goodman concludes that “painted or written portrayals of Don Quixote, for example, do not denote Don Quixote – who is simply not there to be denoted” (ibid.), or that “Bosch’s paintings of weird monsters, or the tapestry of a unicorn, represent nothing; for there are no such monsters or demons or unicorns anywhere but in such pictures or in verbal descriptions” (ibid.: 60). The “axe of dualism” (CP 3.570) which Goodman swings with such reductionistic distinctions between the real and the imaginary blocks his view to more subtle inquiries into the roots of imagination not only in cultural traditions, but also in real life experience. For example, representations of weird monsters are not only representations of nonexistent beings, they are also transformed representations of the real fear which humans have experienced in the face of really existing dangerous animals in the wild.

If imaginary beings can neither be *represented* nor *denoted* by a picture and unicorn- or sphinx-pictures are hence nonrepresentational, nonfigurative paintings of pure forms and colors are even clearer examples of nonrepresentational pictures, according to Goodman. However, under these premises, the important distinction drawn in the traditional semiotics of painting between figurative vs. nonfigurative pictures (unicorn-pictures vs. monochrome pictures, e.g.) gets lost, and this seems to be unsatisfactory even to Goodman himself, since he admits the necessity of introducing an additional distinction between these two kinds of pictures: “Let’s agree,” he argues in his comment on unicorn pictures (ibid.), “that such pictures, though they represent nothing, are representational in character, hence symbolic [...]. All the same, we must

note in passing that their being representational involves no representation of anything outside them.” Goodman’s extended argument is that pictures of imaginary creatures, in their figurative form, are indeed similar to pictures which represent real objects against a ground, especially when the imaginary creatures are inserted in a figurative scene such as a landscape. The words designating these creatures are like other words (and therefore “representational in character”) since they are phonetically and morphologically constructed like other verbal symbols, with the exception that they are devoid of reference. To call unicorn-pictures “representational in character” is thus a concession to their undeniable figurativity, but the argument that the picture of a unicorn represents nothing “outside the representation” suffers from a blatant reductionism. Not only does the picture of a unicorn represent iconically a white horse with a long straight horn growing on its head but also does it represent iconically innumerable other unicorns well known from the history of Western painting and mythology. All of these elements represented in the unicorn picture represent certainly something from “outside” the picture.

In sum, Goodman distinguishes three main modes of pictorial representation. The first can be exemplified by a portrait of myself; it is a symbol which represents, denotes, and refers to me. Let us call it a *picture of an existent object*. The second example is a picture of Don Quixote or of a unicorn; both are symbols, have reference, represent nothing, denote nothing, but are “representational in character.” Let us call such pictorial representations *pictures of imaginary (or fictional) objects*. The third kind of picture may be exemplified with a Mondrian or a monochrome painting; it is a symbol which has reference but is not representational in character, does not represent, and does not denote. Pictures of this kind are often called *abstract* or *nonrepresentational*, but the former term is inappropriate because it still suggests figurativity (one which merely “abstracts” from details), and the latter is inappropriate in this context, since Goodman describes pictures of imaginary objects as equally nonrepresentational (whereas according to Peirce, as we shall see below, every picture “represents”). Table 1 gives a summary of the criteria and examples discussed so far.

Goodman’s criteria <i>Type of picture, example</i>	is symbol and refers; has referential function	is representational in character	represents and denotes (in “external” existence)
<i>Picture of existent objects</i> ; photographic portrait	+	+	+
<i>Picture of imaginary (or fictional)</i> <i>objects</i> ; unicorn, Don Quixote	+	+	–
<i>Nonfigurative picture</i> ; monochrome painting	+	–	–

Table 1. Three kinds of pictures according to Goodman

Let us now try to solve the enigma why a picture which does not represent can nevertheless be a symbol. Goodman develops his argument with examples from pictures of the third kind, nonfigurative pictures which “represent nothing” and are not “representative in character” either. A Mondrian, he says, is a symbol because it “exemplifies,” “stands as a sample of,” “makes manifest, selects, focuses upon, exhibits, [or] heightens in our consciousness” properties which it possesses itself (ibid.: 65).

