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On Aniconicity

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Abstract: Why has semiotics focused more on iconicity and resemblance than on aniconicity and dissemblance? Can a semiotic theory of how signs, and in particular icons, turn into non-signs, be formulated? Taking as theoretical point of departure Peirce's triadic conception of signs as consisting in the relation between a representamen and an object through an interpretant, the article explores the evanescence of iconicity and resemblance through several examples of aniconicity and dissemblance: a son who cannot recognize his own father's picture because it is too old; a writer who cannot recognize his own city because it was turned into rubble by aerial bombing; a cubist painter who distorts the pictorial icon of an object so that viewers cannot recognize it; etc. Through these and more examples, the paper points out that semiotics should develop not only a cultural theory of how signs are created, but also a cultural theory of how they are dissolved.

Keywords: iconicity; resemblance; aniconicity; dissemblance

1. Iconicity and Aniconicity

Semiotic literature on icons and iconicity thus far has mostly focused on the laws of resemblance[1]: given a certain representamen — which signifies its object through a certain interpretant — what features must characterize the relation between the former and the latter, and between the interpretant and the object, in order for the representamen to be an icon? And in order for the representamen to resemble the object it signifies through a certain interpretant?

On the contrary, semiotic literature on icons and iconicity has focused less on the laws of dissemblance: given a certain sign, defined as an icon by virtue of a relation of resemblance between a representamen, an interpretant, and an object, under what conditions does it cease to be an icon? Upon what changes in the elements composing it?

[1] For instance, the concept of resemblance has been central in the debate on 'iconism'; cfr especially Calabrese (1980; 1985; 2003).

The semiotic laws of resemblance have been dealt with more than the semiotic laws of dissemblance for various reasons. The most relevant one is that the relation of iconicity between a representamen and an object through an interpretant can be studied as a synchronic phenomenon, without consideration for the diachronic processes that gave rise to it. However, studying the way in which such relation turns into a non-relation, thus bringing about the end of an icon as such, requires a diachronic point of view. In order to analyze in what way an icon ceases to be such, we must know that it used to be an icon. Only on the basis of this diachronic evidence can we inquire about the way in which something that used to be an icon of something else for someone is not such anymore.

An example will clarify this difference. I visit my parents a few months after my father's eightieth birthday. My mother shows me a picture of him blowing the candles on his birthday's cake. I immediately recognize the man in the photograph as my father. I tell him that he looks good. Next, my mother shows me a picture of my father's schoolmates on the last day of their first grade. She tells me that one of those boys is my father, and challenges me to identify him. Yet, forasmuch I try to single my father out of the group, I cannot. In my eyes, none of the kids in the photograph bears more resemblance to my father than any other.

From a semiotic point of view, the first photograph is a representamen that indexically signifies, through a certain interpretant, the presence of my father's body in a certain time and space (the celebration for his eightieth birthday). Moreover, it iconically signifies, through a certain interpretant, its resemblance to my father's body in that time and space. Finally, it symbolically signifies, through a certain interpretant, its indexical and iconic meaning through the conventions of both the photographic language and the content of my mother's words pointing at the photograph. The indexical, iconic, and symbolic relation between the representamen and the object are all necessary for the photograph to signify as it does. Nevertheless, they can also be told apart: were the photograph a digital creation, for instance, its iconic and symbolic meaning would not change but its indexical meaning would; if my father had been wearing a mask on his eightieth birthday, the indexical and symbolic meaning of the photograph would not change but its iconic meaning would; finally, if my mother had told me that the photograph depicts my father on his seventy-ninth birthday, its indexical and iconic meaning would not change, but its symbolic meaning would.

As regards the second photograph, that of my father as a schoolboy, it is also a representamen that indexically signifies, through a certain interpretant, the presence of my

father’s body in a certain time and space (the final day of his first grade). Moreover, it iconically signifies, through a certain interpretant, its resemblance to my father’s body in that time and space. Finally, it symbolically signifies, through a certain interpretant, its indexical and iconic meaning through the conventions of both the photographic language and the content of my mother’s words pointing at the photograph.

However, whereas the first photograph is an index, an icon, and a symbol of my father’s body in a certain time and space for both my mother and me, the second photograph is an index, an icon, and a symbol of my father’s body in a certain time and space for my mother, whereas it is only an index and a symbol for me.

