SMALL OUTLINE OF A THEORY OF THE SKETCH

It is striking so little space has been devoted to the *sketch* in pictorial semiotics, measured against its central role in the process of creation in many pictures as well as against its central role in recent art history – not to talk about its role as a general tool of thought and memory.

Here, we shall attempt to draw some preliminary lines to a sketch theory. For a crude art history overview, it seems clear that before modernism, the sketch plays the role mainly as an introductory phase in creation, as a working tool on the road towards the finished work. Presumably, it seems just as clear that one central effect of modernism has been to focus upon various features of the sketch, isolate them, cultivate them and see them as just as essential – or even more so – than the finished work of art. This has lead to the fact that many genres of modernist painting and drawing share qualities with the sketch – as well as to the fact that the sketches inherited from earlier phases of art history have been subject to a revaluation so that they in many cases are seen as more interesting than the finished pieces of work which they gave rise to. And it is probably, finally, equally clear that now, when we turn back to form an overview over modernism’s different currents, the sketch can not claim neither more nor less prominence than the finished work of art – the polished, overworked piece and the raw, unfinished fragment now appear as parallel possibilities, and there is hardly any point in attacking one of them on behalf of the other – so much more because the artistic reverence for the sketch or the fragment with a strange necessity makes it into a work of art.

We shall here conceive of the sketch in the light of the Belgian Groupe μ’s pictorial semiotics as it has been presented in the treatise *Traité du signe visuel* (1992). They here present (136) a triangular model for visual signs in general:

![Triangular Model](image)

Figure 48.

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The overall architecture of the model is hardly shocking for any experienced semiotician; what is at stake is an updated version of that set of distinctions between sign, meaning, and object (here, significant, type, and referent) which in various variants date back to antiquity. Yet, Groupe µ.'s version of it contains some decisive accents. When the category of meaning is here rendered by the concept of 'type', the group explicitly refers to a visual type. This aspect of the Group's visual sign concept is explicitly turned against the linguistico-centrism of much pictorial semiotics since the 60s, partially evident in the import of linguistic terminology in pictorial semiotics, partially, and more dangerously, in the accompanying assumption of the primacy of language so that all visual types presumably can be described exhaustively in ordinary language or in the metalanguage of theory. By emphasizing the visual type, Groupe µ. points to the inexhaustibility of the visual sign: it is no superficial vehicle for the communication of a more proper, linguistic or symbolic content; it has in itself, already on the visual level, stability thanks to the typicality of its content. It is, of course, hard to exemplify in text, because ordinary language in many cases has an expression ready to cover a related content, as soon as any visual type for some reason has demonstrated its interest – but a good example might be those spheres with a marked equator that occur in many of Magritte's paintings along with easily recognizable everyday interior. Magritte scholars often refer to them as 'bells', but they cannot be identified with any ordinary utensil and remain enigmatic objects in the context of the space of the picture. This does not, on the other hand, hinder them in begin strikingly easy to recognize from one painting to the next; here we have a purely visual type without any corresponding denomination in ordinary language (and even if the 'bell' of the art historians should become widely known, it would not, of course, exhaust the specific visual typicality which permits them to be recognized – not any old bell will do). Of course, the routine recognition of both concrete and abstract everyday objects is to a very large extent made possible precisely by the existence of visual types: when we see and recognize a bicycle, a chair, a car, etc., we do so because we recognize its visual appearance – only on that basis do we add our linguistically articulated knowledge and identify that object by means of our linguistic denomination.

But this visual type is not determined by the linguistic etiquette, quite on the contrary it functions, in many cases, as a prerequisite to the linguistic denomination.408 The concept of visual type thus points to the fact that there is a strong pre-linguistic generalizing intelligence in perception able to extract types of (series of) particular visual impressions, and able to keep these types stable, able to vary these types so that different concrete phenomena become visually understandable by being categorized as tokens of that same type, and able to compare and distinguish different visual types.

The other special property in Groupe µ.'s version of the classical semiotic triangle lies in the appearance of the term 'transformation' at the basis of the triangle. It refers to the fact that visual signs function by means of similarity, that they are Peircean 'hypoicons' – and this implies that some or other property-saving transformation holds between the signifier of the sign and that object it refers to. What