

A postphenomenological contribution to the study of the origin of the sign

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February 2012

Extracts from the book:
The Big Bang of History, Visualism in Technoscience
Lund 2012 (ISBN: 978-91-633-9204-7)

Introduction: What is a “historical” presentation?

- I will make clear my understanding of “history” which in some other texts have been described as “post-phenomenological”. Let me make some essential distinctions between the following presentations. We notice that **Presentation 1 is *descriptive*** and **Presentation 2 is *demonstrative***.
- In the first case the presentation is about a *thing* while in the second case it is about an *action*.



Presentation 1:
descriptive



Presentation 2:
demonstrative

- I will defend the thesis that ***historical presentations are always demonstrative and never descriptive***. However I recognize that in some cases the limits between description and demonstration can be difficult to decide.

- A second important distinction that I will make is that between ***testimonial and non-testimonial*** presentations.

The death of e.g. Charles XII of Sweden (Presentation 3) is well documented through many important sources that *witnessed* the action.

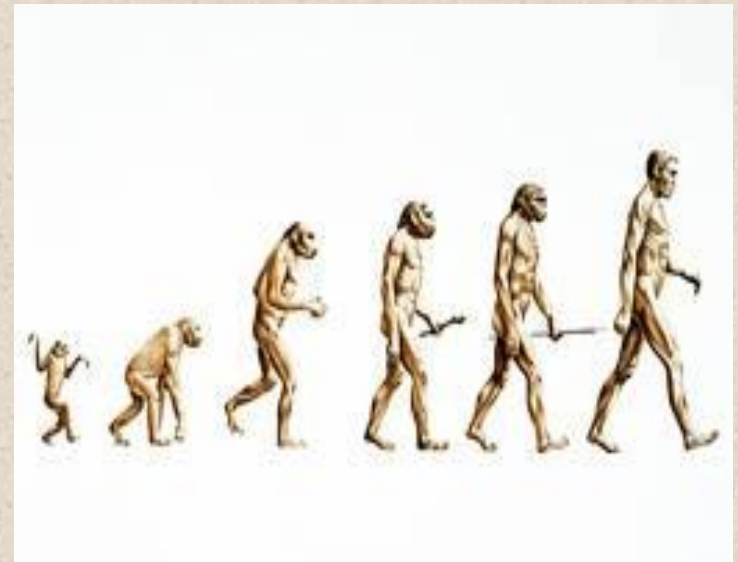
At the other hand the presentation of human evolution (Presentation 4) is *non-witnessed*.

testimonial



Presentation 3: *The funeral transport of Charles XII.* by Gustaf Cederström, 1884

non-testimonial



Presentation 4: A presentation of the human evolution.

- **EMBODIMENT:** Two historical presentations;
while presentation (5 B) is embodied, presentation (5 A) is not.

5 A



5 B

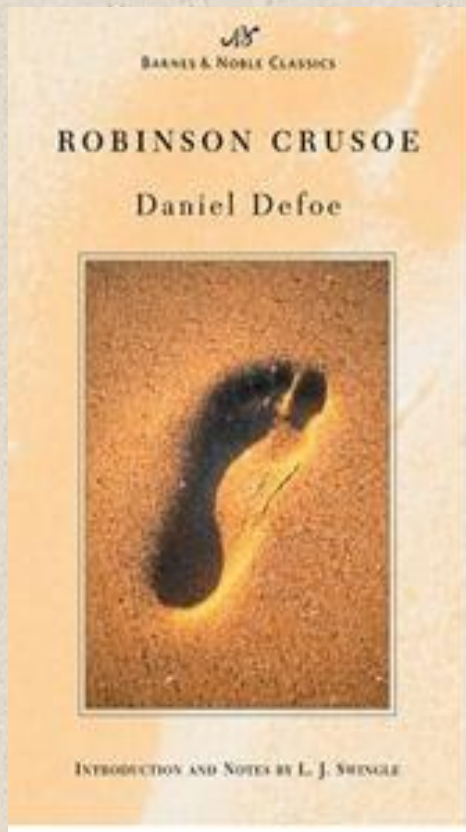


Presentation 5 A and B :

Embodied presentations are the most complete because they solve the question about the congruence between the artefact and the body in the posited action.

- Testimonial presentations are possible because they are presenting descriptions and demonstrations ***contemporary to consciousness***.

