

Iconicity as a key epistemic force of change in the self:  
the film *The Lives of Others* revisited in the light of  
triadic semiotic

**Fernando Andacht**

**Universidad de la República**



Facultad de  
**Información y  
Comunicación**



**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

# Objectives

- Describe the epistemic function of iconicity through the revisiting of a film which may be construed as an allegory of change in self-identity
- Bring out the relevance of the phenomenology/*phaneroscopy* on which Peircean triadic semiotic is built
- Analyze the cooperation of the three valencies of experience – *Firstness, Secondness & Thirdness* – and the effect of its dysfunction in literature as well as in life

# The numbing semiotic power of German bureaucratese: the tyranny of *Thirdness*

- “We still believe in ideas, in concepts, we believe that words designate ideas, but that’s not necessarily true, maybe there aren’t really any ideas, maybe there’s really nothing but words, and the weight peculiar to **words**. And maybe thus we had **let ourselves be led along by a word and its inevitability**. (...) There would have been only words, in our oh so peculiar language, only that word, *Endlösung*, its streaming beauty? For, really, how could one resist the seduction of such a word? It would have been as inconceivable as resisting the word obey, the word serve, the word **law**. This tendency spread to all our bureaucratic **language**, our *bürokratisches Amtsdeutsch*, as my colleague Eichmann would say:

# The numbing semiotic power...

- in correspondence, in speeches too, passive constructions dominated: “it has been decided that...,” “the Jews have been conveyed to the special treatment,” and so things were done all by themselves, no one ever did anything, no one acted, they were actions without actors, which is always reassuring, and in a way they weren’t even actions, since by the special usage that our National Socialist language made of certain nouns, one managed, if not completely to eliminate verbs, at least to reduce them to the state of useless (but nonetheless decorative) appendages, and that way, you did without even action, **there were only facts, brute realities**, either already present or waiting for their inevitable accomplishment”

(Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, pp. 631-632-  
emphasis added, F.A.)

# The functioning of the 3 Categories

***Iconicity  
Firstness***

“(In)Peirce's phenomenology all three of his basic categories are omnipresent in the phenomenon, which means that an object-structure is omnipresent therein.

(Ransdell, 2005/1979)



***Indexicality  
Secondness***

***Symbolicity  
Thirdness***

# The tri-relative influence of *semiosis*

- “The function of the word or symbol is to introduce the icon as the predicative content being associated with whatever is functioning as index, to distinguish the object of which it is being predicated. If there were no icon there would be nothing for the symbol to do, and it would be mere ‘empty verbiage.’” (Ransdell, as cited in Andacht 2003, 228).
- (This) requires understanding the role of the **indexical** and **symbolic** aspects of perception as well the **iconic**, as **all three function cooperatively in the perceptual process.**” (ibid. – emphasis added, F.A.)

# The Phaneroscopic Category of *Firstness*

- “Category the First is the Idea of that which is such as it is regardless of anything else (...) it is a Quality of Feeling.” (CP 5.66)
- “Firstness, Orience or Originality, something which is what it is *without reference to anything else* (...) within it or without it, regardless of all force and of all reason. Now the world is full of this element of irresponsible free Originality.” (CP 2.85)

# The Phaneroscopic Categories of *Secondness & Thirdness*

- The second element is directly experienced in our sense of being here, in our sense of present fact, which is the experience of actual reaction with a non-ego. It consists in anything's being that which another makes it to be here and now. I give to this element of doubleness the name of **Secondness**. (MS 472: 76)
- (**Thirdness**) has a mode of being which consists in the Secondnesses that it determines, the mode of being of a law, or concept (...) **Thirdness** (...) is thought in its role as governing Secondness. It brings the information into the mind, or determines the idea and gives it body. It is informing thought, or cognition. (CP 1.536-1.537)



# Iconicity & Representation

- “An *icon* is any possible qualitative content of consciousness – what Peirce calls a ‘Firstness’ – considered in respect to its possible function in cognition as the form (that is, quality or character) of an actual or possible object.” (Ransdell 2005/1979)
- There is iconic representation in *every* case of sensory perception in virtue of the fact that a form (content of consciousness, ‘Firstness’) is referred to some object as the form (quality, character, phenomenal structure) of that object. (ibid.)