The second photograph is not an icon for me because my oldest mental image of my father’s face is not old enough to serve as an interpretant between the photograph and my father’s present-day face, to establish an iconic relation between the representamen and the object. On the contrary, the second photograph is an icon for my mother because her oldest mental image of my father’s face is at least thirty years older than my oldest mental image of it. Furthermore, it is old enough to serve as an interpretant between the photograph and my father’s current face, to establish an iconic relation between the representamen and the object.

This example makes it clear that, whereas a synchronic point of view is sufficient in order to understand how the first photograph is an icon for both my mother and me, a diachronic perspective is needed in order to understand how the second photograph is an icon for my mother but not for me. Indeed, such perspective is necessary in order to a) realize that the photograph ceased to be an iconic representamen of my father’s face for those who met him after a certain age; b) seek to determine what this age was; c) seek to understand what changes in my father’s face at this watershed age were such to bring about the aniconicity of the photograph for those who met him after such age.

Dissemblance and aniconicity stem from a change in the relation between the representamen and the interpretant, or in the relation between the interpretant and the object, this change being caused by the fact that one or more of these three elements change without accordance with the others.

In the example given above, dissemblance and aniconicity result from a change in the relation between an object that evolves through time — my father’s face — and a representamen that remains unchanged — the photograph taken on the last day of his first grade. In this circumstance, only some interpretants are able to establish a relation of resemblance between the

representamen and the object, namely, mental images that are old enough to mediate between my father's face as it looked on the last day of his first grade and the same face on his eightieth birthday. In general, the older we become, the fewer people hold mental images of us that are old enough to mediate between the way in which we look in our present reality and the way in which we look in photographs that represent us in our childhood. Eventually, people who grow very old, and outgrow all their relatives and friends, are doomed to be the only ones able to recognize themselves in their childhood pictures. Unless, of course, as it is the case with historical figures, alternative interpretants, for instance the captions of a biography's illustrations, trans-codify into both visual and verbal language the mental images that are required to establish a link of resemblance between a present face and its remote past.

At the same time, aniconicity might also stem from a change in the relation between the representamen and the object, brought about by a change in the representamen itself. This is the well-known literary case of the portrait of Dorian Gray, but also of all those icons whose objects cannot be recognized because their representamina have been altered. For instance, had my mother scribbled a long moustache and a thick beard on the birthday photograph of my father's face, the photograph would cease to be an icon of my father's face for me. Indeed, my mental images of his face would once again be unable to serve as interpretants between the representamen and the object, between the face represented in the photograph and my father's face. As in the case of the old photograph, so in the case of the scribbled one only a diachronic perspective allows me to a) realize that the photograph ceased to be an iconic representamen of my father's face for those who saw it after it was scribbled upon; b) seek to determine at what stage my father's photograph became so scribbled that it could not be recognized as a photograph of my father's face; c) seek to understand what changes in the photograph of my father's face brought about its aniconicity.

Finally, aniconicity might also stem from a change in the relation between the representamen and the object, brought about by a change in the interpretants that mediate between them. For instance, the mental image I hold of my father's face could be old enough to identify a photograph as an icon of his face, yet a neurological pathology might not allow me to use this mental image in order to establish a relation between the representamen and the object.

2. Resemblance and Dissemblance

A corollary of this way of construing resemblance and dissemblance is that the former is always recognition, as well as the latter is always lack of recognition. In semiotic terms, resemblance is not a dyadic relation between two objects, but a triadic relation between an object, a representamen that resembles it, and an interpretant that allows the recognition of the representamen as resembling the object. It is only by positing such triadic relation that we can account for the fact that the dynamic of resemblance is always potentially an unlimited semiosis, where the interpretant can establish a relation of iconicity between a representamen and an object only by virtue of the fact that such relation needs a further interpretant to be established, and so on and so forth virtually ad infinitum.

For instance, when I look at my father's photograph and recognize his face, it would be simplistic to say that what enables this recognition is merely my holding a mental image of my father's face, a memorized mental image capable of mediating between the photograph and the face, the representamen and the object. When we say that this is what happens, we are actually adopting an abbreviating description of the semiotic dynamic of recognition. In reality, what enables me to establish a meaningful iconic relation between a photograph of my father and my father's face is an entire semiosic process, in which a chain of interpretants tortuously leads me to establish such a relation. Symmetrically, when we say that a relation of iconicity has been replaced by a relation of aniconicity, it is only for the sake of simplicity that we say that this happens because I do not hold any mental image mediating between the representamen and the object. In reality, what occurs is that, in the chain of interpretants that enables a semiosic dynamic of recognition, one of the rings of the chain becomes disconnected from the others, so that the ontology of the entire semiotic chain is completely disrupted.

