

Are Specular Image Signs?

Fabio Bacchini

University of Sassari, Italy

Abstract

In this paper I address the question whether specular images are signs, that is, whether mirror phenomena possess a semiotic status. The general semiotic theoretical framework I refer to is the one developed by Umberto Eco (1976; 1984; 1999). Although Eco himself invariantly answered the question I raise by the negative, I explore the issue independently of his conclusion.

In section 1, I show why it is not the case that all specular images are signs on all occasions. In section 2, I argue that specular images are signs only under specific conditions. In section 3, I cope with a couple of doubts that can be raised about the legitimacy of considering specular images as signs even under the specific conditions I have identified. Finally, in section 4, I deal with Eco's main objection against considering specular images as signs, and I show that this objection can easily be dismissed with regards to the thesis I advance here. My conclusion is that some though not all specular images are definitely signs.

1. Not all specular images are signs

In this section, I show why the position according to which all specular images are signs on all occasions is untenable.

A preliminary issue is to establish what are the criteria for something to be a sign. Along with Eco (1976), I assume that:

(1) Something is a sign if and only if it can be used to lie.

The idea, as Eco puts it, is this:

If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all. I think that the definition of a 'theory of the lie' should be taken as a pretty comprehensive program for general semiotics. (Eco 1976: 7)

It must be noted that, if taken literally, (1) would exclude from signs everything that is not a truth-bearer, or – for those who believe that only propositions can be truth-bearers – everything whose content is not a truth-bearer. This would mean to exclude from signs all words, and, more generally, all rhemes – a rheme being, in Peirce (1904)'s definition, "any sign that is not true nor false". To avoid absurdity, then, we need a more liberal interpretation of (1) and, in particular, of the expression "can be used to lie". The interpretation we need must admit as entities that "can be used to lie" not only entities that are always said to be either true or false and nothing else, but also entities that are normally used 'to tell– ' to use Eco's expression – and can be used to either tell the truth or lie just on particular occasions (as it is the case for any rheme R, because there are circumstances in which the monorhematic expression 'R' can be interpreted as conveying the propositional content "there is R here and now", or, "'R' is instantiated here and now"). Eco himself seems to implicitly accept a similar extension of (1) when he repeatedly presupposes that a name "can be used to lie" in the sense that it can stand in the absence of its referent.

Also if providing a detailed specification of the needed interpretation of (1) goes beyond the limits of this paper, it will be assumed throughout that it is not necessary for something to be a truth-bearer in order for it to be a sign in accordance with (1); and, when it will be said that an entity E conveys a propositional content P (e.g. "object O is at point P₁"), it will be meant that E either *literally* conveys P, or expresses a non- propositional content (e.g. "O-at-point-P₁") whose referent

is the minimal truth-maker for P (a minimal truth-maker for P being the smallest portion of reality which can make P true).

Now, my goal, in this section, is rejecting:

(2) All specular images are signs.

I stipulate to reformulate (2) as:

(2') Every OM is a sign,

where 'OM' stands for 'object O as visually appearing through at least one (plane) mirror'.

The question is: what would OM possibly be a sign of? According to (1), a necessary condition for (2') is that OM can be used to tell a lie. Typically, what OM can lie about is the location of O. So, it seems to me that (2)/(2') would require:

(3) Every OM expresses the propositional content "O is at point P_1 ",

where O is at point P_1 in regular domestic use of mirrors, for example when one shaves or puts make up on, and O is elsewhere when specular images are used to tell a lie.

But we cannot embrace (3). The main argument against (3) is the following:

(4) (Plane) mirrors do nothing but make light zigzag.

(5) Whatever is having a perceptual visual appearance of O when we are in front of O and the light reflected by O gets to our fovea in a straight path, having a perceptual visual appearance of O when the same light zigzags from O to our fovea, all other things being equal, is the very same thing.

Therefore,

(6) Whatever is having a perceptual visual appearance of O, having a perceptual visual appearance of OM is the very same thing.

A corollary of (6) is that, if we take it that whenever we have a perceptual visual appearance of O we *see* O, then whenever we have a perceptual visual appearance of O *in a mirror*, too, what we see is O.

Now, (3) and (6) entail:

(7) Every O as visually appearing in normal visual perception expresses the propositional content “O is at point P_1 ”.

The first and immediate reason we have for rejecting (7) is that perceptual experience is phenomenally not as (7) describes it as being. We *do not* phenomenally experience visual perception as awareness of ordinary, material objects *that mean* their spatial location. Quite the contrary, we are phenomenally visually aware of objects and, at the same time and in the same way, we are also phenomenally visually aware of their location. Their location, then, is not something that we are phenomenally aware of indirectly with respect to the objects themselves.