Describing nonfigurative paintings in these terms, Goodman evidently means pictures that are signs insofar as they refer (and therefore “have reference”) to themselves. In other words, his topic is *self-referential* pictures, a term which Goodman does not use, but with which he could not disagree, since, in his words, “exemplification is surely to symbolize [...], and it] is a form of reference. A work of art, however free of reference and expression, is still a symbol even though what it symbolizes be not things or people or feelings but certain patterns of shape, color, texture that it shows forth” (ibid.).

Reference is hence a category in Goodman’s semiotics besides representation and denotation; it is that criterion which makes a visual phenomenon a symbol. Whether they represent or not, my portrait, the unicorn, and the Mondrian pictures all evince reference and are symbols for this reason. The difference between my portrait and the Mondrian picture is that the former refers to a person who is “extrinsic” to the picture, living in a world other than the world of pictures, whereas the unicorn and the Mondrian pictures refer to something which is “intrinsic” to the picture.

### 3. Peirce on Signs of Imaginary Objects

Let us now turn to Peirce’s semiotic answers to the above discussed enigmas of pictorial semiosis. For the sake of brevity we must omit Peirce’s analyses of pictures of really existent objects, which have been much discussed in the context of the theory of pictorial iconicity and indexicality (cf. NÖTH 2000, 2003; SANTAELLA; NÖTH 2003). Instead, we will restrict the discussion to pictures of imaginary and nonfigurative objects.

According to Peirce, every picture is a sign. In this respect, Peirce and Goodman agree, except for their terminology (Goodman’s term is “symbol”). To define pictures in general as signs (or symbols) is by no means a generally accepted premise; aestheticians based in phenomenology have often claimed that pictures are not signs but phenomena *sui generis* (cf. NÖTH 2005).

Peirce did not elaborate a semiotics of painting let alone of nonfigurative art, of which he could hardly have any knowledge until his death in 1914. However, his general theory of signs and his many comments on pictures, photos, images, and icons provide a unified framework for pictorial semiotics applicable to figurative and nonfigurative pictures as well as to pictures of imaginary beings. His theory of the object of the pictorial sign dispenses with many of the aporias of the positivists whose dualist theory of sense and reference is only fully applicable to pictures representing “really” existing objects.

The most important difference in comparison with the positivists is that Peirce rejects the Cartesian distinctions between sense and reference on the one hand and between the sign and the nonsemiotic world “extraneous” to the sign on the other. The *object* of a sign can be a “real” thing of practical experience, a mere sign, a mental representation, an abstract notion, or an idea of something purely imaginary. Peirce says nothing about the “reality” of the object at all and describes it as something “perceptible, or only imaginable or even unimaginable in one sense” (CP 2.230, 1910) and even goes so far as to speculate that “perhaps the Object is altogether fictive” (CP 8.314, 1909). Hence, imaginary or fictional beings, such as a unicorn or Don Quixote are naturally among the objects of verbal or pictorial signs. By conceiving of the object of the sign as

something that may be a sign itself, but a sign which precedes the actual sign, Peirce manages to avoid many of the pitfalls and semiotic aporias of the positivists.

The distinction between representational and nonrepresentational pictures would have been a contradiction in terms for Peirce, since in his semiotics, sign and representation are quasi-synonyms (cf. NÖTH 1997). Every sign “represents” (instead of “refers to”) an object. In contrast to the positivist position, according to which only “real” in the sense of existent objects can be *represented*, the object of a pictorial sign, according to Peirce, can be another sign, another picture, the mere memory of the experience of an object, a mental image, the sensation of a color, or, in the case of synaesthesia, even the sensation of a nonvisual sense impression, a smell, a sound, or a taste.

This is why signs can *represent* and even *denote* merely fictional beings, for example, a phoenix or a centaur, two examples discussed by Peirce. A picture of a phoenix has an object, says Peirce in 1910, “for although no phoenix really exists, real descriptions of the phoenix are well known” (CP 2.261), and since the object of the sign is that which is known about it, the sign of a phoenix has evidently an object. But what is the nature of such an object that does not “really exist”?

