Title

A Connotative Turn for Pictorial Semiotics: The Cultural Semiotics of Goran Sonesson

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II TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT Key Words iii

CHAPTER ONE Pictorial Semiotics: An Historical Overview 1

i *Edwin Panofsky's Study of Iconology* 1

ii *Modern Pictorial Semiotics* 3

iii *Roland Barthes: "On the Rhetoric of the Image"* 5

CHAPTER TWO Tracing the Development of a Cultural Semiotic Model 10

i *Sonesson's Critique of the Barthesian Model* 11

ii *Pictorial Semiotics and the Iconic Function* 14

iii *The Iconic Ground* 17

iv *The Argument for Convention* 20

v *An Ecological Semiotics* 23

vi *Regularity and Abduction* 25

vii *The Heirarchical Structure of the Lifeworld* 26

viii *From an Ecological to a Cultural Semiotics* 28

CHAPTER THREE An Iconic Analysis 33

i *An Iconic Analysis of Hinewehi Mohi* 33

ii *Abduction and Contiguity* 35

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iii	*Attributes*	36
iv	*Perceptual Noemata (Prototypical Positions)*	39
v	*Intentional Levels and Interactions*	41
vi	*A Plastic Analysis*	43
vii	*The Textual Field*	45
viii	*The Verbal Message*	47
CHAPTER FOUR	Conclusion	49
i	*The New Zealand Woman;'s Weekly: Hinewehi Mohi*	49
ii	*Conclusion*	54
BIBLIOGRAPHY		55

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I ABSTRACT

Key Words: Pictorial Semiotics, Roland Barthes, Goran Sonesson, Iconicity, Convention, Ecological Semiotics, Cultural Semiotics, Tartu School, *New Zealand Woman's Weekly*, Iconic Analysis, Plastic Analysis,

Goran Sonesson provides a departure point from the work of Roland Barthes in the pictorial semiotic studies. He questions the theoretical and methodological assumptions underlying the Barthesian model.

Figure 1: The image under analysis taken from an article that appeared in *The New Zealand Woman's Weekly* November 08 1999: 29

We compare Sonesson's model to results gathered from the iconic analysis of a selected photograph taken from a women's magazine (see Figure 1 above), and conclude that there is little to suggest an analysis of a pictures iconic content will convey its intended message. However, there is some indication that when the conventions or codes operating within a culture are known, the mechanisms responsible for the production of meaning in the visual medium become more transparent.

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CHAPTER ONE PICTORIAL SEMIOTICS: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

(i) *Erwin Panofsky's Study of Iconology*

The art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) was a pioneer and leading exponent of iconographical studies. According to Panofsky, iconography is "that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form" (Panofsky 1978: 51).

An important distinction made by Panofsky is that between *iconography* as the study of subject matter and *iconology* as the study of meaning. Using the example of "doffing one's hat", Panofsky shows that two meanings can be appended to this common gesture. While the act of raising one's hat indicates a polite gesture, it originated from the practice of medieval knights where the removal of one's helmet indicated peaceful intent. Panofsky goes on to say: "To understand (the significance) of the gentleman's actions I must not only be familiar with the practical world of object and events, but also with the more-than-practical world of customs and cultural traditions peculiar to a certain civilisation." (ibid.: 51-3).

The study of iconography often requires an extensive knowledge of the related culture and intellectual climate before any such analysis can take place. For instance, the act of lifting one's hat can be said to have two meanings: a primary or apparent one, and a secondary or conventional one. It is the conventional meaning that remains hidden within an artwork, requiring a complicated methodological approach to enable its extraction.

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Described as the precursor to modern pictorial semiotics, Panofsky's work can be separated into three levels. The first of these is the pre-iconographical. As an example, an iconic painting in which a woman is placed beside a spiked wheel could be a reference to St Catherine who was martyred upon such a wheel. From a semiotic perspective, there are two sources of information from which such an assessment can be made. The first of these is the factual or pictorial evidence put before a viewer which in this case, is a woman and a spiked wheel. The second source of information are the verbal or written narratives of the martyred St Catherine. In this case, the intended meaning of the association between a woman and a spiked wheel is strengthened further by being cross-referenced with outside narratives. This second level of referencing was what Panofsky called a picture's expressional aspect.

The second or iconographic level examines in greater detail the links between artistic devices and pictorial themes. The aesthetic value of a painting may be representative of, or the allegory for, the power of a particular artistic device. There is no conscious desire to make a direct association between factual and expressional aspects. To return to our previous example, the way in which an artist chooses to depict the spiked wheel might well be just an exercise in perspective. In which case, information concerning the prevalent ideas on perspective at the time of a paintings creation can also be assessed. But this type of information differs from the pre-iconographical stage because it is not an artist's intention to provide this kind of information. But it is still not the level of "unintentionality" Panofsky is seeking either because an artist is still free to choose the kind of artistic device he or she might use to present a particular feature.

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The third level of Panofsky's methodology, the iconological, seeks to draw out the intrinsic meaning or content of an artwork that constitutes the world of symbolic values. An iconological analysis is concerned with unintentionality. For Panofsky, symbolic values could be identified within a painting as those elements that differed radically from the conscious intentions of the artist. Panofsky considered symbolic values to be cultural symptoms that reflected, by way of specific themes prevalent throughout history, of a universal expression of human thought and behaviour.

Rapid technological developments and more sophisticated theories on mass media communication techniques has meant that more refined tools of analysis have had to be adopted. Theories of pictorial representation such as Panofsky's, while still largely prevalent in the field of fine arts, have undergone radical changes in an effort to take into account the way in which pictorial information is presented everyday.

(ii) *Modern Pictorial Semiotics*

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The importance of Roland Barthes (1915-1981) can be seen in the way his work divided pictorial semiotic studies. On the one hand, we have the pictorial semiotics of art history as addressed in the work of Panofsky. On the other hand, the focus of Barthes's work points to another aspect of pictorial semiotics One that can be described more accurately as a semiotics of publicity because of its attention to the more secularised examples of pictorial representation. The semiotics of art history and the semiotics of publicity have both had much to say about pictorial representation, but neither, until recently, have had little to say about photographs.

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Meanwhile, a semiotics of publicity has dealt with the photographic image, but in a more oblique way. In the field of mass media, pictorial aspects are still inextricably bound to textual, graphic, verbal and other components of advertising. A picture is often still supplemented by an accompanying text, whether directly or otherwise, to draw out or reinforce the intended meaning of the picture. In the development of new and more sophisticated advertising techniques, there has been little in the way of pictorial semiotic research carried out.

The works of Panofsky and Barthes indicate a desire to identify the processes or elements responsible for the relaying of information in a specifically pictorial way. For Panofsky, a three-tiered methodological approach applied to works of art allows for the extraction of three kinds of information: pre-iconographic, iconographic and iconological. For Barthes, the intended reading of a photograph is possible only if a verbal text is present. Alternatively, a reading of the most obvious iconic features in a photograph is the only way in which an interpretation or rendering of the intended meaning is possible.

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There has been a shift in the way in which, since Panofsky, internal meaning structures within a picture are related to external references. This also includes the way in which the written text functions. A reading of the Calvin Klein advertisement below (Figure 2), suggests that a process more complex than first envisaged is involved when interpreting such information. For example, according to Sonesson, objects of perceptual experience are hierarchically arranged according to their relative importance to a viewer. That is, human beings, animals and then other moving objects, attract our attention in that order (Sonesson 1988: 43). Also, the general

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consensus within the advertising industry is that the centre of attention of a picture when published in a revue format, is the lower right-hand corner (ibid.: 138).

This increased level of sophistication suggests that the intrinsic structures of meaning are increasingly being associated with extrinsic and often thematically unrelated referential sources. This phenomena of establishing a seemingly causal relationship between the intended meaning of a picture and a seemingly contradictory external reference leads to the work of French semiotician, Roland Barthes.

(iii) *Roland Barthes: "On the Rhetorics of the Image"*

William Leiss and his colleagues note the following about the advertising medium:

> The growing preponderance of visuals in ads has enhanced the ambiguity of meaning embedded in message structures. Earlier advertising usually states its message quite explicitly through the medium of written text. But starting in the mid-1920s visual representation became more common, and the relationship between text and visual image became complementary – that is, the text explained the visual. In the post-war period, and especially since the early 1960s, the function of text moved away from explaining the visual and towards a more cryptic form, in which text appeared as a kind of 'key' to the visual.

Leiss goes on to say: "In all, the effect was to make the commercial message more ambiguous; a reading of it depended on relating elements in the ad's internal structure to each other, as well as drawing in references from the external world" (Leiss et al. 1990: 199). It was the work of Barthes that first drew attention to the fact that the increasing ambiguity between a picture and an accompanying text was a semiotic problem.