One may try, however, to rescue (7) by saying that perhaps visual perception is truly not what we phenomenally experience it to be. Under some theories about the authentic nature of visual perception, (7) might get true, irrespective of its seeming not so.

Two levels of answer are in order. First, also if we take (7) as true in this sense, we should doubt that this is an adequate way of vindicating (2)/(2') and (3). For, according to (7), each and every object we see is a sign *qua object of (visual) perception*. It follows that also any OM – just as any other seen thing – is a sign. But this is clearly a devaluation and even a distortion of (2)/(2'), which is rather the thesis that OMs are signs in a sense in which trees or flowers as seen in normal vision are not – that, in particular, OMs are signs in that they seem to be located where Os are not and can be used to lie about the location of Os. If the truth of (2)/(2') and (3) were only grounded in the truth of (7) in that fundamental and all-embracing sense, then specular images would have *no special semiotic status* at all.

Furthermore, if perception – and, notably, *visual* perception – possessed such an all-encompassing semiotic character, it reasonably should not be limited to the fact that all perceived objects express a content *about their location*. What is at issue is whether perception in general is a semiotic phenomenon. But even if it were, we should be on the lookout for the theoretical costs of the sign inflation it yields. If all perceived objects were signs, the status of ‘being a sign’ would pale into insignificance. Eco (1975) acknowledges this point when he says that we should distinguish between the iconism of perception and that of sign production, so as to confer the title of ‘sign’ only to those items possessing some additional semiotic distinction with respect to the former.

Seen in this light, the prospect of considering specular images as signs might appear unsustainable also if one decides to interpret (1) literally and make the distinction between the propositional

content “object O is at point P₁” and the non-propositional content “O-at-point-P₁”, while at the same time dropping (1) to allow specular images to be signs despite their incapacity to lie. In fact, suppose that we take specular images to be signs standing simply for the real material objects reflecting the light that hits the mirror rather than for a propositional content turning out to be false notably when the specular images are used to lie. The truth of (2') would be grounded on:

(3') Every OM is a sign standing for O.

But again, (3') together with (6) would entail:

(7') Every O as visually appearing in normal visual perception is a sign standing for O,

which seems to deplorably introduce a massive devaluation of the title of ‘sign’ as an effect of the confusion denounced by Eco.

Be it as it may, and maintaining (1) along with a liberal interpretation of it, a second level of answer is that (7) is unsustainable in the light of contemporary philosophy of perception. I will attempt to show that (7) is untenable under every position one may hold in contemporary philosophy of perception. In particular, one cannot subscribe to (7) under acceptance of direct realism, representationalism, the adverbial theory or any version of the sense-data theory.

Consider, first, direct realism. If you are a direct realist, you hold that all cases of veridical visual appearance of O in normal vision are cases of direct visual perception of O. The green tree in a field that you have a veridical visual experience of is actually the material, mind-independent tree object you are in direct perceptual relation to. You *directly* see the real material tree; and you *directly* see it as being green and as being in the field. This means that you *directly* see the tree as having the properties of being green and of being located at that point of the field. What is excluded, then, is that you have an *indirect* access to either property – as it would necessarily be the case if you saw the tree object as a sign expressing the propositional content “the tree is at point P₁ of the field” (or, equivalently, the non-propositional content “tree-at-point-P₁-of-the-field”).

If we come to representationalism, it may seem that we find here a view of perception that is consistent with (7). Indeed, representationalism treats (visual) perception as a non-relational form of mental representation that explains its phenomenal character, and whose intentional content is – roughly speaking – the perceived mind-independent objects and their properties (Crane and French 2021). Although there is no consensus about the exact nature of the intentional content of

perception, some representationalists even claim that it is propositional (Byrne 2001; Siegel 2010). If we take visual perception to be a propositional attitude, we may find it easy to accept (7). For, if all veridical visual appearances of *O* in normal vision truly are mental representations expressing some propositional content about *O*, then part of this content may well be “*O* is at point P_1 ”. Even in case the content of perception is non-propositional, however, it seems not problematic to accept that part of the content of the mental representation which a veridical visual appearance of *O* in normal vision consists in be “*O*-at-point- P_1 ”.

Nonetheless, there is a mistake here. According to (7), it is *O* as it visually appears to us that expresses the propositional content “*O* is at point P_1 ” (or, equivalently, the non-propositional content “*O*-at-point- P_1 ”). But *O* is not the mental representation. Rather, *O* is itself part of the content of the representation. So, *O* and *O*'s property of being at point P_1 are both represented in the representation; and it is not the case that the latter is the content of the former.