# The possibilism of Iconicity

- The freewheeling possibilism of iconicity in life and in art is capable of bringing forth changes through “imagnations of how I would act under certain circumstances, as showing me how another man would be likely to act.” (CP 2.92)
- The icon ” does not draw any distinction between itself and its object. It represents whatever it may represent, and whatever it is like, it in so far *is.*” (CP 5.74)

# Iconicity as a semiotic path to novelty

- Hookway (2002: 102) claims that “the key of iconicity is not perceived resemblance between the sign and what it signifies but rather the possibility of making new discoveries about the object of a sign through observing features of the sign itself” (as cited in Queiroz & Atã, 2014)
- “(A) great distinguishing property of the icon is that by the direct observation of it other truths concerning its object can be discovered than those which suffice to determine its construction” (CP 2.279)

# Icons construed as Dreams carried by Symbols

- So in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream – not any particular existence, and yet not general. At that moment we are contemplating an *icon*. (CP 3.362)
- A *meaning* is the associations of a word with images, its dream exciting power. (CP 4.56)

# Iconicity and Cognition in Triadic Semiotic

- “Peirce holds that all cognition is perceptual in the sense that it always involves (logically, not psychologically) an iconic presentation of the cognized object.” (Ransdell 2005/1979)
- “A symbol is a sign naturally fit to declare that the set of objects which is denoted by whatever set of indices may be in certain ways attached to it is represented by an icon associated with it.” (CP 2.295 (1893))
- “Every symbol must have, organically attached to it, its Indices of Reaction and its Icons of Qualities” (CP 5.119).

# Imagination/Spontaneity and its barriers

- Imagination works as the iconic component of the self , which is construed as an evolving sign whose increase in complexity – “concrete reasonableness” - occurs through communicational encounters. Its phenomenological basis, *Firstness*, like a dream “has no prominent Thirdness; it is utterly irresponsible; it is whatever it pleases” (CP 1.342)
- There are forms of sociopolitical organization that promote dualism, a reductionist way of being and of understanding the world , which severely restrains spontaneity/iconicity.
- A possible threat to such organization is “the sheer qualitative may-be ready to be determined but not yet determinate (as) in itself it is sheer qualitative possibility” (Hausman, 1979, p. 206)

## *Spontaneity* and the emergence of change at a personal and a cosmic level

- “By thus admitting pure spontaneity or life as a character of the universe, acting always and everywhere though restrained within narrow bounds by law, producing infinitesimal departures from law continually, and great ones with infinite infrequency, I account for all the variety and diversity of the universe, in the only sense in which the really sui generis and new can be said to be accounted for.” (CP 6.59)

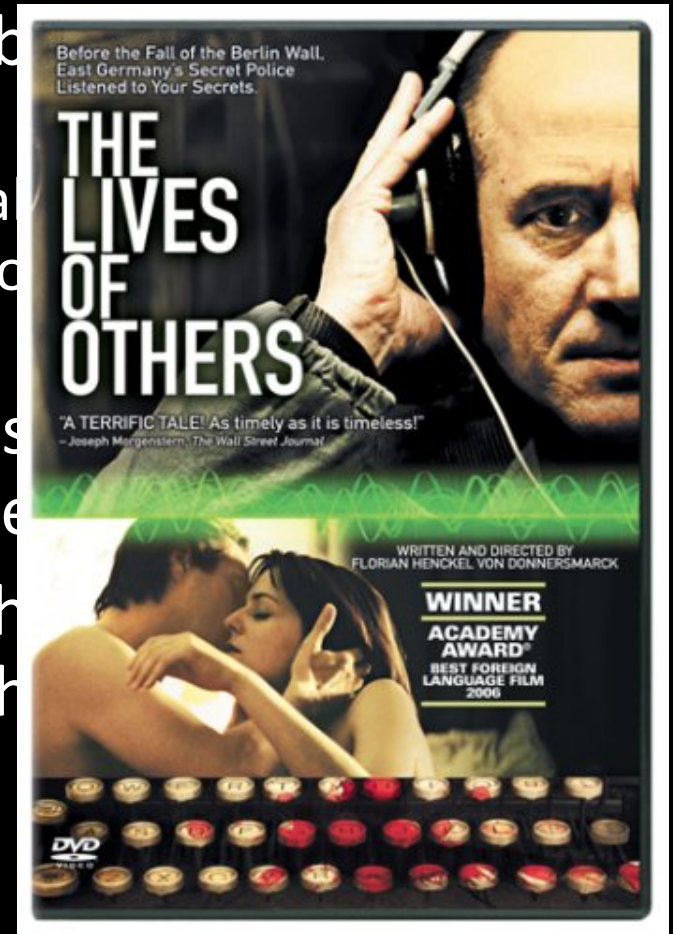
## The Freshness of Firstness & Spontaneity & the *Originalian* sign

