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# Twilight of the Icons, or, How to Sociologize with Visibility

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# Twilight of the Icons, or, How to Sociologize with Visibility

by Andrea Mubi Brighenti

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Mit der wahren Welt haben wir auch die scheinbare abgeschafft!<sup>1</sup>

Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*

D'où viennent ces influences mystérieuses qui changent en découragement notre bonheur et notre confiance en détresse? On dirait que l'air, l'air invisible est plein d'inconnaissables Puissances, dont nous subissons les voisinage mystérieux.<sup>2</sup>

Maupassant, *Le Horla*

Non vi è nulla dal punto di vista strettamente scientifico che impedisca di considerare come plausibile che all'origine di avvenimenti umani possa trovarsi un fatto vitale egualmente semplice, invisibile e imprevedibile.<sup>3</sup>

Majorana, *Valore delle leggi statistiche nella fisica e nelle scienze sociali*

## 1. Established Figurations of Visibility

In recent years, icons have received renewed attention in sociology, in conjunction with the attempt by cultural sociologists – and, specifically, the “strong program” in cultural sociology advocated by Jeffrey Alexander and the Yale school – to interpret iconicity as a crucial analytical category for the social science [Alexander, Bartmanski and Giesen 2012.] Icons could be studied as special visibility formations. In practice, recognized icons function as established *visibility patterns*, whose form may evolve over time, mirroring different and perhaps even contrasting discourses, attitudes, beliefs and desires. In turn, rituals, interpretations, conflicts, negotiations

<sup>1</sup> With the true world we've also abolished the visible one!

<sup>2</sup> Where do these mysterious influences that turn our happiness into discourage and our confidence into distress come from? One would be tempted to say that the air, the invisible air is full of unknown Powers, whose mysterious proximity affects us.

<sup>3</sup> There is nothing, from a strictly scientific point of view, that would prevent us from considering as plausible that at the origin of human events there could be an equally simple, invisible and unpredictable vital fact.

and reforms contribute to draw and reshape those patterns, attaching new meaning to them.

Overall, the “precipitate” of such movements might be said to breed a given concretion, a certain *figuration* of visibility. The term figuration can be borrowed from the sociology of Norbert Elias [2012], retaining its original aim of attaining a synthesis between long-term change, direction and pattern stability in the description of social ties. More pointedly, to all practical purposes icons understood as figurations are *objects* we handle in our everyday life. Not by coincidence the importance of objects and artifacts is increasingly stressed in sociological approaches to culture (an influence can of course be traced back to actor-network theory scholarship, too.)

When it comes to our relation to objects and their meaning, there seems to be always need for new *totems*. Among the first social theorists along this line, Emile Durkheim described the mysterious power of the totem as a peculiar *object* which, acting as a symbol of the group, of its unity and solidarity, acquires a number of *subjective* features.

Today, the name of Bruno Latour is usually associated with the argument that objects, too, rather than subjects only, can be agents and actors. Such a critique of anthropocentrism has been salutary for social theory in the 1990s. However, it should also be noted that modern society – just as many other societies before it – never had any practical difficulty in admitting that objects have agency independently from subjects – a recognition which is ingrained in all sort of technical training. From this point of view Latour’s innovation appears overstated. Not simply. The argument is usually received as an anti-durkheimian one, and Latour has indeed insisted that his mentor in sociology is Durkheim’s “rival” Gabriel Tarde. Yet the point at stake is slightly different from the “mere” recognition of the agency possessed by objects: rather, what is interesting and astonishing is our capacity to bestow on objects, not simply the power to act, but *the power to be subjects*.

Here is where the issue of the totem becomes central. While for Tarde [1999], totems are but an en-passant stage in the general movement of knowledge which proceeds from vague and confused mass similarities to fine-grained individual distinctions, Durkheim [1901], in his essay on totemism, put his efforts in criticizing the idea that the totem could be defined on the basis of a set of rules concerning, for instance, eating and marrying. Instead of a normative-regulative foundation, Durkheim looked for what we might call a “foundation by identity.” He insisted that the totemic group should be equated with a *phratrie*, or brotherhood. There is no doubt that the stake in Durkheim’s largely circumstantial argument – and incidentally one which, ethnographically speaking, might not even prove quite sound – was actually a major

theoretical point: to make a totem – goes Durkheim’s real argument – is a way to say “we.” In this view, norms and rules cannot but *follow* from identity. And identity needs objects to make itself visible and perceptible; it needs *substance* and *matter*. The following passage, dealing with the people affiliated to the totem the Kangaroo, testifies sufficiently well this view:

