1 Resemblance, representation and reality

Communication is central to how we get along in the world: how we make meanings, and how we both make sense of, and organize, our environments. It includes not only spoken and written language, but also visual imagery, bodily gestures, music, architectural design, and all the many other ways by which we insert ourselves into, and communicate with, the world. Representation is the dominant system by which we handle communication, but it is not the only option. In fact, it is a comparatively new system for meaning making: a number of other conceptual frameworks and systems served for many centuries and, in some cases, continue to serve.

It is only in the past few hundred years – the modern era, the period from about the seventeenth century on – that representation, strictly speaking, has dominated approaches to the use of language and the construction of meaning. As Christopher Prendergast writes:

> as a concept supplying a regulatory matrix of thought, representation, notwithstanding its ancient lineage, is an essentially modern invention, one of the master concepts of modernity underpinning the emergence of what Heidegger called the Age of the World Picture, based on the epistemological subject/object split of the scientific outlook: the knowing subject who observes ('enframes' is Heidegger's term) the world-out-there in order to make it over into an object of representation. (2000: 2)

Of course there have always been gestures towards what we now understand as representation: ways of separating ourselves from the objects and ideas under discussion, systems of delegation, and substitutions. The idols that stand in for gods in ancient cultures are substitionary, and so are representational. But how people understood themselves in relation to both the world and the systems of communication has changed radically over the centuries. An earlier model, and one that continues to inflect our perception of and organizing of the world, is resemblance.

BEFORE REPRESENTATION

Stuart Hall describes as 'the reflective' approach to language (1997a: 15) the notion that a sign reflects an already-existing meaning or identity. This approach was written about in very ancient texts – those of the Greek philosophers, for instance, where it is named **mimesis**, or resemblance, or similitude. The idea is that the sign actually *resembles*, and does not simply *signify*, the thing itself. Although like representation-proper it stands in for the original thing, it does so in a direct relationship based on imitation, or likeness.

Mimesis, or resemblance, can be found in virtually all human mark-making or other cultural practices. A portrait that looks like its subject; music that sounds like the wind rustling the leaves of a tree; clothes that resemble the feathers of a bright bird; a garden designed to look like a forest – all these are mimetic signs. It can also be a mode of writing, especially in pictographic forms like Egyptian hieroglyphics or Mandarin characters. Here the writing is a series of marks that act as signs because they stand in for the topic under discussion (they 'represent' that topic). But unlike symbolic representation, they communicate by looking like the things to which they refer. The written sign for water, for instance, might be a series of wave-like lines. The written sign for a god might look like statues of that god; and the statues themselves might have elements that resemble the qualities attributed to that god: perhaps huge muscles for power, a lion's head for nobility, a snake's body for speed, and so on.

Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs are perhaps the best known of written texts based on resemblance; they use many pictographic elements, along with abstract signs, to tell complex stories, relate dense histories, and to record bureaucratic matters such as policies or budgets. The more famous objects are sarcophagi, and thanks to the efforts of Egyptologists there are many examples of tombs and other iconography and objects of the dead in museums around the world.

The image here (from an exhibition at the British Museum) is inscribed on the tomb of a royal woman from Thebes, who died about 530BCE. I cannot read the hieroglyphs, but I assume – based on other sarcophagi – that the story told on the whole object, of which this is a tiny extract, describes her life and times and comments on her death. There are recognizable images: an ibis, a scarab, an eye and a person extending an arm; there are other more abstracted icons, such as the jagged and curved lines and other marks that bear no obvious resemblance to anything. I can recognize, or think I recognize, elements in the text; but I can only guess at the meaning of the signs and the text as a whole, based on what I think the inscriptions resemble, and what little I know about ancient Egyptian culture.

SIMULACRUM AS RESEMBLANCE

In fact pictographic or iconographic writing was not really a simple or direct system of resemblance: the hieroglyphs resemble the objects only in a limited, abstract way, and are transparent only to those trained in their conventions. Only the resemblance that is called a **simulacrum** can really invoke the original by perfecting duplicating it. For an example of what simulacrum is and how it works, let's discuss the Alfred Hitchcock movie *Vertigo* (1958). The movie opens with the protagonist, Scottie (James Stewart), unable to save a police officer from falling to his death from the roof of a tall building. This trauma causes him to suffer (the eponymous) vertigo, and is the core of the plot that follows. Scottie falls in love with Madeleine (Kim Novak), the wife of an important local man; but she is a troubled woman, obsessed with death, and apparently commits suicide. Scottie, desperate with grief and loss, finds a possible substitute for her in Judy. But where Madeleine is elegant and sophisticated, Judy is a loud shop-girl. To make her the perfect copy, Scottie goes to considerable effort to remould her and form her into 'Madeleine'. She is not to be a substitute or resemblance, but a simulacrum: a perfect stand-in for the original, virtually indistinguishable from the source. Of course it doesn't work; but it is an interesting experiment in resemblance, simulacrum and the

idea of presence – whether a sign can really make the original, real-world object present again.

The reason that no simulacrum can in fact perfectly stand in for the original is because there must always be a gap between the sign and what it signifies. Plato discussed this two millennia ago, in his argument that all we see and do is but a pale imitation of the ideal Form for the things we see and do, that exists in some transcendental realm, and is the origin for everything in our world of simulcra. Our efforts to produce representations or resemblances of that Form will only be partial and equivocal; and will be based on our prior understandings of what is important, of what something means, and of the right way of showing it. Scottie's attempt to reproduce Madeleine through a representation – Judy-the-simulacrum – failed not only because the Madeleine/Judy distinction was a trick, not only because there must be a gap between the sign and what it points to, but also because he did not really believe in the value of the outcomes.