- “I don't know what you can make out of the meaning of spontaneity but newness, freshness, and diversity. [...] all this exuberant diversity of nature cannot be the result of law. Now what is spontaneity? It is the character of not resulting by law from something antecedent.” (CP 1.160)
- “The idea of absolutely first [...] must be fresh and new, for if old it is second to its former state. It must be initiative, original, spontaneous, and free.” (CP 1.356)
- The *icon* is “an Originalian Sign, which is a sign whose significant virtue is due simply to its Quality” (CP 2.92)



# Film & Semiotic

- Regardless of their genre, some films can be construed as genuine iconic-symbols (see also Barthes & Michel, 2007)
- The *synechistic* principle claims that “a continuous” (CP 1.172), so is the relationship between the represented world
- *The Lives of Others* (2006) reflects the evolving self-definition of a person
- An age-old question: how does change occur? Could this happen through the prevalence of iconicity?



# The lives of Others as an allegory

- *TLO* portrays allegorically the aesthetic/iconic upheaval of the single, monological identity of the protagonist Stasi officer Gerd Wiesler
- We watch the journey from Wiesler's being an embodiment of the State motto "*the sword & shield of the Party*" to the emergence of a very different, identity of this character for whom the Other is no longer an "enemy object" (*Feindobjekt*)
- The film's fictionalization of a historical episode may also be construed as an allegory of the *opening to iconicity*

# A true anti-hero: the ideal man for the worst job, master spy Gerd Wiesler of the Stasi, GDR

Through the narrative of the rise and fall of this exemplary officer, we witness the incidence of the Present, of iconicity in his life. In this film allegory of change where it is least likely or plausible, we are invited to contemplate the work of the subtlest signs, of pure icons, as they undo the hardened identity of a man who serves a totalitarian regime.



Cap. Gerd Wiesler, STASI

## In the semiotic Penal Colony: when indexicality prevails

- There is a dialectical tension between iteration & novelty in our lives
- In Peircean terms this process occurs through the cooperation of regularity (*Thirdness*) & Originality (*Firstness*), and an actual/material context (*Secondness*).
- In the beginning of *TLO*, we visit the realm of Secondness/Indexicality. All that is left of 'Prisoner 227' after the relentless interrogation is his semiotic sweat, his smell (for the dogs)

# The Opening to Iconicity: how to leave the Semiotic Penal Colony

- The narrative of the film is a fictional representation of '*the opening to iconicity*', which brings to the fore the aesthetic component of subjectivity. It results in an increase of "concrete reasonableness" (CP 5.3) in the self
- The *opening to iconicity* represented in *TLO* involves emulation, the admiring imitation to which Wiesler yields, and thus lets himself be carried away by those qualities of feeling or icons that come from the others. This change involves the gradual predominance of iconicity over indexes and symbols.

# First Firstness are icons as a threat to totalitarianism

- “The form presented in the image is a “First Firstness,” a self-sufficient idea. As Ransdell has pointed out, this means that “there is no distinction between an icon and its object just insofar as the icon is truly iconic with it” (2005 § 5).” (Parker 2017, 67)
- ... music does not isomorphically represent the feeling; the music embodies the feeling in question and communicates this feeling directly to the listener. And this feeling—let us go ahead and call it a form—is itself the same form in both the music and the hearer (Parker 2017, 66)

We feel stationary as trees, but we are responsive to the influence of light qualities: the power of *Musement*

- “Pure Play has no rules, except this very law of liberty. It bloweth where it listeth. It has no purpose, unless recreation. The particular occupation I mean – a *petite bouchée* with the Universes – may take either the form of aesthetic contemplation, or that of distant castle- building (whether in Spain or within one's own moral training).” (CP 6.452, 1908)
- In *TLO*, we contemplate how the exposure to freewheeling iconicity is capable of bringing down the inner wall of blind certainty and loyalty to an inhumane regime.