Semiotics has hitherto privileged iconicity over aniconicity because of the intrinsically synchronic nature of the former, and because of the intrinsically diachronic nature of the latter: one might object to this argument by saying that iconicity too can be considered from a diachronic perspective, namely by inquiring into how something that was not considered by someone as the iconic sign of something else started to be considered as such. One might inquire, for instance, into how the mainstream visual culture of Western Europe changed in such a way that cubist paintings started to be considered by their viewers not only as indexical representamina of the passage of the painter's brush on the canvas, but also as iconic representamina of something — such transition requiring, of course, that the visual language of cubist painting also becomes more or less mainstream. Yet, as soon as iconicity is studied

diachronically, inevitably presupposes the consideration of aniconicity. In order to understand how an icon became such, we must understand how the same icon was not such previously. Hence, we must formulate hypotheses about what changed in a sign — thought of as a relation between a representamen and an object through an interpretant — in order for it to become an icon.

More generally, when focusing on iconicity, and therefore on icons as phenomena, we formulate the hypothesis that something is the icon of something else for someone. On the contrary, focusing on aniconicity, and therefore on icons as processes, we formulate hypotheses about the way in which something that was not the icon of something else for someone became such. Or, vice versa, we formulate hypotheses on the way in which something that was the icon of something else for someone ceased to be such.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to contend that the diachronic dimension equals the chronic one, that is, a dimension constituted around time (and, therefore, both an ontology and a metaphysics of time). Saying that the focus on aniconicity entails a diachronic point of view does not mean that it entails a temporal point of view, or a historical point of view. In fact, the focus is on aniconicity also when we compare two (at least apparently) contemporary semioses, one in which the dynamic of recognition takes place, and another one in which it does not. For instance, when both my brother and I look at my father's photograph, but whereas he recognizes my father, I do not, resemblance and dissemblance, recognition and lack of it, are (at least apparently) occurring simultaneously, and not in two separate temporal or historical moments.

Instead, what is meant by saying that aniconicity entails a focus on the diachronic dimension is that we cannot account, in the synchronic dimension, for both myself as unable to recognize my father's picture and myself as able to recognize it (for instance after that my mother has pointed out the resemblance to me); as well as we cannot account, in the synchronic dimension, for both my brother as able to recognize my father's picture and my brother as unable to do it (for instance after that my brother has been affected by a neurological disease). Therefore, both the construction and the deconstruction of iconicity need to be understood as processes whose semiosic ontology is inevitably diachronic.

This approach allows us to describe semiosic states (that is, phases of the semiosis conceived as a process) that are intermediate between resemblance and dissemblance, between recognition and the lack of it. On the one hand, a series of semiosic rings might be on the verge of constituting a semiosic chain, a relation of resemblance between a representamen and an

object through an interpretant. This happens, for instance, whenever we do not recognize someone in a picture but we nevertheless have the impression that, especially if we concentrate, recognition will take place. What occurs in this case is that, until we recognize this someone, we do not recognize anyone (by definition), but we recognize the fact that we are about to recognize someone. In other terms, the semiosic chain of recognition is not complete, but we have an increasingly strong feeling that it will be complete soon, bringing about a meaningful relation of resemblance, a relation of iconicity, and therefore recognition.

On the other hand, a semiosic chain might be on the verge of turning into a series of more or less unrelated semiosic rings, so that the relation between a representamen and an object is lost. This happens, for instance, whenever we have not seen a dear friend of ours for a long time, and we fear that, were we to come across this friend's picture in the newspapers, or even encounter this friend face to face, recognition would not occur. In other words, we fear that our mental image of this friend — given the speed at which the friend's face and/or our mental image of it must have changed — will not be able to act as an interpretant between the picture and the face, or between the friend's face as we remember it and the way in which it is in the present time.

Human beings are able to strengthen a semiosic chain that is becoming loose — for example, by mentally concentrating on a face that we do not recognize yet but that nevertheless 'looks familiar' and whose identity we have 'on the tip of the tongue', or by developing mnemotechniques to keep a semiosic relation of resemblance alive. In both cases, what we do is to 1) select among our mental interpretants those which might establish a more effective iconic relation between a representamen and its (yet) mysterious object; 2) reinforce the presence and the relations of those interpretants that already work effectively; and 3) look for new interpretants that might play this role.