More in general, *O* and *O*'s being located at point P_1 belong to the same semiotic level under whatever theory of perception, be this level the content level (as in representationalism) or the bottom level (as in direct realism, where there is no content level).

Consider, again, sense-data theory. This is the theory that, if you have a veridical visual appearance of a green tree in a field in normal vision, what you are directly aware of is a mind-independent object called ‘sense- datum’, which is distinct both from the mental act by which you perceive it and from the tree itself: it is a *tertium quid* or a “third thing” that possesses the properties that perceptually appear to you and that you ascribe to the tree. Now, it is not complicated to understand sense-data theorists when they claim that the sense-datum of the tree *is green*. It is far more difficult to follow them when they say that the sense-datum of the tree *is in the field*. Indeed, the issue of the location of sense-data has always been a blind spot of the theory. Some sense- data theorists hold that sense-data of *O* are literally located where they appear to be (Jackson 1977), or even wherever *O* is located. Others locate them properly at a certain point of a non-physical space called ‘phenomenal space’ (Smythies 2003), or in the perceiver’s head in the final analysis (Russell 1927; O’Shaughnessy 2003).

Anyway, it seems impossible to hold (7) within any version of the theory. Consider first the hypothesis that the sense-datum of *O* is in the perceiver’s head or in the ‘phenomenal space’, but, in any case, not in the field. If the sense-datum of *O* is not in the field, then *O*'s property of being in

the field must be somehow represented in the sense-datum. But the sense-datum also represents O. Since there is no reason to deny that the sense-datum represents O and O's being at point P₁ of the field on the same semiotic level, they must be considered as being on the same footing, and we cannot say that "O is at point P₁" – or "O is in the field" – is the content of O.

Consider then the hypothesis that the sense-datum of O is in the field. Since, according to the theory, we are *directly* aware of the sense-datum, while we are only *indirectly* aware of O, it seems that we are more directly aware of something's being in the field than we are aware of O (similarly, since the sense-datum of a tree is taken to be literally green, it follows that while we are looking at a tree we are more directly aware of something's being green than we are aware of the tree). Now, I am not sure whether one could maintain that the degree of indirectness of our awareness of O's being in the field be halfway between that of the sense-datum (of O)'s being in the field and that of O. If this were the case, we would turn out more directly aware of O's being in the field than we are aware of O, and it would be impossible to hold (7), inasmuch as it is out of question to claim that we are more directly aware of the content of a sign than we are of its expression. But even if we preferred to say that we are no less indirectly aware of O's being in the field than we are of O, nonetheless we would have no grounds to deny that the degree of indirectness of awareness is the same for the two cases. Again, we would be forced to admit that the representation of O in the sense-datum is on the same footing as the representation in it of O's being in the field, and there would be no basis for holding (7).

These considerations also hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for the adverbial theory, which takes perception to be a state of mind adverbially modified in a certain way (so that, for example, seeing a green tree in a field is equivalent to visually sensing *treely*, *greenly* and *in-the-fieldly*). First, the modification of the experience consisting in its sensing *treely* seems to occur at the same level as the modification of the experience consisting in its sensing *greenly* and *in-the-fieldly*, hence it is not possible to hold that either of the latter is the meaning of the former. Second, also if we wanted to consider that the modification of the experience consisting in its sensing *in-the-fieldly* modifies the experience by *modifying the more basic modification* of the experience consisting in its sensing *treely*, it does not seem that this hierarchical relation could be correctly described as an expression/content relation. Indeed, while it seems generally possible, in principle, for one experiential modification to be either the expression or the content of another experiential modification, this seems not be our case: the 'in-the-fieldly' modification would modify (if ever) the 'treely'

modification just visually, by inserting the treely-modified experience in a wider visual framework, while any purely semantic modification of a visual modification of an experience seems to have to affect it without changing its specifically visual sensory qualities.

My conclusion is that (7) must be rejected. This entails that (3) and, consequently, (2)/(2') must be rejected, too.

2. Some specular images are signs under specific conditions

In this section, I argue that the refutation of (2)/(2') does not mean that no specular image is a sign in any possible circumstances. Quite the contrary, I intend to show that some specular images are signs under specific conditions (Bacchini 2017).

Before developing my argument, however, I want to remark that even if we are seeing OM when (i) we do not suspect that there is a mirror in front of us (so that we take OM to have spatial properties that O has not), and (ii) the mirror has been placed where it is by an agent whose intention is to deceive us about the spatial properties of O, this is not sufficient for saying that OM is actually used to lie. This point is important, because otherwise our acceptance of (1) would entail that all OMs “can be used to lie” and, therefore, that all OMs are signs – provided that every case in which we are seeing an OM in absence of conditions (i) and (ii) *can* be imaginatively transformed into a new case in which we are seeing OM under conditions (i) and (ii).

