

## **Photography as Translation. Visual Meaning, Digital Imaging, Trans-Mediality**

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Résumé de l'article

C'est aux recherches d'Umberto Eco (2003) sur la traduction littéraire, lesquelles ont inspiré le travail de Nicola Dusi sur le cinéma (2003) que l'on doit l'idée de s'intéresser à la photographie depuis la perspective de la traduction. Dans cet article, l'auteur clarifie les termes et limites qui rendent la chose possible et porte une attention particulière aux débats sémiotiques liés au signe iconique et aux questions entourant la photographie numérique.

# Photography as Translation. Visual Meaning, Digital Imaging, Trans-Mediality

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## 1. Foreword

To examine the issue of photographic representation through the filter of translation theory is an operation that may strike some as obvious, and others as contradictory or even inappropriate. It may indeed seem trivial, to include photographic imaging among the type of transformations wrought by translation, that is, to consider it among those transformations which set-up an equivalence between the source sign and the target one. Such an instance might more appropriately be called 'transduction'; for it concerns only the expressive surface of the sign and not its content. Yet, every instance of translation, in the strictest sense, is based upon a verbal model of language. The act of photographic shooting, whose very premise is visual and not verbal, finds itself in relation to the principal translation theories, therefore, oddly positioned. Regardless, however, it does not appear fundamentally questionable that the photographic image should be considered a sign in the fullest sense. Furthermore, notwithstanding translation studies' customary one-sidedness in the matter, a wider focus on translation ought to include non-verbal languages, and may thus lead semiotic studies towards yet another turning point<sup>1</sup>.

This article's point of departure is to be found in Umberto Eco's *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (2003) [partly translated as *Experiences in Translation*, 2001; and *Mouse or Rat: Translation as Negotiation*, 2003], particularly with respect to issues of literary translation, and in Nicola Dusi's *Il cinema come traduzione* (2003) which applies the same conceptual framework to cinema. The notion of 'surrogate stimulus' or substitute stimulus, developed by Eco himself in *Trattato di semiotica generale* [*A Theory of Semiotics*, 1976] and later revised in *Kant e l'ornitorinco* [*Kant and the Platypus*, 1997], also deserves to be taken into account. This line of thought concludes that every operation of translation ought to

exist within the dual and opposite poles of *equivalence* and *adequacy* regarding source and target texts. The first refers to the ideal semantic identity between different languages' expressions, while the second, having relinquished such an ideal equivalence, summons the narrow link between translation and interpretation as established by the semiotic theory of Charles S. Peirce. According to the latter the interpretation of any sign requires that it be translated into a different sign.

From a theoretical point of view, a photograph offers a good trial for both criteria. With regards to equivalence, a photograph turns the "system" of light, colours and overall spatial array that physically make up a scene present in a scene into another "system" of lights, colours and lens-based perspective, one that is *analogue* but *different* from the first (since it can now be "set" on flat photographic paper). In reference to the second criterion, a photograph interprets reality through the *subtraction* of meaningful elements, which occurs when a portion of reality is cropped, when a scene is compressed from three to two dimensions or when a colourful view is turned into a monochrome image.

## 2. Three Types of Translation

The starting point for any modern theory of translation is Roman Jakobson's (1959) classic tripartition, according to which all possible modes of translation belong to one of three categories:

- 1) "Intralingual translation or *rewording* [which] is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language" (Jakobson 1966: 57);
- 2) "Interlingual translation or *translation proper* [which] is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language" (*Ibid*);
- 3) "Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* [which] is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of non verbal sign systems" (*Ibid*).

While these definitions clearly demonstrate the limits of the linguistic model, especially when one is concerned with interpretation, they nonetheless reveal Jakobson's interest for Peirce's semiotics. However, for our purpose, a broader approach seems preferable, one where translation would be defined according to the similarity, or lack thereof, between different semiotic systems<sup>2</sup>, casting aside the privileged reference to the verbal model in order to widen the typology, and thus include visual and other non-verbal languages.

Indeed, it seems appealing to analyse photographs as resulting from a process of translation and transformation. This follows from the assumption that reality possesses a semiotic structure prior to, and independently of, any photographic representation of it. Such a conception is consistent with both the structural and interpretative approaches to semiotics. Structuralists such as Louis Hjelmslev and

Algirdas J. Greimas have discussed the *natural world's macrosemiotics* in reference to reality's inherent semiotic organization. On the other hand, though not diametrically opposed, one finds Peirce's contention that the very first perceptive contact with the world's objects is steeped in semiosis. Indeed, according to Peirce perception itself fades into abduction. As a result it would seem that photography fully deserves recognition as a translational recording system for it applies its own semiotic structuring to a reality already organized in semiotic fashion.

