# Crisis of representation?

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## The commonplace of the 'crisis of representation'

The 'crisis of representation' has become a commonplace of cultural, philosophical, and semiotic theory during the last decades of the twentieth century. The reasons for assuming such a crisis, however, are quite diverse, and there is not even a general consent as to the existence of such a crisis. The diversity of the arguments concerning this crisis is also due to the diversity of concepts of representation. A careful examination of what is meant by 'crisis of representation' must therefore begin with a thorough diagnosis of the symptoms of crisis that have been ascertained and with a differentiation of the domains to which they pertain. The results of this examination will allow the differences between the various underlying concepts of representation to be more clearly determined (Nöth 2000a: 162–168).

   This paper will deal with three domains in which crises of representation have been diagnosed: firstly, literature, the arts, and the media; secondly, philosophy; and thirdly, semiotics. A further area, which we will not deal with here, is cognitive science. In this field of investigation, the theory of mental representation continues to be a major topic of research, but is, so to speak, in crisis, according to the so-called anti-representationalists whose models of the mind are of a nonrepresentational kind (cf. Nöth 2000a: 230).

## Literature, art, and the media: Crisis as the loss of the referent

In the domains of the arts and of the media, the crisis of representation has emerged with the loss of the referent in modern painting and literature and with the ever-increasing distance from the reality of the referential world in the digital and the mass media.

In modern art, Dadaism, cubism, and abstract art in general testify to the loss of the referent in visual and verbal representation. Of course, it is a deliberate renunciation of the referent owing to the radical shift of focus from the referent to the sign vehicle. As a result, Georg Lukács, e.g., concludes that representation is no longer possible in twentieth-century art (cf. Scheerer et al. 1992: 852). In literature, one of the first protagonists of the renunciation of the referent was Mallarmé. It was Foucault (1970 [1966]: 306–307) who diagnosed the crisis of representation in Mallarmé as a 'fragmentation of language' due to the fact that language, 'having been detached from representation, the being of language itself had become, as it were, fragmented', which resulted in the 'disappearance of discourse'.

The crisis of representation in the media has many facets (Nöth 2001). The best known is, of course, the crisis of truth in political discourse, which is a crisis in the correspondence between the representing discourse and the represented world of facts and events. However, truth is a universal semiotic problem. Hence, this crisis is not specifically relevant to the crisis of representation as it emerged in the twentieth century. If modernity has been the cradle of a hitherto-unknown crisis of representation in the arts, the crisis of representation in the media is most certainly connected with *post*modernity. Two of the prophets who have not ceased conjuring up this crisis in the media are Lyotard and Baudrillard.

Lyotard deplores the loss of a reality *before* representation (cf. Scheerer et al. 1992: 852). Representation loses its ability to represent when the discourse to be represented consists only of catchphrases. In this interpretation, the crisis of representation is in particular a crisis of the legitimization of knowledge and discourse in a world where 'the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation' (Lyotard 1984 [1979]: 27).

According to Baudrillard (e.g., 1976, 1981), we have reached the climax of the crisis of representation in a world of media and hypermedia, where signs only survive in the form of 'simulacra', simulating a reality where even the original turns out to be a mere copy. Baudrillard's critical vision of these symptoms of crisis is the one of a society dominated by 'empty signs' and 'codes without referents' in which even everyday life and contemporary history have degenerated into mere simulacra (cf. Nöth 2000a: 55). Instead of reality, there is only virtual or hyperreality, and the crisis of representation is such that Baudrillard has even come to doubt the reality of the Gulf War. *The Gulf War did not take place* was the conclusion at which he arrived in an essay of 1991.

The crises of representation in the arts and in the media, in spite of their significant differences, have a common denominator: In both domains, the crisis is one of the referent, whose disappearance or even loss is being deplored. However, the concept of representation underlying this discourse of crisis is problematic since those who deplore the loss of the referent have a rather naive vision of semiosis in a world where the signs are not yet 'empty' and where the sign users can still rely on a referent that might not deceive their expectations. No semiotic theory is yet in sight that has been able to account for the nature of an 'innocent' referent not yet affected by the crisis of representation.