On the contrary, if conditions (i) and (ii) are not enough for saying that OM is being used to lie, then embracing (1) is consistent with the denial of (2)/(2'). This means that my rejection of (2)/(2') does not require dropping

(1). At that point, I can move forward and argue that *some* (though not all) specular images are signs under acceptance of (1).

So, what reasons do we have to maintain that conditions (i) and (ii) are not sufficient for saying that OM is being used to lie? The idea is that not every case of purposely causing us to form a false belief is a case of lying; more specifically, not every case of purposely causing us to form a false belief about what we are seeing is a case of lying.

Imagine, for example, that a hotel manager places a white armchair in the hotel entrance hall under a hidden spotlight projecting a beam of green light on it, with the aim of making the visitors form the false belief that the armchair is green. The armchair visually appears as green to us, and we end

up forming the belief that it is green, since we are not aware of the green light hitting it. Still, it would be inappropriate to describe such a case by saying that the hotel manager “is lying” to us. *Intentional deceiving* is not the same thing as *lying*, and we can say that the hotel manager is intentionally deceiving us without necessity to concede that she is lying to us.

An illusionist entertaining people by doing magic tricks or a person performing three-card monte make us form some false perceptual judgments about what we see without involving any communication or signification level – we cannot say that they “lie”. Likewise, the goal of making us form the false belief about the armchair is accomplished just by exploiting the causal relations connecting certain physical and physiological events, with no communicative dimension involved in any phase of the process. If lying requires some kind of ‘telling’, there is no lying here – because there is no ‘telling’. Simply, the extension of ‘intentional deceiving’ is wider than the extension of ‘lying’, and cases of intentional deceiving based on mere causation are not cases of lying. Now, there is a perfect analogy between the green armchair case and the case in which we are seeing OM merely under conditions (i) and (ii). The white armchair is the analogous of O; the invisible beam of green light is the analogous of the invisible plane mirror; and the white armchair as visually appearing under the beam of green light is the analogous of OM. The mere holding of conditions (i) and (ii), then, is not sufficient for making a seeing-an-OM case a case in which we are the victims of a lie. This proves that my denial of (2)/(2’) is consistent with (1).

Now, I want to argue that some though not all OMs are signs, or equivalently, that OMs can be signs under specific conditions. Here is my argument.

Consider the class of signs consisting in expression E and content C, such that one necessary trait of E is instantiated only because of a supervening relevant adjustment in the appearance of a property of the substance of E of the sign. Call these signs ‘last-minute signs’. A specific type of last-minute signs is constituted by those depending on a supervening relevant adjustment in the *visual* appearance of a property of the substance of E; call them ‘visual last-minute signs’.

Now consider the subclass of visual last-minute signs such that the supervening relevant change in the visual appearance of a property of the substance of E is a change in the *mere* visual appearance of that property. This excludes changes in the visual appearances of the property obtained by actually changing the property. Call these signs ‘by-mere-visual-appearance last-minute signs’) ‘MVA last-minute signs’ for short).

To confirm that MVA last-minute signs are consistent with (1), I want to first show that:

(8) MVA last-minute signs can be used to lie.

Let us turn again to the green armchair case. The white armchair visually appearing as green under the green light was an obvious candidate to the status of a MVA last-minute sign; but, as we have said, there was no lie and no semiotic function in action, and in that case the object as visually appearing under a beam of coloured light (OCL for short) was not a sign.

But imagine now a OCL in a context where there is a semiotic code whose sign-functions have colours among the necessary traits of their expressions. Suppose, for example, that we are in a hospital where scrubs colours stand for different roles in health care, and green scrubs are used to distinguish surgeons from physicians and nurses. In such a context, a white scrub dyed green would be a visual last-minute sign, while the OCL consisting in a white scrub visually appearing as green under a green light would be a MVA last-minute sign. Now, we all should agree that a visual last-minute sign can be used to lie, because if a physician wants to pass herself off as a surgeon and dye her white scrub green, the physician is lying, and the dyed scrub is a visual last-minute sign that is used to lie. In like manner, if the same physician – aiming to achieve the same goal of passing herself off as a surgeon – purposely puts herself under an invisible green light to make her white scrub visually appear as green, we must concur that the OCL is a MVA last-minute sign used by the physician to lie. This demonstrates (8).

I want now to demonstrate that:

(9) Some but not all OMs are MVA last-minute signs.