However, as Eco has pointed out, we cannot weaken a semiosic chain whose rings are closely linked with each other (Eco, 1988). For instance, we cannot purposely break the semiosic chain that enables us to recognize a lost lover when we meet such lover accompanied by a new partner. We cannot 1) discard the mental interpretants that enable us to recognize her; or 2) weaken their presence and their relation. If a relation of aniconicity eventually takes place, so that we do not recognize anymore a lover who made us suffer, it is because 1) our mental memories of such lover have naturally faded away with time, as most mental memories do; and/or 2) the lover's physical appearance has changed so much that, although we still have fresh memories of that lost lover, they are no longer able to bridge the past and the present; and/or 3)

we have more or less temporarily 'damaged' the neurological physiology of our semiosic activities (by drinking alcohol, for instance, a substance that is frequently used 'to forget').

Whereas we can intentionally re-activate a meaningful relation of resemblance and iconicity, thus giving rise to recognition, we cannot intentionally de-activate it and turn it into a meaningless relation of dissemblance and aniconicity, so giving rise to lack of recognition. We can try not to forget, but we cannot try to forget. Furthermore, whereas we can have the impression that we are about to recognize something, as well as we can have the impression that we are about to become unable to recognize something, as soon as we become totally unable to recognize something, and therefore a full relation of dissemblance and aniconicity establishes itself between this something and our mental images, we become unaware of this relation itself. Someone or something else must tell us that we are not able to recognize something, for otherwise we would be unable to be aware of our inability.

For instance, if I come across a photograph of an old friend and do not recognize her I cannot be aware of this lack of recognition if someone or something else does not tell me that I should have recognized her, or I could have recognized her if the relation between representamen, object, and interpretant had not been a relation of complete aniconicity and dissemblance. When such relation is complete, it turns into a non-relation, at least from the synchronic and subjective point of view of those who experience it. Something that used to be the sign of something else for me ceases to be such, and therefore ceases to be meaningful. For instance, faces of old friends that we cannot recognize anymore are not meaningful to us in the present time. We cannot reactivate their semiotic relevance, and their potential meaningfulness, unless someone or something makes such complete relation of aniconicity and dissemblance less complete, for instance by pointing out that some of our mental interpretants could be re-arranged in order to give rise to a beginning of semiosic chain, and therefore to a beginning of recognition.

3. Simulation and Dissimulation

Thus far iconicity has been focused on more than aniconicity because the epistemology of semiotics, and especially that of the so-called 'structural semiotics', has been elaborated as a synchronic alternative to the diachronic epistemology of history. But this is not the only reason.

Another reason for this unbalance is that simulation has been generally considered as more interesting than dissimulation in the visual cultures that have exerted a decisive influence on the shaping of present-day visual studies (Leone, 2007; 2009a; Forthcoming). At least until the

development of abstract, non-figurative arts at the turn of the nineteenth century, ‘Western’ visual cultures have focused more on how, for instance, the artifice of perspective could improve the resemblance of an iconic representamen with its object, rather than on the way in which languages of visual expression could be used in order to decrease or even disrupt the iconicity of signs, in order to bestow a veil of aniconicity upon them. Indeed, a whole theory of art has been developed by these visual cultures in order to investigate the relation between representamina and the objects to which they resemble.

On the contrary, it was only with nineteenth-century avant-gardes, and then in particular with cubism, that a theory of aniconicity also developed. What was the best way to distort the relation between an image and its object so that the image could not be perceived as a representamen of the object? What were the artistic, theoretic, and most importantly, philosophical implications of such distortion? As regards non-Western visual cultures, they maintained a different position vis-à-vis iconicity and aniconicity, and were also instrumental in the blossoming of the aniconicity of ‘Western’ avant-gardes. But this is not a theme upon which the present paper can expatiate on this occasion.

Nevertheless, there is at least one field in ‘Western’ visual cultures where aniconicity has long been considered as important as iconicity, or even more important than it, namely, military strategy, in particular as regards the evolution of the tactics of camouflage and their implementation (Leone, 2009b).