Since the men of the group which take the Kangaroo as their totem *are* Kangaroos, they cannot preserve such a quality unless they periodically renew in themselves the substance, *at the same time material and mystical*, which is in themselves and which makes them Kangaroos. This substance would exhaust by use should they not revitalize it regularly, and the only means by which they believe they can obtain this result consists in absorbing some particles [*parcelles*] of the being who is recognized possessing that substance most eminently. In sum, it is a matter of communal sacrament [*sacrement communiel*]. [Durkheim 1901; my translation, my emphasis]

Name, signs and symbols are thus the *technical tools* of identity (please also note the implicit corollary that identity has an inescapable technical dimension to it – an idea that will stretch to Foucault’s notion of “technologies of the self”.) It is widely accepted that, for Durkheim, the mold of social identity is religious. Yet, if identity is an effect of the sacred – of religion-as-sacredness, or religion as “communal sacrament,” which is the same – arguably, it is because the sacred, which makes us so thirsty of totems, is but the most powerful expression of *we-ness*. Incidentally, a nice proof that icons have a lot to do with the sacred is provided by a motif in a contemporary philosopher who never mentions Durkheim, Peter Sloterdijk [2005, 321 ff.]. In his imaginative reconstruction of the human-historical emergence of “anthropogenic islands,” Sloterdijk calls “iconotope” or, indifferently, “theotope” that peculiar spatial form which enables a human group to manage the relation with an exteriority which is felt as haunting. Thus, thanks to the iconotope it is possible to manage images as diverse as those of the gods and the dead, establishing some treaty of non belligerence with them.

In contemporary visual culture studies, a number of reflections have been devoted to show how material objects are turned into icons imbued with cultural meaning and senses of identity. Since the 1980s, W.J.T. Mitchell has pioneered this trend by extending the Warburghian-Panofskian approach to icons [Mitchell 1986.] Setting broad coordinates for visual culture studies, he has invited us to regard “pictures” as not merely representations but material artifacts [Mitchell 1994], using precisely totemism as a critical framework to understand the value of images [Mitchell 2005.] Aby Warburg’s historical-philosophical insight into the nature of images has been likewise beautifully captured by Georges Didi-Hubermann [2002, 39] in his book on the *Nachleben* of images. In particular, Didi-Hubermann digs into how Warburg’s

notion of phantom-survival enables him to conceptualize and study each image as a tensional “result of movements provisionally sedimented or crystallized in it.”

Such a geochemical terminology illuminates the fact that the practices of the image are always surrounded by a complex of technique, politics and mysticism – a triad which lies precisely at the core of Régis Debray’s project of “mediology.” “The practices of the image” – observed Debray [1992, 145-146; my translation] – “raise simultaneously a technical question: how are they fabricated? Which are the supports, the materials, the dimensions? Where are they exhibited, where are they learnt? A symbolic question: which meaning do they carry? Which entities do they bridge? And a political question: which authority does supervise them? Who surveils them and to which aim?”

More recently, cultural sociologists at Yale University, developing a neo-Durkheimian approach, have called for an “iconic turn” to explore the interplay of materiality and meaning in cultural objects and events [Alexander, Bartmansi and Giesen 2012.] From this perspective, the study of icons is not simply a powerful addition to the study of cultural artifacts and performances, but should be squarely located right at the core of it.

## 2. Twilight Zones of Iconicity

The above analyses are excellent contributions dealing with what we have labeled, recycling a notion from Elias, “established figurations of visibility.” But, what remains at the thresholds of these figurations? In this piece, I puzzle about what might be called the *thresholds of visibility*. More precisely, I entertain with the hypothesis – which I have already sketched elsewhere [Brighenti 2010] – that visibility at large is inherently a threshold-phenomenon. Consequently, in the following I invite the reader to venture into some *twilight zones of iconicity*. Let us for a moment go back to Durkheim in order to better articulate our question. In the passages quoted above, Durkheim illustrates the “emanative” power of the totem. A totem is, in other words, an iconic image capable of permeating and impregnating mundane objects and even persons, who thereby become soaked in it and imbued with it. To do so, the totem possesses a series of qualities: it is big, strong, sharp-edged, central, “majoritarian.” The totem is surrounded by those who absorb it, who are small, peripheral, *en demande*. It is in this sense precisely that the functioning can be said to work by emanation.

