Understanding Culture through Images—A Review of Hu Yirong's *Semiotics of the Image: A Study of the Form of Meaning in Media Spectacles*

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"Image is one of the important academic keywords in recent years." (Hu, 2024, p. 282) This observation succinctly captures our contemporary condition. Humans are truly living in an age dominated by images—the popularity of image-based media such as TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram provides clear evidence of this. As W. J. T. Mitchell has argued, we have passed through the "linguistic turn" and are now firmly standing in the "pictorial turn". With this evolution in technology and culture, the definition of art and the function of images have been profoundly reshaped. From the ubiquity of Walter Benjamin's "mechanical reproduction" to the new era of generative AI art, images are no longer just representations; they are active agents that structure our reality. Consequently, a critical understanding of the image is essential for understanding the modern world, yet our theoretical tools for this task often feel inadequate.

Hu Yirong's *Semiotics of the Image: A Study of the Form of Meaning in Media Spectacles* (2024) aims to address this specific theoretical deficiency. The book is an ambitious and comprehensive examination of the semiotic landscape of images,

offering a robust "post-linguistic semiotics" designed to analyze the intricate relationships between images, signs, and meanings within the context of the contemporary media spectacle. Hu's work moves far beyond traditional art theory, arguing that in an age of "pan-artisticalization" (p. 4), we must investigate how all images—from fine art in museums to brand logos and commodity design—function as cultural symbols. The book's primary aim is to rectify three main enduring deficiencies in current study.

First, while image studies span numerous disciplines, from art history to communication studies, they often lack a unified, semiotics-based overview. Disparate fields analyze what images do in their specific contexts but often fail to provide a cohesive theory of how they formally generate meaning. This book provides that foundational logic, proposing semiotics as the essential methodology to "master media spectacles" (p. 5).

Second, Hu confronts the profound lack of integration between Chinese and Western ideas on the image. The book masterfully incorporates Chinese semiotics research, starting from a deep etymological and philosophical analysis of "*xiang*" (象/像) in Chinese, to foster a critical dialogue between Eastern and Western cultural thought. Hu suggests that the Western tradition, often based on representation, struggles to account for modern spectacles, whereas the abstract, holistic nature of "*xiang*" (象/像) provides a more suitable framework.

Last, and most critically, the book repositions the semiotic concept of "iconicity" (像似性) as its theoretical starting point. For decades, iconicity—the relationship of resemblance between a sign and its object—has presented challenges for semioticians like Umberto Eco, who often relegated it to the periphery in favor of the "arbitrary" linguistic sign. Hu reclaims iconicity as central to semiosis, refuting critiques that would exclude "absolute icons" (such as mirror images or perfect replicas) from study. By proving that even the most "realistic" image is built on social convention, Hu brings the entire visual world back into the domain of semiotics. From this foundation, the book "investigates the overall cultural style composed of all kinds of simulacra and spectacles in the media world" (p. 17).

In *Semiotics of the Image*, Hu Yirong constructs a theoretical bridge. By synthesizing post-linguistic semiotics with the foundational principles of Chinese cultural thought, the book not only fills a critical void in contemporary media theory

but also provides a powerful, non-Western "schema" for decoding the complex "media spectacles" that define modern life. The book itself unfolds over seven comprehensive chapters, building its argument from foundational concepts to broad cultural application.

To fully assess this contribution, this book review will organize its analysis of these chapters into three main parts. Part Ⅰ, "Foundations of Semiotics and Iconicity" will examine the book's theoretical groundwork (Chapters 1 - 2), focusing on Hu's foundational re-evaluation of the sign and his critical repositioning of iconicity against classical semiotics. Part Ⅱ, "Language, Literature, and Art in Media Spectacles" will analyze the application of this framework (Chapters 3 - 5) to *xiang*-based linguistics, the verbal icon, and art theory. Finally, Part Ⅲ, "Simulacra, Spectacles, and Cultural Perspectives" will explore the book's culminating arguments (Chapters 6 - 7), including Hu's treatment of media simulacra, the self-image, and the "Four Natures".