## Our never fully realized self & the growth of concrete reasonableness

- “Most human beings betray continuously the self that is waiting to be, and to tell the whole truth, our personal individuality is a character that is never fully realized, an exciting Utopia, a secret legend...” (Ortega y Gasset, 1957)
- “In all his life long no son of Adam has ever fully manifested what there was in him. So, then, the development of Reason requires as a part of it the occurrence of more individual events than ever can occur. **It requires, too, all the coloring of all qualities of feeling,** including pleasure in its proper place among the rest ’ (CP 1.615 –emphasis added, F.A.)



# Iconicity and subjectivity

- The *opening to iconicity* implies being sensitive to the free play of possible qualitative likenesses. Through such play what is new, a novelty that has never been thought about, may come to be and generate a new interpretant, in this case, a different identity in the self-interpretative process.

# The dialectic of self/identity in life as well as in film

- Regarding the notion of personal identity, Wiley (1994) argues that the 'I–you–me' **self structure** ought to be conceptually distinguished from **the manifold of particular semiotic identities** (pp. 26–39), the concrete contents of that structure
- Each particular identity is a **dynamical interpretant**, “the actual effect which the Sign, as a Sign, really determines” (CP 4.536)
- The pathological usurping of the self by a single identity is compared by Wiley with the unrestricted growth of a tumor. (Andacht & Michel, 2005)

# On the pathology of this dialectic

- If the distinction self/identity(ies) becomes blurred, or worse if it is obliterated by the unwarranted halting of what is in fact a continuous flow of change (*self*) which includes and integrates its stationary pauses (*identities*), then we are apt to become the prisoners of a jail of our own devising, namely a fixed, single identity that we feel and think we have to adopt for all times and circumstances.
- This alteration occurs when “some identity usurps the structure’s overarching role and makes a pretense of being the main reality of the self” (Wiley, 1994, p. 38)

# On becoming Other: synechism

- “The synechist will not admit that physical and psychical phenomena are entirely distinct, -- whether as belonging to different categories of substance, or as entirely separate sides of one shield, -- but will insist that all phenomena are of one character, though some are more mental and spontaneous, others more material and regular.” (CP 7.570)
- Nor must any synechist say, ‘I am altogether myself, and not at all you.’ If you embrace synechism, you must abjure this metaphysics of wickedness. In the first place, your neighbors are, in a measure, yourself, and in far greater measure than, without deep studies in psychology, you would believe.” (CP 7.571)



# References

- Andacht, Fernando. 2003. "Iconicity Revisited. An interview with Joseph Ransdell." *Recherches Sémiotiques-Semiotic Inquiry* 23 (1-3): 221-240.
- Andacht, F. & Michel, M. (2005). A Semiotic Reflection on Self-interpretation and Identity. *Theory & Psychology* 15 (1): 51–75.
- Hausman, C. (1979). Value and the Peircean categories. *Transactions of the C. S. Peirce Society*. 15 (3): 203-223.
- Parker, K. (2017). Foundations for Semeiotic Aesthetics Mimesis and Iconicity. In: Kathleen A. Hull and Richard Kenneth Atkins (eds.), *Peirce on Perception and Reasoning: From Icons to Logic*. (pp. 61-73) New York: Routledge.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1931–58. *The Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce*. Vol. I-VI C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss (eds.), Vol. VII-VIII, A. Burks (ed.). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

# References

- Queiroz & Atâ (2014.) Iconicity in Peircean situated cognitive Semiotics, In T. Thellefsen & S. Briar (eds.) *C. S. Peirce in his own words*. Berlin: W. de Gruyter.
- Ransdell, J. (2005/1979) . The Epistemic Function of Iconicity in Perception  
<http://www.iupui.edu/~arisbe/menu/library/aboutcsp/ransdell/EPISTEMIC.htm> (accessed March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019).
- Wiley, N. (1994). *The semiotic self*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.