Yet, Durkheim curiously describes such emanation process in terms of *particle emission*. Hence, an intriguing question: what are these totemic *parcelles*? Are the

particles of a totem totemic in themselves, or are they of a different nature? If the totem is a “we,” are these particles small “we-s,” small “I-s” – each of which is not simply “one of us,” but most crucially “one of *ours*” – or what else? To put it differently, what are the veritable *quanta of kangaroo*? How do we recognize a kangaroo particle when we see one?

In quantum physics, a measurement paradox is known to derive from the tension between two operations, or events – namely  $U$ , so so-called Unitary evolution of a system, which captures the continuous deterministic evolution following the Schrödinger equation; and  $R$ , or Quantum reduction, which occurs each time the wave function collapses and a new quantum state (“eigenstate”) discontinuously and non-deterministically replaces a previous one. The event of collapse is inherently related to the fact that each quantum state is actually a superposition of all the eigenstates of an observable – from which a number of very interesting phenomena follow, such as for instance quantum tunneling. Quantum tunneling occurs when, although a particle appears to be on one side of an obstacle which is insurmountable *vis-à-vis* the particle’s energy, there is a chance of finding it on the other side (the lesson: for how tough improbability looks like, there can be a workaround.)

As soon as we take a quantic view on the totem, and add to totemism an indeterminism principle, we perhaps gain a new entry point into the issue of iconicity, one where matters of energy and flows feature as pivotal. Once we make this step, the description of icons as established figurations of visibility is supplemented by the conceptualization of figurations as composed of both unitary evolution wave functions *and* quantic reduction wave collapses. Although iconic patterns look like discreet eigenstates, this fact cannot be dissociated from the continuous evolution of their superposed quantic states or eigenvalues, so that their ultimate localization may each time turn out to baffle us. A quantic understanding of icons might thus look less familiar than the one handled by current social science and social theory. And indeed, it is curious to observe how the notion of icon, which at first appears so self-evident, may turn out to be strangely elusive since the outset.

If one turns to the classic classification of signs elaborated by Charles Sanders Peirce in the 1860s, the distinction between icons, indices and symbols is so explained:

there are three kinds of signs which are all indispensable in all reasoning; the first is the diagrammatic sign or icon, which exhibits a similarity or analogy to the subject of discourse; the second is the index, which like a pronoun demonstrative or relative, forces the attention to the particular object intended without describing it; the third [or symbol] is the general name or description which signifies its object by means of

an association of ideas or habitual connection between the name and the character signified. [Peirce 1931-1958, 1.369]

Even without analyzing this quote in depth, as it would certainly deserve, we can get a general feeling about the three presented semiotic regimes: icons correspond to an *analogic* regime, indices to a *material* regime, symbols to an *associational* regime. Most revealing is the fact that Peirce initially calls icons “likenesses,” Not much later in the first volume of *The Collected Papers*, he decides to found the iconic regime upon the “mere community in some quality” [CP, 1.558.] Thus, to capture the working of icons, a mobile constellation of notions such as similarity, analogy, community and likeness is deployed. Terribly vague, isn’t it? The informed reader will admit that, yes, unless some clear criteria for producing and recognizing resemblances are specified, this is all too vague.

Yet, what if Peirce deliberately *wanted* to retain precisely such a vagueness at the root of iconicity? After re-reading these pages from *The Collected Papers* several times, one cannot escape the impression that Peirce deliberately left room for a similar feature. To put it differently, just as the semiotic functioning of indices is *forceful*, imperative like the collision between two bodies in classical physics, and just as the functioning of symbols cannot but be codified, or at least regularized, by making reference to a third pole (an observer, an “interpretant”,) the functioning of icons is doomed to remain somehow *loose*, underspecified, without a protocol.