Note, first of all, that just as altering one of its chromatic properties can make an item become a visual last-minute sign in a context in which a semiotic code is in place whose sign-functions have colours among the necessary traits of their expressions, in the same way altering some locative or spatial property of an item can make it a visual last-minute sign, provided that those properties are pertinent traits of the expressions of sign-functions that are in force in a relevant semiotic code. For example, since the position occupied by an individual inside a theatre, an opera house or a parliament is semiotically decisive to understand her role, then moving a spectator from the stalls area onto the stage, a violinist from her seat on the left of the conductor onto the conductor's platform, and a member of parliament to the Prime Minister's seat, can make them visual last-

minute signs whose content is “I am a performing actress”, “I am the orchestra conductor”, and “I am the Prime Minister”, respectively. All these visual last-minute signs can be used to lie, of course.

Now, we have previously established that an OCL can be a MVA last-minute sign. In the same way, an OM can be a MVA last-minute sign. For, imagine that a person visually appears as sitting on the Prime Minister’s seat – thus possibly passing off as the Prime Minister – not because she is actually sitting on that seat, but because she is visually appearing to us through a plane mirror located in front of that seat. I take this to be a case in which an OM is a MVA last-minute sign. As a further example, we can consider the case in which vision through a mirror can make two people visually appear as closer to each other than how really are; if a proxemic semiotic code is in order according to which the appearing proximity between the two persons means “couple in love”, then the OM can be a MVA last-minute sign whose content is “I am her boyfriend” – and, undeniably, it can be used to lie.

Again, if we follow Eco (1980) and say that a functional object is a signifier whose primary meaning is its functional use, then an OM that is also a functional object can serve as a MVA last-minute sign (it can serve so *qua* OM, in addition to its already being a sign *qua* functional object) if the locative or spatial property P that it visually appears to possess through the mirror, and that O does not actually possess, is sufficient to change its functional use. For example, a wall bench visually appearing through a mirror as located two metres above the ground will convey the content “shelf” rather than the content “wall bench” or “you can sit here”. We can add that sometimes the attribution to OM of a locative property not possessed by O entails the attribution to it of another kind of property not possessed by O – e.g., a dimensional property – and it is this latest property that is a relevant trait of some sign-function in force in a relevant semiotic code.

All these cases constitute good evidence to accept (9), which, together with (8), entails:

(10) Some but not all OMs are signs.

If we aim to classify OMs within a typology of modes of sign production (Eco 1976), a fundamental aspect is that the physical labour required to produce the expression E is minimal, because O preexists OM, which is very simply obtained from O by using a mirror for making it visually appear as located where O is not. Indeed, OM gains its semiotic status just because an independent sign-function exists that has among the relevant traits of its expression some of the properties that O and OM have in common, *plus* one or more locative or topological properties

whose visual appearance characterise OM but not O. When there is no such sign- function (or, when O happens to possess all the same locative and topological properties as OM), OM is not a (MVA last-minute) sign and has no semiotic dimension *qua* OM. So, mirror images have semiotic relevance only parasitically because they can only be signs in dependence of some preexisting and independent sign- functions.

3. Dispelling residual doubts

In this section, I try to dissipate two of the main doubts one can raise about the legitimacy of concluding (10). The first doubt concerns the semiotic status of OMs when they acquire semiotic relevance. Perhaps OMs never get the status of fully-fledged signs. My claim is that, quite the contrary:

(11) When they have a semiotic status, OMs are fully-fledged signs despite their being signs only parasitically. This is because both visual and MVA last-minute signs are fully-fledged signs. To see why, consider first a flag like the flag of France. The flag of France is a tricolour flag featuring three vertical bands coloured blue, white, and red; I assume that nobody can possibly deny that it is a fully-fledged sign. Now, consider a flag featuring one vertical band coloured blue and white as for the rest; and suppose that someone climbs the flagpole and dyes red half of the white square of cloth by spraying red paint on it. The result is a flag of France, of course; and there is no reason to deny it the same semiotic status as the first flag of France, that we may imagine as having had a less adventurous genesis. Still, this second flag of France is a visual last-minute sign. Hence, we can allow that there is no reason to think that being a visual last-minute sign, *ceteris paribus*, means possessing a diminished semiotic status.

Now, imagine that the flag featuring just one vertical band coloured blue, and white as for the rest, is stretching out straight in line with a stable wind, and that we project onto it a beam of red light so as to make appear as red exactly half of the white square of cloth. What we obtain is, again, the flag of France. Again, this is a fully fledged sign: there is no reason to acknowledge it a reduced semiotic status with respect to either the first or the second tricolour.