### 3. Translation and Interpretation From Peirce to Eco

In Peircean semiotics, the connection between translation and interpretation appears strong from the onset, outlined by the idea that a sign's meaning may only be clarified by means of an interpretant, sign through which the first one is translated (CP 4.127): sign and interpretant sign are thus, *in some respect*, equivalent in meaning. Also, it is relevant to note that, according to the pragmatic maxim, semantic equivalence cannot be defined without considering the pragmatic effects of source and target expressions on their intended recipients: meanings may only be deemed equivalent if their pragmatic effects on interpreters are comparable. As stated by Eco:

To make clearer what he means, Peirce, in the same context, affirms that meaning, in its prime sense, is the '*translation* of a sign into another system of signs'. [...] It is easy to understand that in this, as in other contexts, Peirce uses *translation* in a figurative sense: not as a metaphor but as a part for the whole (in the sense that holds *translation* to be a synecdoche of *interpretation*). (2000: 56)

Eco's emphasizes the strength of the connection between translation and interpretation in Peirce's theoretical model. But he also intends to warn us against assuming that each form of interpretation, or each act of semiosis in general, represents an instance of translation without soliciting further explanation. The fact is that both Peirce's and Jakobson's (1966) main concern is above all semantic:

Jakobson was simply stating that the notion of interpretation as translation from sign to sign allows [one] to overcome the debate about the location of meaning, whether it is in the mind or in behaviour, and he is not saying that interpreting and translating are always and ever the same operation, but that it is useful to consider meaning in terms of translation (or as I would say, as *if* it were an instance of translation) (Eco, *Ibid*).

I believe these comments may help shed some light on the semantics of translation and interpretation with regards to non-verbal *visual* meaning. In fact, my goal is to apply to photography what Eco has developed in *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (2003), factoring in the strong distinction he makes between literary translation *per se* and other kinds of transformation. Described as intersemiotic translation in the widest sense, the latter would be more correctly referred to as "adaptation" or "transposition"

whenever a relevant change in content or medium takes place. For instance, transposition can include the adaptation of a novel or a play into a screenplay and into the resulting film or television program. Transposition is a broad phenomena with which translation theory must wrestle even though it may be difficult to develop formal criteria that would ensure comparisons between source and target “texts”.

According to Eco’s framework, however, a distinction ought to be made between translation *per se*, and transposition. The former involves verbal texts and is always a reversible process (*i.e.*, one can theoretically translate a text back into its original language with some degree of success or accuracy), whereas the operation is impossible with transposition (*i.e.*, it would be impossible to accurately reconstitute a novel from a film adaptation of it). In the case of films adapted from novels, one problem hindering backtracking to the source text is that movies often explicitly show what novels leave undetermined, thus specifying meanings that were left implicit. Novels, we all know, let readers use their imagination and personal experience to fill gaps that film adaptations must render concretely. Such transpositions *require* that certain inferences be made manifest while simultaneously closing off others, thereby depriving the viewer of the initiative, the freedom or the pleasure to do so himself. According to Eco (2003: 315), a transposed text often says more and, occasionally, may say less than the original source. It never, however, respects the delicate balance between what is explicit and implicit, as should be the case for translation : “a translation should not say more than what is said by the original [text], it has to respect the source text’s [degree of implicitness]” (Eco 2003: 328).

Transformations, however, are not limited to media transpositions such as the filmic adaptation of novels. Indeed, any type of rewording (or “reworking”), even within the same semiotic system, can initiate content changes. When photographic imaging is considered to be an example of translation, a number of transformations must be considered: photography imposes a specific visual organization onto optical matter belonging equally to the naked eye’s field of vision. A translational relationship connecting photography to “real” optical matter also exists between the photographic reproduction of an oil painting and its original (see Eco 2003: 255): in such cases, only one relevant textual aspect needs to be accurately conveyed while all others (size, for instance) may be discarded as irrelevant. In translation therefore, the target text is generated according to the determination and organization of what is considered to be the source text’s *relevant matter*. Such a process implies accepting the losses due to different medias’ expressive capabilities and compensating for them with those provided by the target media, with the aim of best satisfying the addressee’s expectations.