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In "Rhetoric of the Image" (1977), Barthes turns to the advertising image in an attempt to develop a clearer idea of how the image and its attendant text produce meaning. It is possible to make these associations, argues Barthes, because of the manner in which the advertising image is more frank and explicit in the way the information is convey as opposed to other forms of communication. His famous analysis of the Panzani pasta advertisement resulted in the development of a system of signification comprising of three levels:

1. Linguistic message
2. Coded iconic message
3. Non-coded iconic message

Barthes considered next the role of the two types of iconic messages he had identified and their relationship to the linguistic message. He concluded that the linguistic message had two functions. With *anchorage*, "the text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image", essentially steering one "towards a meaning chosen in advance." (ibid.: 39-49). In this sense, the linguistic message is both coded and iconic. It is coded because it is the text, which provides the clues as to how the image ought to be interpreted.

Relay, on the other hand, describes the complementary relationship between the text and the image wherein the unified meaning is realised at the narrative, anecdotal or diegetic level. In other words, the text and the signifieds of the image together tell a story or push a particular message. Here the iconic message is uncoded but remains iconic. It is uncoded because the key required to unlock or interpret this unified

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meaning resides in the minds of those apprehending the interplay between text and the signifieds of the photograph. Both types of messages remain iconic because they resemble or are similar to the objects they are representing.

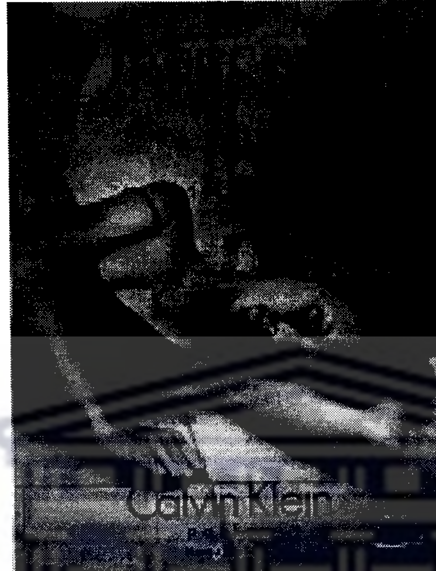

Figure 2: Calvin Klein ad featuring Kate Moss (Available from http://pobox.edu/~davidtoc/images/ck.eternity1.jpg)

To resolve this ambiguity between a coded and uncoded iconic message, Barthes points to the complex and naturalising role of photographic signification. Seemingly replicating reality, the image naturalises the symbolic message. Subsequently, photographic signification gives the impression that no code or no interpretation is required. The symbolic message appears as a natural sign, where meaning is in and of the symbol itself. In comparison, no other pictorial medium is able to emulate the degree of likeness, point for point, that the photograph is capable of attaining.

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Despite an appeal to the naturalising role of photographic signification, the ambiguity in Barthes's system of photographic signification can be traced back to his earlier work. In "Elements of Semiology" (1977), Barthes incorporates ideas borrowed from the work of Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965). In particular,

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Barthes uses the Hjelmslevian term denotation to refer to a sign whose signifier does not participate any further in the process of signification. Meaning is achieved purely by the direct relationship between a sign's signified and signifier. According to this view, denotation is often referred to as the "common sense", "literal" or "logical" interpretation due to its firm link with its corresponding signified. In other words, the photographic message is only that which is being depicted and nothing more.

And yet, according to Barthes, the photograph is also subject to connotative factors such as "professional, aesthetic or ideological norms" Barthes (ibid.: 19). Selected and processed on the merits of its particular connotations, a photograph is used to support an intended meaning. A photograph can be manipulated to be read in a particular way. Examples abound, for instance in women's magazines, where readers are constantly bombarded by images of beauty products associated with beautiful or famous female personalities (see Figure 2 above). Furthermore, connotative meaning can be derived from a photograph by way of six primary *effects* – trick effects, pose, photogenia (the "perfect" subject), aestheticism, syntax (where photographs exist in a series) and objects which index certain things (indexicals) such as the human form and schematic diagrams.

The list of connotations that Barthes (1961: 14) proposes above has been widely commented upon. To begin with, Barthes admits that only the last three, that is, aestheticism, syntax and indexicals properly speaking, are connotations, since only these are capable of modifying the sign as opposed to any modification of an object in the natural world. Schaeffer (1987: 94) agrees that the first three effects, that is, trick effects, pose and photogenia, do not involve the photographic sign so cannot be

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considered connotative factors. But neither can the other three, or any other intervention relating to the photographic sign, at least if Barthes is right in his description of the structure of the photographic sign. This is because if the nature of the sign is denotative, connotative meaning will have no relevance whatsoever in the interpretation of a photographic image. Schaeffer (ibid.: 97) also points out that Barthes' connotative effects are few in number and do not convey any particular message, other than the mere intentionality of the intervention.

Barthes' definition of denotation and connotation within the general context of pictorial semiotics is unclear. One is left with a legacy where on the one hand, we have the claim that because photographs are not arbitrarily contrived like verbal texts, no code is required to interpret their meaning. But on the other hand, Barthes admits that interpreting a photograph's connotative meaning involves a degree of mediation in the form of a socially or culturally constructed and shared code.

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CHAPTER TWO TRACING THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CULTURAL SEMIOTIC MODEL

According to Goran Sonesson, a pictorial semiotic method of analysis should be able to ascertain general facts about pictures and in particular, how pictorial meanings differ from other signs and significations. In addition, one must also discover what kinds of meanings are contained within the limits set by the form and content of the pictorial sign. With these objectives in mind, semiotics for Sonesson is a *nomothetical* science. That is, a method of investigation "directed at the elucidation of rules and regularities attendant on each and every case of signification" (Sonesson 1989: 33). Such a method of elucidation would not involve the examination or categorisation, as in the field of conventional arts, of every individual instance of pictorial signification. Neither would it entail, following Barthes, an understanding of the pictorial sign in terms of simple linguistic units and the rules for their combination.

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Pictures and pictorial kinds must be conceived as "rules of transformation applied to the visual world" (ibid.). Therefore pictorial semiotics must, from the very outset, assume a sociological dimension because everyday experiences have forced us to realise how deeply mediated our perceptions of the world are. Pictures, like verbal languages, can convey the world to us in many different ways. The primary concern of pictorial semiotics is with the different procedures or mechanisms responsible for the transformation of nature into culture. Therefore, the most appropriate place to begin this task is to question the validity of the most fundamental assumptions underlying the influential Barthesian pictorial semiotic model.

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(i) *Sonesson's Critique of the Barthesian Model*

In "Pictorial Semiotics" (1989), Sonesson deals with what he sees are major inconsistencies in Barthes' work regarding the photographic image. Some of these inconsistencies are due in part, to the "fragile theoretical contribution" of the "Hjelmslevian framework of Barthes's semiology" (ibid.: 8). According to the Danish semiotician Louis Hjelmslev, a language irreducibly involves two layers, namely, a signified and a signifier. Connotation in Hjelmslev's sense refers to the *second* of the above layers. It is the result of a particular expression having been selected to the exclusion of all other possible ones.

Barthes appears to agree with Hjelmslev's secondary definition by also describing the connotative message of the photograph or the signified aspect of photographic signification as having been selected on the basis of a set of cultural or social codes. The selected expression is made to stand for a given primary or denotative content. But Barthes then claims, because the signifier does not depend on any code for its interpretation, the denotative message must be the primary vehicle by which the intended meaning of a photograph is conveyed. The two levels of meaning, the signifier and signified, are treated tautologously.

Barthes defines photographic signification *in toto* in denotative terms because the internal structures of meaning allow for a direct reading or interpretation. Subsequently, a general consensus can be easily acquired to determine a photograph's intended meaning. More contentious however, is the way in which Barthes' preference for a denotative reading restricts the playing field. If one were to look

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beyond the internal structures of meaning to external sources of reference, the spectre of endless signification rears its head. The likelihood of any general agreement over the intended message of a photograph would be remote since every individual is apt to interpret it differently.

This confusion in Barthes's works tends to filter down to his followers. Barthes's exclusive attention to the denotative content of the pictorial sign can found in the semiotic works of Peninou (1968); Nordström (1975); Porcher (1976) and Dyer (1982). Barthes; Floch (1981); Langholz-Leymore (1975); Millum (1975); Nöth (1975); and Williamson (1978) to a lesser extent influence latter contributions concerned with the media photograph. But despite the second groups' avoidance of the confusions inherent in the Barthesian model, the photographic nature of media pictures is never thematised. "One is left wondering…" concludes Sonesson, "…whether any generalized conclusions drawn are, just as in the case of Barthes' own work, meant to apply to publicity generally, or to photographically mediated publicity only" Sonesson (1989: 10)

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Citing Schaeffer (1987), Sonesson notes that because Barthes studied strongly organised communicational texts like the advertisement and the press photograph, he became convinced of the important role verbal language played, even in the understanding of pictures. It is true that pictures give us much less *linguistic* information than verbal texts, except in those cases where the picture contains the reproduction of written messages. But pictures may, at a *plastic* level, contain much more visual information akin to the kind of information present in the world of everyday experience. According to Barthes, information itself is conceived of as

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something verbal by nature. But this information, says Sonesson, differs from the kind psychologist James Gibson refers to when he claims pictures permit us to pick up the same kind of information as is present in the real perceptual world (cf. Sonesson 1989: Chapter 3).