ANALOGY AND SENSE

Even a perfect resemblance will be perfect only because it fits with ideas we might have about perfection, and about the thing it resembles. What is important here is that all uses of representation to make meaning are fundamentally epistemological. That is, they are not just about communicating something, but are based on theories of knowledge. There is no simple mirror of the world, but only ways of seeing that are inflected by philosophical and hence **ideological** perspectives. Slavoj Zizek argues that ideology is a 'generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and non-visible, between imaginable and non-imaginable' (1994: 1). We can only see, or make sense of what we see, on the basis of how we understand the world to be.

The world in medieval Europe was viewed through the epistemological filter of Christianity, so that it and all its contents were perceived as being there for a divine purpose (Eco 1986a: 53). Virtually everything one could see had a meaning based on some sort of resemblance to, or echo of, or analogy of, the divine: white meant light and goodness while black symbolized evil; lambs reminded viewers of Christ; doves were echoes of the holy spirit; olive branches indicated peace, and so on. Nor were Christians the only ones to make use of allegory. It was widley used in the ancient world: this image, for instance, is part of a fresco in Pompeii that is rich in elements that point to something beyond the everyday. Something similar still occurs, though more often in fun. Halloween imagery is an example of a cultural form that recalls the traditional logic of analogy, a pumpkin carved into a frightening mask, for instance, resembles an idea of the devil, and works best at night – the time of darkness and hence evil.

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This one is carved and lit so that it does something unexpected: the apparent image of pretty stars actually throws a demonic face against the wall.

As we saw in the case of hieroglyphics, the resemblance between the sign and the referent might be very slight, no more than an echo. But that was enough for the era, where what was required for meaning was not a sort of photographic reproduction, but a 'witty coincidence': just enough hints for someone to make a connection between the concrete and the abstract – the thing observed and the concept for which it stood. Resemblance, especially in the form of analogy (a lamb stands for Christ, for instance), was a way of filling the gap between the concrete and the abstract. There was never only one way of making analogies to fill that gap, though. Barbara Stafford writes that resemblance is an attempt to find the sameness in difference (1999: 2): to see how a wavy line might be the same as a body of water, to see how a dove might be the same as God. It does recognize that things cannot precisely and perfectly represent other things, but suggests that there are ways of finding points of connection and association that help us to make sense of the world.

To do so we have to ignore the real differences, and look only for the possibility of sameness. For example, philosopher Adam Dickerson discusses how we read a smiley-face emoticon. The 'face' is on the one hand simply a combination of lines and dots, and on the other hand is itself and itself only. It is neither a resemblance nor a representation, because there is no actual smiley-face outside the picture that it might look like, or for which it is a substitute. Yet we can read it as both resemblance and representation. No one looks like a smiley-face; but the big smile on the emoticon sort of resembles a happy person. There is nothing outside the picture that is an original smiley-face which the emoticon can render in an image to make it present again, but there are happy people, and it stands for us as a valid representation (Dickerson 2004: 15). We know it is neither a face or a smiling face, simply a pattern of lines. We know it is not *in* the picture either – it *is* the picture; and yet we comfortably say that it is a face, smiling, in the picture; and it is a picture of smile. It is nonsense, and yet it makes perfectly good sense. And it spirals on to make sense of other non-sense objects. This manhole cover, for instance, looks like someone winking, someone almost but not quite smiling, someone who is present. And yet all it is, is a chunk of metal on a Paris street, covered in litter.

The smiley-face is similar in its properties to pictographic writing: it gives a direct reflection of things that are in the world. But the signs Eco identifies as medieval representations of God rely on a different logic of resemblance. Here the resemblance is not a sort of mirror image, but a resemblance of affinity, or sympathy – based on connection and not of reflection. We find this in images and also in spoken or written language. Philosopher John Searle, for instance, points out that if you say someone is tall, he or she is tall

only as an attribution, not a reality (1993: 86–7). Every person, after all, is in real or short actual terms, when say, compared with a giraffe – even a giraffe who is short in giraffe terms. But a person short in actual terms may well be tall in relational terms: a women who measures two meters – short in comparison with giraffes – is tall by humans standards: a women who measures only 2.5 meters is tall in relation to toddlers.

ANALOGY AND EDUCATION

This is a mode of language use that is more closely associated with affect – feelings, attitudes – than with deductive reason. It is figurative rather than factual, and more inclined to communicate through story than through evidence and argument. It is thus a system of communication that is very well suited to teaching. In the Medieval period the focus on seeing everything as an analogy for the divine served as a reminder to people about the centrality of their religion to their lives. In a similar way, experts often use analogy – resemblance – to explain complex issues to those who do not know their field of expertise.

Writings by early medical scientists are full of analogical explanations and descriptions of the human body and how it works. The pelvic cavity was often described as a cave, and this allowed listeners – students, other doctors – to

visualize its form and to be alert to important issues for research or examination (*it is dark in there; there may be unexpected tunnels or fissures; go carefully!*). Following the same principle of rendering visible something that is hidden and complex, people using language to persuade will often use analogy. For example, environmentalists will talk of the 'rape' of the earth, an analogy that brings to mind vulnerable femininity, brute force, violation, and the need for people of goodwill and legal integrity to intervene. These are not 'true' images in the sense used by deductive reasoning, and nor are they 'true' – mirror image – resemblances, but they are pointers to something that a speaker might wish to posit as true.