**Philosophy: Crisis of the idea of re-presentation**

A quite different 'crisis of representation' has been discussed in the context of philosophy and, in particular, in phenomenology. The root of this crisis is inherent in the etymology and the conceptual history of the term 'representation'. 'Re-presentation' appears to be an antonym of 'presentation'. The term suggests the idea of something that is presented 'once more' to our mind. The idea is also rooted in the history of semiotics. William of Ockham, for example, defined representative signs as 'rememorative', that is, as signs that remind us once more of something previously experienced (cf. Nöth 2000a: 9–10).

The opposition between 'present(ation)' and 're-present(ation)' has been elaborated in the phenomenology of E. Husserl and M. Heidegger (cf. Nöth 2000a: 37–38), where 'presentation' and 'presentification' refer to phenomena which are immediately present to consciousness and, hence, do not require any semiotic mediation, whereas 'representation' refers to a semiotic process involving something like the elaboration, reproduction, or even duplication of a previous 'presentation'. Along these lines of argumentation, phenomenological semiotics has also drawn a sharp distinction between signs that represent and those that do not. According to Husserl, signs that represent are called symbols, whereas signs that do not represent are indices (*Anzeichen*, cf. ibid.).

Of course, the phenomenological view of representation and the distinction between signs that represent and those that do not cannot be considered a symptom of a crisis of semiotics as such, but the assumptions on which these distinctions are based have been subject to fundamental objections. Let us consider only two of the critics, Peirce and Derrida. According to Peirce, signs that do not represent are a contradiction in terms, and cognition is never unmediated, but always of a semiotic nature (cf. Santaella Braga, this volume).

Derrida's critique of the phenomenological view of representation focuses on the idea of presence inherent in the idea of 're-presentation' (cf. Nöth 2000a: 54–55; Mersch, this volume). According to Derrida's philosophy of presence, representation is by no means the repetition of something previously present. It cannot be so since, quite in accordance with Peirce's idea of infinite semiosis, that which is represented is of the nature of a sign itself, i.e., something never immediately present, but which contains the traces of other signs in itself in the unlimited deferral of presence that Derrida dubbed *différance*.

In sum, the crisis of representation in the context of phenomenology is the crisis of the idea of presence and presentation in the face of the discovery of the idea of unlimited semiosis.

### The challenge of the idea of representation by self-reference

A major challenge to the idea of representation comes from the idea of self-reference. Is it possible that a sign may not represent anything but itself? Can something that does not stand for something else still be called a sign? Such challenges to the idea of representation have been elaborated in the framework of radical constructivism and the theory of autopoietic systems (Nöth 2000b). If the human mind is an autopoietic system, i.e., one that permanently constructs its own world, then representation can only be of a self-referential nature. Self-reference has, furthermore, been declared to be a characteristic feature of postmodern culture. If postmodernity is confronted with a loss of the referent of the signs in the media, the remains of these signs thus deprived of their function of representation can only become self-referential. Such self-reference has many facets.

A domain of culture that has always been self-referential is fashion: The frame of reference of today's *dernier cri* has always been what used to be fashionable yesterday, but is no longer today. In the media, news reports become more and more reports about reports and not about events (Marcus 1997). In literature and the arts, novels and films are more and more reflecting the modes and conditions of writing and filming. Novels become metanovels and films metafilms. In postmodern architecture, we are faced with a style that renounces functionality in favor of quotations from past styles of architecture. Reference to function is replaced by reference to architecture itself.

Even in advertising, we find the tendency to desist from representing the product and its qualities. The current Camel campaign represents nothing but a mere name in countless variations, and the well-established

Marlboro campaign only perpetuates its own mythology in endless circles of self-referentiality.

