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HOW DO PICTURES ACT? TWO SEMIOTIC ASPECTS OF PICTURE ACTIVITY

Recently, leading scholars have focused upon the strange phenomenon that some pictures seem to possess an intention of their own and thus act upon the observer in ways not unlike other subjects. W. J. T. Mitchell famously asked *What do pictures want?*¹, and most recently Horst Bredekamp has presented his argument in *Theorie des Bildakts*², arguing from example and discussing a selection of artifacts, pictures, and artworks which he claims display this strange action potential. These arguments are based upon a basic phenomenological experience – namely of pictures in some sense gazing back upon the observer and taking action.

Bredekamp, of course, takes care not to presuppose any vitalist assumptions in his description of picture acts, just as he retains a minimum of human involvement as a requirement in his general definition of *Bilder*. Natural images may appear, but they only qualify as pictures, according to his definition, by a minimal degree of human involvement: the addition of aesthetic arrangement or framing creating an “iconical difference”³ – “daß von Bildern zu sprechen ist, sowie Naturdinge ein Minimum an Spuren menschlicher Bearbeitung aufweisen”⁴. It seems this minimum of human interference in the picture is connected to the picture act notion – it is human intervention and intention which is delegated, maybe in a transformed and remote manner, which reappears as the strange action potential so strikingly experienced in many pictures.

My argument in this note is that another aspect of this action potential of pictures roots in the structure of pictures themselves, irrespective of the de-

1 W. J. T. Mitchell: *What Do Pictures Want?*, Chicago 2005.

2 Horst Bredekamp: *Theorie des Bildakts*, Berlin 2010.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

gree of human participation in their origin. Bredekamp refers to Charles Sanders Peirce for his emphasis on the spontaneous activity of matter – thereby placing himself in the hylozoist tradition reaching back through Enlightenment to Lucretius and Epictetus.⁵ Here, I shall refer to a couple of other important aspects of Peirce’s concept of iconicity – namely the ability of icons to enter into propositions and function as vehicles for reasoning. Both of them add to the experienced “liveliness” of pictures.

As to the former – picture propositions – Peirce’s notion of “Dicisign” is important. It is, of course, his version of the logical notion of “proposition”, and Peirce was among the early formalizers of propositional logic, constructing, inter alia, his “Alpha Graphs” as a graphical notation system for propositional logic. But an important aspect of Peirce’s conception of logic as semiotics is the fact that his notion of which signs may serve as vehicles for propositions is much broader than that of most other logicians. Thus, a portrait with a legend is as good a representative of propositions as any purely linguistic expression, be it in everyday or formalized languages. This is because the painting with its title displays the basic subject-predicate duplicity of propositions – the painted surface providing the descriptive predicate while the legend provides the subject reference.

The portrait of the silk weaver Joseph-Marie Jacquard (1839) is basically a proposition, the legend “A la mémoire de J. M. Jacquard” playing the subject role and the silk portrait of a seated person playing the predicate role (fig. 1). The resulting proposition combining these two parts simply claims that the picture predicate presented depicts J. M. Jacquard. On top of this proposition comes the explicit speech act admonishing the observer to remember the weaver and inventor. More implicitly, the very technique of the portrait also adds to what should be remembered: The picture was woven on one of the special silk looms which Jacquard had invented; it required no less than 24,000 punched cards to create. Charles Babbage owned one of the few copies of the picture and it is assumed to have played a central role in early computing theory, the punched cards implicitly containing the information encoding the woven picture. Hence, an additional picture act presented here can be rephrased as fol-

5 Jonathan Israel, in his impressive trilogy on the Enlightenment, places the insistence on the spontaneous activity of matter at the core of “radical Enlightenment” as opposed to “moderate Enlightenment”, to which matter is inert and its movement the effect of divine intervention. The hylozoism central to radical proponents of the Enlightenment like Spinoza or Diderot thus has a strongly anti-theological impetus, taking all activity to be immanent to this world. Jonathan Israel: *Radical Enlightenment*, Oxford 2001; Id.: *Enlightenment Contested*, Oxford 2006; Id.: *Democratic Enlightenment*, Oxford 2011.