Ultimately, this book provides an indispensable resource for scholars and students in semiotics, communication studies, and visual culture, etc. "In the contemporary era, we live in a world where our visual senses are highly refined, yet we are simultaneously confronted with an overabundance of imagery." (王立慧, 2019, p. 165) Hu Yirong not only equips academics with the tools to navigate the articulate, image-based world we now inhabit, but also charts a vital new course for the future of semiotic inquiry. It is a highly recommended book for any researcher seeking to understand the form and function of meaning in our contemporary media environment.

Ⅰ. Foundations of Semiotics and Iconicity

The first chapter delineates the fundamental framework for the examination of semiotics in the realm of contemporary media. It presents the concept of the "image age" contending that the surge of visual media has profoundly transformed cultural production. Here, the author is diagnosing a methodological crisis: classical, Panofsky-style iconology, he contends, is too confined to "the field of fine arts" (Hu, 2024, p. 2) and is "no longer the only important way" (p. 3) to understand meaning in an era of "pan-artisticalization" (p. 4). As art moves from elite

domains to pervasive roles in commercial art, product design, and advertising (pp. 3 – 4), a new methodological framework becomes necessary. Hu proposes that "semiotics as the methodology to master media spectacles" (p. 5) is the necessary lens to understand this interplay and to properly examine images as primary cultural tools (p. 5).

The book's solution to this methodological gap lies in the introduction of "iconicity" as its central theoretical apparatus, which constitutes the core theoretical basis for the entire work. Hu argues that iconicity is the "most stable basic property" (p. 9) for understanding our image-saturated world. The author's intervention, in this regard, is to broaden this concept beyond mere pictorial representation. He dedicates a significant portion of the chapter to tracing the "main areas of iconicity" (p. 8), deliberately exploring its controversial role in linguistics. This theoretical move is significant, as it directly challenges Ferdinand de Saussure's foundational principle of the "arbitrariness" of the linguistic sign. By demonstrating that iconicity is also prevalent in language structure, Hu offers a critique regarding the primacy of the "linguistic turn", arguing that "iconicity being superior to arbitrariness" (p. 11) is a more accurate model. This line of reasoning is not an isolated one; it places the author's work within a major contemporary theoretical re-evaluation. Furthermore, as Nielsen and Dingemanse have chronicled, the "current surge of interest in iconicity research" is actively "questioning ... the dogma of arbitrariness" and seeking to articulate "ways in which iconicity may provide practical utility in language learning and communication" (Nielsen & Dingemanse, 2020, p. 53). The author's project aligns with this, as he subsequently discusses "verbal icons" in literature to prove that iconicity is a fundamental mechanism not just for pictures, but for language and thought itself.

The first chapter concludes with a "Research Scope and Development" that serves as an ambitious roadmap. This section functions as a "schema" (Hu, 2024, p. 14) for the book itself, explaining the "three levels" (p. 14) of inquiry the book will undertake: first, the narrow visual "icon" (such as a picture); second, the non-visual "icon" (such as a verbal metaphor); and third, the broadest sense of general iconicity that ultimately constitutes the "cultural spectacle." This section serves to functionally connect the concrete analysis of the "image sign" (p. 17) to the abstract cultural logic of the "media world."

Chapter 2 conducts the substantive theoretical work that underpins the entire book. This chapter's work can be contextualized within what M. A. K. Halliday has termed the "two realms of human experience": the "world of matter" and the "world of meaning" (O'Halloran, 2022, p. 174). The author's central task is to develop a definition of the "image sign", freeing it from the twin perils of realism (which mistakes meaning for matter) and linguistic structuralism (which over-emphasizes arbitrary convention).

Indeed, Hu had previously argued that the "post-semiotic" proposition, particularly from Mitchell, is based on a misunderstanding of iconicity. In that earlier work, Hu concludes that "iconicity does not negate the semiotic nature of the image" (胡易容, 2012, p. 146) by analyzing the very "extreme cases" of mirrors and replicas that form the core of his argument against Eco. Chapter 2 of the book, therefore, provides the fully-developed version of this critical refutation.

The theoretical core of the chapter is its direct and systematic refutation of Umberto Eco's influential critique of iconicity. Eco, in his *Theory of Semiotics*, had famously excluded "absolute icons" like mirror images and replicas from the realm of signs. Thus, the author systematically outlines Eco's position, summarizing his "seven sins" (2024, p. 52) for why, in Eco's view, a mirror image is not a sign: it is a "double" that is "present with its object" it supposedly cannot be used "to lie" and it is a "physical fact" rather than a semiotic one. The author identifies the root of Eco's "mistake" (p. 53): Eco, it is argued, was focusing purely on the physical system (matter) rather than the semiotic system (meaning).

