
CHAPTER ONE

Marks, Traces, *Traits*, Contours,
Orli, and *Splendores*

ART HISTORY LACKS a persuasive account of the nature of graphic marks, and that limits what can be said about pictures. If a sign, as Charles Peirce said, is “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity”¹ – a formula as vague as it is compact – then every mark in a picture is also a sign: every brush-stroke, pencil line, smudge, and erasure must function as a sign and have meaning. In practice, that would spell trouble for accounts of pictures which take “sign” to mean the forms made out of the marks – such as, in the typical examples, figures, scenes, and narratives. For the most part – and with important exceptions in all periods and subjects – art history has concentrated on the larger-scale forms, or on the large-scale properties held by groups of marks, such as *facture* and “handling.” That emphasis has left more exacting questions about graphic marks to the domain of practical criticism, so the people who are said to understand marks best are other artists, and the most incisive critiques are taken to be other paintings instead of texts.

Although it might seem that semiotic art history would address that inequality – perhaps by reinstating something like Peirce’s wider sense of signs – it is closely wedded to the distinction between meaningless marks and meaningful signs, and for that reason semiotic accounts tend to gloss over marks in favor of the scenes they comprise. In Mieke Bal’s view, “the field of signs and meanings” in pictures can be divided into three classes: signs properly so called, marks that are “subsemiotic,” and those that are “suprasemiotic” or “holistic.”² Subsemiotic marks are those that “are part of what make us

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interpret the work," even though we do not usually "give them meaning in themselves."³ They include "stylistic variation, light and dark, composition, or mere technical aspects like brushstrokes, paint thickness, and lines." Suprasemiotic "signs," in contrast, are "holistic aspects" of works including entire pictures considered as signs. Bal's schema excludes painted or drawn marks from visual semiotics by denying them the status of signs and by demoting them to the domain of the "technical." Both judgments can be read as strategies that allow the wider project of semiotic art history to get under way, and later I will argue that semiotic art history sometimes depends on suppressing the semiotic nature of marks in order to proceed with readings that hinge on narrative.

Bal's formulation is particularly clear, which is why I will be addressing it here, but any visual semiotics implicitly divides what is to be analyzed from what cannot be, even when the general tendency is to move beyond the "semiotic function."⁴ Partly following A. J. Greimas, more recent work by Göran Sonesson, Jean-Marie Floch, and Félix Thürlemann has turned to the possibility that the concept of the visual sign might be better considered as a "process," or that semiotics itself might be understood as the study of "meaning (or 'mediation'), in some wider, yet to be specified sense."⁵ Those choices influence what visual semiotics can do without dissolving into hermeneutics or interpretation in general, and they raise questions about the boundaries between semiotics, phenomenology, and structuralism.⁶ In this context I want to stress only the practical consequences of any such decision. Regardless of how crisply writers make the distinction between sign and mark, what they write about pictures shows what counts as the morphemes – the smallest meaningful or analyzable units – of pictures. Sonesson's analysis of Rothko, for example, concentrates on the color fields and bypasses the brushmarks that comprise them and the shapes of their outlines (although he mentions "regular" and "irregular" sides).⁷

Decisions about marks and signs are at the root of competing versions of how pictures mean, and of what happens in pictures "below" or apart from the level of figures and narratives. In the first account (the one I am representing as Peirce's, although I mean to say only

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that it is compatible with what he writes about signs in general), semiotics comprehends the entirety of marks, whether they are the discrete, systematic morphemes of writing or the slurred brushstrokes that make up a painting. In the second account, which I ascribe by synecdoche to Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, it would not make sense to call the morass of painted marks “signs,” so that semiotics in painting properly begins with larger units. Let me call Bal and Bryson’s account “semiotic,” and Peirce’s, following his own spelling, “semeiotic.” In semiotics, graphic marks somehow build to make signs, but are not signs themselves. They are “technical,” irrelevant, or irrecoverable, and in the strict sense meaningless. In semeiotics, however, any mark could function as a sign, although signs for scenes and figures might be different in kind from signs that are nameless brushstrokes. (Peirce’s popularity in recent art historical writing is a separate issue, since it depends on what is perceived as a dynamic, fluid, context-sensitive approach to signs. In that he is often contrasted with Ferdinand de Saussure. It is possible to argue that there is only a weak relation between Peirce’s actual doctrines and the practices of the contemporary historians who advocate his work. Here, however, I am concerned with a different aspect of semeiotics, its fundamental claim to provide a general theory of meaning that could encompass all meaning as the play of signs, without excluding “sub-semiotic” marking.⁸)