At first, Peirce’s notion of icon might seem at odds with a “figurational” or “totemic” conception and rather more akin to a “quantic” notion which takes into account unlocalizable eigenstates and twilight regions (or even, improbability regions). However, it is certainly not a matter of opposing Peirce against Durkheim. On the contrary, I think both Peirce and Durkheim glimpsed into a certain elusiveness – and maybe even ineffableness – of icons. Actually, Durkheim’s reference to kangaroo particles opens up the theoretical space where it becomes possible to appreciate that the communal sacrament with the totem entails a dissemination of pulverized, molecular quanta. From this point of view, even emanation, which looked so essential, is in fact just one of the *many possible movements* and trajectories in this quantic environment. Most importantly, emanation as a function of unitary evolution does not at all rule out the wave collapse of quantic reductions.

### 3. Gestures and the Limits of Codification

Overall, these ideas – I submit – concur with a view of visibility as an inherently metamorphic element, one whose fixation into given figurations is always immanent,

never assured by reference to either material causes or semiotic codes. A case which may help us to zero in on some further properties exhibited by icons is the analysis of bodily *gestures*, these veritable eigenstates of social life. It is the analysis of a gesture that famously inaugurates Panofsky's [1972] magisterial study in iconology. A rather humble everyday encounter: in the street, a man takes his hat off and waives at me. It is clearly a salutation – one of the old time, we could add – to which I am expected to respond.

Panofsky uses this example to single out three strata or layers in the organization of visual experience. There is a primary or natural subject stratum (the formal act of so and so lifting the hat, the *motif* of hand-waiving,) an iconographic stratum (the substantive social meaning of salutation) and, finally, an iconologic stratum (which Panofsky designates as the “intrinsic meaning” or content, where visual data are revealed as cultural symptoms of symbolic values.) The triad, of course, works particularly well for the study of art history: there is a baby in the cradle; it's Jesus Christ; it conveys a religious message of salvation for believers.

In the same page span, Panofsky [1972, 9] seemingly dismisses the pre-iconographic primary stratum, observing: “Everybody can recognize the shape and behavior of human beings, animals and plants and everybody can tell an angry face from a jovial one.” True, it's easy to recognize a baby, a smile, or a waiving hand. But this *en-passant* remark by Panofsky is, I think, not without importance. For it is only upon such an unshaking, reassured confidence that the good functioning of the iconographic enterprise at large can be granted: once we “recognize” a gesture, we can easily codify it, and iconize it.

In fact, however, the relationship between the gesture and the icon is never a settled one. The case of the infamous Fascist salute provides an instant illustration of this puzzle. No doubt, the Fascist salute is an icon. There is a whole iconography of it: we know that it derives from the Roman salute; that is proved embarrassingly similar to the Bellamy salute in use in the US at end of the Nineteenth century; that Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco made it in slightly different fashions; and so on.

But, was it a Fascist salute the greeting gesture given in 2009 by the by-then Italian Minister of Culture and Tourism Brambilla (a right-wing politician from the “post-ideological” party Forza Italia,) which she vehemently denied having given, claiming she had been “misunderstood?” And what about the *quenelle*, a kind of salute seemingly originated in the milieu of football hooligans, since 2005 adopted and made famous by the controversial French humorist Dieudonné (sentenced various times for inciting anti-Semitic hatred?) What are these gestures? Can we call them Fascist salutes or not? More generally, at which of the three Panofskian strata should we measure gestural force? What if the three strata, instead of orderly car-



rying one another as Panofsky presupposed, end up slipping upon each other and melting?

As soon as we ask ourselves whether a given gesture or body motion is an icon or not, and *at which conditions* it can become one, we intersect the history of the experiments that, since the Nineteenth century, have been carried out to transcribe bodily movements and annotate “the gestural.” It is an immense reservoir of imagination and creative attempts, which spans the kinesiology of the photographer Eadweard Muybridge and the chronophotography of Étienne-Jules Marey (whom Warburg himself regarded as the inventor of a veritable “seismograph of the human body”), Charles Darwin’s 1872 treaty on *The expression of emotions in man and animals*, the system elaborated by the early Twentieth century dancer Rudolf Laban (“Labanotation,” currently still in use especially in dance teaching), the *kinesics* developed by the anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell, the *motation* (movement-notation) system by the architect Lawrence Halprin in the 1960s, as well as visual designer Bruno Munari’s playful “dictionary” of Italians’ body language (following Andrea de Jorio’s early Nineteenth century treaty on Neapolitans’ *pantomimica*.)