IDEOLOGY AND RESEMBLANCE

It is important to remember that all resemblances, and indeed all representations, are only partial and contingent. We interpret signs in order to extract a desired truth. In Victorian England there was a tradition of using an extensive range of images (signs) on gravestones to tell something important about their beliefs. A number of graves in London Highgate Cemetery, for example, are adorned with carvings of guttering candles. This is a sign that reminds viewers of the transitory nature of life. There is no reason it should necessarily do so; after all, a candle, however low it has burned, looks nothing like a dying person. The only likeness is one of connection – both are dying. And even in what might seem to be the most naturalistic, the most mimetic, form of communication, that of onomatapoeia, cultural differences far override whatever might be the actuality of the referent. In France, for instance, barking dogs make a sound rendered as *ouaoua*; in Anglophone societies the same sound is rendered '*woof*', or '*yap*' (Belsey 1980: 41). The French and the English both, I assume, hear their dogs as 'naturally' making those very different sounds – even hear the same dog making those very different sounds. So what an individual person sees or hears as 'natural' is in fact cultural: it is the effect of ideological and epistemological frameworks.

Think, for instance, of modern public signage, which is a system of communication based on resemblance. The idea is that it acts as a perfect form of communication, that because it is 'obvious' and directly mimetic it can be read by anyone. It is not quite as simple as that. Look, for example, at what is a very common sign in public spaces around the globe: (see Figure 1.5). The pictures of figures on the doors of public conveniences are recognizable as male or female by very abstract, crude outlines – females in skirts, males in trousers. 'Obviously' these resemble men and women – and yet they don't in any real way. Men's and women's bodies are far more complicated than these line drawings. They are also more cultured than natural, so the signs do not

just say 'men', 'women', but men and women of a particular period, and in a particular society. In many cultures, for instance, men wear skirts and women wear trousers, in a reversal of the conventional (western) sign. But whatever icons are chosen to stand in for men and women, there is always more being conveyed than gender: epistemology and ideology are also being conveyed. For instance, this gender differentiation on the doors of public toilets naturalizes the social norm that, regardless of how we organize our facilities at home, men and women must use separate conveniences in public. The signs also naturalize the norm that only certain parts of the anatomy may be seen. Heads, legs and arms are visible, but the actual markers of bodily difference – breasts, male genitalia – are not shown. Such markers would, infact, offer much more explicit statements of who should enter which room, but cultural norms that prohibit the representation of nudity is overcome by representational convenience. The images resemble human male and female figures, but – like the baroque 'witty coincidence' – only just.

THE BIRTH OF MODERNITY

Resemblance in its various forms pretty much dominated seeing and making meanings up to the period of the **Enlightenment**, after which representation

became the more dominant mode (Foucault 1970: 51). The Enlightenment is the beginning of the modern age; it was characterized by a massive outpouring of philosophical thought and political actions, all grounded on a belief in what is 'rational, secular, democratic, and universal' (Alves 2000: 488). 'Rational' means that reason, rather than belief or tradition, became the basis for engaging with ideas and concepts; 'secular' because the Church finally lost its temporal power, and human thought, rather than God, became the measure of truth; 'democratic' because it also saw the shift from rule by the elites to elected governments; and 'universal' because the freedoms to be ushered in by the Century of Lights were for all. Consequently, Alves writes, 'Man was, therefore, the subject and mastermind of history' (2000: 488). And it was 'man', rather than woman, who became this free subject; though Enlightenment thought laid the foundations for the liberation of women as well as men, it took a couple more centuries before women even won the right to vote.

With the emergence of the modern era, science emerged as a positivist system of observation, testing and measurement; pragmatic reason replaced mysticism, resulting in what Max Weber termed 'the disenchantment of the world'; and a bright new period of human history seemed to have begun. Of course it wasn't only positive: by the nineteenth century many commentators were pointing out qualifications on the promise of the Enlightenment. Marx, for instance, wrote about the pressures on individuals, and the limits on their freedoms (though Man as a concept may be the centre of the world, individual men and women are not); Nietzsche pointed out the irrationality and particularity of what was 'reason' and 'universalism; and then the grand narratives of the Enlightenment were blown apart on the battlefields of the First World War. It turned out that rather than being 'truth', the philosophical pillars of modernity were just another set of perspectives.

This is the basis for our contemporary understandings of representation. Claire Colebrook writes that modernity ushered in representation because it countered the old approach, where knowledge about something was grounded on and validated by direct and immediate reference to the thing itself. With the new view of science, knowledge about something was grounded on and validated by representations: arguments, diagrams, pictures and other forms that were separated from the thing itself (Colebrook 2000: 49). In this way modern science changed the world from a place of mystery and habitation into an object of study. It also changed the way of looking at, framing and naming the world: it carved a space between the thing observed and the observer, because an experience and how it is articulated; it initiated the practice of mediation.

This was not, of course, the first time mediation was used. Human beings have always observed and named the things in their environment, and have used marks and sounds of various sorts to bring into presence an absent object or an idea. So a fundamental principle of representation – the act of

standing in for – has always been around. People in the ancient world had words for the creature we know as a cat that would have been every bit as arbitrary as c-a-t; inevitably: communication would be impossible if one needed to carry around an actual cat in order to talk about it. Even if were it possible to carry that cat around on the off chance that the topic of cats might come up in conversation, the principle of representation would still apply because the cat I show to people would change from being *this particular cat* to being the sign of cat, standing in for all cats, and for the idea of cat-ness. In other words, as soon as people began to communicate, they began to make representations – to use signs that stood in for the things being discussed. But how they figured and understood the relationship between the concrete thing and its sign has differed over human history.

FROM RESEMBLANCE TO REPRESENTATION

The move from resemblance to representation was a move from a system of meaning making based on similitude to one based on difference. The issue of similitude – or its capacity to mirror reality – was seen as a problem by many philosophers of the Enlightenment and after. The main issue was that a sign that resembled a real-world object or event seemed to imply that it contained the truth of that object or event: that it possessed the presence it was now re-presenting. In fact, as we discussed above, there was no real likeness or empirical resemblance, just ideas of likeness or association. But this was not enough.