In what follows I am going to argue against semiotics and propose ways to think about “subsemiotic” marks by attending to their syntactic properties. Semiotics, I think, has several deleterious effects on the ways we understand pictures. Despite its claims to be neutral between linguistic and other sign systems, semiotics slights the meaning of marks, bringing visual narratives unpleasantly close to written ones (so that without illustrations in the texts, it would sometimes be difficult to tell if a semiotic account was referring to a painting or another text). In the end, semiotics shrinks the notion of what a picture is, assimilating pictures to texts and overlooking their painted strangeness. Semiotics makes pictures too easy: I want pictures to be harder to look at and harder to describe, so that we cannot get as quickly from the slurry of marks to orderly historical meanings.

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Pictures would be somewhat difficult to write about if their “sub-semiotic” marks were ultimately beyond the reach of linguistic analogies, as many people take them to be; but pictures would be even more difficult, and far more analytically engaging, if marks were neither hopelessly beyond the reach of analysis, nor entirely assimilable into the systems of semeiosis. Both of those possibilities are reductive in their own ways: positing that marks are nonsemiotic gives up a large part of what pictures are, and claiming marks are signs more or less avoids pictures by making them into other kinds of objects. I do not think pictorial marks can be discussed on the model of written marks, but neither are they inarticulable inchoate mutterings forever divided from the signs of language. What I will be saying about previous theories can be put as two interlocked claims: first, about semiotics, that its own logic of the sign prohibits it from assuming marks are meaningless “subsemiotic” elements; and then, about semeiotics, that it need not – as Peirce often did – assume that everything about the taxonomy of signs can be analyzed. But most of this chapter is occupied with what marks are, rather than with what they are not. I will be presenting a series of modes of graphic marks that have connections to art history, art practice, and linguistics, but no exclusive allegiances to any of them. The idea is to make a start in describing graphic marks by showing some ways they can exist between linguistic signs and painterly babble.

WHAT IS VISUAL SEMIOTICS?

To begin, it is reasonable to ask how semiotics can make sense outside of linguistic structures and analogies. Is there any such thing as visual semiotics, apart from the application of linguistic models to nonlinguistic forms? Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson encounter these issues in their essay “Semiotics and Art History,” in the course of reviewing Saussure’s relevance to a semiotically informed art history.⁹ It may seem, they remark, that Saussure’s emphasis on the “significant units” of language makes his doctrine inapplicable to visual art, where there may not be units of any kind:

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We might try to say that below a certain threshold, perhaps roughly corresponding to phonetics in language, there are marks that contribute to, but which do not yet produce, signification – individual brushstrokes or lines, or dots or pixels; and that above that threshold these as yet nonsemantic marks emerge as productive of meaning. But can we say that marks below the threshold are “units”? Or above the threshold? Particularly in the Saussurean tradition, the positing of meaning-bearing units – signifiers – seems essential. But a painting is a continuous surface, with marks that blend together inextricably. If minimal units for images can be found, then a visual semiotics, deriving from Saussure, must be an impossible endeavour: we cannot establish where the “signifier” actually is.¹⁰

Their response is that the problem is ill conceived because not only pictures but language itself lacks those static signifiers:

The objection is understandable, but it may be misplaced. The problem of a mismatch between words and images can, in fact, lead us in a rather different direction, toward the question of whether the individual word actually is language’s *prima materia*. . . . The question is a reflection of a philologically derived linguistics that posits meaning as occurring at the level of the word or the sentence, but does not consider the larger aggregates, the bonding together of words and sentences in social practice, as discourse. At this level, signs are not discrete but “dense”: individual signs become molar, consolidated, fundamentally inseparable. . . . To think of semiosis as process and as movement is to conceive the sign *not as a thing but as an event*, the issue being not to delimit and isolate the one sign from other signs, but to trace the possible emergence of the sign in a concrete situation, as an event in the world.¹¹

It is odd to defend the use of a linguistic theory that depends on “fundamental units,” as Saussure’s does, by arguing that language’s primary units are not “fundamental units”; but this way of answering the question runs into serious logical problems when it implies it is acceptable that pictures do not possess discrete units because lan-

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guage does not possess discrete units at *higher levels* of organization. Does the fact that pictures do not have “significant units” below a certain level mean they can be better compared with language, which lacks discrete units *above* a certain level?¹²

Mieke Bal’s *Reading “Rembrandt”* repeats the defense of semiotics against those who would claim that signs in visual works are dense. The distinction between “oppositional” language and “dense” pictures, Bal says, “is deceptively self-evident and can be deconstructed only by reversing it and arguing that to some extent verbal texts are dense – the sign of the effect of the real cannot be distinguished from the work as a whole on which it sheds a specific meaning – and that visual texts are discrete, which sometimes, and in some respects, they are.”