By the use of technical devices including photography, film, drawings, diagrams, sketches, conventional symbols and verbal accounts, all these researchers dealt with the challenge entailed by carefully writing up gestures. In other words, they made hard work to ensure that that primary, pre-iconographic stratum Panofsky passed by so swiftly and took for granted could be “grounded,” made discreet (“quantized”) and fittingly captured.

Even so, any sufficiently close examination of these fantastic attempts – which would deserve, not a paper, but a whole monograph – would reveal that a point is soon reached where science is taken over by art. The task soon becomes one which is best performed by a literary or visual artist. This means that in the case of gestures, as probably in other cases concerning the sensorial perception at work in social tie, both iconography (the scientific collection of icons) and iconology (the science of icon meanings) always face, sooner or later, an indelible residuum. The gestural can never be fully subsumed by the iconic. The former’s excessive, if ineffable (maybe even sober,) manifestation recalls us that we still don’t know which is its veritable measure unit. We are thus reminded of the majestic conclusion of *Les lois sociales*, where Tarde comments on the hard work that is necessary to capture one’s *physiognomy*, and unearths what this teaches us about the relationship between social science and art:

There can be no science of the individual, but there is no art except of the individual. And the scientist, recalling that universal life in its entirety relies on the flourishing of personal individualities, should regard the artist’s work with modesty and even a

little bit of jealousy, if it's true that he himself, by necessarily imprinting his personal seal onto his own general conception of things, in any case confers to it an aesthetic value, which is ultimately the only true reason of his theoretical effort. [Tarde 1999, 132; my translation]

Needless to add, these considerations apply entirely to bodily gestures. The title of the collection *Iconic Power* suggests, *inter alia*, that icons contain and condense much cultural power. Certainly, when one looks at the controversies recurrently ignited by salutes charged with political meaning, such as the infamous Fascist salute and its reappearances, one is immediately struck by the intimate association of icons and power. A codified, rigidified gesture can symbolize a whole ideology, a credo, a worldview. Hence the force of an icon could be likened to the force of the paradigm, with all its blatant superiority over the syntagm, or the Durkheimian force of the collective over the individual. From this perspective, the phrase coined at the outset of this piece, “figurations of visibility,” might prove too weak to describe the import of the phenomenon: what we are dealing with here are veritable *crystals of visibility* (incidentally, the geometry of the crystal might have offered to humans the first hint to the notion of *structure*).

Does this entail, by contrast, that non-codified, underdetermined gestures belonging in the pre-iconographic stratum are weak, that they can only become meaningful once they are granted by or stabilized into iconic crystals? Here, I think it would be useful to distinguish between *power* and *potency*. Tentatively, one could say that, whereas icons are powerful, gestures are potent. Such a distinction could be a way to take into account Mitchell's [2005] enlightening reflection on “What do pictures want?”. The conventional wisdom about the power of images, Mitchell suggests, might be misplaced. We like to portray images as strong, and often evil, replicating ancient Platonic anxieties. But – what if, in fact, they were *weak*? Rather than creatures of power, Mitchell suggests, images can be better approached as creatures of desire:

Images are certainly not powerless, but they may be a lot weaker than we think. The problem is to refine and complicate our estimate of their power and the way it works. That is why I shift the question from what pictures do to what they want, from power to desire, from the model of the dominant power to be opposed, to the model of the subaltern to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak. If the power of images is like the power of the weak, that may be why their desire is correspondingly strong, to make up for their actual impotence. [Mitchell 2005, 33-34.]

In my view, Mitchell's idea of images as “subaltern” matches well with the reflection on gestures developed above. It is gestures, rather than icons, that look more like images in Mitchell's sense. Like images, gestures contain a potency which lies

precisely in their weakness. Because of their subalternity, their under-determination, their lack of codification, gestures contain more potency. Weak anchorage in structure, low degree of crystallization, on the other hand, does not at all mean lack of affectivity (indeed, the affective and the meaningful entertain a complex, non linear relation.) Conversely, the consequences of iconic power can be paralyzing. Rather than merely imbued with meaning, icons are often saturated with it. The overload of meaning, or the overload of codification, is what makes icons stop wanting and loose the ease of metamorphosis. Gestures, by contrast, continue wanting because they contain the impossibility of paradigmatic closure: since they are less powerful, they also leave scope for transformation and space for desire. This is also why, despite the fact that gestures may on many occasions be less openly defiant than icons, in the end they are always received by the instituted power as more threatening and destabilizing.