This does not mean that every testimonial presentation is conscious. Some presentations are obviously contemporary to consciousness as Presentation 6, in which testimonial presentativeness is the only possibility.



Presentation 6:
Testimonial but descriptive or demonstrative?

- Presentation 7 is a descriptive testimony (photograph) of a fossil.
The position of the fossils often presents an action to be performed just before the dead moment; in that case, the fossil itself has historical value when the scientist assumes the reconstruction of that action with the form: “If I were the bird, I would have done this and that.”



Presentation 7:

An 85-million-year-old carnivorous dinosaur unearthed in Argentina had a breathing system of bellows, or air sacs, which helped pump air through its lungs. Today, only birds breathe in this manner.

The porosity of history

- According to Thomas Kuhn:
 - “The historian at work is not, I think, unlike the child presented with one of those picture puzzles of which the pieces are square; **but the historian is given many extra pieces in the box.** He has or can get the data, **not all of them** (what would that be?) but a very considerable collection.”
- This puzzle has to be solved using data which is conscious and *out-conscious*.
 - “According to proponents of the covering law model, a historical narrative is explanatory to the extent that the events it describes are governed by laws of nature and society **to which the historian has conscious or out-conscious access.**”

Kuhn, Thomas. *The Essential Tension*; p. 15 (emphasis mine).

- Everything that is lost in each day of our life is potentially ***testimonial*** because it is contemporary, but much of the testimonial is out-conscious.
- So, testimonial presentations and conscious presentations are *not* covering the same field of phenomena.
- The same can be said about non-testimonial presentations which do not coincide with conscious presentations either.
- ***So, historical presentation in general—both testimonial and non-testimonial—present conscious as well as out-conscious eidetic contents.***

The Enigma: working with many extra pieces in the box

- While the analogy of a puzzle is more adequate to describe the internal relationship existing between the parts of a ***description***.
- To take care of the particularities of the ***demonstrative*** presentation another analogy is necessary:

I believe that the term “enigma,” will be much better.

(Latin *aenigma*, from the Greek *ainigma*, “to speak obscurely or speak in riddles”.)

The historical extrapolation

- The solution of an historical enigma supposes the study of all the information available ***and more***— including in this “more” the short-term and the long-term extrapolations embodied in the porosity of culture.
- But what is an “historical extrapolation”?

- I believe that both *testimonial* and *non-testimonial* inferences are based on *ontic intuitions of anthropognomic character*.
- I have substituted the suffix “logy” with the suffix “**gnomy**”, from the Greek *gnomon*, “means of judging or interpreting” of “what is happening”).

We notice that the rose has thorns; how can the rose’s thorns be explained?

The only possible answer is ontic: “the rose has thorns **to defend itself**, because if I were a rose I would use the thorns to defend myself”.

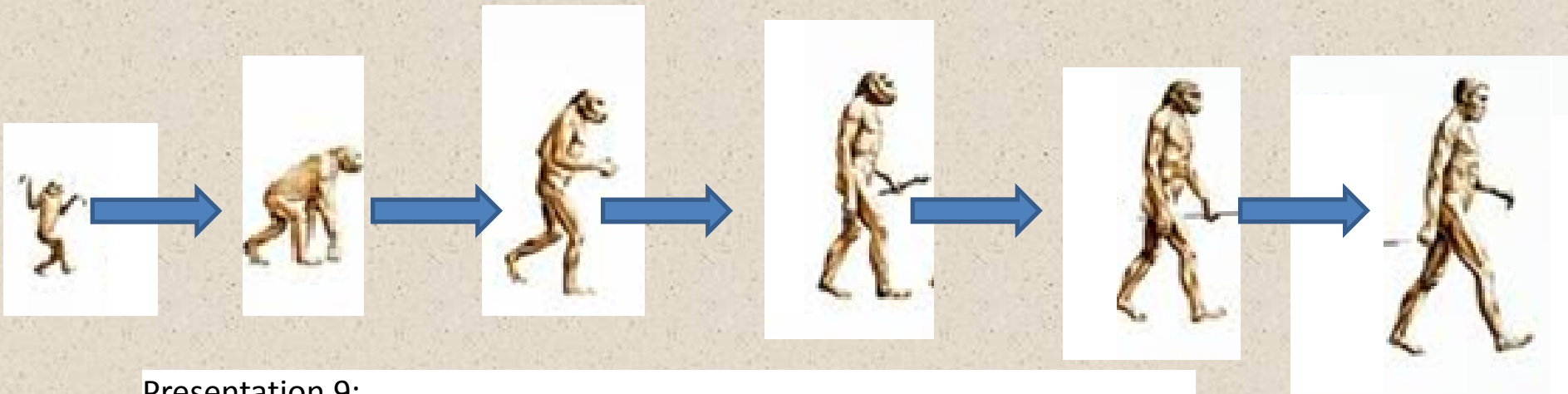


A Phenomenology of History

- A phenomenology of history must be ***anthropognomic***.
- It must build inferences relying in one final anthropognomic intuition.