According to Sonesson, pictorial semiotics in the Barthesian mode is linguistically determined. Hence Barthes's focus on the advertising medium. But it is not just the textual element that characterises his analysis of the photographic image as being *linguistically determined.* It is also "his putative employment of [a] structural method" (ibid.: 2). The application of such a linguistic method involves "transporting concepts and terms derived from the [structural] study of language to the analysis of pictures" (ibid.: 5). The unchallenged assumption in this shift from a linguistic to a pictorial context is that any meaningful phenomenon occurring in a culture should be treated *as a text* of the given system.

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It then becomes easier to identify a categorical framework when a text is reduced to a series of common or iterative elements accompanied by a set stock of rules governing their combination. But it does not follow that pictorial iterability in any sense resembles that which holds within a linguistic context. This, and the limited set of photographic examples the linguistic method has been applied to, characterises the *vacuous* nature of the structuralist methodology underlining Barthes' pictorial semiotics. There is a lack of anything explicit enough to be called a *model.*

This does not mean that pictorial semiotics as a discipline is not possible, but rather that semiotics is not to be characterised as a particular method. Semiotics has been

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used in many other disciplines, including legal studies, psychology and sociology because it brings to bear upon the object being analysed a model founded, in all instances, on prior assumptions concerning a particular category. In its Barthesian form, pictorial semiotics founders upon the unquestioned assumptions arising from the implementation of a semiotic model drawn from the structural analysis of language.

Following his critique of Barthes's semiotic analysis of the photograph, Sonesson's next task is carry out an indepth analysis of the pictorial icon. While Barthes's model may have been flawed, Sonesson concurs that it is primarily the iconic sign, which represents the single most distinctive semiotic feature of the pictorial medium. Clarifying the form and function of the iconic sign will lead Sonesson toward a pictorial model, which looks closer at the importance of culturally constructed sign systems and their role in translating or interpretating the pictorial medium.

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(ii) *Pictorial Semiotics and the Iconic Function*

Within semiotics, the term icon is rarely used to refer to pictorial representation of persons or events derived from the Christian faith and used particularly as an aid to devotion. However the only substantive semiotic monograph concerned with a single pictorial genre is in fact about icons in this sense (Uspenskij 1976). Nor is the term normally used to refer to all visible things. In semiotic terms, which is derived from Peirce, an icon is a sign in which the "thing" serving as expression in one respect or another is similar to, or shares properties with, another "thing", which serves as its content. In fact, if we follow Peirce, there are two further requirements. Not only

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should the relation connecting the two "things" exist independently of the sign relation, as is the case with the index, but, in addition, the properties of the two "things" should inhere in them independently.

Thus, icons in the religious sense are not particularly good instances of icons in the semiotical sense, for they are, as Uspenskij has shown, subject to several conventions determining issues such as perspective and the kind of things and people which may be represented in different parts of the picture. Iconic signs may occur in any sense modality, for example, in audition, notably in verbal language and music. Neither are all visual signs iconic in the semiotic sense.

Many semioticians, in particular those who deny the existence of iconic signs, believe pictures to be typical instances of an aniconic sign. There are several reasons to think that this was not Peirce's view. Pure icons, he states only appear in thinking, if ever (Peirce 1989: 157). According to Peirce's concept, a painting is in fact largely conventional, or "symbolic". Indeed, it is only for a fleeting instant, "when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy", that a painting may appear to be a pure icon (ibid.: 362).

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A pure icon is thus not a sign, in the sense that the latter term is commonly understood. At first, it may seem that although the icon is not a socially instituted sign, that is, not something which is accepted by a community of sign uses, it could, at least for a short time span, become a sign to a single observer. But even this is contrary to the very conditions described by Peirce. He specifically refers to the case in which the sign loses its sign character when it is not seen as a sign but is confused

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with reality itself (which could actually happen if were looking at a picture through a key hole with a single eye.

It would seem that at least sometimes, the pure icon is taken to be an impression of reality, which does not necessarily correspond to anything in the real world. It seems to be something that appears to the mind irrespective of its status in reality. In this sense, the Peircean icon is somewhat similar to that of cognitive psychology, for it involves "sensible objects" and not signs in any precise sense. However, it still engages all sense modalities.

In most cases, when reference is made to icons in semiotics, what is actually meant is what Peirce termed hypo-icons, that is, signs which involve iconicity but also, to a great extent, indexical and/or "symbolic" (that is, conventional or rule-like) properties. There are supposed to be three kinds of hypo-icons: images, in which case the similarity between expression and content is one of "simple qualities"; diagrams, where the similarity is one of "analogous relations in their parts"; and metaphors, in which the relations of similarity are brought to an even further degree of mediation. Diagrams in the sense of ordinary language are also diagrams in the Peircean sense. For example, a population curve rises to the same extent the population does so. The Peircean concept is however much broader. Moreover, no matter how one chooses to understand the simplicity of "simple qualities", the Peircean category of images will not include ordinary pictures. If anything, a Peircean image might be a colour sample used when picking out the paint to employ in repainting the kitchen wall.

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Contrary to the way in which icons have been conceived in the later semiotic tradition, diagrams, rather than pictures, are at the core of Peircean iconicity. Indeed, mathematical formulae and deductive schemes, which are based on conventional signs, are those most often discussed in his work.

(iii) *The Iconic Ground*

Conceived in strictly Peircean terms, iconicity is one of the three relationships in which a representamen (expression) may stand to its object (content or referent). This relation may be taken as the "ground" for the formation of a sign or more precisely, it is the first of such relationships. At the other extreme, iconicity has been variously conceived as a case of the expression being similar or identical to the content of a sign or as a particular variety of conventional coding.

Considerations of iconicity must take as their starting point the iconic "ground", or what has been described as the "potential sign-vehicle" (Bruss 1978: 87). The ground is part of the sign, which functions by picking out the relevant elements of expression and content. It would appear that, in Peirce's view, when two items share an iconic ground, they are apt to enter into a semiotic function thus forming an iconic sign. There is some set of properties which parts of the expression and content possess independent of each other. Such sets of properties are considered identical or similar when seen from a particular point of view.

Peirce describes the sign-vehicle as something which "stands for that object not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I sometimes called the ground of the

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representation" (Peirce 1989: 228). According to Greenlee (1975: 64), the ground is that aspect of the referent which is referred to by the expression. For instance, the direction of the wind, which is the only property of the referential object "the wind", can be conveyed to us by the actions of a weathercock. On the other hand, Savan (1976: 10) considers the ground to consist of the features picked out from the thing serving as its expression, which, to extend Greenlee's example, would include those properties of the weathercock allowing it to react to the wind. They would include, for instance, the shape of the weathercock, the materials for its construction and its location such as a church steeple.

In one passage, however, Peirce himself identifies "ground" with "abstraction" exemplifying it with the blackness of two black things (Peirce 1989: 293). That would be an iconical ground An indexical ground, in a parallel fashion, would then be whatever it is that connects the properties of the weathercock as a physical thing to the direction in which the wind is blowing. If so, the ground is really a principle of relevance, or, as Saussure would say, the "form" connecting expression and content.

Generally put, an indexical ground , or indexicality, would then involve two "things". Parts of the expression and content are apt to enter into a semiotic relation forming an indexical sign, due to a set of properties which are intrinsic to the relationship between them. This kind of ground, which is a relation, is best conceived in opposition to an iconic ground, which consists of a set of two classes of properties ascribed to two different "things". These two sets of classes are taken to possess the properties in question independently, not only of the sign relation, but of each other. However, when considered from a particular point of view, these two sets of

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properties will appear to be identical or similar to each other. This is the sense in which Pierce classed indexicality as the second condition (Secondness) and iconicity the first (Firstness) for the creation of an iconic sign.

Contrary to the indexical ground, which is a relation, the iconic ground thus consists of a set of two classes of properties ascribed to two different "things". These two classes are taken to possess the properties in question independently, not only of the sign relation, but of each other. Indexicality as such involves two "things", and may therefore be conceived independently of the sign function. Since iconicity is first condition however, it only concerns one "thing". Indeed, for Peirce, a pure icon cannot even exist: it is a disembodied quality which we may experience for a fleeting instant such as when contemplating a painting. Perhaps then, to use some of Peirce's own examples, the blackness of a blackbird, or the fact of Franklin being American, can be considered iconicities. When we compare two black things or Franklin and Rumford from the point of view of their being Americans, we establish an iconic ground; but only when one of the black things is taken to stand for the other, or when Rumford is made to represent Franklin. They become iconic signs (or hypo-icons, as Peirce sometimes says). Just as indexicality is conceivable but is not a sign until it enters the sign relation, iconicity has some kind of being but does not exist until a comparison takes place. In this sense, if indexicality is a potential sign, iconicity is only a potential ground.

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(iv) *The Argument for Convention*

Since the iconic ground is established on the basis of properties the two items share, the standard of comparison must be something like similarity or identity. Signs based on similarity have been distinguished before in semiotic theory. Peirce says that an icon (more exactly, a hypo-icon) is "a sign which stands for something merely because it resembles it" (Pierce 1931: 362). This point of view was pursued by Charles Morris (1946: 98), who considered that a sign was iconic to the extent that it had the same properties as its referent. According to this concept, iconicity becomes a question of degrees: a film is more iconic of a person than a painted portrait, but less so than the person itself.