Peirce distinguishes two kinds of object, the *immediate* and the *dynamical* object. The *dynamical object* is the reality behind the sign, “the Object outside of the Sign” (EP 480, 1908). It belongs to a reality which is independent of its representation in the sign, a reality to which the interpreter of the sign has no full access, since only “unlimited and final study could reveal” its nature (CP 8.181, 1903) at the end of an endless series of its representations (CP 1.339, 1893). Of this object we have to assume that it “by some means contrives to determine the Sign to its Representation” (CP 4.536, 1906), which means that the dynamical object must precede the sign which it determines to its representation (see below).

The *immediate object*, by contrast, is “the object as the sign represents it” (CP 8.343, 1910) and “whose Being is thus dependent upon the Representation of it in the Sign” (CP 4.536, 1906), which means that it is an object only incompletely presented by the sign (CP 4.536, 1906; CP 8.183, 1903). This description of an incomplete presence of the dynamical object in the immediate object fits well with another requirement, familiarity or presupposed knowledge. The immediate object is that which we know about the object, and familiarity and previous knowledge can never be complete knowledge of the object. The argument that the object “is itself of the nature of a sign or thought” (CP 3.538, 1903) is equally compatible with the notion of the “object of the sign as the sign represents it.” As an incompletely represented object, the immediate object may be vague, opaque, false, erroneous, or otherwise affected by prejudice, bias, or cultural ways of seeing the things. The immediate object contains an index, a “hint” indicating the dynamical object to which it corresponds (EP 480, 1908).

The difference between the immediate and the dynamical object seems relatively clear in signs referring to physical facts and our knowledge of them. The word “electricity,” for example, had a different and less evolved immediate object present to Benjamin Franklin’s mind. The knowledge which physicists of our times have about the same phenomenon has grown, and the immediate object of the sign has changed over the centuries. The dynamical object, by contrast, has remained unchanged in the course of time, since this object is the sum total of all physical facts which cause experts and lay persons likewise to denote electricity by its verbal sign (cf. SANTAELLA 1995: 53-66), and it will remain the same if the future should reveal more or other facts about the

physical processes involved with the object of this sign.

Another term by which Peirce used to designate the dynamical object was *real object*, and if the dynamical object of the sign is the reality behind the sign, the example of the word “electricity” exemplifies well the idea that the real object is something inaccessible but unchangeable, determining each individual sign of it while more and more knowledge is being gathered about its reality. The concept of reality which Peirce proposes reveals the nature of the dynamical or real object, too. “I define real,” explains Peirce in 1906 (CP 6.495) “as that which holds its characters on such a tenure that it makes not the slightest difference what any man or men may have thought them to be, or ever will have thought them to be, here using thought to include, imagining, opining, and willing [...]; but the real thing’s characters will remain absolutely untouched.”

But what about the dynamical object of thought-signs, fictions, myths, and mere imaginations? Can ideas as dynamical objects of signs “remain absolutely untouched” by the thoughts people have had about them? What is the dynamical object of an imaginary being in a picture which represents something that does not exist? Since the dynamical object of a sign is that which determines the sign to its representation, the dynamical objects of myths, fictions, ideologies, or imaginations are evidently to be found in the system of ideas, myths and imaginations rooted in a culture insofar as it precedes a particular representation in a specific sign, and the immediate object of such a cultural representation is the imaginary or fictional object as it presents itself in an incomplete way to the mind considering the specific sign.

Peirce gives the example of a picture of a phoenix (MS 318: 41, cf. PAPE 1996: 109). Although it represents a fictional being, he argues, it is certainly a sign, not only with an immediate but also with a dynamical object. According to the above premises, its immediate object is our familiarity with the image of a phoenix, which is not only rooted in some usually incomplete knowledge of ancient mythology but also in our knowledge of the real world of birds and fire, life and death. According to ancient Greek mythology, a phoenix is a magic bird born from fire. The dynamical object of this sign is hence the ancient mythological construct which has determined and will determine all past and future representations of phoenixes. It is the sum total of what has been known about these magical birds. However, the complex mental construct of this (mental) dynamical object does not only consist of magical and unreal archaic imaginations. Insofar as ideas such as “fire,” “large bird,” or “resurrection (after a defeat)” are part of the idea of a phoenix, fragments of present-day real world experience are part of the cultural construct, too.