Since this time the flag of France is a MVA last-minute sign, we can conclude that transforming a fully-fledged sign that is not a last-minute sign into a MVA last-minute sign – all other things being equal – does not affect its semiotic status. Nor does it seem that the fact that *all* rather than just *some* of the appearances of the chromatic properties of the material object constituting the

expression of the sign are modified by the “supervening relevant change”, can be detrimental to allowing a complete semiotic status to the MVA last-minute sign. Imagine, for example, to have a completely white flag flapping stable in the wind and suppose to make it visually appear as red by illuminating it with a red light with the purpose of warning swimmers of serious hazard in the water, as normally red flags do on the beach. Again, if we grant the status of a fully-fledged sign to a true red cloth safety flag, there is no reason not to do so with regard to our MVA-last-minute-sign red flag.

Now, the same line of reasoning holds when locative or topological rather than chromatic properties are involved. For, if a sign is fully-fledged *and* its E includes some locative or topological property P among its necessary traits *and* the substance of E actually instantiates P, it will remain a fully-fledged sign if, all other things being equal, P gets instantiated in the substance of E only by virtue of some delayed modification in the substance of E (which makes the sign a visual last-minute sign), or even if, all other things being equal, P falsely visually appears as being instantiated in the substance of E only by virtue of some intervening modification in the substance of E (which makes the sign a MVA last-minute sign). In other words, if a woman means “I am a performing actress” to the greatest semiotic degree or extent possible when visually appearing as located on a theatre stage by virtue of her actually being located there (even if some other conditions Cs are necessary, as for example that she visually appears to be on the stage during the show time, and so on), then she will convey the same content to the same fully semiotic degree or extent also when she falsely visually appears as located on the stage through a mirror, all other things being equal (and, in particular, provided that Cs hold). I think we can conclude for the truth of (11): even if a sign is only parasitically so, this mere fact cannot lessen its semiotic status.

I now turn to another possible concern regarding the semiotic status of OMs. One could doubt that it is really OM that is a MVA last-minute sign. Perhaps something else is a MVA last-minute sign, not OM. I want to show that:

(12) It is OM that is itself a MVA last-minute sign – not something else that is involved in the causal process that grounds OM.

Consider a case in which we concede that a MVA last-minute sign is in play, such as – for example – the case in which a person falsely visually appearing as sitting on the Prime Minister’s seat by virtue of a mirror located in front of that seat passes off as the Prime Minister. The role of MVA

last-minute sign can only be attributed to something that can be said to visually appear to the observer as instantiating the locative property “sitting on the Prime Minister’s seat”, since it is only this property that is an essential trait of the sign-function “surfaced” by the MVA last-minute sign. OM is the only item that fulfills this requirement. O – the mere member of parliament that passes off as the Prime Minister thanks to the mirror – can be considered as the MVA last-minute sign only *qua visually appearing as sitting on the Prime Minister’s seat* – namely, only *qua* OM. Therefore, inasmuch as we oppose O to OM, it is OM that must be considered the MVA last-minute sign, not O. Furthermore, we cannot assign the role of MVA last-minute sign to anything doing the same specific piece of work also in the causal process underlying normal visual perception, such as, for example, the light reflected by O that hits our fovea, or the retinal image. For we would have no reason to deny the role of *sign* to these things also when we correctly interpret who the Prime Minister is in a group of dozens of people dressed in a similar way just by seeing in normal vision that *that* person, differently from the others, is sitting on the Prime Minister’s seat. But, in this latter case, we would attribute the role of a sign to the human figure visually appearing as instantiating the property “sitting on the Prime Minister’s seat” – not to anything like the light reflected by it. The homologous of this seen human figure is, in the mirror case, OM.

To continue to reason by exclusion, we cannot even say that the MVA last-minute sign is the mirror itself. For, the mirror *does not* visually appear as instantiating the property “sitting on the Prime Minister’s seat”. Nor does it actually (necessarily) instantiate the crucial locative or topological property at issue. Indeed, whatever is the MVA last-minute sign, it must be seen by us; and our seeing an OM through a plane mirror when we are not aware of the presence of the mirror – and when, typically, OM visually appears to us as having a locative or topological property that O has not – is not even a case of seeing a mirror on our part. Remember what we have established about perceptual visual appearances of OM:

(6) Whatever is having a perceptual visual appearance of O, having a perceptual visual appearance of OM is the very same thing.