The same confusion is found in other semiotic theories involved with iconicity. Umberto Eco's (1976) critique of iconicity is almost exclusively concerned with pictures. In pictorial semiotics, both as conceived by the Greimas school and in a version of Groupe μ, iconicity is supposed to account for one of the two semiotic functions of the picture sign. One gives the illusion of seeing something depicted in the sign, while opposed to this is the plastic function, which is concerned with the abstract properties of the pictorial surface. However, following an example from Groupe μ (1979), if a circle is drawn to represent the sun at the iconic level, and on the plastic level for roundness, which, in turn may signify softness, etc., then what is called here the plastic language is at least as iconic, in Peirce's sense, as the iconic layer. For roundness is certainly a property possessed both by the circle representing the sun and by the originally drawn circle. There must be some abstractly

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experienced property which is common to both the visual mode of roundness and the tactile mode of softness.

When conceiving iconicity as engendering a "referential illusion" and as forming a stage in the generation of "figurative" meaning out of the abstract base structure, Greimas & Courtés (1979: 148) similarly identify iconicity with perceptual appearance. However, not only is iconicity not particularly concerned with "optical illusion" or "realistic rendering", but it does not necessarily involve perceptual predicates. Many of Peirce's examples have to do with mathematical formulae, and even the fact of being American is not really perceptual, even though some of its manifestations may be.

It thus becomes necessary to posit a hierarchy of prominence among the things of the Lifeworld. For something to be a sign of something else, it must be ranked relatively low on the scale of prototypicality applying to the "things" of the Lifeworld. Such a scale would be similar to the basic metaphor underlying ordinary language which Lakoff & Turner (1989) call "the great chain of being". Indeed, these regularities of the Lifeworld, together with the similar laws of environmental physics formulated by James Gibson, stand at the origin of an even broader domain of study, which Sonesson calls an ecology of semiosis (cf. Sonesson 1993, 1996).

When used to stand for themselves, objects are clearly iconical: they are signs consisting of an expression which stands for a content because of properties which each of them possess intrinsically. And yet, without having access to a set of conventions and/or an array of stock situations, we have no possibility of knowing

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whether something is a sign or what it is a sign of. Whether that be itself as an individual object, a particular category (among several possible ones) of which it is a member, or of one or another of its properties. A car, which is not a sign on the street, becomes a sign at a car exhibition. We have to know the showcase convention to understand that the tin can in the shop-window stands for many other objects of the same category. We need to be familiar with the art exhibition convention to realise that each object merely signifies itself. We are able to understand that the tailor's swatch is a sign of its pattern and colour, but not of its shape only if we have learnt the convention associated with the swatch (Sonesson 1989, 1994).

Convention is thus needed, not only to establish the sign character, but also the very iconicity of these icons. Since iconicity can be perceived only once the sign function, and a particular variety of it, is known to obtain, the resulting icons may be termed secondary (Sonesson 1994). This also applies to "droodles", a type of picture exemplified by the view of a sombrero from above which, once informed, is meant to represent a Mexican waiting for a bus.

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In such cases, knowledge about the sign function already obtaining between the two "things" involved is clearly a prerequisite to the discovery of their iconicity. The opposite case, in which it is the perception of iconicity which functions as one of the reasons for postulating a sign relation, would seem to be more germane to Peirce's conception of the icon. Such a primary icon is actually realised by the picture sign. Indeed, we know from child psychology and anthropology that no particular training is needed for a human being to perceive a surface as a picture. The possibility of this feat remains a mystery because the properties possessed in common by the picture

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and that which it represents are extremely abstract. Again, picture perception may only be possible because there is a taken-for-granted hierarchy of things in the world of everyday life which makes certain objects and materials more probable sign-vehicles than others (Sonesson 1989, 1997).

(v) *An Ecological Semiotics*

Ecological semiotics is Sonesson's term for what Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and his followers, Schütz and Gurwitsch, have called the science of the Lifeworld. Gibson's "ecological physics" and Greimas' semiotics of the "natural world" (cf. Sonesson 1989, 1997) also resemble this Husserlian concept. It may seem strange to put together ideas and observations made by a philosopher, a psychologist, and a semiotician. Yet the proposals are largely identical. Husserl, Gibson, and Greimas all invented such a science because they realised that the "natural world" as experienced, is not identical to the one known to physics but is culturally constructed. Like Husserl's Lifeworld and Gibson's ecological physics, but unlike Greimas' natural world, semiotic ecology supposes this particular level to be a privileged version of the world. It is, to use Schütz's phrase "the world taken for granted" from the standpoint of which other worlds such as those of the natural sciences may be invented and observed (Sonesson 1989).

It is a basic property of the Lifeworld that everything in it is given in a subjective-relative manner. This means, for example, that a thing of any kind will always be perceived from a certain point of view, in a perspective that lets a part of the object form the centre of attention. What is perceived is the object, though it is always given

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through one or more of its perspectives or noemata, which themselves are unattended. Gibson observes that when we are confronted with a cat from one side, a cat from above, a cat from the front, etc., what is seen all the time is the same cat. To Husserl, this seeing of the whole in one of its parts is related to the etc principle, that is, our knowledge of being able, at any one point, to turn the dice over, or go round it to look at the other sides.

Everything in the Lifeworld is given in "open horizons", that is, reality is not framed off like a picture, but goes on indefinitely, however vaguely indicated. Beginning with the theme or centre of attention, the experienced world gradually fades away without there being any definite limits, and we only have to change the centre of attention in order to extend the field of distinct experience. Every object has an outer horizon, that is, the background field, nearby objects, an inner horizon and the parts and attributes that are presently out of view or just unattended.

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The temporal organisation of the Lifeworld is similar to the spatial one. In the consciousness of each moment, lies embedded the consciousness of the immediately following moment and the consciousness of the immediately preceding moment. Sonesson refers to this process as protention and retention respectively. Each protention and retention in turn, contains its own protentions and retentions. They may be general and vague, like the expectancy that life will go on, or that something will change, or more definite, like the expectancy that the dice will turn out to have a certain number of eyes on the hidden sides. This model of time consciousness underlies all schemes of expectation.

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(v) *Regularity and Abduction*

Every particular thing encountered in the Lifeworld is referred to a general type. Typification applies to all kinds of objects, even to human beings. According to Schütz, other people, apart from family members and close friends, are almost exclusively defined by the type to which they are ascribed, and we expect them to behave accordingly. "In perceptual experience, the spatial shapes of things are determined only as to type - a margin of latitude is left for variations, deviations, and fluctuations" (Gurwitsch 1974: 26). Thus, there are no circles in the Lifeworld, only things with "roundish" shapes and a "circular physiognomy". Indeed, the "good forms" of Gestalt psychology, and the prototypes of Rosch's theory, are clearly typifications (see Sonesson 1989).

Closely related to typifications are the regularities which obtain in the Lifeworld, or, as Husserl's says, "the typical ways in which things tend to behave". In fact, once an object has been assigned to a particular type, we know more or less vaguely what may be expected, or rather protained from it in the future, and we can then learn to manipulate desirable changes ourselves. Many of the "laws of ecological physics", formulated by Gibson (1982: 217) are also such "regularities that are implicitly known". These would include statements such as substantial objects tend to persist; that animate objects change as they grow or move; that some objects, like the bud and the pupa transform; that no object is converted into an object that we would call entirely different such as a frog into a prince and so forth. Some of the presuppositions of such "laws", such as the distinction between "objects that we

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would call entirely different", are also at the basis of what is called the Lifeworld hierarchy and the definition of the sign function.

The Husserlian description of regularities fits in with the notion of abduction, which reasons from one particular instance to another. Abduction does not, however, run exclusively on the level of individual facts because the facts, as Peirce tells us, are mediated by certain "regularities" or principles that are tentatively set up or taken for granted. Peirce wondered how it was possible so many abductions could be proved right, postulating a natural instinct as an explanation. Actually, there are an infinite number of ways to relate facts, but most of them would seem to be humanly inconceivable. The limited number of alternative abductions really proposed may be due, not to a natural instinct, but to the commonalty of the most general organisational framework of the Lifeworld.

(vii) *The Heirarchical Structure of the Lifeworld*

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Sonesson refers to the hierarchy of prominence of Lifeworld things, and uses such a scale in two different, but complementary, ways. On the one hand, objects, such as the human body, in particular the face, and also common objects like chairs, must be so central to the human sphere that they will be recognized with only scant evidence, even though the invariants embodied in a particular picture are found in other objects as well. In this case, the objects at the highest levels of the scale stand the best chance of being selected. On the other hand, Sonesson argues that only objects low down on the scale will be recognized as susceptible of embodying a sign function without being particularly designated as such.

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One may wonder whether the same scale, with the same ordering, would be involved in the above two cases. This is not clear at present. However, a human being, a shape which is easily recognized as such with very scant indications, is perhaps also that object which is most difficult to see as a mere signifier of something else if one is not explicitly so designated. This is the case in the theatre or in a ceremony. On the other hand, the human face, which is probably that object which is most easily identified of all, serves at the same time as support for conveying other signs such as the expressions of feelings and attitudes. But then again, it is not the face but its movements which are signifiers of these other signs. It is just that, unlike that of the Cheshire cat, the human smile cannot exist independently.