Camouflaging oneself is different from wearing a mask exactly because of the different relation that these two behaviors hold with aniconicity. Wearing a mask has little to do with aniconicity, since it simply entails the substitution of a certain icon with another. If I am a dancer wearing a mask during the Carnival of Venice, for instance, I eliminate the resemblance between my face and the mental images of it that could be used as interpretants in order to link such bodily representamen with the object of my somatic identity. However, people who will not recognize me will still be able to recognize the artifact that I am wearing on my face as a mask. The mask will still be an icon for them, although not an icon of my somatic identity. By contrast, if I am a soldier camouflaging my face during a battle in a forest, my purpose is not only to replace my face — an icon that signifies, through a certain interpretant, a target for an enemy soldier — with another icon, but rather to bestow a veil of aniconicity on my face. Through camouflage, my face does not merely become invisible behind another icon, but ceases to be a

signifying representamen altogether (at least until it becomes suddenly and lethally signifying again, when I defeat the enemy by taking advantage of his foolish unawareness).

Camouflage is not a recent phenomenon. Many creatures adopt behaviors that seem very close to human camouflage. Moreover, ancient sources show that camouflage techniques have been used in battle in the oldest civilizations. Yet, there is no doubt that camouflage became a fundamental element of military strategy with the advent of aerial warfare. The point of view of war aircrafts is such that a gigantic operation of camouflage is needed in order to eliminate the iconicity of a potential target like an enemy camp or an enemy city.

Aerial warfare brought about a reflection on aniconicity also from a different point of view. The first German ‘experiments’ in aerial bombing caused such destruction in European cities like Guernica, Warsaw, Belgrade, and Rotterdam that no human action had been previously able to bring about. Before the advent of aerial bombing, indeed, with very few exceptions, only ‘natural’ cataclysms like the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755 or other similar catastrophes had devastated European cities in a comparable way (Leone, 2009c).

Thus, a ‘progress’ in military technology resulted in an increased interest in aniconicity, meant as the semiotic process of complete disfigurement: on the one hand, cities had to be protected from the disruptive power of aerial bombing through the voluntary self-disfigurement of camouflage; on the other hand, in the absence of such protection, aerial bombing could carry out a complete disfigurement of the city.

It was exactly at this watershed in the history of ‘Western’ visual cultures that the semiotic difference between *ruins* and *rubble* started to be fundamental (Augé, 2003). Until the adoption of aerial bombing, citizens would experience loss of meaning in their cities as a gradual, rather non-traumatic process, mainly involving a semiotics of ruins. Ruins are urban representamina signifying the past of the city for those citizens who are able to interpret them through the mental images of the buildings which the ruins were part of. The relation between ruins, mental images, and ancient buildings is at the same time indexical, iconic, and symbolic. Ruins were once physically part of the buildings they signify through the citizens’ memory; simultaneously, their shape still allows citizens to establish a relation of resemblance between ancient buildings and what is left of them; finally, the semiosis that relates ruins as perceptible representamina and the buildings which they were part of (through the mediation of appropriate mental images) could uneasily take place without the symbolic connection provided by verbal discourse.

For instance, ruins in the proximity of the present-day Iranian city of Shiraz signify, through a certain interpretant, the ancient capital city of the Achaemenid empire not only because they were physically part of it, and not only because they resemble the buildings which they used to be part of, but also because they still hold the name of Persepolis.

Even the destructive fury of Alexander the Great, indeed, with the pillage and burning of the city, and even many centuries of negligence, with the desert gradually conquering the urban space of Persepolis, have not succeeded in breaking the iconic relation between the ruins of the Achaemenid city and the memory of it.

Hence, from this semiotic perspective, the typically modern activity of restoration consists in modifying a certain representamen so that our mental images of it can more effectively establish a relation of resemblance, a relation of iconicity, between the representamen and the past it signifies through a certain interpretant (Mazzucchelli, 2010). At the same time, the typically post-modern practice of making a book or a piece of furniture look older than they are through some particular forgery techniques might be called "de-storation", that is, a process consisting in modifying a certain representamen so that our mental images of it can less effectively establish a relation of resemblance, a relation of iconicity, between the representamen and the past it signifies through a certain interpretant. In restoration, a representamen is modified so that it signifies, through a certain interpretant, more a passed temporal status of the object and less the passing of time; in de-storation, on the contrary, a representamen is modified so that it signifies, through a certain interpretant, less a passed temporal status of the object and more the passing of time. What we value in a restored representamen is the past time it signifies through a certain interpretant; what we value in a de-stored representamen is the passing of time it signifies through a certain interpretant.