René Descartes, the philosopher Michel Foucault identifies as the first important exponent of what we now understand as representation, opposed resemblance on the basis that it offered only false comparisons and, as I pointed out above, tends to work through the emotions rather than through reason. Descartes writes:

> Whenever men notice some similarity between two things, they are wont to ascribe to each, even in those respects in which the two differ, what they have found to be true of the other. Thus, they erroneously compare the sciences, which entirely consist in the cognitive exercise of the mind, with disposition of the body. (1969: 359–60)

He is prepared to allow resemblance as a basis for lived experience, but insists that it is inadequate for the development of science or reason. He was not the first to make this point; we find a similar complaint in Plato's *The Republic*, where he criticized art for doing just this, presenting illusions as actualities, and seducing people on the basis of emotion rather than reasoned thought.

But Descartes' call to reject resemblance in favour of representation does more than simply separate emotion and reason. It also encourages a change in the grounds of perception and discussion – from the visual to the linguistically based, as Martin Jay suggests (1993: 79). This is taking us at least two steps from the thing being represented: not only is it removed by being turned into image, but it is removed again by being reduced to words, and to an ever-increasing abstraction, accompanied by an ever-increasing distance between people and their physical environment.

REPRESENTATION AND REALITY?

Can representation deliver the rational truth that was at the heart of Enlightenment thought? Certainly it can allow us to consider and discuss what 'rational truth' means, or how we understand the world to be arranged. Frank Ankersmit explains this phenomenon as follows:

> one of the reasons why we need representations is that they enable us to obtain and to express an insight into the nature of things. That is why we have artistic representation, historical representation and political representation. But elsewhere representation is no less important. For representation defines reality; and that is why we could not possibly do without it. (2003: 320)

'Representation defines reality': it tells us what it is. But it does much more than that; it also makes and shapes our understanding of reality. We can know and access the world only through language, or representation.

We know of the Renaissance, for instance, because of how it has been represented, and the features of that period that historians have identified and written about. There is, though, nothing 'real' about the Renaissance in any way other than in how aspects of the period have been categorized; so, Ankersmit continues, '"things" such as the Renaissance could not even be said to *exist* in the absence of their representations' (2003: 322). Artist Paul Carter writes, similarly, of how Australia came into being as far as the Western world was concerned: 'Before it was known, Australia was named. Before it was seen, it was represented' (2004: 1). Long before Captain Cook reached the shores or circumnavigated the continent, even before the early Dutch explorers had bumped into bits of Australia, European cartographers had drafted an unknown landmass more or less in the vicinity occupied by Australia. Of course it was already known by indigenous Australians and their neighbours, but their knowledge and systems of framing the place were very different from that of the European explorers and colonists. It is hardly surprising, then, that the British who occupied Australia failed not only to see ('see') Aboriginal Australians, but

failed to see Australia from the indigenous perspective; they already 'knew' it, long before they actually experienced it, thanks to the various representations made of it well before the first fleet arrived in 1788. So:

> Reality is in the eye of the beholder; or rather, what is regarded as real depends on how reality is defined by a particular social group. … reality may be in the eye of the beholder, but the eye has had a cultural training, and is located in a social setting and a history. (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 163)

Just as our particular cultural history sets the terms for how we will represent and thus make our reality, so too that history, and its modes of representation, make each of us what we are. When I am represented, socially or politically, I am subtly or explicitly changed by that representation, because I am separated from myself and made to see myself, as it were, at a distance. When I am invoked by political candidates representing me, it is not me that I observe in their representations, but an abstract idea I do not recognize as myself. The person disappears in, or is blurred by, the idea of the electorate.

This effect is perhaps even more obvious in the case of photographs, as Kate Bowles describes (2002: 73), especially photos of the self. A photo may remind you of an event, but it does not take you there – not literally. And moreover, while it is 'you', at one level, it is not really you. If you look at it, you might say or think 'that's me'. Your mother might show the picture to friends and say, 'This is my child'. It is not you, is not your mother's child. It is a photograph, merely the capturing on paper of light and shade, line and point, at a particular moment and in a particular place. Nor does it really look like you, to you: for one thing, we experience the world from the inside out, looking out through the holes in our skulls. When looking at a photograph of me, I experience the world looking in, from the outside: something that is pretty disturbing if I think about it to any extent. A second problem is that I know myself only in mirror image – what I see when I look in the mirror. A photograph reverses this. For example, I have a mole under my left eye; I know it is the left because I can touch it. But in my mirror reflection it is on the right hand side. When I see photos of myself, I look subtly wrong – the mole is on the 'wrong' side (not the side I see from the inside out, but the side the world sees, from the outside in). This disconnection, this dislocation, is explored in a poem by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, titled 'This is a photograph of me'. The poem describes a landscape, and the lake in that landscape, and then continues:

> I am in the lake, in the center
> of the picture, just under the surface.
> It is difficult to say where
> precisely, or to say
> how large or small I am …' (1983: 1373–74)

The poem is consciously unsettling. Although it is written in the first person, and in the present tense, it describes the photograph as having been 'taken/the day after I drowned' – a logical impossibility, but a worrying conceit. It circles around ideas of loss, absence and exclusion. The line breaks inserts a halting quality to the sentence, as though the speaker is fumbling with language. It also talks explicitly about the problem of meaning – the photograph is 'blurred', for instance, it cannot produce the truth of its title.