According to Peirce, Franklin and Rumford are iconical signs of each other. But very special circumstances must obtain in order for a human being to function as a mere signifier. A convention would be needed for Franklin to represent Rumford, or the opposite. This may happen if Rumford appears on the stage playing the part of Franklin, or the reverse. It may even suggest itself spontaneously to someone acquainted with Franklin but not with Rumford. The latter would be a case of prominence by familiarity, as in circumstances when one compares the identical twin being presented to us with the one we knew before.

Even so, the case seems strange because the iconic ground is supposed to reside in the common Americanness of Franklin and Rumford, which is not in itself a property that can be seen. Rumford the ambassador more officially and clearly represents Americanness, but he does not represent any particular other American. The iconicity of Franklin and Rumford is not visual or even sensual. It is a case of a

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shared abstract property. But since it is a very common property, the two parts entering into the sign relation must be determined by convention or habit.

(viii) *From an Ecological to a Cultural Semiotics*

At the moment, because verbal and pictorial signs intermingle more than ever before, in publicity, television, and multimedia, they tend to resemble each other. Indeed, television and pictorial data bases transform the transmission of images into spatially and temporally delimited occurrences just like verbal exchange. Clip art also makes it possible to create pictures by combining pre-existing (though not in themselves meaningless) elements.

In practical terms, both relationships concern the kind of translation which Roman Jakobson termed *intersemiotic*, that is, the translation between different semiotic systems. The other two kinds of translation considered by Jakobson are the intralinguistic translation within one single language (for example. finding a synonym in English), and interlinguistic translation (for example, to substitute a French word for an English one). Similarly, the possibility of intrapictorial translation (e.g. exchanging one drawing for another) and interpictorial translation (substituting a photograph for a drawing) must also be considered.

The translation of a verbal text accompanied by a picture involves all these types of comparisons, and perhaps several more. If the verbal text is determined by, and/or determines the pictorial one, then it is natural that the translator should have access to the latter one in order to translate the former. In most cases, the linguistic

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transposition at the same time involves a cultural transposition. Usually, the problem posed by the picture from the translator's point of view, is cultural, rather than intrinsic to the pictorial medium. That is, it concerns the way in which the perceptual and/or socio-cultural world is rendered in the picture. It is possible to imagine cases in which the picture type itself is involved. Thus, highly codified picture types like the Russian icon or a Cubist painting, may have to be translated into some other pictorial style before being useful in other cultures. But these are certainly marginal cases.

Just as in the case of deviant picture types, pictures containing culturally loaded content may be exchanged for others or simply modified. This would involve the work of a professional not ordinarily called a translator. On the other hand, the translator may try to make up for the cultural deviance of the picture by adding elements to his verbal text not found in the verbal part of the source text. At this point, the question whether verbal and pictorial signs system are similarly organised and thus able to carry the same kind of information becomes practically relevant.

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The translation from one culture to another still is, in Jakobson's terms, an intersemiotic translation. However, since it involves the transposition, not of one single semiotic system but of elements stemming from a whole of culture, it may be better to have recourse to the terms of the semiotics of culture initiated by the Tartu school which would call this a case of cultural - or perhaps better intercultural - translation. Typically, the Tartu school would argue that intercultural translation gives rise to deformations. These will only be remedied when the familiarity with

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foreign texts has made it possible for the receiving culture to establish its own version of the cultural production system first generating the texts.

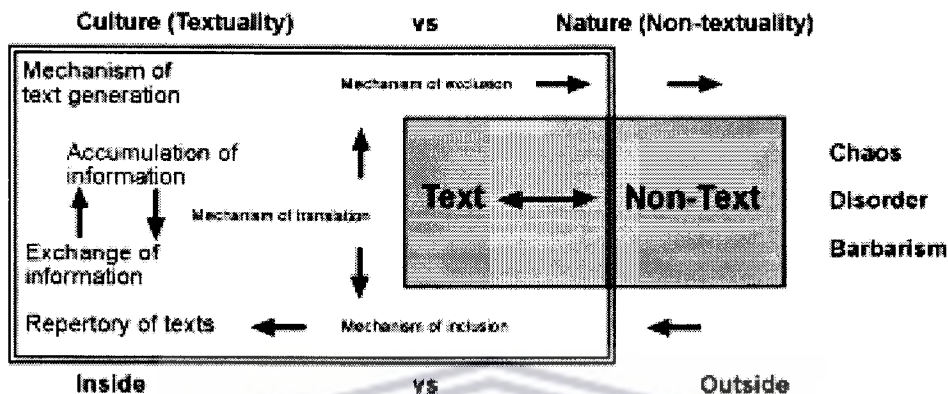

Figure 3: The "semiotics of culture" was coined by the Tartu School to describe the study of all semiotic systems present in a culture. Alternatively, the term could also refer to some kind of regularity mechanism organising semiotic systems as they are divided in a culture (Sonsson, G. (1997a): The Multimediation of the Lifeworld [online]. Available from http://www.arthist.lu.se/kultsem/sonesson/media_2.html: 3)

Semiotics of culture can be seen as something distinct from anthropology and sociology if two propositions are retained. A semiotics of culture is not about Culture per se but is more about the model members of a Culture make of their Culture. Also, this model itself is more involved with relationships between cultures (as well as subcultures, cultural spheres, and so on) than with a Culture in its entireity. This is not to deny that a model of Culture easily becomes a factor in Culture. For instance, those who insist that contemporary Culture is an information society and/or a global village are certainly capable of making a contribution towards transforming it into just that. Indeed, if semiotic systems are points of view on the material world, as Saussure (1974: 47) claims, then cultural semiotics is a point of view on these points of views; and it is easy to imagine this second-hand point of view contaminating the former. As to the second limitation, if it is not all too unfashionable to retain some aspects of the structuralist lesson, relations between cultures may be seen as partly

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defining what cultures are. The simple model above (see Figure 3).that emerges from the writings of the Tartu school, is still used by many cultural groups today; but it is certainly not the only one which is currently employed in the confrontation between cultures.

The Tartu model in Figure 3 is presented in the schematic form of two overlapping squares representing Culture and Nature, respectively. They are connected by different arrows, referring to the inclusion and exclusion of texts and non-texts (Sonesson 1994). This scheme is of course too simple to do justice to the Tartu school conception: as it only accounts for one part of the examples given in their articles. On the other hand, it is a model in a more pregnant sense because it can be continuously modified when in confronted with new real-world examples.

According to Sonesson, the model is built around an opposition between Nature and Culture, whereby both terms are constituted in the classical sense of linguistic structuralism, that is, by mutually defining each other. Yet a fundamental asymmetry is built into the model. Nature is defined from the point of view of Culture, not the opposite. According to this model, every Culture conceives of itself as Order and is opposed to something on the outside, which is seen as Chaos, Disorder, and Barbarism. In other words, Culture is opposed to Nature. In this sense, Nature will include other cultures not recognised as such by the dominant cultural model.

Beginning with his critique of Barthes, we have followed Sonesson's development of a new pictorial semiotic model. With his analysis of Pierce's concept of the iconic sign and the incorporation of new concepts drawn from the works of Husserl,

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Greimas, Gibson and the Tartu School, Sonsson provides us with enough material to apply a working model to an actual photograph. In the following chapter I will conduct an iconic analysis upon a photograph taken from a well-known New Zealand women's magazine. The goal is to determine what type of information Sonesson's model will provide and whether it is useful enough to provide a satisfactory interpretation or translation of its intended message.

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CHAPTER THREE AN ICONIC ANALYSIS

In the previous chapter, Sonesson introduced some new concepts into the lexicon of pictorial semiotics. In addition to some already established terms such as iconicity, plasticity, expression, content and form, Sonesson added convention, heirarchy, prototypicality, Lifeworld, open horizons, protention and retention, regularity and abduction, the etc principle and typification. In this chapter, we will undertake an iconic analysis of a photograph taken from a well-known New Zealand women's magazine (see Figure 4 below) incorporating these new elements suggested by Sonesson.

(i) *An Iconic Analysis of Hinewehi Mohi*

From an iconic point of view, there are three independent objects and a textual field to be considered in Figure 4. There is a woman, clouds, blue sky and a text field containing the word "inspiration". Figure 4 relies on a series of abductive and contiguous indexicalities. Sonesson uses the term abductive to refer to ones reliance upon a common-sense knowledge of nature when contemplating a static image in relation to ones perceptual experience. Such expected regularities as experienced in the world, otherwise described by Sonesson as factoriality, permits access to at least an approximate interpretational scheme relating to, in this case, the human (and in particular female) body, clothing and natural phenomena such as clouds and the sky.

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If a photograph were to be divided into a number of fields in an effort to localise certain general features, certain elements from one field will carry on through to any number of neighbouring fields. Such features are said to be contiguous. This

Figure 4: The image under analysis taken from an article that appeared in *The New Zealand Woman's Weekly* November 08 1999: 29

contiguity can also be extended to include features that are not actually depicted or are obscured in a photograph but can be supplied from real-world experience. In this sense, contiguity is considered performative because the internal composite features of the photograph provide the visual cues.