In 1908, Peirce calls the dynamical object the “really efficient but not immediately present Object” (CP 8.342). The archaic (and hence not “immediately present”) complex of cultural and natural ideas, images, and anatomical details associated with the figure of a phoenix which have determined (have been “really efficient” with respect to) innumerable of its narrative or pictorial representations since antiquity are their dynamical objects in this sense; in their complexity and our historical distance from its origin and evolution, these objects are never fully present to the mind of an observer of an individual picture of a phoenix. What is present and plays a role in the viewer’s understanding of the picture of a phoenix is the immediate object, which consists of the observer’s partial knowledge based on an incomplete familiarity with the dynamical or real object. There are always further details from the broader horizon of culture and nature, the dynamical object of the picture, of which the viewer has insufficient knowledge or

awareness but which are likely to determine and at the same time limit the possibilities of future interpretations.

Peirce's typology of possible dynamical objects is triadic, as all of his categories are. In 1908, he writes that the sign may represent its dynamical object as a mere possibility, an existent, or a necessity. Only the second of these categories is applicable to representations of "real" existents and facts. His examples of signs determined in this way by their dynamical object are a barometer and "a written narrative of any series of events." Fictional narratives, myths, or imaginary creations, by contrast, due to their lack of realism, are determined by mere possibilities, since "a Possible can determine nothing but a possible" (EP 480-81). However, insofar as they also represent historical contexts, as Shakespeare's Hamlet, they may also be determined by the universes of existents and necessities, such as historical facts which cannot be denied.

Tellingly, in 1903, Peirce exemplifies his semiotic category of the iconic sign not with the example of a picture of some existent object, but with the example of a representation of the statue of a centaur. Peirce's argument why such a statue is an icon although it represents a merely imaginary being is the following: "The statue of a centaur is not, it is true, a representamen if there be no such thing as a centaur. Still, if it represents a centaur, it is by virtue of its shape; and this shape it will have, just as much, whether there be a centaur or not" (CP 5.73, 1903). Hence, the statue of the centaur is an iconic sign because its features correspond to those of other representations of a centaur which are equally determined by the cultural prototype of this mythological creature with its mixture of features of a human and of an animal being.

One of the aspects of the dynamical object of a mythical creature is its fictional anatomy. A centaur, for example, is a fictional creature from Greek mythology with the head, chest, and arms of a man and the body and legs of a horse. These anatomical characteristics are features of the dynamical object which determine any pictorial representation of a centaur. For example, with reference to these features we can decide that an appropriate picture of a centaur cannot have a bird's head. A representation which has the typical features of a centaur is therefore an icon of the dynamical object of this ancient mythological creature, although no real creature of this kind exists in nature. Iconicity, too, does not necessarily require correspondence with something really existing; it is rather based on the correspondence of the features of one mental image with those of another.

#### 4. Thought-signs, the Object in the Mind, True and False Representations

The object of a sign need not exist in reality, but in order to understand a sign, its observer must be familiar with this object, which is not contradictory, since familiarity does not presuppose existence; we are not only familiar with facts, but also with ideas, fictional beings, errors, or even lies. Familiarity presupposed, the object of the signs is a feeling, experience, or cognition which is antecedent to the sign. Nothing can be a sign if the object is completely unknown, although the object may be nonexistent, imaginary, or even false (e.g., CP 2.230, 1910).

Since 1868, Peirce describes thoughts as examples of signs, which he calls *thought-signs* (CP 5.283, W 223; cf. SHORT 2004: 215). In 1896, he argues that the first of a

representation can be exterior or interior to the interpreting mind and that there can be an “outward or inward” mediation “between an object and an interpreting thought” (CP 1.480; 1896). Signs can hence be mental representations, and mental representations are signs, according to Peirce. As new as this projection of the mental into the chain of signifiers may seem, its roots are in medieval semiotics (cf. TABARRONI 1989).