It is the same faulty argument: if it seems inappropriate to use semiotics on dense images, then it is not less inappropriate just because texts are *also* dense. Both linguistics and textual semiotics depend on the existence of minimal units of meaning, whether they are morphemes, phonemes, or entire propositions, and no matter how much attention we choose to pay to larger structures, atomic units remain essential for the sense of the enterprise. Even if they didn’t – even if it were possible to imagine a linguistics or a semiotics independent of the oppositional, discrete character of linguistic signs – then it still wouldn’t be an adequate reply to the claim that the density of pictures is different from the density of texts. It is an evasion, and it contradicts the tripartite division of signs into subsemiotic, semiotic, and suprasemiotic, because if “suprasemiotic holistic aspects” of artworks are *not* to be considered as signs, how can they be the *only* important or legitimate units of meaning in texts?

I have recounted these arguments in some detail in order to show the analytic issues that have traditionally awaited semiotic accounts of pictures. Visual semiotics owes its conceptual consistency to the way it handles these problems, although they can have very little relation to what ends up being interpreted in pictures. In this case, I would read the foreclosure of sign theory under the rubric of “philologically derived linguistics” less as a logical problem than as a political move: in order to get on with the business of reading pictures (for

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example with questions of psychoanalysis, gender, disciplines, and other social structures, which occupy the bulk of “Semiotics and Art History”), they need to finesse the nature of graphic signs.¹³ In that respect their move is related to some earlier efforts, from Greimas onward, to claim semiotics might do without the discrete sign, and look instead at “meaning” in general.¹⁴ In the end I don’t think that Bal and Bryson want to present an account of how signs work in pictures as much as they want to show how semiotics can open questions of meaning by remaining alert to dissemination, reception, and the production of meaning. A visual semiotics pitched at a higher level, as they say, could benefit from the wider field of meaning-as-event, and avoid the restrictive interpretation of “significant units.” Still, the price for that liberation is very high, since it entails relegating the very foundation of a semiotic reading – that is, the sense to be made of marks and signs – to a matter of “misplaced” concern about local structures. It begs questions about the way pictorial meaning happens at all.

Even so, “Semiotics and Art History” proceeds on the assumption that there is a specifically visual semiotics parallel to the linguistic model. Bal and Bryson mention “visual and verbal practices of the sign,” and they point to semiotics as a “transdisciplinary theory” that “helps to avoid the bias of privileging language” – as if the only initial problem with visual signs is making sure they are not ignored in favor of written signs (S 175, 194). But the question of the relation between visual semiotics and linguistic semiotics is not as easy as it seems, and theories that begin from linguistics have often remained within linguistics. As W. J. T. Mitchell puts it, “although Bal and Bryson insist they are providing ‘a semiotic turn for art history’ rather than a ‘linguistic turn,’ they underestimate . . . the extent to which semiotics privileges textual/linguistic descriptive frameworks.”¹⁵ The three major sources Bal and Bryson adduce concerning visual signs – Fernande Saint-Martin, Roland Barthes, and Nelson Goodman – can each be read as evidence that “visual semiotics” may not exist in the developed state that Bal and Bryson require.

Saint-Martin’s book *Semiotics of Visual Language*, for example, is cited as a source for the semiotic theory of visual works, but her cate-

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gories are often rudimentary or awkward by art historical standards. Even though her book has been received by the wider semiotic community as a synthesis of art history and visual semiotics, her categories are too schematic to be much help in understanding visual signs in artworks, and neither Bal nor Bryson make much use of her classifications.¹⁶ Nelson Goodman also appears in their notes, but principally so they can import his concept of “density,” which would, if it were taken the way Goodman presents it, vitiate any attempt to read visual marks as signs (S 176, 194). For those who wish to argue that painted and drawn marks are beyond the pale of logical analysis, Goodman has long been a point of reference. He has several ways of distinguishing graphic marks from those in writing or notations: he says painted and drawn marks are “syntactically dense,” so that unlike the “discrete” characters in an alphabet, each blends into the others in seamless infinitesimal variation. Among the dense symbol systems Goodman also distinguishes the “replete” marks in pictures from the “attenuated” marks in schemata such as graphs. A stock market graph, for instance, is attenuated because only a few properties of the lines matter: their height denotes stock prices, and their horizontal position denotes the date; but it does not matter if they are printed in red or black ink, or even drawn by hand. Paintings are different, according to Goodman, because every change in the mark will change the meaning.