It is not without consequences to admit that gestures are located in the twilight zone of iconicity – or, alternatively, within the elusive iconic domain described by Peirce. For his part, the founder of kinesics Ray Birdwhistell [1970] insisted on the intrinsically polysemous nature of gestures and rejected the view that there could be an ultimate deciphering of the gestural (a similar modesty had, on the other hand, already been recommended by Darwin, on the ground that movements can be “often extremely slight, and of a fleeting nature” [1872, 13.]) I think the argument needs to be pushed even farther. Tarde, in the passage we have recalled above, was, in a typical Nineteenth century fashion, reflecting on the relationship between the individual and the universal. Luckily, with the vintage point of over a century, and thanks to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze [1969], we have a further third notion at our disposal, namely *the singular*.

Rather than *individual objects* or things that belong to the individual who expresses them, gestures are *singular events* which *flow through* the individuals who express them. These events can be only defined in terms of *style*, once we grant to style the necessary degree of consistence and condensation it deserves. To resort to Barthes’ [1981] photographic lexicon, a gesture can thus be appreciated as a *punctum*: something very precise yet simultaneously elusive, hardly reducible to “common names” [Brighenti 2014] – style being defined precisely by this impossibility of reduction. This is why, in many cases, to capture a gesture, to really learn something about what is a gesture, one needs a writer like Franz Kafka, or a photographer like Diane Arbus – a Karl Rossmann sitting on Mr Pollunder’s knees, a child with toy hand grenade in the park...

The name of these great artists is a name of styles, and there is no better way to express the gestural singularities they were able to nuance than their own name. How

does these singularities relate to power? Often, power is conceived of as a force of change, as “power to make the difference”. It was Elias Canetti [1979], however, who proposed a different view: power is inherently based on a mechanism of *fixation*: it is a repetition of the same (hence, incidentally, its similarity with paranoia.) By contrast, Canetti called *Verwandlung* [“transformation”] a way of escaping from fixations: power will not be struggled against, it will be evaded.

Transformation is long apprenticeship in errance. The skills of mimesis, camouflage, and metamorphosis are all intimately tied to *Verwandlung*. The human being itself can be described as the great metamorphic being, the great imitator. Some forty years before Canetti, Walter Benjamin [1979] had evoked a specifically human *mimetische Vermögen*, or mimetic faculty:

The gift which we possess of seeing similarity is nothing but a weak rudiment of the formerly powerful compulsion to become similar and also to behave mimetically. And the forgotten faculty of becoming similar extended far beyond the narrow confines of the perceived world in which we are still capable of seeing similarities. [Benjamin 1979, 65]

The most remarkable consequence, continues Benjamin, is the intimate relation that exists between magic and language: the former actually made the latter possible. Indeed, magic, which concerns transformation as a “compulsion to become similar,” is a training of the human mimetic faculty. And language wholly derives from a trained mimetic faculty, for language is ultimately the medium that has incorporated the faculty to perceive similarities between objects.

Language has been such a successful medium to handle similarities that today objects themselves, in order to enter into any sort of relationship between themselves, must pass through it. Benjamin, however, invites us to remember that the power of language does not at all derive from the usual character that is attributed to it, namely symbolism. Rather, it remains fundamentally rooted in the original human mimetic faculty. In the terms of our previous discussion, we might also describe such a faculty as the capacity to produce quantic eigenstates and collapse them.

#### 4. Atmospheres of the Visible

Understood as expressions of potency, gestures belong entirely to the mimetic domain. And, insofar as icons are concerned, one could be struck by how much Benjamin’s discussion of similarity is reminiscent of Peirce’s conceptualization of iconicity. Far from being laid out in predefined protocols, as we have observed, the “likeness” Peirce speaks about is designed to remain a quality “out in the open field.”

So, it is as if both Peirce and Benjamin placed an element of instability at the root of iconicity. Certainly, Peirce refrained from the notion of “compulsion to produce similarity”, which is a most ingenious anthropological idea by Benjamin [1933/1979, 65 ff.], allowing the latter to join analogic thinking and practical imitative activities.