The thesis that silent and invisible mental representations are signs seems counterintuitive from the commonsensical point of view according to which signs serve as instruments in human communication and must therefore be perceptible to an addressee. However, the purpose of a sign, according to Peirce is not necessarily to be an instrument for the communication of ideas to others. The purpose of a sign is rather to “be interpreted in another sign” (MS 1476, 1904 [in: PEIRCE 1991]), and such interpretations of the sign in a subsequent sign begin in the flow of ideas in a mind addressing itself only to itself (CP 5.284, 1868).

The flow of ideas is a flow of signs in which “every thought-sign is translated or interpreted in a subsequent one” (ibid.) so that each actual thought has its object in an antecedent thought-sign and its interpretant is the subsequent thought in the flow of thought-sign. With this account of semiosis in the flow of ideas, Peirce gives a radical solution to the structuralists’ alleged dilemma of the semiotic abyss between the sign and its object (the signifier and the signified). By projecting the object of the sign into the chain of signifiers (alias representamens), Peirce semiotizes the object of a sign in the most radical way. What is a thought-sign in the present moment will be one of the objects of the subsequent thought-sign which it triggers. However, the difference between the sign and its object in this flow of thought-signs is not merely one of the sequence in time, but also one of determination of the subsequent sign by the antecedent object and in the reverse perspective one of representation of the antecedent object in the subsequent sign.

In 1903, Peirce sets up the requirement that any object of a sign be a thought: “Every sign stands for an object independent of itself; but it can only be a sign of that object in so far as that object is itself of the nature of a sign or thought” (CP 3.538, 1903). The argument does not mean that Peirce turned mentalist, but it has to do with the requirement of familiarity with the object, which can only be a familiarity in a mind. In 1871, Peirce specifies: “To say that an object is in the mind is only a metaphorical way of saying that it stands to the intellect in the relation of known to knower” (CP 8.18).

The sign “can only represent the Object and tell about it,” but it “cannot furnish acquaintance with or recognition of that Object” (CP 2.231, 1910), since it would be a contradiction in terms to furnish acquaintance with something whose acquaintance is presupposed in the first place. On the other hand, the sign does *not only* represent something with which we are already acquainted; at the same time, its function is to “convey some further information concerning” the object (ibid.).

There are two opposite directions of relation between the sign and its object; the sign *represents* its object, and it is at the same time logically *determined* by it (PARMENTIER 1985; PAPE 1996). Determination means that the object as the antecedent information presupposed by the sign, the necessary familiarity with it, the so-called collateral knowledge of what is represented in the sign, exerts a semiotic influence in the way the sign is interpreted.

How can a sign be determined by something that does not exist, is merely imaginary, or even erroneous? Peirce offers an example from literary fiction, the statement,

“Hamlet was insane.” Even though this dicent sign is about a merely fictional man, it has an object, namely that which we know about Hamlet as the protagonist of Shakespeare’s drama before we hear the sign. The object is the information necessary to understand this sign; Peirce paraphrases it as the “Universe of Shakespeare’s Creation so far as it is determined by Hamlet being a part of it” (ibid.). In fact, the object of a fictional sign is a special kind of object, one about which Peirce says that it is “created by the sign” itself (CP 8.178, 1903), but at the same time, it is not completely created by the statement about Hamlet, since to understand the sentence about Hamlet’s insanity, we must have some collateral knowledge of what insanity is, what a young man is like etc.

How even false or erroneous signs can represent an object is the topic of an illustration given by Peirce in 1903 concerning the object of the historically false proposition “Napoleon was a lethargic man” (CP 8.178). According to Peirce’s analysis, this sentence has several objects determining the mind of the one who utters it. The first object is Napoleon, the historical figure, of which we must have heard if we want to understand the message. The second partial object is lethargy, since the sentence cannot “convey its meaning unless collateral experience has taught its Interpreter what Lethargy is” (ibid.). The truth missing in this dicisign, namely the fact that Napoleon was by no means a lethargic man, is equally one of the objects of this sign, since truth, as Peirce defines it in 1904 and 1906, is “the conformity of a sign to its object” or simply “the *object* of the sign” (EP 380, 304) and determines its interpretation in its resistance to its falseness in the long run.