We can now reaffirm the truth of (6) by saying that plane mirrors are only light zigzaggers, and that, at least when they are perfectly clean and smooth and we are not aware that we are seeing through them, we are not seeing *them* – no more than we are seeing our eyeglasses and the windscreen of our car while we are driving. Mirrors are prosthetic devices, and what we have a perceptual visual appearance of when they reflect the light onto our fovea is not necessarily a mirror. It is possible for

us to only see the mirror, of course, without seeing any OM – like when we are evaluating a mirror for purchase. On the other hand, it is possible for us to see just the OM, the mirror being completely transparent. And it is possible to see both at the same time (although we could discuss about whether we can speak of a mirror/OM bistability, in the same sense as we speak of a rabbit/duck bistability). Now, whatever is the sign in the Prime Minister case, it must be seen by us. Still, the Prime Minister case is a case in which we are not seeing the mirror we are not visually aware of – while we are seeing the OM and we are visually aware of it. It is easy to conclude that neither the mirror nor its surface can be the MVA last-minute sign, and that the MVA last-minute sign must rather be the OM.

Perhaps we could say that the MVA last-minute sign is part of the look or visual aspect of the mirror – but merely in the sense that seeing OM is also seeing part of the look of a mirror. If we allow this way of speaking, however, we should be prepared to concede that, when we are seeing the car in front of us while driving, we are seeing part of the look of our eyeglasses and of the windscreen of our own car, too. In any case, what we are primarily seeing in this case is the car in front of us. In like manner, what we are primarily having a visual experience of in the Prime Minister case is the OM. Thus, at best, the OM is the MVA last-minute sign; and, at worst, it is the MVA last-minute sign primarily.

4. Coping with Eco's main objection

In this conclusive section, I examine Eco's main objection against considering specular images as signs. Eco writes:

The sign is something that stands for something else in its absence. The mirror image, on the other hand, stands in the presence of the object it reflects. [...] The sign can be used to lie or to state (erroneously, even though in good faith) that which is not the case. The mirror image, on the other hand, never lies. The sign can be used to lie, because I can produce the sign even though the object does not exist (I can name chimeras and portray unicorns), while the mirror image is produced only in the presence of the object. (Eco 1999: 369)

I have extensively shown that, contrary to what Eco says, a mirror image can lie, or can be used to lie. I have claimed that it is not the case that it *always* lies – as it is not the case that it always tells the truth – because it is not the case that it is always a sign. When it happens to surf an independent sign-function, however, it can either tell the truth or lie.

Still, these remarks by Eco contain another basic objection against considering mirror images as signs, according to which a mirror image cannot “stand instead of something else *in its absence*”. The referent must be present; and this necessity disqualifies mirror images from being signs. Let us call this objection ‘the Presence Objection’:

The Presence Objection: OM cannot stand instead of its referent in its absence; therefore, it cannot be a sign.

I want to show that the Presence Objection is misconceived and can easily be dismantled.

First, we can contest Eco’s claim that “the mirror image [always] stands in the presence of the object it reflects”. It is not difficult to argue against:

(13) OM cannot be visually perceived in the absence of O.

For, O might be located so far from the mirror that last addresses to our fovea the light originally reflected by O (possibly thanks to the fact that many other mirrors interpose between O and that mirror), that – if in addition O is hidden from our view – everybody would consider O as absent rather than as present relatively to us. Second, even if one believed that O is always to be considered as present when we are looking to OM, it is simply false that this is automatically detrimental to any full semiotic status of OM. The following couple of statements, which are presupposed by the Presence Objection, are likely to be false:

(14) Something is a sign only if it stands instead – rather than in front – of its referent. (15)

Something is a sign only if its referent can be non-existing.

To see why both (14) and (15) can be false, it is sufficient to think of some kinds of signs which necessarily depend on the presence of their referents (Sonesson 2003). Just to mention the first examples that come to mind, weathervanes can only stand for the direction of the wind *in the presence* of the wind, just as windsocks can only indicate its speed if the wind is blowing. To stick to the wind, the little strips of ribbon or threads of wool called ‘telltails’ that are attached to the sails in strategic positions to reveal whether the air at those points is flowing smoothly or with turbulence, and thus whether the sail is optimally set, can only serve as signs if their referent exists. One could object that we can make a windsock mean “intense northwest wind” in the absence of wind, for example by installing a rigid, inflexible windsock heading northwest; but this is a trick involving heavy material modification of the expression plane, and we might rebut the objection by

saying that, in the same spirit, we could obtain a mirror serving as a sign of O in the absence of O by portraying O on the mirror surface. A further example of a sign whose form of expression cannot exist without the referent is a shadow, because a shadow needs to be projected by the opaque object which it happens to be a sign of. Again, if one objected that it is not necessary for a shadow of a man to be projected by a man, and that there are some projection artists like Tim Noble and Sue Webster that “take ordinary things including rubbish to make assemblages and then point light to create projected shadows which show a great likeness to something identifiable including self-portraits” (from their artist statement; see Jobson 2012), we could answer that such a case would correspond to placing a sculpture built from what appear to be haphazard clumps of pillows and clothes that has the visual appearance of a man seen through a mirror if seen through a mirror.