The author's solution is to re-ground the sign entirely in social convention. He deconstructs Eco's argument piece by piece. Regarding the mirror image, the author counters that it can lie, citing the common use of mirrors in "narrow fruit shops... creating a sense of larger space" (p. 53). Moreover, he argues, a mirror is not a "double"; it is a "one-sided process of signs" that "removes the temperature, texture, tactility, and many other elements of the object" (p. 53). Because it requires this "cultural acquisition interpretation" (p. 38) from a human subject, it is, therefore, a fundamentally semiotic phenomenon.

The author then subsequently addresses the even more extreme case of the replica. As O'Halloran describes, semiotic systems are the "most complex" order precisely because they integrate "physical systems (the material sign), biological

systems（human beings）, social systems（society and culture）and meaning itself"（O'Halloran, 2022, p. 174）. The author's analysis of the replica serves to demonstrate this hierarchy. He uses the example of counterfeit banknotes（Hu, 2024, p. 55）: even if a counterfeit is physically identical to a real banknote（a perfect replica of the "physical system"）, it is semiotically worthless because it lacks the "social convention"（the "social system"）of being produced by an authorized institution. The author's argument culminates in a concluding statement for the chapter: "the meaning of a sign carrier is not copied synchronously with the physical form, because the semiotic meaning is the result of a social convention"（p. 55）.

This defense of iconicity as a semiotic, rather than physical, category allows the author to consequently offer his own definition of "image" itself. He rejects the idea of image-as-object and instead defines it as a "perceptual form of meaning" and a "schematic experience"（p. 34）. This perspective is thus able to provide a counter-balance to more text-centric semiotic theories. For instance, much semiotic work, such as recent studies on "verbal anchoring", which, building on Roland Barthes, explore how verbal text "constrains the meaning of static images" that are assumed to be "vague and polysemous"（Bünzli & Eppler, 2024, p. 192）. While such models are useful, the author's framework is positioned as more foundational. According to his argument, the image is not a passive, polysemous object waiting to be "fixed" by language. Instead, the author's "image" is a "schema": a primary and autonomous mode of meaning-making that is cognitive and perceptual prior to being linguistic. By the chapter's end, the author has successfully defined "Image as an Icon" and delineated its operational "degrees" —imaginal, diagrammatic, and metaphorical（Hu, 2024, p. 63 - 64）. He thus establishes the complete, post-linguistic theoretical foundation that the rest of his ambitious project will be built upon.

Ⅱ. Language, Literature, and Art in Media Spectacles

In Chapter 3, the author tries to examine the relationship between language and images, focusing on the concept of transparency in communication. It discusses the semiotic logic of language formation and examines the symbolic development of

words and concepts. “If language can be subjected to semiotic analysis, then images, as symbolic constructs, undoubtedly warrant the same analytical approach.”（蒋世强, 2025, p. 236）The chapter addresses the challenge of achieving a “universal language” and criticizes the linguistic turn that prioritizes textuality over visuality. By analyzing linguistic iconicity, the chapter argues for a more integrated approach that takes into account the visual dimensions of language.

The author examines the complex relationship between language and images, focusing on the concept of transparency in communication. This chapter serves a dual purpose: it first deconstructs the long-held Saussurian principle of “arbitrariness” and, second, proposes an alternative, iconicity-based model for understanding language, one which re-integrates the visual dimensions of thought.

To substantiate this argument, the author's primary contribution in this chapter is a deep semiotic and diachronic analysis of the Chinese writing system. This move is methodologically critical. The author meticulously deconstructs the etymological origins and symbolic logic of the characters 象（*xiang*）, 像（*xiang*）, and 相（*xiang*）（Hu, 2024, pp. 67 – 75）. This analysis functions as a powerful counter-narrative to Saussurian linguistics, which, being based on alphabetic languages, privileged the arbitrary nature of the sign. Hu demonstrates that in the Chinese cultural-linguistic system, iconicity is not a marginal feature（like simple onomatopoeia）but a foundational principle of signification. The character 象, for example, is shown to be the semiotization of a natural, pre-symbolic object（a concept akin to the Object）; 像, which contains the “person” radical, is the artificial, human-made simulation（the Representatum）; and 相, meaning “to look” or “examine”, functions as the human cultural Interpretant that activates the meaning（Hu, 2024, pp. 68 – 75）.