Nonetheless, both thinkers draw our attention on how, in practice, every established figuration of visibility tends to obfuscate the ongoing commerce between images’ foreground and background, between the visible and the invisible or, if one prefers, between the *ongoing partitioning* that is taking place in the element of visible. Here, we can also follow Merleau-Ponty’s [1964/1968] insight that the invisible is not merely a visible that happens to be contingently away from us; rather, the invisible is “here without being object.” Conversely, visibility concerns a specific “presence effect” – in more philosophical terms, a relation between pure immanence and pure transcendence. Such relationship might sound paradoxical or even impossible to some, but we should not forget that it derives rather coherently from the application of a quantic perspective, with its entwinement of unitary evolution (pure immanence) and quantum reduction (pure transcendence.)

Actually, how to describe the capacity to “become-foreground” possessed by certain figurations? Isn’t it, after all, a capacity to become-object, to become-totem? The foreground stands alone – with its bigness, its centrality, its emanative discourse. Yet, once we have set a sufficiently large stage for our inquiry, we realize that, in order to understand the foreground, we cannot content ourselves with the foreground alone. Even for a modest black-and-white little Gestalt, what counts is the thin, movable, unlocalizable threshold between the present and the absent. This, in my reading, is also the meaning of Nietzsche’s cry: “With the true world we have also abolished the visible one!”. With the *wahre Welt*, with the promised foreground, sinks also *māyā*, the veil of appearances, the deceiving foreground-as-stage, the *mise-en-scène*.

In *Götzen-Dämmerung* Nietzsche tells a story in three *tableaux*, whose transcription might read as follows: ancient philosophy first imagined that beyond the visible, apparent world there was another, deeper, truer world, accessible only to the enlightened ones. Medieval philosophy gave a distinctively theological twist to this view, identifying the true world with Paradise and the path towards it with moral effort to attain a virtuous soul; modern philosophy progressively dissolved the path towards the true world: the *noumenon* is unthinkable and inaccessible, it only remains as a thought which produces “a consolation, an obligation, an imperative” (pitiless nietzschean summary of Kant’s philosophy.) But, once that path is deleted completely, when the true world is recognized as unattainable, unattained and utterly unknown, it is the destination itself that disappears. And, as soon as we abolish the invisible “true world” that would stand as the transcendent foundation of the visible one, we

concurrently loose all reasons to retain what we had previously called the “apparent world:” we are left with a single world without qualifications, beyond all dichotomies.

We move inexorably towards the hour of the shortest shadows. Even at the highest point of the sun, however, shadows do remain. The nietzschean “hour of the shortest shadows” is not the hour of positivistic disenchantment, of “objectivity.” Quite on the contrary, we know it may as well be the hour of the *meridian daemons* [Caillois 1991], the scene for a new *Verwandlung*. More pointedly, we should recognize that *every shadow is a small twilight* in its own right. The region we have called the *twilight of icons* thus reveals us the existence of a quantic nebula of eigenstates which forms the major constituent component in every single figuration of visibility – iconic and totemic ones included.

Concurrently, each figuration is accompanied by a *halo*, given that it is nothing else than a measure of a certain quantic *density* (probability and improbability) in the domain of the visible. Most notably, this is not meant to deny the distinctiveness of certain states, certain figurations, certain “hours.” Weather possesses its own peculiar individuality – as in Magritte’s *Empire of Light*, or Van Gogh’s *Wheat Field Under Clouded Sky*. In fact, like a gesture, the most singular hour is the most difficult to capture with figurations. It’s the time when creeping shadows are constantly playing with new flows of light: indeed, what time is it in the seemingly still scene in *Empire of Light*? The “hour” is a *quale*, a whole atmosphere.

The threshold-like quality of visibility indicates, it seems, that our understanding of icons needs to pass through an atmospheric consideration [Ingold 2000; Sloterdijk 2005; Pavoni 2013.] We may need to shift from an iconic to an atmospheric thinking, or at least supplement the former with the latter. In his uncanny novella, *L’Horla*, Guy de Maupassant describes “the invisible air” as “full of unknown Powers, whose mysterious proximity affects us.” Isn’t this a declaration of potency? Aren’t we dealing with affective circulations of quantic gestural events? Certainly, modern science has exiled and banned the *occult* qualities – but, what about the *mysterious* qualities? Couldn’t we also call them *emergent properties*? Aren’t quantic eigenstates and their reductions all about the unexpected emergence of events and their disappearance into the atmosphere? Certainly, the atmosphere itself affects us no less – probably more – than the bodies we are perceptually capable to single out. In this vein, let’s turn once again to Merleau-Ponty [1964/1968, 131-132], where he ruminates about the *quale* of color: “And, now that I have fixed it, if my eyes penetrate into it, into its fixed structure, or if they start to wander round about again, the *quale* resumes its atmospheric existence.” Color: it is as easy to grasp it as it is to lose it. Not simply “it condenses and dissolves,” rather “it condenses *as* it dissolves:” to condense it, we must focus on it, and yet as we penetrate into it, it dissolves – we dispel it.