Density and repleteness are important concepts; what gets decided about graphic marks largely depends on how they (or terms like them) are understood. If Goodman’s claims hold true, then it would probably not be helpful to say that marks can be signs in the same way as figures or painted objects. Marks would be left in a kind of paradoxical perdition, since they would be *so* sensitive, so attuned to nuance, that they would be incapable of saying any one thing. But there are also important ways in which Goodman’s claim does not make sense. Certainly graphic marks are often dense – although there are also many exceptions – but is any graphic mark functionally replete? The idea is true enough as an exercise in classification – each tiny change in a mark *could* alter its syntactic and semantic function –

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but it does not correspond well to the ways that pictures are actually made or viewed. The problem is that marks in pictures are not perceived as dense: depending on the context, some changes might appear meaningful, but most would be ignored.¹⁷ I have argued elsewhere that repleteness is a fictional construct because we would be hard pressed to come up with more than a few variants of any given mark that might be expressively meaningful. Many changes are invisible because they do not correspond to any known styles, periods, strategies, or genres we know how to read.¹⁸ So density is a reasonable notion, but it is not well related to the ways that pictures are interpreted.

Roland Barthes is another principal source, but Barthes's essays on signs, such as "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills" and "The Photographic Message," are deeply problematic attempts to understand what a truly "uncoded" image might be (S 191). In the *Elements of Semiology*, Barthes says he finds it "increasingly more difficult to conceive a system of images and objects whose signifieds can exist independently of language: to perceive what a substance signifies is inevitably to fall back on the individuation of language; there is no meaning that is not designated, and the world of signifieds is none other than language."¹⁹

Nor is Barthes the only semiotician who was troubled in this way. Mitchell has noted several other attempts to resolve the issue: Umberto Eco, he observes, was skeptical of a tendency in the 1960s in which "semiotics was dominated by a dangerous verbocentric dogmatism whereby the dignity of 'language' was conferred only on systems ruled by a double articulation." The problem, as Eco saw it, was that there is no secure way of saying what an "iconic sign" might be. Some iconic signs are like the "significant units" of language, and others "result from the correlation of an imprecise expressive texture and convey a vast and unanalyzable portion of content"; and likewise some rules that govern iconic signs *include* rules for other kinds of signs, and vice versa. For Eco these confusions make the entire notion unworkable: "One and only one conclusion is possible at this point: *iconism is not a single phenomenon*, nor indeed a uniquely semiotic one.

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It is a collection of phenomena bundled together under an all-purpose label (just as in the Dark Ages the word “plague” probably covered a lot of different diseases).²⁰

In a later essay Eco remarks that “the study of iconic signs is reaching more and more complicated levels of sophistication,” but the examples he cites – Panofsky, Gombrich, Goodman, Martin Krampen, Christian Metz, and his own work – are principally concerned with what I have been calling higher-order forms, and they have little to do with the strictly pictorial nature of elementary marks.²¹

Other writers as well have been skeptical of the idea of an independent semiotics of pictures. In *Structuralist Poetics*, Jonathan Culler renames Peirce’s semeiotic triad of icon, index, and symbol as “the icon, the index, and the sign proper,” and he does so in order to exclude both iconic and indexical signs from semiotics.²² Icons “differ markedly from other signs,” he writes, because an indeterminate part of their function is due to cultural conditioning. Icons cannot even be said to make sense until there is a reasonable account of “the way in which a drawing of a horse represents a horse,” which Culler thinks is “perhaps more properly the concern of a philosophical theory of representation than of a linguistically based semiology.”²³ Culler’s judgment – apart from its criteria, which have to do with the way signs refer, rather than their structure in the image – is in line with Barthes’s and Eco’s: visual semiotics is not a coherent enterprise because it rests on poorly formulated notions.

The most persistent attempt to define the sign theory that underlies visual semiotics is Anne Hénault’s essay, “Semiotics in France.” Like Bal, Bryson, and Goodman, Hénault takes the extreme antirealist stance, claiming that “semiosis is as arbitrary for visual languages as for any other,” and she uses that position to “avoid the dead-end of Barthes’s semiology,” where the writer is forced to stop interpreting in the face of the purely visual “uncoded image.” But she does not object to the idea that there might be some purely visual realm exempted from the domain of language, and she faults Barthes for “transforming the visual text into a linguistic text” and for being satisfied with “naming one by one the various items which could be