In this regard, the author's method begins to address a well-documented gap in social semiotic research. Aiello & van Leeuwen have noted that “social semiotics has largely emphasized research on the synchronic rather than diachronic dimensions of meaning-making” despite calls for “a systematic engagement with history”（2022, p. 28）. They argue for an approach that undoes what Bourdieu called “genesis amnesia”（Aiello & van Leeuwen, 2022, p. 29）by examining the concrete histories of semiotic resources. Hu Yirong's etymological excavation of *xiang* is a precise execution of this diachronic method. He investigates why and how

this specific semiotic resource (the character xiang) was "socially shaped and culturally given" (Aiello & van Leeuwen, 2022, p. 34) in ancient China, proving that its core logic was iconic, not arbitrary.

Consequently, this etymological grounding allows the author to challenge the "linguistic turn" from within language itself. The chapter then addresses the challenge of achieving a "universal language", suggesting that image-based systems (like Chinese characters) possess a "transparency" that arbitrary alphabetic systems lack (Hu, 2024, pp. 86 - 100). This section argues that the "pictorial turn" is, in effect, a return to a more fundamental, iconic mode of communication that the West's linguistic bias had obscured. By the chapter's end, the author has successfully established language itself as an iconic system, setting the stage for an analysis of how this "verbal iconicity" operates in literature and art.

Chapter 4 moves from iconicity in language to iconicity through language, with a focus on literature and narrative. This chapter applies the principles of iconic "schema" to the traditionally text-dominant fields of rhetoric and narratology. The author first traces the concept of the "verbal icon", distinguishing between descriptive, metaphorical, and symbolic images (pp. 109 - 114). The chapter's first major argument involves a re-evaluation of the classical rhetorical concept of "ekphrasis" —the verbal description of a visual artwork. Hu broadens this concept beyond its literary confines, translating it as *fuxiang* (符象) and defining it as a "cross-media rhetoric" (p. 123).

According to his argument, ekphrasis is not a simple, one-way translation of image into text. Instead, it is a fundamental "symbolic libido" (p. 105) that drives heterogeneous signs (e. g., text, image, sound) to represent one another. This "intersemiosis" (p. 125) is what creates the "implosion of meanings" (p. 132) that defines the contemporary spectacle. This argument resonates with social semiotic models of drawing, such as that proposed by Riley. Riley posits a "triadic structure" that links "perceptual modes" (how we see), "semiotic codes" (how we represent), and "social mores" (Riley, 2004, p. 295). Hu's *fuxiang* operates in a similar fashion: it is the process through which a semiotic code (language) attempts to activate a perceptual mode (vision) by appealing to a shared social more (the "cultural mental image") (2024, p. 129). By invoking Mitchell's concepts of "ekphrastic hope, fear, and indifference" (Hu, 2024, p. 126), Hu illustrates the

inherent impossibility, yet creative necessity, of this cross-media process.

Furthermore, the chapter extends this critique of linguistic bias to the field of narratology. This section represents an expansion of the author's previous research on this topic. In that earlier article, Hu had already argued that the "pan-media age" necessitates a "dilatation of narratological studies" (胡易容, 2013, p. 83). The author contends that classical, text-centric narratology erroneously concludes that static images lack narrative capabilities, because it defines narrative as an inherently temporal and linear sequence (Hu, 2024, pp. 136 – 137). This, Hu argues, is a category error that "sacrifices the iconicity of image" (p. 137). In response, Hu proposes a "minimal narrative" for semiotics that is not medium-dependent. It is based instead on the presence of "emplotment" and "personalized involvement" (p. 139). In this way, he argues that a single image can fulfill these criteria by guiding the viewer's perception and implying causality. This argument effectively reclaims narrative function for non-linguistic media. This aligns with the position articulated by Kress that "Image has ceased to be there as mere illustration ... Image is now fully communicational" (qtd. Riley, 2004, p. 294). Hu's "minimal narrative" provides the theoretical justification for how an image becomes "fully communicational" in its own right.