History as time-passing

- The traditional presentation about historical time-passing consists in a **linear succession** of facts in which some aspects of the lifeworld evolve from others in an **irreversible** manner. (Presentation 9)
- The presentation of change is connected to the presentation of gradual or revolutionary linear changes that are **irrevocable**.

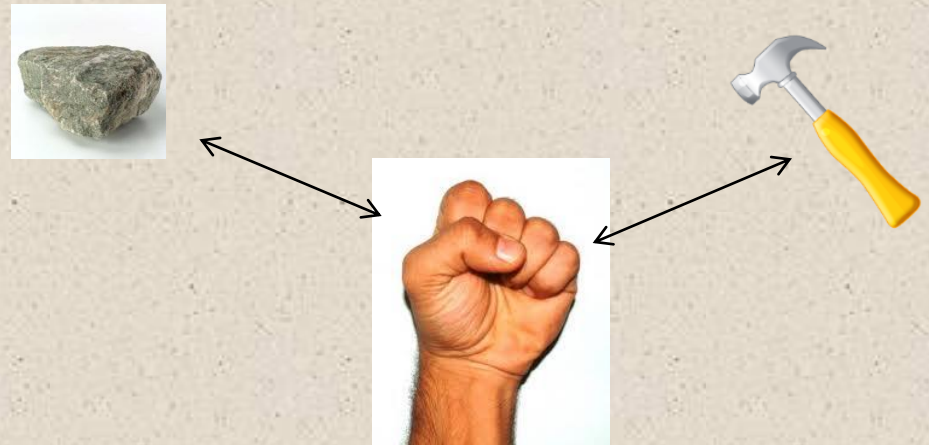


Presentation 9:

A linear presentation of time in human evolution.

- I believe that linear time-passing metaphors ***could be considered correct for living organisms***, but does not take account of some important aspects of demonstrative presentations about artefacts and technologies.
- For example, we can ontologically assume that “hammer-beating” evolved from “stone-beating”.
- In this sense, the “hammer-beating-time” could be considered contemporary-time and the “stone-beating-time” could be considered past-time.
- However, we still beat things with stones and stone-like artefacts.
- ***That means that the relationship between the stone and the hammer cannot be seen “evolutive” in the same sense that organisms “evolve” from each other.***

- Of course the solution to this problem can only be ***non-testimonial***; we must extrapolate the origins of these technologies “giving these artefacts a voice.”
- And the voice “says” that these artefacts and technologies have a common origin in the “fisted hand” and the “fist-beating” in a “fist-beating-time” which is still contemporary-time.



Presentation 10 A:
the eidetic explosion of the fisted hand

- We must assume then, that the fist, the stone and the hammer must be *interchangeable* technologies which do not *overshadow* each other.



Presentation 10 B:
Improvising the cracking of walnuts.



Presentation 10 C:
Example of the fisted hand as an eidetic motor of
new technological solutions.

Eidetic Motor

- Don Ihde explains ***multistability*** as the phenomena in which the “same technology takes quite different shapes in different contexts.”
- the study of e.g. the technology of the funnel, could be understood as the multistable consequence of an embodied correspondence between the artefact and the positions of the coupled hands. (Presentation 11).



Presentation 11:

From the coupled-hands to the funnel

I propose to call a multistable presentation of a technology an ***eidetic motor***, understanding with this the kind of inference that these presentations allow to make.

An eidetic motor produces new technologies and works in an ontological plane *connecting back to an anthropognomic reference* which makes possible the process of “estrangement”.

- I understand the relation between the hand and the funnel as *anthropogonomic* in the sense that it implies the process of the estrangement of the introspective presentation of the funnel.
- Multistability can be seen then, as a kind of eidetic inference or “reduction.”
- Applying ***the principle of multistability*** to the hands/funnel, some other artefacts can be inferred as e.g. the trumpet, the hearing aid and the megaphone (Presentation 12).