With Peirce, we must conclude that any false sign has at least two dynamical objects, which determine it as if in a dispute, as he writes in 1906: “So, then, a sign, in order to fulfill its office, to actualize its potency, must be compelled by its object. This is evidently the reason of the dichotomy of the true and the false. For it takes two to make a quarrel, and a compulsion involves as large a dose of quarrel as is requisite to make it quite impossible that there should be compulsion without resistance” (CP 5.554).

## 5. Peircean Foundations of a Semiotics of Nonfigurative Pictures

If pictures are signs, and all signs represent an object, what does a nonfigurative picture represent, and what is the object of such a picture? The answers to these questions that can be derived from Peirce’s semiotics are several, and each will focus on a different aspect of pictorial representation.

The first can be found in Peirce’s theory of iconicity, more specifically Peirce’s theory of the *pure icon*. This is Peirce’s semiotic concept that comes closest to the self-referential sign postulated in semiotic aesthetics and also in Goodman’s theory of nonrepresentational art. In contrast to the hypoicon, which is a sign by similarity, the pure sign is a sign which is so much like its object that it seems indistinguishable from it. According to a manuscript of 1903, it is a sign that “does not draw any distinction between itself and its object [...] an affair of suchness only” (CP 5.74, 1903), or “a representamen of what it represents [...] by virtue of [...] characters which belong to it in itself as a sensible object, and which it would possess just the same were there no object in nature that it resembled, and though it never were interpreted as a sign” (CP 4.447, 1903).

Peirce illustrates the notion of a pure icon with the example of a painting into which the viewer becomes so immersed that he or she begins to see the representation becoming indistinguishable from what it represents: “In contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream [...]. At that moment we are contemplating a [pure] icon” (CP 3.362, 1885). In the moment of contemplative immersion described here, the picture no longer fulfills its usual sign function of representing something else. Instead, it represents only itself and has thus become a self-representing or self-referential picture

It is true that Peirce could not have meant a nonrepresentational picture in this quote of 1885, but as far as the object relation is concerned, Peirce’s description of a picture that becomes indistinguishable from its object to the contemplating mind is rather congruent with Goodman’s interpretation of nonrepresentational pictures as symbols referring to qualities “intrinsic” only to themselves. What is different in the two descriptions of aesthetic perception apart from the terminology is that Goodman speaks of the picture that symbolizes by *showing forth* its own “patterns of shape, color, texture,” whereas Peirce describes a picture that becomes a matter of “mere suchness” while it merges with its object in the process of contemplation. Goodman apparently conceives of the self-referential nature of a nonfigurative painting that “shows forth” its own qualities as a matter of *indexical* semiosis, whereas Peirce conceives pictorial self-reference as a matter of pure *iconicity*. Below, we will see that, in fact, both aspects of pictorial semiosis can coexist in one and the same painting.

Nonrepresentational paintings are complex signs, and their aesthetic features cannot be reduced to their referring to their own qualities, which is a general description equally valid for all nonfigurative works of art. In addition to self-reference, other sign relations are relevant to the analysis of nonrepresentational art. Let us consider the example of Kazimir Malevich’s painting *Red Square and Black Square* of 1914 or 1915 (see for example [http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/malevich/blk\\_red.jpg.html](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/malevich/blk_red.jpg.html)). It shows, as the title says, nothing but a red and a black square on a white ground, and in this radical reduction of figures and forms, the painting seems to be a prototypical example of a self-referential sign, a pure icon, that represents nothing but its own qualities. Being an approximation to pure iconicity, the painting, like all icons, is a phenomenon of firstness, the category of mere possibility and of suchness without any relation to anything else. In their abstraction, the red and black squares offer indeed an unlimited potential of representing real things in addition to the self-referential showing of its own qualities. The pictorial sign is referentially open to the possibility that the two squares might not only *be* red and black squares but also *represent* an indefinitely large number of red and black square forms in the world of existing objects. For example, it could be the representation of two square pieces of red and black paper on top of a sheet of white paper used in a classroom to illustrate the geometry of squares. To the degree that the possibilities of representation are unlimited and open, the pictorial sign is a pure icon, a sign about which Peirce wrote that it “can convey no positive or factual information; for it affords no assurance that there is any such thing in nature” (CP 4.447, 1903).