The analysis in Part Ⅱ then moves from linguistic and literary icons to the traditional domain of the image: "Art Images". This chapter, which is the longest and most theoretically dense of the section, addresses the complex relationship between artistic representation, objective reality, and social convention. It serves as the capstone for the book's entire argument on iconicity. Hu begins by grounding his analysis in the work of Panofsky and Cassirer, positioning art history as a "humanistic discipline" and the artwork itself as a "symbolic form" (2024, pp. 152 – 153). This move is crucial, as it immediately shifts the discussion away from art as a physical object and toward art as a semiotic system—a system that must be interpreted not by its material properties, but by its relationship to culture.

The central thesis of Chapter 5 is a sophisticated critique of Renaissance "perspective" as an objective or scientific truth. Hu argues that perspective is not a "discovery" of how the world truly looks, but is, in itself, a "symbolic form" (p. 161). It is a specific code, a "restricted visual formula" (p. 166) that is rooted in "social convention" (p. 159). This argument becomes the basis for a

pivotal cultural comparison that undergirds the entire book. Hu suggests that Western art's historical preoccupation with "accurate" linear perspective reveals a cultural focus on *si* (似) —objective, geometric, measurable similarity. This is contrasted with the foundational aesthetic pursuit of Chinese painting (discussed in 7.2.3, but prefigured here), which values *xiang* (像) —the artist's abstract, mental, and holistic resemblance to the Tao (the "great form is beyond shape"), rather than the physical imitation of a specific object (p. 259).

This critique of perspective as a social code, rather than a natural fact, finds strong parallels in contemporary social semiotics. Riley, for instance, develops a "social semiotics of drawing" built on the premise that "visual aesthetic sensibility is culturally determined" (2004, p. 295). He explicitly critiques "an artificial perspective which represents distance relations from a static, one-eyed central viewpoint" as a product of a society with a specific "concept of egocentricity" (p. 299). This supports Hu's argument that perspective is not a universal truth but a "social construct" (Riley, 2004, p. 299) tied to a particular "world-view" (p. 299).

Moreover, Hu's historical treatment of perspective as a convention aligns with the diachronic methodology advocated by Aiello and van Leeuwen. They use the work of historian Michel Pastoureau on color to illustrate how a semiotic resource becomes "socially shaped" (Aiello & van Leeuwen, 2022, p. 34). Pastoureau demonstrates that color was "dematerialized" from a physical substance (a dye) into "a concept, an abstraction" (qtd. Aiello & van Leeuwen, 2022, p. 36) that could be systematized and regulated by "normative discourses" (p. 33). The author, in Chapter 5, is effectively making the same argument for space. He demonstrates how Renaissance "perspective" (the code) and "proportion" (the ratio) (Hu, 2024, p. 162) functioned as the "normative discourses" of their time, abstracting visual space into a calculable, geometric system that became the dominant "symbolic form" of Western art for centuries.

Finally, the chapter dismantles the false dichotomy between "representation" and "expression". According to the author, expression is not the opposite of representation but rather its "more profound form" (p. 172). He posits that modern art's move towards "dissimilarity" (*busi* [不似]) (p. 183) is not a rejection of iconicity, but rather a sophisticated exploration of "iconic probability" (p. 182).

This is a search for a more abstract *xiang* (像, the mental "idea" of the bed, p. 174) rather than a literal *si* (似, the "carpenter's bed", p. 174). This argument resonates strongly with Riley's historical categorization of art forms. Riley distinguishes between "invocational" art (where sign and referent are one), "evocational" art (where the sign is distinct, as in Renaissance "lifelike" representation), and "provocational" art (e. g., modernism) (2004, pp. 297 – 298). He argues that this "provocational" art "shifted the emphasis from the relationship between the sign and its referent altogether and drew attention instead to the process of signification itself" (p. 298). This is precisely what Hu describes. By rejecting simple *si* (似, evocational likeness), modern art embraces *xiang* (像, a provocative, conceptual iconicity). This successfully integrates art theory back into the book's central semiotic project, demonstrating that all forms of art, even abstract ones, are engaged in a process of iconic signification.

Ⅲ. Simulacra, Spectacles, and Cultural Perspectives

Following the establishment of the book's foundational theories of iconicity, language, and art, Part Ⅲ transitions from theoretical construction to direct application. Chapters 6 and 7 represent the culmination of Hu Yirong's entire project: to utilize this "post-linguistic semiotics" to analyze the "simulacra and spectacles in the media world" (2024, p. 17).