In other words, we wouldn't be able to single it out without concurrently accepting its atmospheric nature. After all, this is also the story of the kangaroo quanta. By venturing deep into the nature of the totemic particles, we discover the quantic nature of totems: there are no visibility patterns without quantic circulations of visibility and a whole story of tensions between deterministic evolutions and nondeterministic gaps – the story, in short, of thresholds.

## 5. Conclusions: Thresholds are Also Vanishing Points

One final thought concerns *subjectivity* and builds on the last of the three epigraphs chosen for this text. We have started recalling that Durkheim's analysis of totemism envisaged to place "we-ness" at the center: to him, the social group is a morally cohesive collective, a "we" which is irreducible to a sum of "I-s." Only the we does mirror itself in the totem. And, because totemic objects function as identity props, for Durkheim totemism is one workable way of coming to grips with the power to be subjects bestowed on objects.

However, once we admit that the totem incorporates a twilight quantic region, the communal sacrament which joins the collective and its icons also reveals a new side. Every social "we" is but the eigenvalue of an *ambiguous multiplicity* [Brighenti 2014], a composition of mutual affections whose overall shape is a variable topology of likenesses. An interestingly non-deterministic and non-formalistic remark on this point then comes from the 1930s theoretical physicist and engineer Ettore Majorana. Highly praised by Fermi and Heisenberg, and recognized today as an important developer of quantum mechanics, Majorana was very reluctant to publish his research and probably destroyed most of his writings when, at 32, he decided to disappear (to some, he decided to take his own life; yet his body was never found). The considered paper on statistical laws, from which I have excerpted the third epigraph above, was commissioned as an educational piece for a journal of sociology, probably when he was about 24. Later on Majorana abandoned and discarded the paper, probably deeming it as too simplistic. Eventually, it was published posthumous by his friend, Giovanni Gentile Jr.

The closing paragraph of Majorana's article is the most interesting one for our rumination. It contains a bold vision on not only physical but also social epistemology. Majorana establishes a sort of counterpoint between "the accidental disintegration of a single radioactive atom" and the "complex and visible chain of phenomena" ensuing from it. The precise nature of such a counterpoint is not clear, but what is clear – even for those of us who do not possess any skills in algebra – is that the

description of all series of mechanical chain reactions is not sufficient to attain any knowledge about the “atomic event” itself. Not only is the atomic event unapparent, it is also unlocalizable. At the root of human events, speculates Majorana, there might be an analogously “simple, invisible and unpredictable vital fact.”

At this point, on the basis of our previous discussion, we may sense that “we-ness,” the we-effect from which subjectivity stems, is intimately tied to such an unknown – as well as highly improbable – vital fact. If so, it will not be thoroughly illegitimate to infer that the twilight zones of iconicity are also the twilight zones of subjectivity. Likely, any in-depth exploration of the social region beyond these undetermined and un-deterministic thresholds will call for a relentless capacity to move between and throughout all the most unsettled states of visibility. Perhaps, then, it is not merely ironic that Majorana’s own vicissitude is ultimately one of disappearance.

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## Twilight of the Icons, or, How to Sociologize with Visibility

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**Abstract:** This piece proposes a little *détour* at the margins of icons. If we understand icons as more or less established figurations of visibility, we should also be able to ascertain the existence of twilight zones where a less predictable circulation of visibility particles takes place. The piece invites to delve into this region developing a sort of “quantic” view on the iconic domain. Using the case of bodily gestures as an illustration, the piece examines how every figuration of visibility entails the experience of “thresholds” which function as both atmospheres and vanishing points of icons.

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**Keywords:** *Iconicity, Visibility, Totemism, Twilight Zones, Quantic Social Theory*

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