According to Eco’s analysis of interlinguistic translation, transformations of the above kind are ruled by two key principles:

- 1) the flexibility of the relevant matter in the source text and its hierarchic organization in relation to the overall choices made during translation;
- 2) the loss of the semantic material (from the source text) not conveyable in the target text and its compensation through the new expressive resources made available by the target media (or code).

These principles may be easily applied to photography provided that the aforementioned translational categories be generalized and extended. In order to adapt these concepts to photography, a reversal of Eco's theoretical view becomes necessary, however. For instance, Eco imparts a peculiar relevance to certain figures of speech, like hypotyposis<sup>3</sup> because they are linguistic devices that allow verbal language to substitute for a visual experience. According to the conceptual line herein adopted, the inverse must be considered: namely, it is important that the semiotic strategy allow the image to become (or be translated into) language. Not only can verbal language *show while saying*, but the image can also *say while showing*.

#### 4. Iconic Signs and the Visual Stimulus' Substitution

Allowing for verbal language to replace visual experience, even if only in a limited and faulty manner, or inversely, allowing for an image to replace speech structures specific to verbal language, if only in a very partial way, is a perspective that calls upon the fundamental notion of *surrogate stimulus*.

Developed by Eco (1976, 1997), on the margins of his radical critique of the iconicity as a naïve semiotic construct, this concept involves a careful reconsideration of the iconic sign. Peirce posits that an iconic sign shares similar properties, a *likeness*, with the real object to which it refers. His classification, which divides signs (in relation to their dynamic object) into icons, indices and symbols, is based upon this degree of likeness, that is, the level of cooperation in the relationship between the sign and what it stands for. This level is maximal in the iconic sign, intermediate in the indexical sign, minimal in the case of symbols.

According to Eco, the solution to the problem of iconicity lies in the dissociation of likeness, a non-formal property, from the formal definition of the sign's structure. In *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), he demonstrates how, according to a theory of codes, the condition of a sign's production, but not its relationship with a portion of extra-semiotic reality — whose situation is external to the semiotic system and contrasts with semiotic theory —, could be a relevant element for defining a sign's inner structure. Furthermore, the opposition between arbitrariness and likeness is itself usually dependent on the properties of various other codes. As a result, their link with such notions, though widely accepted, is ambiguous from a theoretical point of view. A very

ancient traditional belief, which dates back to Plato's *Cratylus* (see Eco: 1975: 254), associates arbitrariness with conventionality, in the sense that, when not ruled by necessity the production of a sign is instead ruled by a socially stipulated convention, and both properties come together as a discontinuous feature in the sign's structure. In contrast, a motivated sign (such as smoke rising from a fire) is deemed both natural and analyzable as a continuous phenomenon, that is to say, one inconceivable as a set of discrete units. Such contrasting properties may be sketched as follows.

<u>NOMOS</u>	<u>PHYSIS</u>
ARBITRARINESS	MOTIVATION
CONVENTIONALITY	NATURALNESS
DISCRETENESS	ANALOGUENESS

Figure A

Nevertheless, writes Eco:

even a superficial glance at many sign phenomena tells us that the equation is not true and that therefore the oppositions are not synonymous; a photograph is perhaps 'motivated' (the traces on paper are produced by the disposition of the matter in the supposed referent) but it is digitally analyzable, as happens when it is printed through a raster (1976: 190).

Hence, if a monochrome picture is not perceived as lacking something, even though it does not perfectly record the original chromatic values of the world, it is for the same reason that technical devices such as the artistic use of out-of-focus or blurred shots are conventionally accepted as possessing meaning nonetheless.

The key problem is that the first opposition, between arbitrariness and motivation, is not fully congruent with the second one between conventionality and naturalness, neither opposition sharing the same scope of applicability. Consequently, the relationship linking an iconic sign to the real object it stands for, may be both motivated and influenced by cultural and social conventions, with the latter determining its potential for meaning:

To produce a signal that it may be correlated to a content is to produce a sign-function; the modes whereby either a word or an image are correlated with their respective contents are not the same. The problem is to find out whether the former is a cultural correlation (and therefore a conventional one) and the latter is not; or whether, on the contrary, both involve some sort of cultural correlation even though these correlations are operationally different (*ratio facilis* vs. *ratio difficilis*) (Eco, 1976: 191).