Chapter 6, "Simulacrum" deals with the concept of the simulacrum and examines how images create hyperrealities in contemporary culture. It examines the relationship between images and the self and discusses the reflexive nature of visual representation. The chapter looks at the concept of simulation and highlights the blurring of boundaries between reality and representation. It critiques the notion of "pseudo-environment" and examines the impact of simulacra in advertising, journalism and literature. To achieve this, the author first investigates the concept of "Image and the Self". Here, "image" (*xingxiang* [形象]) is defined not as a physical picture, but as a "comprehensive impression perception based on objects" (p. 199) and a form of "symbolic capital" (p. 196). This argument is crucial, as it firmly links a subject's identity to a socially evaluated and constructed image.

The author then develops this argument through the concept of the "Reflexive

Image" returning to the "mirror image" previously discussed in Chapter 2. This is a theoretically sophisticated move: whereas Chapter 2 uses the mirror to prove that iconicity is semiotic (a product of convention), Chapter 6 uses it to prove that the self is semiotic (a product of reflection). Drawing on Lacan's "mirror stage" (Hu, 2024, p. 205), Hu argues that self-cognition is not innate but is a semiotic process established through an external, reflexive icon. The "self-image" is, therefore, a simulacrum—a sign that constitutes the self by representing it. This leads to the chapter's core section, "Simulation", which analyzes the broader societal implications of simulacra. The author adopts Baudrillard's historical progression of the image through three stages: "counterfeit" (imitation of an original), "production" (mass reproduction, where the original's status is weakened), and "simulation" (models that generate a "hyper-reality" with "no original object") (Hu, 2024, p. 199). This framework is highly relevant to contemporary discussions of "fake news" and visual disinformation. For instance, Morris argues that "fake news" is not a new phenomenon but a "continuum with forms of media that went before... detailed by Baudrillard" (Morris, 2020, p. 319). Hu's work provides the semiotic mechanism that underlies this continuum.

The author's most effective analytical tool here is Greimas's Semiotic Square of Veridiction (Hu, 2024, p. 213). Hu employs this square, which maps the relationship between "Being" (是) and "Seeming" (似), to move beyond a simple true/false binary. This creates a nuanced typology of "symbolic veridiction": (1) Truth (Being + Seeming); (2) False (Not-Being + Not-Seeming); (3) Illusion (Not-Being + Seeming); (4) Secret (Being + Not-Seeming).

This Greimasian framework offers a significant contribution to the current urgent academic debate surrounding generative AI and visual disinformation. Contemporary journalism scholars are grappling with how to define and categorize these new visual falsehoods. Weikmann and Lecheler, for example, call for visual disinformation to be "(treated as) its own type of falsehood" (2022, p. 3696) and categorize it by "manipulative sophistication" (p. 3698). Hu's model provides the precise semiotic classification they are seeking. A "cheap fake" (e. g., a decontextualized photo) and a "deepfake" (e. g., a synthetic video) are not semiotically different in kind—both are "Illusions" (Not-Being + Seeming). Their difference lies only in

the degree of their "Seeming."

Furthermore, this framework provides normative clarity for journalism ethics. Raemy et al. note that journalists are uncertain about the "normative implications" (2025, p. 1725) of deepfakes and that "judgments depend on what is manipulated" (p. 1724). Hu's square clarifies these ethical boundaries. "Deepfaking the presentation" (Raemy et al., 2025, p. 1736) (e. g., using a synthetic avatar to read a real news script) could be categorized as "Truth" (Being + Seeming), provided it is transparently labeled. In contrast, "deepfaking the subject/event" (p. 1736) (e. g. creating a fictitious event) is unambiguously "Illusion" (Not-Being + Seeming) and thus violates journalistic norms.

Hu's analysis also explains why these new technologies are so challenging. In recent research, Thomson et al. identify "mis/disinformation" and the "difficulty or impossibility of detecting AI-generated images" as a "primary challenge" for news organizations. (2024, p. 1) Hu's theory, via Baudrillard, argues that in the age of simulation, we have entered a state of "hyper-reality" where the "pseudo-environment" has become the only environment (2024, p. 211). The problem is not simply that a fake image (simulacrum) is hard to distinguish from a real one (original object); the problem is that the very concept of a verifiable "original object" has been "dispelled" (p. 199). "Photography originates from reality, yet it is not reality itself. Through the mechanism of iconicity, photography enables the significance of an event to transcend reality entirely, emerging within the interplay between the image and the object." (张沛之, 2024, p. 179) Hu's framework thus explains that the challenge identified by Thomson et al. is not merely technical (a lack of detection tools) but epistemological (the loss of a ground for truth itself).