However, such indexicalities or schemes as those considered above cannot be considered as indexical signs. The objects in Figure 4 are depicted in part for two different reasons. Some aspects are hidden behind others. For instance, parts of the female form are hidden beneath the hair. Other aspects are hidden behind other objects. For example, parts of the clouds and sky are obscured behind the female figure. The picture frame as perceived in real time also interrupts the natural extensions of objects. Whatever the case may be, all such instances are not representative of any discontinuity between the signified and signifier which,

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following Piaget (see Sonesson 1988: Chapter 1), is one of the requirements for the creation of a sign.

A complete depiction of the objects in Figure 4 can be readily supplied from perceptual information drawn from nature. Generally speaking, in the case of a photograph, the difference between information drawn from experience and objects depicted in a photograph is that the constantly shifting perception of the world is frozen by the photographic act into a single static image. This kind of framed hiatus creates a greater problem in terms of perceptual expectations than the parts of those objects hidden behind other parts. It is easier to refer to everyday perceptions to fill in the missing parts of depicted objects from nature than it is to fit a photograph into its proper context. In other words, while it is easy to fill in obscured or blank areas of a photograph from real-world experience, it is much more difficult to place a photograph within the chain of events of which it is but a single moment forever frozen in time.

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(ii) *Abduction and Contiguity*

There are two kinds of indexicalities to be considered in Figure 4: that there are limitations imposed by a static view; and that restrictions arise due to the interruption of the picture frame. Those aspects abduced or obscured within Figure 4 will be rendered in italics while those features considered contiguous or that extend beyond the frame will be recorded in boldface.

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I **Figure 4: Scheme of the Body (Female Variation)**

(a) **Woman**:

1. *Area above the crown of the head, left ear*
2. *Neck*
3. *Shoulders*
4. *Upper right arm, upper left arm*, **lower arms, hands**
5. *Upper torso*
6. **Lower torso**

8. **Legs**

(b) **Figure 4: The Necklace Scheme**

1. *Necklace*

(c) **Figure 4 Background: Natural Phenomena Scheme**

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1. *Clouds*/**clouds**
2. *Sky*/**sky**

Generally speaking, common knowledge of the human form makes it a relatively simple task to reconstruct the full human form in Figure 4 despite the interruption created by the border of the photograph. But there are also contiguities of an abductive kind to be considered though most of them are performative, that is, they are produced in the picture. For example, it can be determined from perceptual experience that there must be a neck between the head and the upper torso. A

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contiguous relationship can be established by considering the proximity of the chin to the torso. By adding these two indexicalities together it is possible to determine the approximate location of the neck. The above body scheme may be an over-simplification even to everyday experience. However, the above example shows how aspects of, in this case, the human form can be reconstructed from knowledge gained from a combination of everyday perceptual experience and visual cues provided within the photograph itself. This is despite the neck being almost totally obscured.

Meanwhile, the scheme representing the background components raises a different issue. Both abductive and contiguous function operate (the female form abducts while the picture frame interrupts). However information required to rebuild the background scheme can easily be reconstructed from perceptual experience.

(iii) *Attributes*

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Objects and their individual parts contain many properties. Because of choice, combination and presentation of the object, a certain number of properties belonging to an object will be more clearly highlighted than other properties. Below I will italicise those parts of each independent object that tend to emphasise a particular attribute.

II Figure 4: The Female Form Scheme

(a) Face: light complexion (?), *smooth skin*, small face, short upper lip, small nose, salient jaw-line, high forehead = feminine

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(b) Face: (as a cultural feature of femininity), *painted lips*, *eye make-up* = +feminine

(c) Hair: *long*, dark, = +feminine

(d) Hair: (as a cultural feature of femininity), *stylised* = +feminine

(e) Chest: smooth, *projects outward*, no muscle definition = +feminine

(f) Chest: (as a cultural feature of femininity), dress straps (?), *adorned* = +feminine

(g) Upper left arm: *no muscle definition*, smooth = +feminine

Figure 4: The Necklace Scheme

(a) Necklace: *loose choker style*, feather or quill material (?) = feminine

Figure 4: The Background Scheme

(a) Sky: blue, flat = masculine

(b) Cloud: white, soft, rounded shapes = +feminine

In most cases it is possible to identify the gender of an individual from the face alone. Sonesson (1992) refers to the work of Liggitt (1974) who lists a number of general physiognomic tendencies regarding the form of the female face. The female face is 4/5 the size of the male face; the nose is smaller even in proportion; the mouth is smaller; the upper lip is shorter; the eyebrows are thicker; the bridge of the nose is wider, more concave and sunken down; the eye-lashes are longer and stronger; the iris and the eye region generally are darker.

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Any list like that proposed by Liggitt must be treated with some scepticism. If it is applied to Figure 4, the results are no more certain than if a simple visual assessment had been preferred. Few of the attributes highlighted have little to do with the physiognomic features of the face. Presumably it is the culturally defined features of femininity and how they emphasise the natural features of the body, that play the main role in establishing the gender of the person appearing in Figure 4.

For the time being, the physiognomic features of the clouds and sky determine the kind of appellation attributed to them: that is, rounded forms and curves as feminine and flatness as masculine.

(iv) *Perceptual Noemata (Prototypical Positions)*

Following Rosch (1978), Sonesson indicates that for some objects, there are visual perspectives that are protoypical; that is, provide the best angle from which to view a particular object. For example, animals and vehicles are preferably seen from a side angle while the human body is better viewed from the front. This notion of prototypicality will be applied to each independent object in Figure 4.

III **Figure 4: The Female Form**

(a) The Face and Neck

The angle presented to a viewer of the face and neck is a ¾ right-hand turn opening up the left-hand side of the person being photographed. This represents a ¼ turn from the prototypical forward-facing position for the human body. This degree of

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deviation from the prototypical position presents two problems. It is not possible to conduct a comparison between paired features such as the ears, eyes, and eyebrows to determine the evenness or the balance of facial features generally. This problem is further exacerbated in this case by the abductive properties of the hair that further hinders the viewing potential of the person being photographed from this angle.

(b) The Body

The angle of the body presented to a viewer follows that of the face and neck. The problems are the same as those encountered in the case of the face and neck. However, because more of the body can usually be seen even from this non-prototypical position, the hair obscures much of the detail including the suggestion of dress straps running down either side of the neck.

(c) The Necklace

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The necklace is much less affected by the prototypical position of the woman. The main details of the necklace are presented allowing a fairly accurate idea of its overall design and position on the body. This would indicate that the position of the necklace is fairly close to prototypical.

(d) The Background: The Sky and Clouds

The clouds and sky appear to be fairly prototypical.

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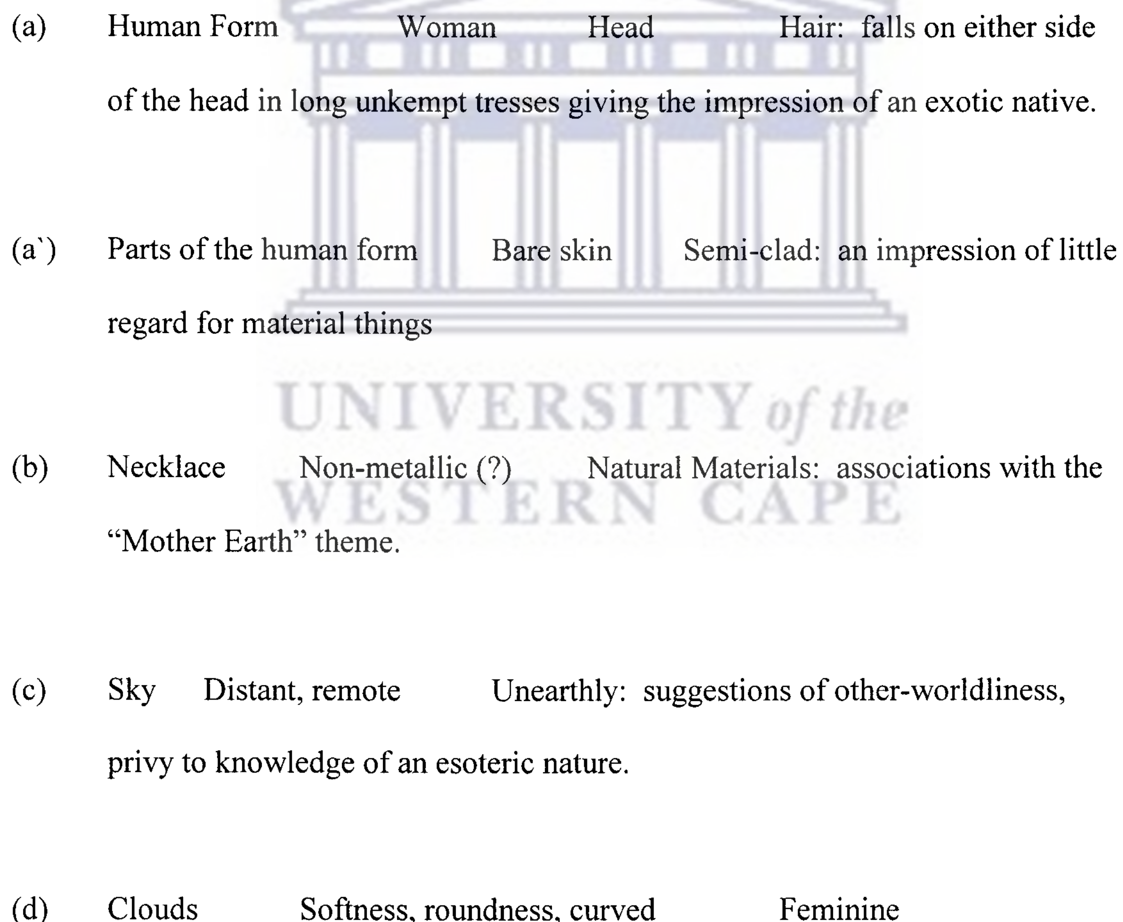
(v) *Intentional Levels and Interactions*

This section concludes with a brief note on the number of modifications that the independent objects undergo as they are interpreted at different intentional levels. In addition, I will list the array of interactions that occur between independent object in Figure 4 also.