In order to untangle this conceptual knot, Eco suggests that the iconic sign's signifying capabilities do not reside in its sharing some property with the object it represents. Rather, they depend on transforming, within a given media (say photography), "the elements of a schematic conceptual or perceptual convention which has motivated the sign" (Eco, 1976: 194). Such signs offer "surrogate stimuli" (*Ibid.*) but only through the conventions proper to a given medium. In other words, the sign must evoke for its addressee a perceptual experience similar to the one produced by the corresponding real object to which it stands for, even though this experience (that of the sign) manifests itself through stimuli that are different in nature for those associated with the referent (or the experience one can have of it) and are determined by underlying cultural conventions.

The recognition that cultural conventions play a role in "iconic" signs illustrates the fact that likeness alone cannot account for semiosis. Thus, for instance, aesthetic and cultural codes must be considered in picture-taking. This entails bearing in mind spectators' propensity for recognizing the portion of the world portrayed in a photograph, or selecting the right visual cues as relevant (and ignoring others), or the acquisition of appreciation habits imputable to cultures accustomed to making and sharing pictures and photographs. The capacity to distinguish various resemblances is a culturally acquired cognitive skill, which incorporates mental and pragmatic habits associated with the use of certain technical devices. Consequently, this likeness relationship, upon which photography is based, is neither instinctive nor, regardless of circumstance, consistently valid. A picture's "likeness" therefore arises only under specific conditions, many of which involve cultural mediation.

As Eco explains, the judgment of likeness is always pronounced on the basis of relevant criteria fixed by way of cultural conventions:

The elements of motivation exist, but they can only work when they have been conventionally accepted and coded. [...] A transformation does not suggest the idea of natural correspondence; it is rather the consequence of rules and artifice. [An] image is motivated by [...] representation [...] but it is nevertheless the effect of a cultural decision and as such requires a trained eye in order to be detected [...]. Similitude is produced and must be learned" (*Ibid.*: 199-200).

## 5. The Trans-Mediality of Photography

Based on what was emphasized above and despite the years that have elapsed since it was first coined<sup>4</sup>, the notion of surrogate stimulus is still useful today when considering the problems raised by visual representation, including photography. For photography may be considered to be one of the most powerful and refined systems of visual surrogate stimulation. It is only surpassed by film (and television), which adds movement and sound.

It bears noting that motion picture recording is itself an illusion generated by a flood of otherwise *still* frames projected at the appropriate speed. As



someone once said, cinema is photography twenty-four times per second. The increased capacity for surrogate stimulation in cinema results from the addition of motion, sounds and voices and its wider expressive potential. Yet, it does not really compete with the one made available by still photography since motion and sound serve to enrich what is otherwise photography's existing semantic potential. This is the consequence of the fact that the technical devices used for shooting still or motion pictures belong to optics and are therefore governed by the same theoretical and physical principles, technical options and creative solutions regardless of the expressive domain to which they are applied. The title of 'director of photography' is bestowed upon the person in charge of the overall visual tone of a film because 'photography' as a term applies not only the single frame imaging but to the medium's technical and aesthetic options as a whole: from camera positions and movements, to the choice of lenses and lighting, the use of filters and other devices needed to achieve specific visual results. These remarks simply underscore the central position of photography and its connections with the other components of film production. A diagram such as the following one (fig. B) might provide a better illustration of how these elements come together by highlighting qualitative, not quantitative, relationships. The image's photographic structure is assigned to the diagram's first axis, the motion of both the camera and scene (pro-filmic motion) is on the second axis, leaving the third axis for the soundtrack. Therefore, the first pair of axes define the spatial plane upon which both the bi-dimensional frame and the three-dimensional scene rest; the second pair of axes define the temporal plane, containing the development of both the action and the soundtrack<sup>5</sup>.