Yet, both aerial bombing and modern art have introduced in the visual cultures of Western cities ruins and artworks that could not be restored, for both aerial bombing and modern art entailed a new power of disfigurement, of aniconicity. As regards modern art, present-day art theory is showing with increasing evidence the paradoxes that stem from the desire of restoring non-figurative artworks. As regards modern bombing, since the first German aerial attacks against Guernica, Warsaw, Belgrade, and Rotterdam, it became increasingly evident that this new military technique was able to disfigure cities in an unprecedented way, to bestow such a veil of aniconicity on them to thwart any attempt at restoration.

This became even more evident with the Allies' bombings against German cities during the Second World War and, ultimately, with the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Cities destroyed during the Second World War could not be restored. They could be only re-built, thus marking a radical change in their ontology. Indeed, what aerial bombing produces in cities is not ruins, as it was the case with non-aerial warfare, but rubble.

4. Ruins and Rubble

The semiotic difference between ruins and rubble should now be clear: whereas ruins maintain an indexical, iconic, and symbolic relation with the past buildings they were part of, and as a consequence also with the past city and city-life these buildings were part of, rubble is an aniconic representamen: it is still physically part of the building it was part of, and it is still symbolically identifiable, through verbal language, as 'rubble from a certain building'; yet, rubble does not hold any iconic relation with the building it was part of. Rubble does not resemble anything but itself, or other equally aniconic rubble. From this point of view, Ground Zero, what is left of a whole area of Manhattan after what can be considered an unconventional aerial bombing, is not ruins, but mere rubble. The Twin Towers were so devastated that our mental images of them can establish no iconic relation between Ground Zero and the Twin Towers. We hold the Twin Towers, and therefore what they represent, only by their name.

Returning to the example given above, a city in ruins is like a picture torn into pieces, whereas a city in rubble is like a picture turned into ashes. However, the passage from ruins to rubble is not without consequences. It is only by indexical contiguity and symbolic convention that we say that a city rebuilt from its rubble is the same city that preceded its destruction, its disfiguration, and its aniconic annihilation. On the contrary, it is also by iconic motivation that we say that a city restored from its ruins is the same city that preceded its destruction. In other words, aerial bombing made the relation between a rebuilt city and its past as a largely conventional matter.

Winfried Georg Sebald was maybe the first to ponder upon the cultural consequences of aerial bombing. In *On the Natural History of Destruction*, on the one hand, he claims that Germans in the aftermath of the Second World War were too traumatized to be able to effectively account for the way in which German cities were devastated by the Allies' bombings. On the other hand, though, he seems to surmise that such inability was due not only to psychological, but also to moral reasons: Germans could not describe the cities destroyed by the