IV **Figure 4: Intentional Levels**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(a) Human Form Woman Head Hair: falls on either side of the head in long unkempt tresses giving the impression of an exotic native.

(a`) Parts of the human form Bare skin Semi-clad: an impression of little regard for material things

(b) Necklace Non-metallic (?) Natural Materials: associations with the "Mother Earth" theme.

(c) Sky Distant, remote Unearthly: suggestions of other-worldliness, privy to knowledge of an esoteric nature.

(d) Clouds Softness, roundness, curved Feminine

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V Figure 4: Interactions

(a) Interaction: Female form/Necklace

The interaction of the necklace with the female form accentuates or reinforces the feminine theme with the wider connotations of the association between women and the earth, creation, birth, nurture and sustenance.

(b) Interaction: Female form/Sky

There is little suggestion of any direct interaction between the sky and the female form. Because the sky changes colour from an aquamarine hue at the bottom of the photograph, to a dark blue almost indigo colour at the top, there is an inference of movement, some kind of journey. It is possible to interpret the interaction between the female form and the sky as a journey or a progression from light to dark, from the secular to the profane, culminating in the attainment of enlightenment, understanding or wisdom.

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(c) Interaction: Female form/Clouds

The primary inference arising from the interaction between the female form and the clouds is the reinforcement of the notion femininity albeit a particular type of femininity. The soft, rounded and curved features of the clouds add further to the connotative message, which in this instance, is a female form whose sexuality is

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further reinforced by associations with objects exhibiting characteristics deemed to be of a feminine quality.

(vi) *A Plastic Analysis*

Following Floch (1981), a plastic or verbal analysis begins with a segmentation of the total picture surface into broad sub-areas (see Figure 5 below). Additional information is gathered through a series of contrasts between plastic attributes identified among the properties of the segmented areas.

All potential contrasts between, and the way in which the properties within, each sub-area are constructed are examined. Meanings are then assigned to the relevant plastic properties on the basis of available psychological research. A possible methodological approach to the photograph considered in this study might take the following form:

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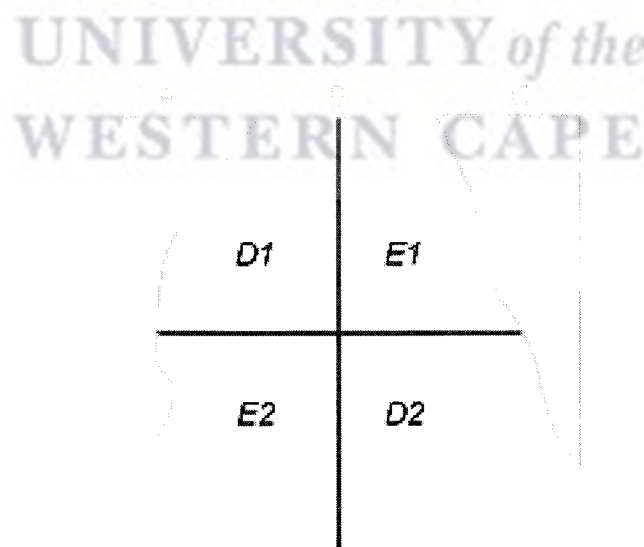

Figure 5: Proposed segmentation scheme for the plastic analysis of Photograph 4.

(a) The photograph is segmented into three vertical bands. The middle band is further segmented into the vertical bands of *A1* and *A2* as well as two further horizontal bands *B1* and *B2*. The proposed segmentation scheme is argued

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for on the basis that, with the aid of the dominant attributes within each band, a correlation can be made between the following segmentations:

1. $(A+C)+B$
2. $(A+C)+D1$
3. $(A+C)+D2$
4. $(A+C)+E1$
5. $(A+C)+E2$

A correlation between segments can be made on the basis of colour, shape, homogeneity and symmetry.

(b) Within each correlation one segment is contrasted with another two to identify any contrastive characteristics particular to the segment under analysis. Similarities between segments are also looked at but only as isotopies, that is, similarities that can only be read as continuing from one area to another. Contrasts between the three main segments *A*, *B* and *C* as well as those between the sub-sections of segment *B* are noted.

(c) Properties are ascribed to interactions arising as the result of contrastive relations established between areas. Any interpretation of these properties is derived from available psychological research and, to some extent, from personal intuition.

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(d) The meaning generated by the textual block is considered as a visual element. The final analysis confronts the meanings derived at both the iconic and plastic levels for each area.

Time and space will not allow an analysis of similar and contrastive characteristics following the segmentation scheme proposed for Figure 4 on the previous page. To a certain extent, point (c) has already been carried out during the iconic analysis of the intentional and interactional levels. The only feature upon which a plastic analysis will be conducted is the textual field.

(vii) *The Textual Field*

In this particualr instance, a plastic analysis of the text is argued for because the word "inspiration" counts as a simple perceptual property that is also capable of carrying a meaning of its own. Obviously the form, attributes and position, coupled with the verbal meaning of the word "inspiration" in Figure 4 is going to affect the way in which the photograph is read.

(i) **The Textual Field of Figure 4: Contrastive Analysis**

(a) Colour: White, black drop shadow, parallel lines, vertical

(b) Symmetry: Off-centre to reader's left

(c) Shape: Angular and roundish, horizontal and vertical

(d) Contrast: Dominant

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(ii) **The Textual Field of Figure 4: Expression**

(a) Many units

(b) White and black

(c) Horizontality

(d) Limited verticality

(e) Shallow depth

(f) Interrupts picture frame

(iii) **The Textual Field of Figure 4: Content**

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(a) Busy, informative

(b) Bold, declamatory

(c) Crowded

(d) Dominant

The visual aspects of the word "inspiration" exhibit strong contrastive characteristics. The word occupies almost the entire bottom length of the photograph. The font style is Helvetica, a classic sans serif style noted for its strong clean appearance. This type of font attains a balance between the elements of angularity and roundedness that normally gives it a certain reserved appearance. The size of the font however, suggests this is a typical heading commonly used in print media.

The white fill of the letters contrasts strongly with the black drop shadow effect, allowing the text to stand out from the page. The same effect however, also serves to

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isolate the text from the rest of the visual features in the photograph. Those forms and qualities that the text field shares such as the whiteness of the necklace and, to a lesser degree, the whiteness and roundedness of the clouds, are unable to counteract the strong contrastive affects. If one chooses to engage with the more complex signified form of the simple attribute colour white, one thing becomes apparent. A greater emphasis is placed on the verbal message or the meaning of the word "inspiration" rather than any consideration for the way it interacts visually with other visual aspects within Figure 4.

Resorting to personal intuition, the quality of whiteness can be made to stand further for qualities such as purity, virginity, innocence, colonialism, coldness and so on. But there is little at this stage to indicate that the visual aspects of the word "inspiration" share any of the intrinsic qualities that the colour white may commonly signify.

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(viii) *The Verbal Message*

The message the word "inspiration" is intended to convey is that the female depicted in Figure 4 is cause enough to stimulate, arouse or enkindle such an emotion or reaction in a reader. But the cause of such a response is not immediately clear. There is no indication provided by the word "inspiration" to suggest why one should feel inspired by the female form other than a general linguistic reference to someone or something that is capable of enkindling such a state of mind, feelings, etc..

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In the following chapter, we will compare and consider the implications of the results from our the iconic analysis.

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CHAPTER FOUR CONCLUSION

In the previous chapter we conducted an iconic analysis of a photograph taken from a New Zealand women's weekly magazine. At this stage, a preliminary assessment of the results suggests that while a great deal of information can be gathered by analysing and comparing iconic aspects in a picture, there is little consensus on just what the intended message in Figure 4 is meant to be. In addition, a significant intuitive leap is still to be made from the mass of information collated to deducing the most likely reading intended.

Keeping in mind the fact that the wealth of data collated from the iconic analysis conducted in the previous chapter has not provided any clear indication of how Figure 4 is to be read, a consideration of the cultural context appears to offer a more promising solution to the following question: what intended message is Figure 4 trying to convey?