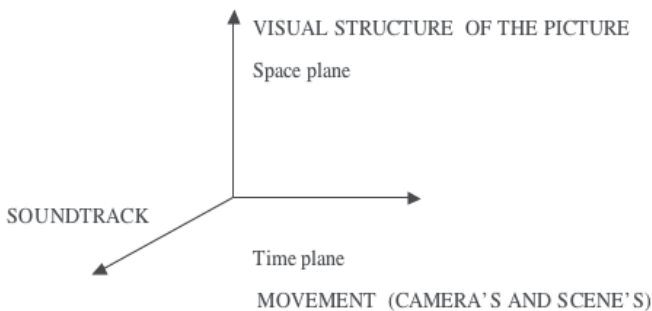


Figure B

Once such general coordinates are established, it is nonetheless worth examining the theoretical consequences of medium's accurate capacity for visual stimuli substitution, as well as the technical characteristics upon which they rely. The primary photographic properties, it now

appears relevant to emphasize, are the *objective-looking* characteristics of the image and the *impression of reality* they induces. Obviously, such complementary features are so tightly intertwined that it would be difficult to consider one without the other. The first feature relies upon photography's ability to translate the visual aspect of the portrayed real object into a picture through *objective* means of representation: it is capable of conveying the impression of portraying reality without the intermediary of human subjectivity. The second feature consists in creating, for the spectators' benefit, the illusion of being confronted with an accurately recorded portion of reality: a duplicate, or copy of reality itself.

The first point addresses the fact that the presence of a human operator is hidden behind photography's mechanical nature. Of course, the camera operator's technical competency and aesthetic sensitivity, or, *subjectivity*, will influence the image (depth, angle, lens, composition, framing, etc.). Hence, once set to function in a given fashion, the photographic device serves the confluence of the operator's own visual intentionality by depicting as objective what is in fact the end result of a series of very subjective operations. As a result of its direct effect on spectators, who sees what the cameraman has first seen for himself, it seems most relevant to consider the question from this angle. The peculiar relationship that exists between the camera operator and the mechanical device is then the seat of a process of *delegated vision*, which is further magnified if one considers the production of moving images. In fact, in such instances, not only does the audience delegate its own vision to choices made by the cameraman during shooting, the filmmaker often delegates to the director of photography the task of deciding the overall visual tone of the work, while the latter delegates decisions concerning the finest details of a shot to the camera operator. In order to study photography from a translational perspective it becomes impossible to disregard the fundamental mechanism of the delegation of vision, which consists in what appears to be a cascading translation of visual intentionalities between the various actors involved.

The second prominent aspect, closely related to the one developed above, concerns the fact that photographic and cinematographic images imitate human vision in such an exact way that reality and its image might appear indistinguishable. It is what André Bazin (1973) called the "mummy complex", in reference to Western society's typical habit of rescuing real objects and bodies from the past by capturing them iconically so that the icon may come to stand for a long gone referent. Together, the image's objective quality and the impression of reality emanating from photography accomplish, from a technical perspective, what man has long pursued through all other forms of visual representation, beginning with painting: "photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it from its proper corruption" (Bazin 1967: 14). Cinema, which inherits the same

photographic features, fulfils this "ontological" objectivity on the temporal plane<sup>6</sup>: as Bazin concludes "cinema is objectivity in time" (1973: 8).

Concern for the "ontology" of cinema, as developed by Bazin and herein summarized, is not intended as a reference to an old-fashioned theory of cinema, but rather is meant to help us see how issues concerning the "true nature" of photography or cinema have once again become current, as a consequence of technological evolution. Nowadays, electronic processing techniques and digital photo retouching have had a profound impact over the documentary power of the photographic image and our understanding of it. So much so, in fact, that it has become possible to "photographically" show things that do not exist in reality or, inversely, hide away or erase what exists. The ever-increasing development and spread of such techniques challenge the distinction, fundamental to photography and cinema theory, between filming and the filmed objects of the image. As a result, we ought to ask ourselves what is the "nature" of the "fiction" that is referred to by a photograph that has been digitally manipulated.

## 6. Digital Imaging as the Degree Zero of Translation

Digital photography offers a novel situation in which the CCD (charge-coupled device) sensor — a photoelectric device that reacts to light impulses by generating micro-electric current — constitutes the light sensitive element that replaces the chemical plate of traditional photography. Once further amplified via the digital camera's other components, this electric signal is converted into information that can be stored numerically on a magnetic support as a *file*. Such aspects expose certain relevant differences between the digital process and the traditional chemical one. First, unlike traditional analogue photo processes, all phases of the digital process are completely *reversible*, since once they have executed their tasks, the CCD sensor and the other magnetic devices are readily available for a subsequent "running" of the process. Second, information coded in a file format acquires the decisive feature of *immateriality*, rendering the particular properties of the support upon which information is recorded insignificant, as opposed to the film negative whose properties of physical support cannot be separated from the information it stores.