Gilles Deleuze explains this uncomfortable experience by referring to the idea of representation as a mirror. This is not the mirror of resemblance (similitude) but the mirror of difference. Take, for instance, your own name: it is you, and at the same time it is not you, but just a collection of alphabetical shapes or uttered sounds. You (the thing itself) and your name (the designation that stands in for you) simply circulate:

> It is a two-sided entity, equally present in the signifying and the signified series. ... Thus, it is at once word and thing, name and object, sense and *denotatum*, expression and designation, etc. It guarantees, therefore, the convergence of the two series which it traverses but precisely on the condition that it makes them endlessly diverge. It has the property of always being displaced in relation to itself. (Deleuze 1990: 48)

In photographs, in our names, and in political representation we are always present and not present, always weaving back and forth between our **phenomenological** sense of ourselves, and our having been reduced to a sign.

VARIOUS SIGNAGE

I pointed out in the Introduction that there are several meanings of the term 'representation'; let me detail them a bit further to explain how it functions as a game. When we refer to texts, representation may be understood as transitive: that is, a representation *represents something*. It may also be understood as reflexive: that is, a representation *presents itself representing something*. It may be an instance of substitution, the making present of something that is absent; it may be a matter not of substitution, but of intensified *presentation*. Louis Marin explains this in his discussion of the effect that can be produced by visual representations of royalty. In discussing a trompe-Il'oil in the Sun King's palace, the 'Ambassador's Staircase', Marin shows that the ostensible subject, the Ambassador (an important person, the delegate of a foreign king) is reduced, by the structure of the painting, to a mere object: 'the gazer gazed upon. The spectator has become a spectacle. (2001: 318). It is the king who gazes upon all, and is also the subject of everyone else's gaze, not as object, but as intensified representation. Marin goes on to say that in this respect.

> All representation, all mimesis, is, in a sense, royal or theoretical: with it is
> instituted ... a subject who dominates apperances, thereby appropriating it for
> himself and identifying himself as a truth-judging subject in that appropriation.
> (Marin 2001: 318)

The subject of the painting is represented in the work, but at the same time
is self-representing: the painted face looks back at the viewer, controlling the
interchange. It is the work of representation performing communication
through presentation. The portrait instantiates a reality because it represents
not only a human being, but also a political situation – the actual status of
the king compared with the subject-viewer – and because it demands partic-
ular responses from those in its presence.

Marin also points to a third, and older, use of the term representation –
'to appear in person and exhibit things'. This he draws from Furetière's
Dictionary (published 1690) where one of the meanings of representation is
given as being 'to present oneself representing something' (Marin 2001: 352).
This, the reflexive dimension of representation, is a reminder that there is usu-
ally an active investment in representation; someone makes something, and
stands in the place of an absence, bringing both themselves and the repre-
sented thing or person to 'life'. An extreme version of this would be the situ-
ation where the person performing the representation is actually representing
themselves in themselves, rather than through an image – a purely reflexive,
and not a transitive mode. An example of this might be when the British royal
family or the Pope emerge on their respective balconies, to be seen. They are
themselves, individual human beings. They are there as representatives not
only of themselves, but also of their office. And they are both presenting and
*re*presenting themselves. This involves a curious doubling of the self (*this* me
is representing *that* me); it also reduces the person from self to representation:
a distance, an abstraction, which is at the heart of representation. This out-
line of some uses of representation does not, of course, draw attention to the
modes of representation, or the media in which they are communicated to us.
But media have a huge effect on how something is communicated, what it can
mean, and the functions a representation might perform. Paintings, books,
music, design, performances – each might take precisely the same issue, and
communicate it entirely differently, with very different effects, simply because
of the impact of the medium being used. Digital media makes this very
evident because in the digital environment, the 'language' of representation is
entirely central to how, and whether, a text works (Buzzetti 2002). Think, for
instance, of the writing of this page you are reading. A human being thought
up the words, and used an alphabetical system and a language well estab-
lished in history. Those words had to be keyed into a computer using a soft-
ware program that digitised – or converted – them into a string of characters

that are resistant to swift, fluent reading (by those not familiar with computer language). The computer screen showed the words in a way that reproduced the analogue equivalent to the digital coding. The digital material remained hidden behind the screen: this is the material that allowed the disc that contained this final, edited manuscript to be read by a digital printer, and turned out as a book in conventional, readable English. For computers, representation must be, first of all, digital. Without this precondition, it cannot function. But computers do not use representation the way we do as humans. A digital representaion is a representation 'for' as well as a representation 'of': it is a sign that is not a sign, designed not simply for communication but for storage and manipulation.

Still, this usage can be subverted in a way that renders digital text – code – as 'pure' representation. The Australian media artist Mary-Anne Breeze ('Mez') does precisely this in her 'codework' poems, an example of which can be found at http://beehive.temporalimage.com/archive/5larc.html (accessd 13 September 2007). Titled_ [ad] [Dressed in a Skin C.ode_, the work uses the complexities and inaccessibility of computer code to point out the ambiguities and sheer chance of much representation. It uses the representational devices of a computer to generate a work of art, an instance of representation that is as much about feeling as communicating, and that critically engages with the very act of making representation.

Gilles Deleuze identifies a similar complexity in human representation. He makes the point that regardless of the use, the mode of the medium of representation, meaning-making is not just a matter of a circular process – from utterance towards actualities and back to other utterances. In fact he suggests it is not circular, but that the two domains of propositions (utterances) and actualities (things) are themselves like two circles that may or may not touch. It is not *reality* that is brought into presence through representation; rather, it is *meaning* that is brought to light. People align the borders of the representations and that actualities to make meaning happen, and to make it seem real. We construct meaning out of the raw materials that are on the one hand the world, and on the hand, statements abouts the world.

REPRESENTATION MAKES MEANING

So the processes of representation do not simply make meaning present; rather, they *construct* that meaning. And certainly people seem eager to make meanings: indeed, as Simon Critchley writes, 'there is an almost irresistible desire to stuff the world full of meaning' (Critchley 2004: xxiii–xxiv). We find meanings in the most unlikely or subtle of things – a sunset, for instance, which in fact signifies nothing of itself, but is used as a sign of the end of the day, as

a metaphor for romance, for the end of things, or for the completion of a legal contract. A sunset does not 'mean' per se; it is not an artefact designed for meaning but a physical phenomenon. Still, we make it mean.