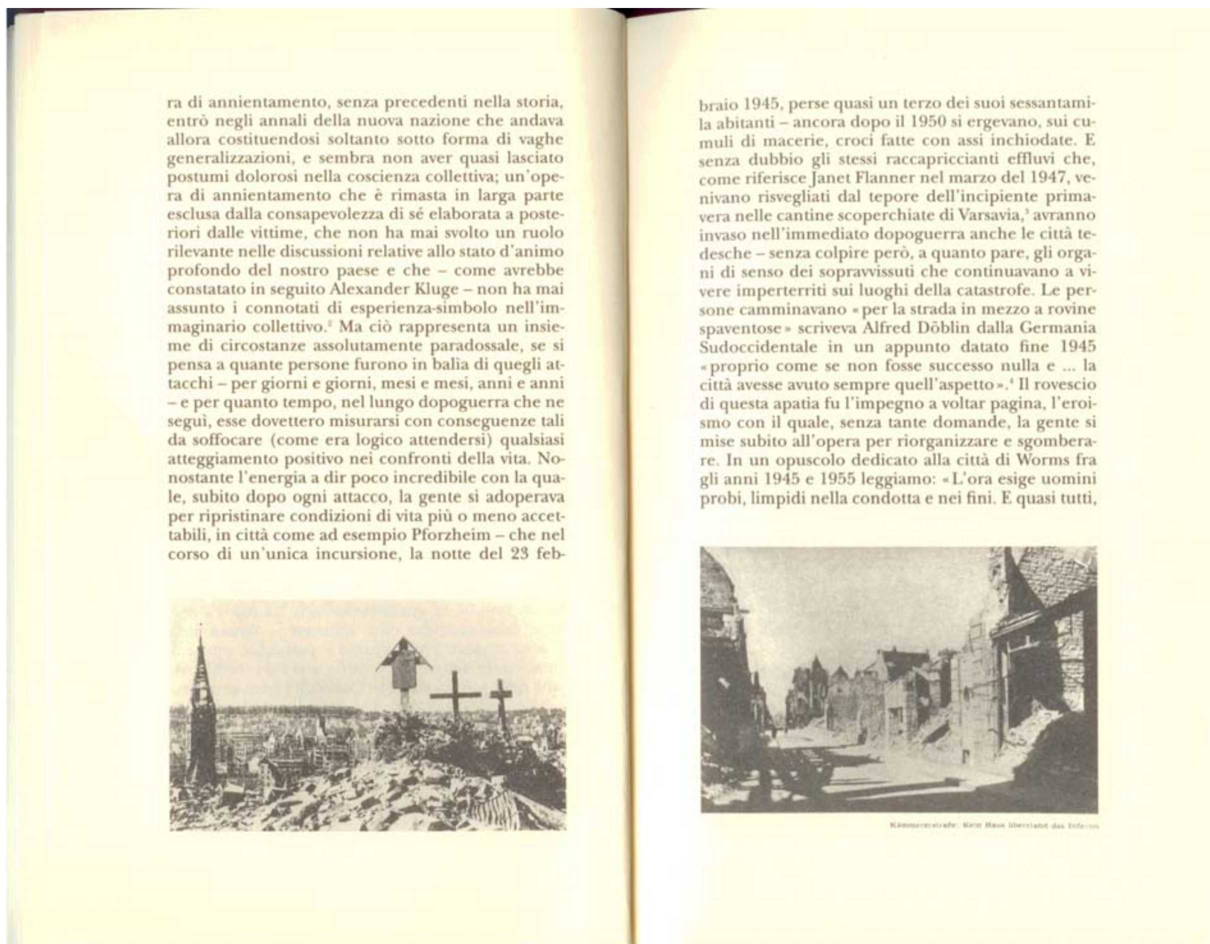
Allies' bombings because they were not in the moral position of running the risk of depicting themselves as victims (Sebald, 2003). The first explanation points at a common psychological mechanism: the untrustworthiness of both memory and language in coping with a traumatic experience. The second explanation points at a common moral phenomenon: the acceptance of suffering as punishment for evil actions previously done.

Yet, semiotics more than psychology or moral philosophy may shed new light on the phenomenon described by Sebald in his essay. Correctly, in the beginning of his survey of the German literature that was written in the aftermath of the Second World War, he emphasizes that it is precisely in language that the incapacity of effectively describing the destruction of cities by aerial bombings can be detected. According to Sebald, indeed, prose written in this period sounds inadequate to convey a precise idea of the devastation. Yet, the theoretical framework exposed above might encourage us to hypothesize that such inadequacy was due also to the unprecedented semiotic dynamics brought about by aerial bombing: rarely in the past had writers been confronted with the results of a power able to suddenly transform an entire city into rubble, into a series of representamina whose relation with the preexistent city was uniquely based on indexical contiguity and symbolic convention but not on iconic resemblance. In facing the challenge of describing rubble, confronted with the task of bestowing, through the resources of verbal language, a veil of iconicity on the aniconic outputs of aerial bombing, according to Sebald most German writers failed.

Nevertheless, this paper would like to suggest that they failed not only psychologically or morally. They failed also semiotically. Aerial bombing, indeed, had suddenly introduced in 'Western' visual cultures a new form of aniconicity, a new way of nullifying the relation of resemblance between a representamen and its object. Post-Second World War verbal language was unprepared to give an iconic form to such new form of aniconicity, it was unable to produce forms miming the meaning of maimed cities, and it was rather paralyzed in front of rubble as the new protagonist of urban semiotics.

One might even suggest that only the visual arts, which had already experimented new forms in order to explore aniconicity, were able to swiftly react to the semiotic novelty introduced by aerial bombing. From this point of view, Picasso's painting *Guernica* can be considered as the visual encounter between the aniconicity brought about by modern warfare and the aniconicity experimented by modern painting.