## Semiotic resolutions of the paradox of self-reference

Self-reference constitutes a paradox to classical semiotics since the sign has traditionally been defined as an *aliquid pro aliquo*, that is, as something that stands for something else. Is self-reference, therefore, a challenge to the foundations of semiotics? Aspects of self-reference have traditionally been recognized in the framework of many semiotic theories (Nöth 2000b). Self-reference is the opposite of alloreference, which is the classical mode of a sign's referring to something else as its referent. However, there is no incompatibility in principle between both, but rather a gradual continuum from self-reference to alloreference. In fact, elements of self-reference are present in many sign processes.

To semioticians in the structuralist tradition, the idea of self-reference is not as paradoxical as it seems. In a way, structuralist semiotics in the Saussurean tradition conceives of the sign as a structure that is only constituted by other signs and, hence, can never really represent anything that is nonsemiotic. Since the world beyond the signs, according to Saussure, is a mere nebula, signs can only be signs in opposition to other signs, and representation is not the representation of the world, but the representation of a difference between signs (cf. Nöth 2000a: 74–75). Furthermore, the gulf between the signifier and the signified postulated by the structuralists testifies to another aspect of a radical self-referentiality. If there is no access from the signifier to the signified, the two sides of the Saussurean sign are still more restricted to their own domains.

Elements of self-referentiality are also inherent in Jakobson's six functions of language. Only the referential and the conative functions are typically alloreferential; the former because the focus is on the content represented by the message, the latter because the focus of the message is the addressee, and not the producer of the message. All other language functions contain aspects of self-referentiality: first of all, the poetic function, whose focus is on the message itself; secondly, also the phatic function, since it ignores representation for the sake of communication as such. Furthermore, there is self-referentiality in the metalinguistic function, whose concern is also with a nonreferential aspect of the sign, and finally, even the emotive function has an element of self-referentiality insofar as it focuses more on the addresser, the source of the message, than on what is represented by the message.

In two respects, elements of self-referentiality are also inherent in the semiotics of Peirce. One is the theory of semiosis as an infinite process where signs refer to signs in a never-ending chain of semiosis. The other has to do with the semiotic category of firstness, in which every sign participates besides its elements of secondness and thirdness. Thirdness is the dimension of representation proper, since a prototypical sign consists of a first, a representamen, related to a second, the object, and a third, the interpretant, which is a more developed sign resulting from the process of interpretation.

However, in Peirce's typology of signs, we also find signs that primarily pertain to the category of firstness. The qualisign and the genuine icon are the ones in which firstness predominates. Firstness is the category of mere suchness where a phenomenon is perceived without reference to anything else. Hence, Peirce's category of the genuine icon is nothing but the idea of a genuinely self-referential sign. It is a sign 'by virtue of a character which it possesses in itself' without drawing 'any distinction between itself and the object' (*CP* 5.73–74). The genuinely iconic sign thus represents only itself and is hence completely self-referential. Now, why should such a sign without reference be a sign at all? Husserl and the phenomenological semioticians would consider it as a nonsemiotic phenomenon, but to Peirce, it is nevertheless semiotic, since even if a sign refers only to itself it has the potential of producing an effect in a process of semiosis. Producing this effect, the phenomenon functions as a sign. Hence, even in self-reference, semiosis is possible.

**Crisis of representation?**

In conclusion, the study of the varieties of representation between reference and self-reference does not lead to a crisis of the general theory of signs. Neither is there reason to postulate a crisis of representation from the point of view of semiotics at all, since semiotic theory has long been aware of the many forms of representation between self-reference and alloreference. Nor does the so-called loss of the referent shake the foundations of the theory of semiosis, since it can be interpreted as a by no means uncommon shift from alloreferential to self-referential semiosis. Furthermore, re(-)presentation does not mean the mere repetition of a previous sign phenomenon. Instead, it always involves a difference from what precedes (as a sign or a referent), and it is the dynamics of the effect of this difference which result in what Peirce calls 'the growth of signs' (cf. *CP* 2.302).

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