We also make each other 'mean', in a similar way, because we read people's minds – that is, we name the state of someone else's mind based on how we perceive their actions, and what we think those actions mean (Baron-Cohen 1995). Someone is slowly shredding a tissue; very well, then they must be bored or tense. Someone smiles widely; very well, then they must be happy or excited. Someone flinches away from a sudden movement; very well, then they must be afraid, or stressed. Someone takes a slice of cake from the plate on the table; very well, then they must want something sweet to eat. And so on. Our mind-reading may be spot on; or it may diverge wildly from what the person is actually thinking and feeling. But in any event, as research in the cognitive sciences shows, it is something that most people do, mostly quite accurately, and mostly without giving it a great deal of conscious thought.

Their doing it, though, can make it (appear) 'real'. Deleuze uses the notion of displacement to elaborate the uncertain or unstable nature of identify. With every new designation, he writes, the 'two series' (signified and signifier; me and how I am represented) may diverge in a different way. For example, following the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington and the USA's return attack on Afghanistan, a number of media reports focused on the history of the connection between Afghanistan and the West: Britain's long and unsuccessful struggle to hold Afghanistan, and the similarly long and unsuccessful attempt made by the Soviet Union, were revised as evidences of the intractability of the Afghan region and the stubborn resistance of Afghan people. It was difficult to 'read' Afghanistan in any other way than as the home of cunning, determined resistance fighters, a place of craggy impossible terrain, where locals are able to beat back considerably more sophisticated armies by virtue of local knowledge and determination. The 'truth' of the Afghan people became entrenched – at least until the next way of representing them emerges in the discourse.

Behind the urge to make meaning is what Jacques Derrida calls the '**metaphysics of presence**'. We saw above that the central concerns of the Enlightenment were reason and truth, because of the idea that these would set people free from the yoke of tradition, religion and ignorance. Enlightenment thought aimed to disenchant the world – to remove the magic by showing how things really worked, to allow us to understand and thus control our environments. It lifted human beings away from the domain of nature, and into the somewhat disembodied realm of culture where reason and clear thought were the watchwords.

Enlightenment discourse, though, typically ignored the fact that the whole logic of this new system of knowledge shared aspects of the magical, traditional

mode of metaphysics. Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy traditionally concerned with the nature of the world. More typically, the term is used for what we might call 'the unseen things', Like the modern scientist, the metaphysician wanted to discover the essence of all things. Of course the traditional mode did not use the sophisticated methods of science, or ensure replicability of results; it was closer to religion than to science. But both metaphysics and science are grounded on the belief that there are secrets in the universe that can be uncovered and discovered; that it is possible to understand, and give an account of, reality (Ankersmit 2003: 317).

THE ORIGINS OF THE SIGN

Just as metaphysics lurks in the domain of science, so too it inflects the domain of representation. It is important to understand this because it goes some way towards explaining the complexities of this system. A reference that is grounded in the real world – say, one based on resemblance – has a very different ontology (being) from one that is purely symbolic. The one based on resemblance is only one step away from the thing itself, and remains closely bound to it. But a representative sign is at least twice separated from the thing itself, as I pointed out in the Introduction. Its connection with the referent is arbitrary; which is to say, it is not grounded in any actual association between sign and signified. Still, to say that a representation stands in, or is a substitute for the original, implies that the original is capable of being made present – and that it is a convincing and necessary source of the sign. Richard van Oort points out:

> Any reasonably complete account of representation must sooner or later address the problem of origins. Where do our representations come from, and how are they grounded in the real physical and biological world? (2003: 245)

This is an important question because it goes to the heart of the connection between the representation and the original. It is also a question that could only be asked by someone in the modern age, because it shows the drive, since the Enlightenment, to understand how the world fits together in a logical and rational fashion. But like other aspects of Enlightenment thought – science, for instance – it keeps one foot in the enchanted world of pre-modernity.

GROUNDING METAPHORS

The contemporary notion of symbolic representation, as I suggested in the Introduction and will develop further in the next chapter, is that the representative signs are abstract and arbitrary. But alongside this dominant notion of the arbitrary, abstract nature of the sign is another that takes a very different view. This is the belief that though signs may vary from culture to

culture, they are not arbitrary, because they come from actual experience in the physical and social world.

The writers most often cited in discussions about this are George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, authors of a seminal text on metaphor. They argue that 'the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 5): in other words, metaphor belongs in the category of substitutionary representation. Such representation, they go on to write, emerges from real-world, observed phenomena – things we see, things we feel – that are then turned into metaphors and gradually move away from direct to purely analogical connection. All our metaphors and hence all our ways of making meaning through representation, they suggest, depend on those real-world events that become 'grounding metaphors'.

They use the example 'Harry is in the kitchen' to explain this (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 59). Harry is a real-world person, who can be perceptually observed in an actual place. To say he is 'in the kitchen' is not metaphorical, but a simple description. If rendered as a painting it would be pure resemblance. That description, though, provides us with the notion of a container for Harry, and this notion can be abstracted from the real-world perceptual domain to a more metaphorical one. We can then say, for instance, that 'Harry is in love'. Of course Harry is not *in* a physical container called 'love' as he was *in* a physical container called 'the kitchen', but the idea of *being in* carries through. This second container is more abstract; you could not paint a picture of Harry in love that would simply and without additional information resemble 'love' – unlike that previously mentioned painting that would directly resemble a man in a kitchen. Someone standing in a space is in the realm of phenomenology; some one 'in love' is in the nature of an abstraction and so cannot belong to the realm of resemblance.