From a translational perspective, digital picture processing acquires a particular relevance, related largely to the novelty it represents within photography. As previously mentioned, the choice between an analogue and a digital device has outlined wider implications than those pertaining to the strictly technical aspects above. Accordingly, any physical system that links the *continuous* variation of a first variable to the *continuous* variation of a second quantity dependant on the first one can be called *analogue*; while, a physical system that relates the *continuous* variation of a first quantity to the *discrete* variation of a second one is

*digital*. In the case of photography, light values that belong to the real scene constitute the independent variable's field of variation, while the photosensitive material's degree of response to incident light constitutes the dependent variable's narrower field of variation. It becomes clear that within a specific range of value the photographic film darkens to black *continuously* in proportion to the quantity of light to which it is exposed, while each picture element (pixel<sup>7</sup>) of a digital sensor reacts in a *discontinuous* manner, due to the binary nature of its value: from 0 up to a certain threshold of sensitivity, and 1 once that threshold has been surpassed.

Digital imaging therefore proves to be an issue of great interest from a translational perspective, as it includes a double order of transformations: first, the light signal that becomes an electric one; second, the digital sampling of the latter and its conversion via binary code. Nevertheless, both kinds of transformation may not be properly admitted into the field of translation *per se*, since they are based upon one-to-one rigid correspondences between incoming and outgoing signals. These do not allow for variation or interpretation, except for those occurring in the machine in a purely mechanical sense. It would therefore appear more suitable to consider digital imaging as the "degree zero" in the field of translation through images: the digital processing of pictures would then be included among the processes of *transduction*<sup>8</sup> rather than among those of translation proper. Among verbal languages, the transliteration process would represent a corresponding phenomenon, from the Latin to the Cyrillic alphabet for instance, or the transcription into Morse that allows a verbal message to be transferred over an electric channel. As a whole, these phenomena concern only the message's secondary level of expression, the phonemes in verbal language and the picture elements in image language, which have no bearing upon the content of the message. According to this view, the technical aspects of an image's acquisition or elaboration are irrelevant and have no impact on its meaning: regardless of how the picture was shot and processed, be it on film or with a digital camera, through a darkroom or a "lightroom" process, the device's technical features do not seem to influence the content of the image.

## 7. Conclusions

We have demonstrated how the analysis of photographic imagery through the perspective of translation theory rests upon the premise that semiotic theory is based upon a semiotic organization intrinsic to the real world, called a *natural world's macrosemiotics*. This notion, rooted in the structural approach to semiotics and developed by Hjelmself and Greimas (see Dusi 2003: 3), merges with interpretative semiotics to include Umberto Eco's revision of the iconic sign, whereby he excludes any extrasemiotic reference from the sign's formal definition. Subsequent

to this reconsideration of basic semiotic theory, the notion of *surrogate stimulus* was considered. In addition to its central role in solving the problem of the image's meaning, this notion reveals itself surprisingly useful with regards to translation theory.

Once this conceptual framework was established, one provision allowed its application to photography: the generalization of Jakobson's subdivision of translative moods. This move enabled us to include cases of translation that do not involve verbal language. Despite an obvious need for caution while the issue is further investigated, it appears possible to define the limits within which it is appropriate to discuss photography from a translational perspective or, at least, the threshold over which an image loses relevance from such a perspective. In this sense, the superior threshold is represented by a change in expressive matter or media: if photography always operates transformations within the same visual or optical matter, it obviously cannot be considered a case of transposition or adaptation.

In the end, it seems that the application of translation theory to the pictorial domain may be valuable for both areas. On one hand, it enhances our semiotic understanding of photography, a medium that has long been deemed to be merely reality's twin and hence lacking its own genuine semiotic nature. Thus, to affirm that faithful representation is a relative feature of photography and to replace it with the more suitable (though admittedly vague) notion of equivalence — by invoking the negotiated character of translation and its existence inside cultural practices — means to finally reclaim possession of the photographic image's full semiotic nature.