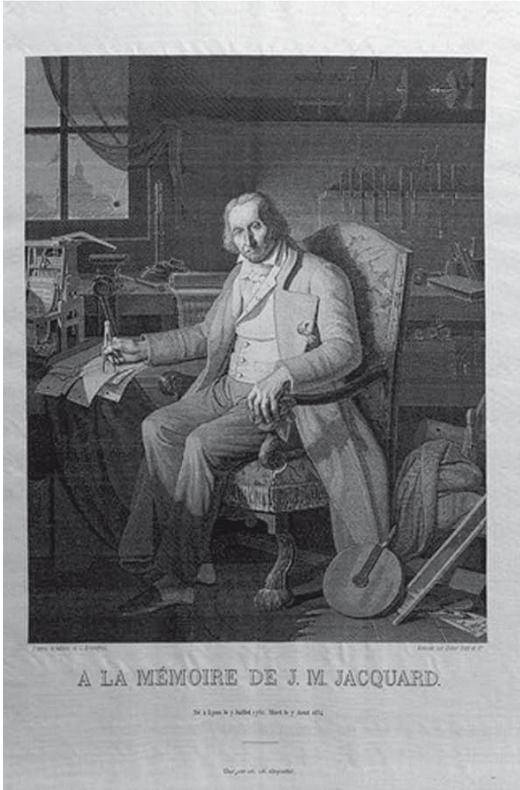


Fig. 1 Michel-Marie Carquillat: Portrait of Joseph-Marie Jacquard, 1839, woven silk, 60,3 x 50,8 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

lows: ‘Remember Jacquard for it was he who made possible the technique of this very picture.’

This example is half pictorial, half linguistic, and my contention is that most (not all) pictures in everyday life do not appear in isolation but as part of propositional wholes involving text, gesture or other semiotic machinery. But pictorial propositions without any linguistic part at all are also possible. I may show you a photograph of a person who is present and, at the same time, point to that person in order to indicate it is he who is portrayed in the photograph. This picture act is as good as any linguistic proposition, claiming the identity of the person in flesh with the person in the photograph. But this S-P duplicity may be even more subtle. Take the well-known example from the political scene: a male politician receives the copy of a photograph of himself by mail showing him in company of professional prostitutes – one need only think of

the videos from the Turkish sex scandal connected to the Ergenekon case, allegedly showing leaders of the Turkish opposition party “The Nationalist Action Party” engaged with prostitutes (fig. 2). Such photographs have been known at least since the time of Otto von Bismarck’s famous “Greenhouse” brothel in Berlin, which was equipped with disguised cameras in order to intimidate politicians frequenting the place. Such a letter is obviously a picture act, even in the complete absence of any accompanying written legend or message. It is, of course, a threat – fully equivalent to the linguistic speech act of threatening. It tells you that somebody out there knows you have been engaged with a hooker and participated in a humiliating kind of sexual intercourse – and it immediately implies the threat of sharing that information with a broader public. For preventing this, you must, of course, accept to bow to a certain pressure which may be made more specific in subsequent correspondence.

The decisive criterion for such photographs is of course the identifiability of the blackmail victim in the picture. If this is indeed the case, the bare photograph itself performs both the S and the P function of the Dicsign at once – it identifies the subject and it describes an action he has been involved in. In such a case, no linguistic legend is needed. This is what Peirce calls “collateral knowledge” of the subject of the proposition. If no such knowledge is possessed by the addressee of the proposition, some procedure for locating the subject must be given (by a proper name, a pronoun, a pointing gesture, a logical quantifier, etc.) in the S part of the proposition. But the important insight for our argument here is that in the presence of such collateral knowledge, the picture in itself may constitute a full-fledged proposition. In the case of political blackmail, of course, the shooting of the photo and the ensuing mailing are human actions governed by human intentions which aim to set up the picture as a proposition smearing the person in question. But the fact that the picture itself may constitute such a proposition loosens it from any intention promoting that proposition. The picture may present a proposition without any intentions on behalf of the manufacturer, provided that “collateral knowledge” is present in the observer. An adolescent photograph of a political candidate showing him smoking marijuana may cause grave effects to his career – even if the photograph was originally taken with the best of intentions, only as a part of cozy teenage social life. But still the photo may serve as a threatening proposition, given that collateral knowledge sufficient to identify the candidate is at disposal. This implies that pictorial signs may function as propositions without any deliberate “propositional attitude” being put forward by the photographer or any other promoter of the picture.

In this sense, the picture is able to act – in a broader sense of the word, it is able to assume a “propositional attitude” and perform a picture act on the beholder. Of course, as is the case in all speech acts, such an action can only be

WORLD NEWS

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The sex videos were grainy and filmed from odd angles.



In the starring roles: a series of middle-aged Turkish politicians chatting, smoking and rolling in bed with women who were not their wives. Some were recorded joking about how enviable the working hours of prostitutes were; others were

Fig. 2 Screenshot from the newscast of the Ergenekon case at www.thedailybeast.com, 27 May 2011.

completed in the presence of a beholder – providing the collateral knowledge and the cognitive skills necessary to understand the depicted scene. But the picture is not a mere extension or delegation of the propositional attitude of the receiver. Quite to the contrary, the proposition involved in the picture act may present a highly unwelcome, surprising, disgusting information for the recipient, just as the potential consequences might not at all be of a kind he intended or wished for.

So a basic ingredient in the quality of *Bildakte* is the ability of pictures to be involved in propositions without any intending sender being present. But there is more involved. Propositions, of course, make up the basic ingredients of reasoning, arguments generally taking us from one proposition to another in a truth-preserving manner. This is highlighted in Peirce's notion of "diagrammatical reasoning", which takes deductive reasoning to result from the mani-

pulation of or experimentation with a diagram.⁶ The icon subtype of the diagram thus makes it possible for the user to reveal information implicit in a diagram and to render it explicit. Peirce's notion of the diagram is famously broad, covering prototypical examples such as geometrical *figurae* or graphs, but also algebraic equations and linguistic or formal grammars on the one hand, and pictures and images on the other. The central criterion is whether the icon in question can be used experimentally to disclose implicit information about its object – for instance when conducting a proof with a geometrical figure, solving an algebraic equation, reasoning on the basis of grammatically presented information – or with regard to images, manipulating a picture, in one's imagination or on paper, screen, slate or canvas. The old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words presents a vast understatement, as Philip Kitcher and Achille Varzi have already argued in a short paper.⁷ A simple map, e.g. of Manhattan (fig. 3), may serve as support for an infinite number of linguistically expressed propositions pertaining to distances between any two salient points



on the map, contour curvatures etc. Even if the map as a whole may be considered as one proposition – the S part being played by the proper name “Manhattan” next to the other indexical references given in the map, the P part being played by the iconic outline of geographical and other structures – such sentences are only implicitly present in the map sign. But they may be read off of the map and be made explicit by a recipient familiar with the rules of map reading. Such extraction of explicit information from a picture may come in various degrees of difficulty. To trace a route on a map and follow it in reality is an everyday experiment with diagrams – involving many different cognitive capacities, all

Fig. 3 Map of Manhattan.

- 6 Peirce's diagram doctrine is discussed at length in Frederik Stjernfelt: *Diagrammatology. An Investigation on the Borderlines of Phenomenology, Ontology, and Semiotics*, Dordrecht 2007. See also Joao Queiroz and Frederik Stjernfelt (eds.): *Semiotica* 1/4 (2011), issue 186, special issue on “Diagrammatical Reasoning and Peircean Logic Representations”.
- 7 Philip Kitcher, Achille Varzi: Some Pictures are worth $2^{\text{Aleph-0}}$ Sentences, in: *Philosophy* 75/3 (2000), pp. 377–381.

the while it so ingrained in many users as to appear almost effortless. However, some of the implicit aspects of pictures may take much more effort to discover. The similarity between the east coast of South America and the west coast of Africa may be striking even to a child's eye, but it took the gaze of an ingenious scientist – Alfred Wegener – to draw groundbreaking conclusions for geographical and geological ontology from this observation. The potential difficulty inherent in diagram experiments with pictures may derive from many different sources: One is the inherent difficulty of the problem – take the classic Traveling Salesman problem of finding the shortest route between a number of cities on the map, or take Peirce's distinction between corollarial and theorematic reasoning;⁸ another is that the relevant clue in the picture may be minimal – take the written messages allegedly recently discovered in the irises of the Mona Lisa; furthermore, it may require the discovery of new, yet undiscovered manipulation rules – for instance the discovery of non-Euclidean geometries; or it is due to the simple fact that nobody had paid attention to this particular aspect of the picture before – think of the photographer discovering a murder in his innocent photographs from a London park in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up*. But the important issue with regard to picture acts is that all pictures possess a large amount of implicit information most of which was never explicitly “put there” by the painter, photographer or constructor of the picture, and thus is not the result of any intention.⁹ Such information constitutes the secret of the picture, to put it dramatically. Of course, the same holds true for the world itself: it is ripe with relations not yet mapped or made explicit. However, in contrast to the ever-changing structures and the indefinite extension of reality, pictures are stiffened, localized, repeatable, as if brooding over their implicit information, virtually ready to be taken. Just like the potential involvement of pictures in non-intended propositions, this is a quality not necessarily foreseen by their producers. They possess this information themselves, and they

8 Frederik Stjernfelt: Peirce's Notion of Diagram Experiment. Corrolarial and Theorematic Experiments with Diagrams, in: Richard Heinrich et al.: *Image and Imaging in Philosophy, Science and the Arts*, vol. 2, Frankfurt 2011, pp. 305–340.

9 The same obviously holds true for algebraic diagrams, for instance equations. Fermat's theorem, which took more than 300 years of intensive scrutiny to be proven, evidently kept this implicit information quite hidden. It is well known that subject-like qualities have often been attributed to written texts as well – one need only think of the relation of believers to sacred texts or holy books. Nevertheless, pictures often seem more strikingly subject-like than texts. One reason may be the immediately continuous quality of (most) pictures, which allows them to display their implicit information in a more striking way than is the case for algebras or texts.

may outlive us as information repositories – this is a further reason why they may appear to us so lively, subject-like and active. This quality of *Bildakte* thus does not require the ascription of any vitalist mysteries to pictures, or the intervention of human intention, but lies in their semiotic structure.