Furthermore, a semiotic point of view reveals that most commentators on Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction* have probably failed to realize that this essay is not only a diagnosis of the semiotic paralysis that struck German writers before the urban consequences of the devastating aerial bombings carried out by the Allies during the Second World War. Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction* may also be the long awaited therapy for this paralysis, achieved not only through the self-awareness of the limits of the verbal meta-language vis-à-vis the evolutions of aniconic dynamics but, above all, through one of the most original traits of Sebald's books, that is, the constant search for an expressive cooperation between words and images. Consider, for instance, the writer's choice to evoke German cities in rubble by juxtaposing verbal descriptions and photographs taken soon after the bombings.



ra di annientamento, senza precedenti nella storia, entrò negli annali della nuova nazione che andava allora costituendosi soltanto sotto forma di vaghe generalizzazioni, e sembra non aver quasi lasciato postumi dolorosi nella coscienza collettiva; un'opera di annientamento che è rimasta in larga parte esclusa dalla consapevolezza di sé elaborata a posteriori dalle vittime, che non ha mai svolto un ruolo rilevante nelle discussioni relative allo stato d'animo profondo del nostro paese e che – come avrebbe constatato in seguito Alexander Kluge – non ha mai assunto i connotati di esperienza-simbolo nell'immaginario collettivo.[2] Ma ciò rappresenta un insieme di circostanze assolutamente paradossale, se si pensa a quante persone furono in balìa di quegli attacchi – per giorni e giorni, mesi e mesi, anni e anni – e per quanto tempo, nel lungo dopoguerra che ne seguì, esse dovettero misurarsi con conseguenze tali da soffocare (come era logico attendersi) qualsiasi atteggiamento positivo nei confronti della vita. Nonostante l'energia a dir poco incredibile con la quale, subito dopo ogni attacco, la gente si adoperava per ripristinare condizioni di vita più o meno accettabili, in città come ad esempio Pforzheim – che nel corso di un'unica incursione, la notte del 23 febbraio 1945, perse quasi un terzo dei suoi sessantamila abitanti – ancora dopo il 1950 si ergevano, sui cumuli di macerie, croci fatte con assi inchiodate. E senza dubbio gli stessi raccapriccianti effluvi che, come riferisce Janet Flanner nel marzo del 1947, venivano risvegliati dal tepore dell'incipiente primavera nelle cantine scoperchiate di Varsavia,[3] avranno invaso nell'immediato dopoguerra anche le città tedesche – senza colpire però, a quanto pare, gli organi di senso dei sopravvissuti che continuavano a vivere imperterriti sui luoghi della catastrofe. Le persone camminavano «per la strada in mezzo a rovine spaventose» scriveva Alfred Döblin dalla Germania Sudoccidentale in un appunto datato fine 1945 «proprio come se non fosse successo nulla e ... la città avesse avuto sempre quell'aspetto».[4] Il rovescio di questa apatia fu l'impegno a voltar pagina, l'eroismo con il quale, senza tante domande, la gente si mise subito all'opera per riorganizzare e sgomberare. In un opuscolo dedicato alla città di Worms fra gli anni 1945 e 1955 leggiamo: «L'ora esige uomini probi, limpidi nella condotta e nei fini. E quasi tutti,

Figure 1: Two pages from Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction*

5. Conclusions: toward a natural history of semiotic destruction

The specific semiotic dynamic diagnosed and somehow exorcised by Sebald should promote a more general reflection on the role that aniconicity and its inextricably diachronic relation with iconicity plays throughout the history of visual cultures.

Thus far, as this paper has sought to highlight through several arguments, the approach of semiotics toward signs in general and toward icons in particular has been meant to write a 'natural history of semiotic construction': from Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) on, semioticians have been interested in how new signs are produced through the establishment of a relation between a representamen and an object via an interpretant. However, Sebald's insights on the cultural consequences of aerial bombing on post-Second World War German literature suggest that *a natural history of semiotic destruction* should also be elaborated, mainly as regards those signs that we call icons.

Indeed, whereas the transformation of an index into a non-index can be clearly accounted for in terms of the transformation of the relation of physical contiguity between a representamen and an object into a relation of discontinuity, and whereas the transformation of a symbolon into a diabolon (de Certeau, 1992) can be clearly accounted for in terms of the breaking of the convention that links the representamen and the object, what turns an iconic relation into an aniconic relation is not clear at all.

Sebald's essay demonstrates that it is not only our sense of iconicity that changes according to the historical and socio-cultural context, but also our sense of aniconicity. During the Second World War, for instance, as this paper has pointed out, aerial bombing brought about a dynamic of semiotic disfiguration that writers could not make sense of anymore through their verbal meta-language. A semiotics of aniconicity should therefore be a historically-sensitive approach to the different ways in which the death of signs, and in particular the death of icons, is considered in different historical and socio-cultural contexts.

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