On the other hand, the comparison herein developed may end up proving even more valuable to the very idea of translation itself, at least in Peirce's sense: as a form of interpretability. Whereas, as Peirce claimed, a sign interprets another sign by translating it and bringing meaning to it, it may be argued that photographic signification emerges from the subtraction (rather than the addition) of elements. Indeed, whether it is achieved by framing or cropping, by compressing real 3-D depth onto a bi-dimensional surface, by transforming the chromatic range of the real world into the grayscale of a monochrome print, or even by giving up sharpness of vision for a blurred view, photography always interprets reality and turns it into an image by abstracting something from it. This forces Peirce's interpretation principle to widen its scope: the meaning of a sign can be interpreted by translating that sign into another one, causing *either* an increase or a decrease in meaning, that is to say: a *transformation*.

## Notes

1 Such a result stems from Umberto Eco (1976: 216): "*It is the very notion of*

- sign which is untenable* and which makes the derived notion of 'iconic sign' so puzzling." This conclusion is probably too radical to be accepted nowadays, and too deeply influenced by the intellectual climate of the time, one very close to the "textual turn" which completely upset semiotics, but it would be wise nonetheless not to undervalue the questions it helped raise.
- 2 A typology of semiotic codes based upon their semantic potential was elaborated by Tullio De Mauro (1982), and its relevance has been already recognized for issues of translation theory (see also Gagliano 2000).
  - 3 Hypotyposis is a figure of speech giving rise to a visual experience through the description of a scene, a listing of its relevant elements, or an accumulation of events, features or characters. The most interesting case is when a hypotyposis calls forth the experience of something that the text's addressee has never seen. On this point see Eco (2003: 197).
  - 4 A circumstance shown by the fact that Eco (1997: 297) itself reworked the same notion, not only to justify the reasons leading to this debate in the 60s and 70s, but also in order to link the issue of the substitution of perceptual stimuli to the notion of cognitive type, later developed by him within the framework of cognitive semantics.
  - 5 For simplicity's sake, this diagram doesn't take into consideration cinematic montage.
  - 6 From this point of view, it is nonetheless worthy to take into account the peculiar connection that links photography to temporality and narration. At first glance, while the click of the shutter sets the scene portrayed apart from the continuous flow of actions, it isolates the purely spatial elements of the image, immortalizing their instantaneousness. As if the simple removal of passing time from the course of events was enough to define the relationship between what happens and its image. If the lack of time-lapse over the text's surface results in the loss of narration, a properly narrative dimension ought not be recognized for photography, since narration is precisely based upon a set of transformations that require the passage of time. But several famous shots, in particular those by Henri Cartier-Bresson (as well as his idea of "*instant décisif*"), might well convince us instead that in photography the passage of time is not absent as much as it is condensed or, better yet, *crystallized* in the image, a result achieved through temporal operations like the photosensitive material's exposure to light, the lasting of the development and setting processes, not to mention the entirely subjective time of viewing the image.
  - 7 Let us consider that, from a physical perspective, the single element, of which the digital sensor is made, is a *photosite*, that is, a microscopic photoelectric device that reacts to light by generating a micro-electric current. A picture element (a pixel) is the elementary part of an image, containing all the information about light and colour generated by that current. As a result one can say that a pixel is generated by the corresponding photosite on the sensor.
  - 8 "The transducer is defined as a device or element that converts an incoming signal into an outgoing one with a different shape" (Mondadori 1980, XII: 350). "With the term 'transduction' what is intended is the transformation of a kind of energy into another. In the biological world some structures can resemble transducers, though with some approximation: these are receptors or specialized structures that place living beings into a relationship with the surrounding environment." (Mondadori 1980, XII: 354). Thus, not only are the sensor of a digital camera or the diaphragm of a microphone transducers, but so are the eardrum or the retina of the eye. Finally, it is noteworthy that in Hjelm's semiotics the term 'transduction' refers to transformations that involve different matters, substances and forms of expression (see Dusi 2003: 6).

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## Abstract

The idea of envisaging photography through the concept of translation is based on the work of Umberto Eco on literary translation (2003) and its application to the cinema by Nicola Dusi (2003). In this article, the author seeks to clarify the terms and limits of this idea, all the while paying attention to debates surrounding the iconic sign and to issues raised by the coming of digital photography.

## Résumé

C'est aux recherches d'Umberto Eco (2003) sur la traduction littéraire, lesquelles ont inspiré le travail de Nicola Dusi sur le cinéma (2003) que l'on doit l'idée de s'intéresser à la photographie depuis la perspective de la traduction. Dans cet article, l'auteur clarifie les termes et limites qui rendent la chose possible et porte une attention particulière aux débats sémiotiques liés au signe iconique et aux questions entourant la photographie numérique.

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