Lakoff and Johnson's argument, then, is that the perception of a real-world phenomenon can, if it becomes a grounding metaphor, provide a basis for genuinely representational – that is, arbitrary and abstract – communication. Every time we use the term 'in' to describe someone's state of mind or other condition, lurking behind it is the real-world, perceptual and sensual sense of an enclosed space.

This notion of representation through metaphor – a very widely held one – is closely committed to the metaphysics of presence. It implies that all the terms of our representation are based in an actuality, and that behind the veil of the representation, the reality can be glimpsed, if you just look carefully. As van Oort complains:

> this explanation of how metaphors are grounded in the real world is really no explanation because it assumes precisely what is at issue, namely, the difference between a symbolic reference system and a reference system based on perceptual categorization. (2003: 246)

This is not to say that perception and representation are never connected, or that there are not good precedents for this approach to understanding the origins of language. Michel Foucault described something very similar in his *The Order of Things* where he discusses the origin of writing as being first of all based on resemblance, then on metaphors linked to resemblances, and finally on symbolic writing which also uses resemblance, to a more 'concealed' extent (though he is speaking here of a more pictographic than alphabetic form of writing). He goes on to state:

> Originally everything had a name – a proper or peculiar name. Then the name became attached to a single element of the thing, and became applicable to all the other individual things that also contained that element: it is no longer a particular oak that is called tree, but anything that includes at least a trunk and branches. The name also became attached to a conspicuous circumstance: night came to designate, not the end of this particular day, but the period of darkness separating all sunsets from all dawns. Finally, it attached itself to analogies: everything was called a leaf that was as thin and flexible as the leaf of a tree. (Foucault 1970: 110–11)

So finally, from the word 'leaf' being the name for a single and particular object, it gradually comes to designate sheets of paper, fine pastry, room partitions, as well as every instance of foliage. Fair enough; and at one level it seems that Foucault is mining the same territory as Lakoff and Johnson. But unlike those scholars, for whom linguistic representation remains at base phenomenological, Foucault insists that words are in fact free to align in many ways and to stand in for many possible real-world phenomena, whether there is a causal relationship between the word and the phenomenon or not.

UNGROUNDED REPRESENTATIONS

Often, there is no such relationship. Film–maker Danny Boyle, in an interview about his movie *Sunshine* (2007), talked about the pleasures of making a film about the sun because of its important to us all: it is, he said, the source of life, and that is why people have treated it as a god. This is a matter of assuming a relationship on the basis of common sense; it is a very common assumption and does seem perfectly reasonable. But drawing a line from sun to source of life to worship begins at the wrong end of things, because it assumes that the worship is the result of people knowing the sun's lifegiving properties. But there is no real evidence that sunworshippers understood the place of that star in the solar system. Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1965) made this point decades ago, and it still applies to virtually anything people have viewed as possessing symbolic significance. His argument was that people perceive

things as being awe-inspiring not because of the phenomenal properties of these things, but because of the representations their culture has made of them. This is why one real-world thing may be perceived, observed and invested with symbolic significance, and another is barely, or not at all, observed: a culture will worship the sun, but not the ocean; or a mountain, but not the sun. If our systems of representation genuinely rested firmly on real-world perceptions, we might expect there to be some consistency across cultures in what they observe and how they structure thought: yet 'it is precisely the functional explanation of this transition that cannot be reduced to purely biological terms' (van Oort 2003: 244).

The issue for van Oort is that Lakoff and Johnson's dependence on perception overlooks the fact that symbolic representation is disconnected from actuality. There is a significant difference between a reference that is grounded in the real world and one that is purely symbolic. This is, of course, another way of describing the problem of representation as a problem of the metaphysics of presence: Lakoff and Johnson depend entirely on the prior existence of real world events and effects that provide the 'grounding metaphor' on which all other metaphors are based, and from which they emerge.

Their thesis depends on there being a real relationship between perception and meaning making – as though perception were a simple practice that anyone could do in much the same way. But as Henri Bergson points out, this is simply not the case. Perception is cultural and specific, limited and interested. Bergson uses the concept of nothingness to explain his point: most of us have a sense of what is meant by 'nothing': it is absence, emptiness, it is a vast space that is unfilled. 'But in reality there is no vacuum. We perceive and can only perceive occupied space. One thing disappears only because another replaces it' (Bergson 1946: 97). So we might think we can perceive nothingness, but it is not a vacuum, not just absence. Rather what we actually perceive is presence and changing perspectives on the presence.

THE GAME OF PRESENCE

Much of Derrida's writing has taken on the connection between reality and representation, and shown that the apparent connection is generally just an effect of relations of power. If I can convince people that the sun is a divinity, and that we must therefore worship it; and, moreover, that I myself have special insights about its nature and how it wants to be worshipped, I will have the tools to control much of the discourse and practice in my community. This is a crude example, and I do not suggest that it is the primary origin for sun worship or even a conscious point of origin; but nonetheless, once a system of sun worship was in place, it was very easy to use it to manage the

population. The metaphysics of presence underpinned the power of images and other representations of the sun, implying that the actual presence, with all its might and authority, lay behind and backed up the representations.

Other scholars have taken a similar line to Derrida, investigating the apparent link between representation and reality and pointing out its very tenuous nature. Claire Colebrook (2000), in her insightful essay into the philosophical quarrels that surround representation, suggests that rather than relying on the metaphysics of presence, we should recognize that representation is not a mirror of the world, but simply a human practice, an effect of being in the world. We experience the world as given, or 'just there', not as represented or mirrored. Drawing on Deleuze, she suggests we consider the possibility that the world is not present, in the sense of being presented to us, and subsequently re-presented by us. Rather, it is we who are in it, at all times. The representations we make do not affirm the presence of real-world phenomena, but are simply effects of our being in the world. Like Derrida, Deleuze rejects the metaphysics of presence, or of presence at all in representation. Representation does not, for these thinkers, bring the idea of the real-world event into language, but is simply an effect of that real-world event (Deleuze 1991: 30). And the language in which we articulate it does not bring about a re-presentation – a substitution – but is something else entirely – a game of language played by members of society.