Chapter 7, "The Cultural Spectacle" serves as the book's philosophical capstone, synthesizing all previous arguments. The author returns to Guy Debord's "spectacle", not merely as a social critique, but as a "schema" (Hu, 2024, p. 231) for grasping the world. This connects the contemporary media world back to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" (Hu, 2024, pp. 231 – 232): we are all prisoners watching shadows, and the spectacle is the form of those shadows.

To explain the structure of this entire process, Hu proposes his most significant original theory: "The Four Natures". This model presents a comprehensive "meta-semiotic" framework for existence: (1) The First Nature (the "world in itself" /

the abstract Tao)；(2) The Second Nature (the "Umwelt world" of objective matter and energy)；(3) The Third Nature (the "world of perception" / the biological realm of sensation)；(4) The Fourth Nature (the "cultural world" of human symbolic interpretation). (pp. 236 - 247)

The book concludes by returning to "Thinking in Sign in Chinese Culture". This section is positioned as the philosophical answer to the crisis of the Western spectacle. Hu argues that the Western focus on *si* (似, objective, measurable likeness), which he critiqued in Chapter 5, inevitably led to the hyper-real crisis of simulacra (Chapter 6). The Chinese philosophical tradition, founded on the *I Ching* (Hu, 2024, p. 253), offers an alternative. It is based on *xiang* (象), which is an abstract, holistic, and conceptual iconicity. It does not seek to imitate a specific physical object *si* (似), but to embody the underlying Tao or "idea" (the great form is beyond shape [大象无形]) (p. 254). In conclusion, the author posits that this *xiang*-based thinking, which is not dependent on a "real" original, is a semiotic model uniquely suited to navigating a world of simulation, offering a way to find meaning within the spectacle rather than in opposition to it.

To summerize, *Semiotics of the Image* is a work of significant theoretical synthesis and noteworthy originality. Its primary contribution is the construction of a comprehensive, non-Western semiotic framework specifically designed to address the "pictorial turn" and the rise of the contemporary media spectacle.

First, the book successfully bridges several disparate academic fields. It connects the linguistic turn of Saussure to the pictorial turn of Mitchell, the philosophy of art articulated by Panofsky and Cassirer to the media theory of Baudrillard and Debord, and most importantly the Western structuralism of Greimas and Eco to the Eastern philosophy rooted in the *I Ching* and Tao. The author's development of "iconicity" as the central thread linking all these fields is a major achievement.

Second, the author's re-evaluation of iconicity in Chapter 2, particularly his systematic refutation of Eco's exclusion of mirrors and replicas, is a crucial intervention. By re-grounding the sign in "social convention" rather than "physical matter", Hu provides a solid theoreticalfoundation for the semiotic study of all images, including the "hyper-real" products of generative AI, which Eco's model struggles to accommodate.

Last but not least, the book's integration of Chinese semiotic thought is its most unique and valuable contribution. The deep analysis of *xiang* (象/像/相) provides a powerful alternative to the representation-centric models of Western semiotics. This Eastern framework, based on abstract and holistic resemblance rather than direct imitation, proves remarkably adept at explaining the "simulacra" of the media spectacle, where the "original" is no longer relevant. The "Four Natures" model proposed in the final chapter is a sophisticated, "meta-semiotic" framework that elegantly synthesizes matter, perception, and cultural meaning.

All in all, *Semiotics of the Image* is a demanding but highly rewarding academic work. Hu Yirong succeeds in his goal of constructing a robust semiotic framework for the image age. By forcefully re-centering "iconicity" as the core of semiosis and by integrating the abstract, holistic logic of Chinese *xiang* philosophy, the book provides a powerful alternative to Western representation-based theories. Especially, in today's era defined by the rise of generative AI and the proliferation of "deepfakes" where the link between image and reality has been severed, Hu's work is not only relevant but essential. This book is highly recommended for any researcher seeking to understand the form and function of meaning in our contemporary media environment.

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