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(i) *The New Zealand Woman's Weekly: Hinewehi Mohi*

Since its inception, the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* has been a staple of the New Zealand magazine scene. From its earliest days, the magazine sought to reflect the lives of ordinary New Zealand women within its pages. For over 60 years the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* has held a place of esteem in the New Zealand market, reaching, in 1998, an estimated circulation of one million readers.

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In the 08 November 1999 edition, the magazine featured an article concerning the Maaori singer/songwriter Hinewehi Mohi (see Figure 6 below). Written in the first person, Mohi speaks of the motivation and inspiration provided by her daughter Hineraukatauri upon the 1999 international release of the album *Oceania*. A collaborative effort, the album represents a "celebration" of her daughter's survival since her birth in 1996, after having been diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

Mystory

Hinewehi Mohi is taking the sounds of Maori culture overseas to a new audience. Her success owes a lot to do with tradition – but her greatest inspiration comes from her daughter

Sweet inspiration

Figure 6: Feature article from *The New Zealand Woman's Weekly* 08 November 1999: 29

The above information is drawn from the text of the Hinewehi Mohi article in the New Zealand Woman's Weekly 08 November 1999 issue. With this additional textual information, the intention behind the word "inspiration" in Figure 4 is clarified. In the previous chapter, the word "inspiration" suggested that the female

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depicted in Figure 4 was cause enough to stimulate, arouse or enkindle an emotion or reaction in a reader. But the cause or nature of this reaction was not immediately clear. There was no indication provided by the word "inspiration" in either its visual or semantic form, to suggest why one should feel inspired by either part or all of the visual aspects that made up Figure 4.

We now know that the word "inspiration" within the context of the entire article relates to how Hinewehi Mohi's daughter Hineraukatauri has inspired her to continue to create a music that celebrates not only her daughter's survival, but also promotes her cultural heritage.

Figure 7: The album cover for *Oceania*, released in 1999.

The second smaller photograph featured in Figure 6 also provides additional information. The second smaller photograph depicts Hinewehi and her daughter together. If one considers the information gathered so far; that is, data from the iconic and plastic analyses and the additional textual information, we find that the second smaller photograph reinforces the idea that the word "inspiration" relates to the mother-daughter/relationship between Hineraukatauri and Mohi.

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A focus on the relationship between a mother and her child is not surprising if one considers the medium within which the article appears; that is, a women's weekly magazine. The emphasis on how such a relationship can lead to success on a professional and international level is a relatively new slant on a common theme in women's magazines; namely, the balancing of child-rearing with a professional working career. However, there is another process at work in the Hinewehi Mohi article that suggests that Sonesson's cultural semiotic model has another important contribution to make.

Figure 8: Hinewehi Mohi with daughter Hineraukatauri (http://www.apra.com.au.htm/nz/NZ_APRAP/99july/mohi.htm)

Although not the same photograph as shown in the article, Figure 8 above is a photograph taken from the same series as the one that appears in the New Zealand Woman's Weekly article. The dominant feature in Figure 8 is the wall mural depicting the figure of a *manaia*, a mythical half-bird/half-man figure often used to

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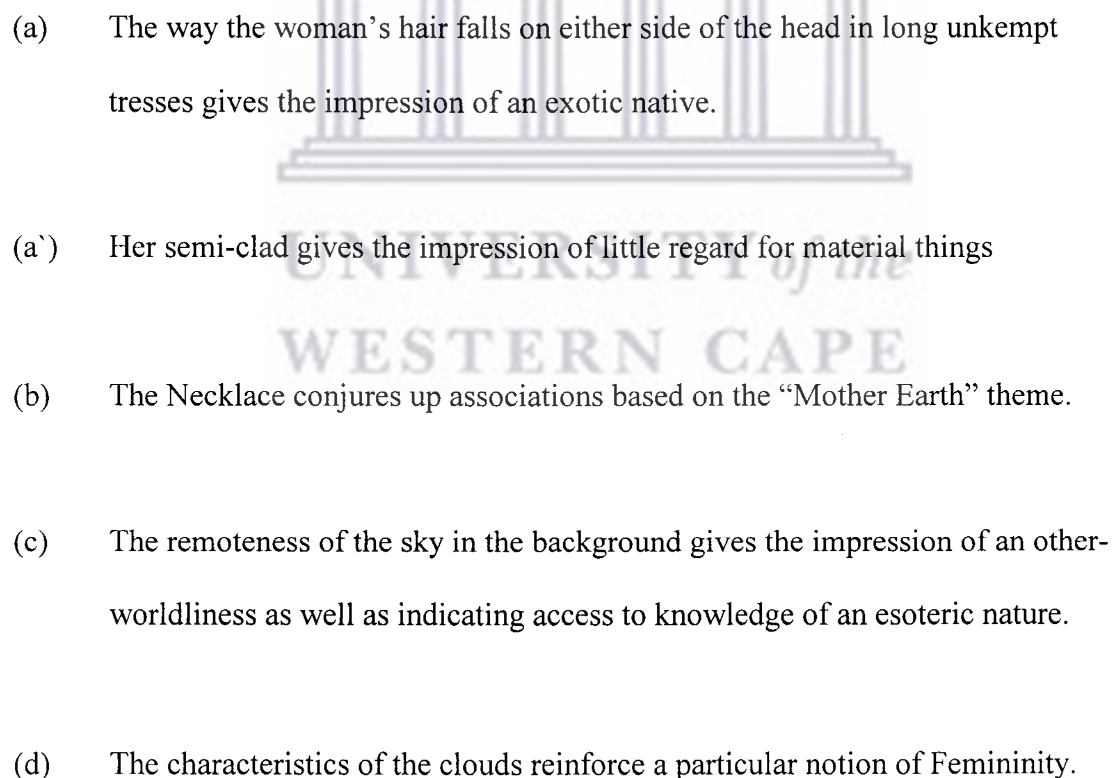
represent a tupuna (ancestor) or as a messenger of the gods. It is used extensively in whakairo or tradition Maaori carving.

The importance of the Maaori heritage both Mohi and her daughter embrace would have been more strongly highlighted had Figure 8 been used in the layout of Figure 6. Alternatively, the same effect would also have been achieved had a larger amount of the background of the photograph used in the Figure 6 been shown, as depicted in Figure 8. There is certainly a greater degree of continuity if one looks at the relationship between Figure 8 and Figure 4. During the analysis of the intentional levels of Figure 4 on page 38, the following observations were made:



(a) The way the woman's hair falls on either side of the head in long unkempt tresses gives the impression of an exotic native.

(a`) Her semi-clad gives the impression of little regard for material things

(b) The Necklace conjures up associations based on the "Mother Earth" theme.

(c) The remoteness of the sky in the background gives the impression of an other-worldliness as well as indicating access to knowledge of an esoteric nature.

(d) The characteristics of the clouds reinforce a particular notion of Femininity.

Coupled with the cultural significance of the mural backgrounding Figure 8 and the textual information relating to the mother-daughter relationship and Mohi's

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achievements in the musical world, the verbal message of Figure 4 is more clearly articulated. We now recognise Figure 4 as the kind of iconic image used in music promotion or advertising. The portrayal of Mohi as an exoticised female persona can be traced to her cultural background although it is likely that the image is modified to appeal to a wider audience. However, if one takes into consideration the general context within which Figure 6 appears, it is clear that the intended reading is a reference to the "mothering" theme or a variation of it. In terms of Figure 6, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the cultural slant taken on the Hinewehi Mohi story is meant to highlight the ability of women in general, to successfully fulfil the roles of being both a mother and a career woman. However, to ensure that the intended message is successfully conveyed to a reader, foreign elements or elements that refer to another cultural context are either excised or exoticised.

(ii) *Conclusion*

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The results of the iconic and plastic analyses in Chapter 4 indicate that insufficient information is derived from the analysis of pictorial aspects to be able to interpret the intended message of a photograph. The possibility for such an interpretation relies on access to information from extraneous sources or prior knowledge of a set of conventions and/or an array of stock situations by which both the iconicity of the icon and the character of the sign can be established. It is unlikely however, that such a set of conventions based on perceptual experience would provide a sufficient knowledge base when considering the cultural aspects of pictorial representation.

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Sonesson's cultural semiotic model stands on firmer ground when he considers the way in which cultures consider themselves as *insiders*, while those from other cultures will be seen as *outsiders*. Any *text*, that is, anything that is *understood* within the accepted norms or values of the inside culture or, semiotically speaking, everything that *belongs* to a particular system of interpretation, cannot exist outside a culture. But the potential exists for *non-texts* to be transformed into *texts* by way of mechanisms of inclusion. Non-texts however are more likely to be excluded or deformed by such mechanisms.

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Mystory

Hinewehi Mohi is taking the sounds of Maori culture overseas to a new audience. Her success owes a lot to do with tradition – but her greatest inspiration comes from her daughter

Sweet inspiration

8 November 1999 New Zealand Woman's Weekly 29

Figure 6: Feature article from *The New Zealand Woman's Weekly* 08 November 1999: 29

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Figure 1: The image under analysis taken from an article that appeared in *The New Zealand Woman's Weekly* November 08 1999: 29

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