GETTING IT WRONG

Given that meaning and reality are made, they clearly do not simply or innocently exist. There is an actor (a series of actors) behind every instance of representation. And in every instance of representation, a different perspective may be offered on the item under discussion. In some cases what happens is termed *mis-* (or wrong) representation. This is a tricky issue; as I have discussed above, representation does not provide either presence or truth. How can we say something is a misrepresentation if its obverse, perfect representation, does not exist?

We call a representation wrong when we don't approve of the reason for the representation; when we believe it is designed to convince us unfairly, to con us or to pull the wool over our eyes. Advertising is the field that attracts many of the complaints about misrepresentation, not surprisingly because, like politics, advertising is interested in producing a very specific image of its products. In advertisements for British tourism designed for overseas customers, for instance, the scenes are usually of grand old buildings, beautiful green parks, or splendid craggy hills. I have seen these things when I've been a tourist in Britain; but I have also seen many, many sights that never make it into the advertising campaigns, and that in fact would be likely to put me off coming

to Britain for a holiday. I could, I suppose, write to British Tourism to complain about misrepresentation because they did not show that St. Paul's seems in variably to be hidden under great sheets of canvas, make explicit the numbers of beggars on city streets, or explain how rarely the sun shines.

But this would not be playing the game correctly. The issue at stake is not really misrepresentation, but 'interested' representation: representation that offers only a particular *inflection* of that situation. Of course Britain has wonderful buildings, parks and countryside. It might be fair to argue that a more representative image of the UK would show economically depressed areas, people struggling with cold and rain, littered streets and so on; but that would not be a 'true' representation either, just a different one. Any advertiser will edit out everything unlikely to sell, say, tourist destinations; and even if an advertiser were struck by the need to provide a fully balanced representation of the nation, there would never be time to show all it facets. Partial, contingent representations are the best we can achieve.

This is not to say that we all tell the truth to the best of our (limited) ability all the time. While misrepresentation might not be the best term to explain what can go wrong, there are examples of deliberate efforts to mislead through representation. Mistakes can be made, of course, some articulations are less clear and precise than others, and insufficient or flawed data might have been used. But beyond that, sometimes people deliberately offer misleading representations. There are outright lies; and there is also what Princeton University's professor of moral philosophy, Harry Frankfurt, terms **'bullshit'** (2005).

Frankfurt acknowledges that it is never possible to communicate the full truth – that, indeed, 'every use of language without exception has some, but not all, of the characteristics of lies' (2005: 9) – but goes on to draw a distinction between lies and what he calls bullshit, or humbug. 'Humbug' is Max Black's term for representation made with 'an intention to deceive' (Frankfurt 2005: 7). The assertions by US president George W Bush, UK prime minister Tony Blair and Australian prime minister John Howard in the early 2000s that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq, and that Iraq was a hotbed of Al Quada terrorism, are examples of 'humbug'. Knowing it was not true, those leaders presented their assertions as true with the intention, if not to deceive their publics, certainly to persuade them to support the invasion of Iraq. One might assume that once the intelligence community had shown them – and the public – the contrary evidence, they would have realized that public trust was at stake, but each went on to focus on the game of politics rather than the actuality of the facts.

What matters in this sort of situation is not that a politician is in fact trustworthy, or is in fact trusted, but that he is able to represent himself in the place of something called 'trust'. What the politician wants is for his audience:

> to think of him as a patriot, as someone who has deep thoughts and feelings about the origins and the mission of our [sic] country, who appreciates the importance of religion, who is sensitive to the greatness of our history, whose pride in that history is combined with humility before God, and so on. (Frankfurt, 2005: 18)

There is a fine line, in Frankfurt's account, between lies and bullshit, though both could be termed misrepresentation. A liar believes that the thing he is saying is not true; a bullshitter doesn't care whether it is true or not, only that it lets him advance in the game (Frankfurt 2005: 34). The point about bullshit is that the person making the representation is concerned 'to deceive us about his enterprise. His only indispensably distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way he misrepresents what he is up to' (Frankfurt 2005: 53). Both the liar and the truth-teller share an interest in and a concern for the truth. The bullshitter does not.

Perhaps in this respect we can say that the tourism advertisements I described above are bullshit, rather than a lie: they are not concerned with whether their representations are true, only that they will effectively convince tourists to visit the sites they are selling. A con artist, on the other hand, is more likely to be an actual liar: he will be concerned with the truth, and with concealing it.

It really isn't valid, or useful, to talk about misrepresentation as though there were a correct representation against which we could measure it. Certainly lies and bullshit can be demonstrated to be inaccurate, inappropriate or otherwise flawed; but we can never 'get it right' as far as representation is concerned; we can only gather information and mount an argument in the way that best serves our purposes; and hopefully those will be ethical purposes. No text is a vessel sufficiently large to contain all the possible meanings that can be made of it, or all the effects it might have. There are always latent meanings, and latent effects; even in the smallest statement. Think of that famous joke:

> 'Time flies'
> 'You can't; they fly too fast'

Despite these difficulties, we all make representations all the time, without necessarily thinking consciously about how to do it. Our capacity to reduce the world to signs and to use those signs fluently, or to treat a substitute as validly standing in for an absent original, is remarkable. In the next chapter I will develop these issues by focusing on how representation works in language, and how its particular abstractions and chains of signs allow us to make and to represent ideas about the world.