The correct conclusion seems that either (14) and (15) are false, or they are true in a sense that does not threaten the capability of OMs to be signs. Still, the most important reply to the Presence Objection lies elsewhere. For, also if we conceded to Eco the truth of (13), (14) and (15), this would still be not a problem. This is because, even if we consider O as necessarily present, (14) and (15) can only preempt OM from being a sign if O is its referent. Thus, we must raise the following question: would O necessarily be the referent of OM if OM were a sign? The answer to this fundamental question is for the negative. Indeed, all the examples I have offered so far illustrate the thesis that it is not necessary for O to be the referent of OM serving as a MVA last-minute sign.

In the Prime Minister case, for instance, the content of the sign is “Prime Minister”, the referent is absent, and O is not at all the Prime Minister. Similarly, the referent of the wall bench visually appearing through a mirror as located two metres above the ground, thus conveying the content “shelf”, is not the bench: it is rather the absent shelf.

Indeed, it is impossible for O to turn out to be the referent of OM serving as a MVA last-minute sign, because when OM is a MVA last-minute sign, it is impossible for O to be its content: for, the sign-function surfed by OM must have among its necessary traits some locative or topological property/ies that OM but not O visually appears as having. O is, of course, always a necessary cause of OM. But no semiotic theory can deny the status of a sign to a thing just because it needs something else to exist. So, even if we allowed (13) along with (14) and (15), this could not be detrimental to a full semiotic status of OM.

This shows that the Presence Objection can be put aside. Eco's insistence on the Presence Objection was motivated by his antireferentialist position: the referent is not relevant for semiosis, and it needs to be possible for it to be absent. I believe that this position, in turn, was mainly motivated by two reasonable objectives. The first objective is that (1) must be preserved: something is a sign if and only if it can be used to lie. The second objective is that (7') must be rejected: it cannot be accepted that O is automatically a sign standing for O itself, for this would entail a massive devaluation of the title of 'sign'. The thesis that I have defended, according to which OMs are only signs when they surf some independent and preexisting sign-functions, is consistent with these two objectives.

My conclusion, in any case, is that some though not all specular images are definitely signs.

References

BACCHINI, Fabio 2017. "Lo Status Semiosico dei Fenomeni Speculari", *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio* 11.1, 43-58.

BYRNE, Alex. 2001. "Intentionalism Defended", *Philosophical Review* 110, 199-240.

CRANE, Tim and Craig FRENCH. 2021. "The Problem of Perception", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/perception-problem/> (accessed 20 September 2021).

ECO, Umberto. 1975. "Chi Ha Paura del Cannocchiale?", *Op. Cit.* 32, 5-32.

1976. *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

1980. "Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture", in *Signs, Symbols, and Architecture*, ed. Geoffrey Broadbent, Richard Bunts and Charles Jencks (New York: Wiley), 11-69.

1984. *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

1999. *Kant and the Platypus* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company).

Are Specular Images Signs? By Fabio Bacchini

JACKSON, Frank. 1977. *Perception: A Representative Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

JOBSON, Christopher. 2012. "Nihilistic Optimistic: New Shadow Sculptures Built from Discarded Wood from Tim Noble and Sue Webster", *Colossal*. <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2012/10/nihilistic-optimistic-new-shadow-sculptures-built-from-discarded-wood-from-tim-noble-and-sue-webster/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

O'SHAUGHNESSY, Brian. 2003. "Sense Data", in *John Searle*, ed. Barry Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 169-188.

PEIRCE, Charles Sanders. 1904. Letter to Lady Welby of 12 October 1904 (L 463). Then in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge (Ma.): Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 8.337.

RUSSELL, Bertrand. 1927. *The Analysis of Matter* (New York: Harcourt, Brace).

SIEGEL, Susanna. 2010. *The Contents of Visual Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press).

SMYTHIES, John. 2003. "Space, Time and Consciousness", *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 10.3, 47-56.

SONESSON, Göran. 2003. "Why the Mirror Is a Sign – And Why the Television Picture Is No Mirror. Two Episodes in the Critique of the Iconicity Critique", *Proceedings of the 5th International Interdisciplinary Symposium of the Austrian Society for Semiotic Studies, S: European Journal for Semiotic Studies* 15.2-4, 217-232.

Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges financial support under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.1, Call for tender No. 104 published on 02/02/2022 by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR), funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU – Project Title: Normative artifacts and normative drawings: investigating non-linguistic regulation (NAND) – CUP Master: F53D23003500006 – CUP: J53D23005480006 – Grant Assignment Decree No. 968 adopted on 30/06/2023 by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR).