Images: An Introduction

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One persistent ideological ambivalence in Western academic thought is the differentiation and slippage between language and image. As historians of philosophy have pointed out (Rorty 1979; Levin 1993; Judovitz 1993; also Heidegger 2002[1938]), Western philosophy has often construed language as a species of vision and imaging. In this line of thought, the meaning of linguistic discourse is (or is like) an image, imprinted in the mind. Just as frequently, however, it is asserted that there is a radical caesura between language and image (and between representation and our sensory modalities), the latter being a space of non-representability and thus before or beyond the enclosure of language. Here, images exceed language, which is unable to capture their affect, materiality, or sensoriality.

This special issue confronts these two persistent problematics by critically asking, how can we productively (re)think the relationship between language and image, text and the sensorial, representation and presence through a holistic semiotic framework? And how can we do so without reducing one side of these seeming antinomies to the other or instating their radical difference?

These questions have taken particular importance for empirically-oriented scholars in diverse disciplines working with the pragmaticist semiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce. Ranging across a number of different fields—linguistic anthropology (Silverstein 1976; Stasch 2014; Chumley 2017), photography and film studies (Lefebvre 2006; Bateman and Schmidt 2012), art history and visual studies (Mitchell 1986, 1994, 2015), among others—such scholars have argued against structuralist and formalist approaches to semiosis that treat non-linguistic media on analogy to "language," narrowly conceived as autonomous, semantico-referentialist "system" for acts of propositional reference. By contrast, such work has articulated a more capacious conception of semiosis—and thus of language—as indexical practice and as iconically textured process, rather than symbolic "code" or "system."

Such a reframing has made it possible and necessary to ask anew how linguistic and non-linguistic semiosis can be thought together. It also situates the action of these processes in the social, rather than in the individual mind and body. In linguistic anthropology, our disciplinary home, this deconstruction of language (qua *langue*) has meant a refusal of positing language as a disciplinary boundary object (Nakassis 2016) and, instead, a turn to *semiotic mediation* as object of analysis (Mertz and Parmentier 1985), whether this be in language or, as relates this issue, in cinema (Meek 2006; Kirk 2016; Nakassis 2017, 2019; Hardy 2018), puppetry (Barker 2019; Silvio 2019), photography (Wirtz 2014; Ball 2017), painting (Chumley 2016), or furniture design (Murphy 2015), among any number of other media.

Despite such advances, in many fields the term "semiotics" has continued to carry the (indexical) baggage of the semiological tradition (Saussure 1966[1916]) and its structuralist analogizing of

language (or rather, *langue*) to culture (see Keane 2003). That is, "semiotics" is still too often assumed to be a field devoted to treating images and other semiotic phenomena as "codes" to be deciphered.[1] This assumption is unfortunate for a number of reasons: first, because it offers a facile way to dismiss approaches to semiotic mediation, in effect throwing out the pragmatist baby out with the structuralist bathwater; and relatedly, second, because it concedes what we might mean by language or representation—and thus semiotics—to limited conceptions of both, creating straw-men that allow for disciplinary lines to be artificially and prematurely drawn around and between language and image. It is precisely such prefab conceptions that maintain the unproductive binaries between image/text, materiality/language, affect/meaning, sense/semiosis, presence/representation (Ranciére 2007, 2009) and the disciplines that purport to study them (in unfortunate isolation from each other). It is for these reasons that this issue attempts to cut the Gordian knot and asks how we can formulate a semiotics of the image that refuses such absolute divides; indeed, a semiotics that neither assumes that image or language are pregiven or exclusive terms, nor attempts to purify one from the other.

One important result of such an approach is a refusal of the easy slippage of *image* into the *visual*. The other is to *temporalize* the image—to see that images (whether they "move" or not) happen in-and-as relational, pragmatic events (Strassler 2020), as emergent patterns of signs that unfold in and across time-space. In so saying, we take a cue from Roman Jakobson's (1987[1935], 1960) discussion of the "aesthetic" or "poetic" function, that metapragmatic function by which indexically contiguous arrays of signs draw attention to their own aesthetic form *qua* form, that is, as congeries of sinsigns comprising bundles of qualities that iconically participate in the diagrammatic textual wholes of which they are a part (see Nakassis 2019). We also draw on the work of W. J. T. Mitchell (2015) and others who, like Jakobson, argues that images occur in any and all media and modalities, be it a pattern of touch, "figures of sound" in verbal poetry, light-based inscriptions on a screen, or the iconic resonances forged out of the interaction of any of the above (visual, aural, tactile images, etc.). Temporalizing the image invites us to see images as a process and precipitate of *entextualization* (Silverstein and Urban 1996), that is, the making of "text," those emergent coherences of unfolding sign activity that, in its diagrammatic texture, serve as the pragmatic basis of social life by reflexively picturing, or figurating, it. As many scholars have pointed out, entextualization needn't pull us back into a preoccupation with the visual or the linguistic, as the term calls our attention to images as *textured*.

How might we study and theorize the semiotic processes by which images dynamically come into recognizable textual form? How do images become fixed as circulatable social types or genres, or alternatively, fade away or slip into other types, genres, or texts? How are images projected onto and from, and deployed within, interactional and denotational texts? Indeed, how are they an infrastructure for experience? And with what pragmatic effects, with what political stakes, and as part of what larger projects? Semiotically and socially, what confers performative force to images, making them able to demand something of us (Gell 1998; Mitchell 2004)? And further, how are the semiotics of images—their affordances, pragmatics, and aesthetics—not only objects for empirical analysis but part and parcel of our own scholarly practices and modes of discourse and thinking? In short, how do images anchor social worlds or transform them?

These are some of the broad questions that this special issue attempts to broach. In doing so, we hope to cultivate a productive space for dialogue between visual studies, cinema and media studies, visual anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and related fields through semiotic theory. We first opened this dialogue through a number of scholarly events that have culminated in this special issue: a 2016 workshop ("Semiotics of Images") and roundtable ("Opening Up the Indexicality of the Image, Again") at the University of Chicago, both organized by Constantine Nakassis; a panel

organized by Gwendolyn Kirk, "Explorations at the Intersection of Linguistic Anthropology and Visual Culture," at the inaugural conference of Society for Linguistic Anthropology in 2018 (Philadelphia, PA); a panel at the 2018 American Anthropological Association annual meeting in San Jose, California co-organized by Meghanne Barker and Gwendolyn Kirk ("Imagining Intersections of Linguistic and Visual Culture"); a 2019 Wenner-Gren sponsored workshop at the University of Chicago, "Sense and Semiosis: Creating Conversations between Linguistic and Visual Anthropology" organized by Meghanne Barker and Constantine Nakassis; and two linked panels at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in 2019 (Vancouver, British Columbia), one organized by Constantine Nakassis ("Performative Images: Toward a Linguistic Anthropology of Images") and the other by Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway ("Images of Otherness, Othering Images"). This special issue draws together and builds on the energy and discussions at those events, providing the space for what we hope continues to be a vibrant dialogue on the semiotics of images.

As with all issues of *Semiotic Review*, and in the spirit of the conversations from which this issue emerges and that it hopes to further foster, "Images" remains open to new submissions (essays, reviews, interviews, etc.). We invite you to join the conversation.

Endnotes

1 Approaching semiotics as semiology in this way is limiting even when a certain openness of interpretation is acknowledged through a distinction between "denotative" and "connotative" meanings (Barthes 1977; Hall 1997).

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