In addition to its self-referential character and its openness to many hypoiconic interpretations, there are other respects, in which the semiotic potential of Malevich’s painting is more determined in its message. On the one hand, it is not completely without “positive or factual” information; on the other hand, it is not utterly devoid of

some general meaning. To the degree that the painting evinces factual information, it is an index, to the degree that it conveys some general message, it is a symbol.

Malevich's painting is not complete without its title *Red Square and Black Square* which adds a verbal interpretation to the visual signs. In contrast to the equally possible alternative title with articles, *A Red Square and a Black Square*, at least in the English translation of the title, which would be indexical, pointing to the specific squares of this particular picture, the title without articles suggests generality in its lack of any reference to the specific pair of squares shown in this painting. Generality is a feature of symbolic signs. Thus, insofar as the title suggests the more general idea of a red and a black square, the two squares evince an element of symbolicity, too.

In other respects, the picture also evinces indexicality. For example, it conveys positive information insofar as the two squares are precisely determined in their size, shape and chromatic quality. Furthermore, the geometrical and chromatic forms constitute oppositions, such as the ones between small and large, chromatic and nonchromatic forms in horizontal or nonhorizontal, straight or oblique orientation. The resulting composition constitutes a net of internal relations consisting of indexical references from element to element: the chromatic red, a color that has a certain inherent indexicality insofar as it is the natural color of alarm, points to its nonchromatic black counterpart; the large square draws attention to the small square and its different size; the black square arranged in parallel with the outlines of the rectangular frame draws attention to the obliquely arranged red square, creating, by its formal opposition still another indexical tension in the pictorial equilibrium.

The title *Red Square and Black Square*, in addition to its aspect of symbolicity discussed above, suggests also an indexical reading of the painting. Apart from the indexicality inherent in its being the name of an individual object, which makes any title an index of the picture it refers to, it is indexical because it selects from the three colors of the picture, red, white, and black, only two, thus focusing the viewers' eyes selectively to the red and the black squares in the picture. Furthermore, it also focuses selectively insofar as it abstracts from the size and position of the square by not mentioning this detail.

Malevich's picture with the red and black squares has two different titles, the second being *Suprematist Composition*. This title is indexical, too, in its selection of the name of a style of painting and its identification of the painting as an example of this school of art. Even without this second title the painting, like any painting characteristic of a historical style, is an indexical sign of this style.

Let us conclude these considerations on the objects of nonfigurative paintings with a second look at the topic of pictorial self-reference and pure iconicity. No real painting can be absolutely self-referential and a pure icon in every respect. Only approximations to pure iconicity are possible. To the degree that nonrepresentational paintings are self-referential in their lack of figurative reference to the world of objects, Malevich's painting seemed to be an approximation to pure iconicity with its lack of figurative referents. However, to restrict our attention to the aspect of the mere suchness in the contemplation of the picture, as the contemplator described above by Peirce did, who, as if in a pure dream, lost the consciousness of the fact that the painting was not the object represented by it, would have obscured our view of many other semiotically relevant features of this picture. As works of art, nonrepresentational paintings are complex signs. The plurality of descriptions, interpretations, and categorizations to which they

give rise testify to their semiotic complexity. After all, pictures which refer to nothing but to themselves cannot become the object of critical and aesthetic discourse about these pictures. Our analysis brought forth many indexical and symbolic features of Malevich's suprematist composition. Peirce has always emphasized that signs are rarely of one kind only and has even claimed that "the most perfect of signs are those in which the iconic, indicative, and symbolic characters are blended as equally as possible" (CP 4.448, 1903). The multiplicity of signs of all three kinds which we found in Malevich's suprematist composition may, in the end, testify to its aesthetic perfection.

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