Presentation 12: funnel-like artefacts; a trumpet; a hearing-aid and a megaphone

Examples of eidetic motors

Presentation 13 :

Embodied technologies as anthropognomic generators of eidetic contents.

From Tallis, Raymond.

The Hand. A Philosophical Inquiry into Human Being. Edinburgh University Press, 2003; p. 26.



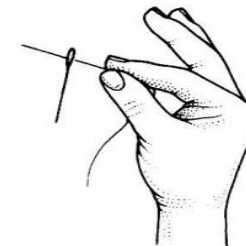
1. Hook grip



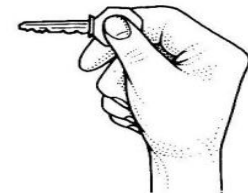
2. Scissor grip



Five-jaw chuck



Two-jaw chuck
pad-to-pad



Two-jaw chuck
pad-to-side

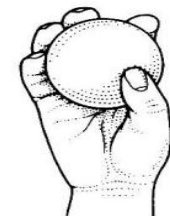
3. Precision grips



Squeeze grip



Disc grip

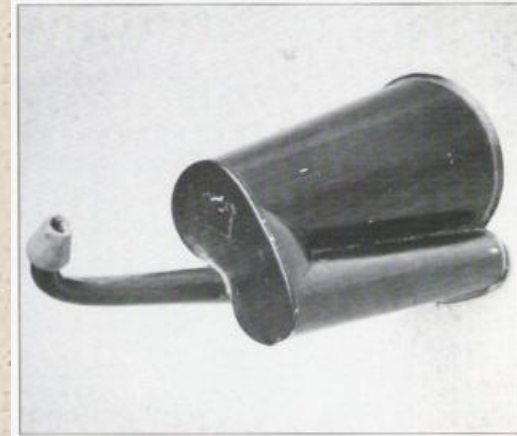


Spherical grip

4. Power grips

The question of *meaning* in historical presentations

- Let us consider Presentation 14; it presents a What-artefact. What can be said about it?
- We do not recognize it, but we can answer the question of *What?*, saying that it is an artefact “of some kind”.
- ***We have no information about its size and therefore we cannot intuitively refer it to the human body and decide if it is or isn't a kind of tool.***
- Presentation 14 is a pure descriptive presentation and ***no historical inferences can be made from it.***



Presentation 14: What-artefact

Because the artefact is meaningless, it cannot be used as a sign.

- When I discover that it is not possible to connect Presentation 14 to any other, I **embodied** Presentation 14 positing it in a **demonstrative** act.
- During this stage, the answering of “What-it-is” must be changed making extrapolations to ask instead **“How-is-it-used”**.
- Presentation 15 is the resultant of one possible extrapolation, of the use of the artefact, **introducing the alter-Ego** and giving us a complete answer about **What the artefact is**, through the demonstration of **How the artefact can be used**.
- Presentation 15 is demonstrative and therefore **historical**. But it is also **meaningful**.

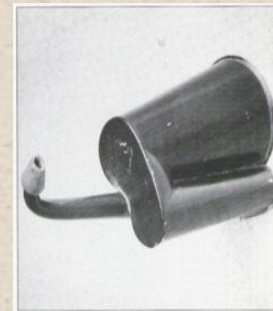


Presentation 15: The What-artefact is presented as a hearing aid.

Because the artefact is meaningful, it can be used as a sign.

The conversion of a presentation into a sign

- I observed that when the embodied technology is objectivized in a presentation that **demonstrates** its functionality and it includes the presentation of an alter-ego performing the demonstration,
- the presentation itself becomes “the artefact”, and the communicative act defines the technology as “communicative”.
- I will name this process *estrangement*.
For example, Presentation 17 differs from Presentation 16 in the sense that it is no more the presentation of a technology but rather **a technological device itself**.
- While Presentation 16 is **introspective**, Presentation 17 is **projective**.



Presentation 16: *introspective* multistable inferences





Presentation 17:
Projective inferences, estrangement of the tool by embodiment through the Other

- A sign is an ***objectivized presentation*** –a ***presentation-
artefact, projected to the Other in a communicative act.***
- A sign is an interface forming a common meaningful boundary between adjacent intuitive regions, bodies, substances of the Lifeworld.

The multistability of the sign

- W.J.T. Mitchell, recognize the connection existing between the picture, the pictogram, the ideogram and the word.

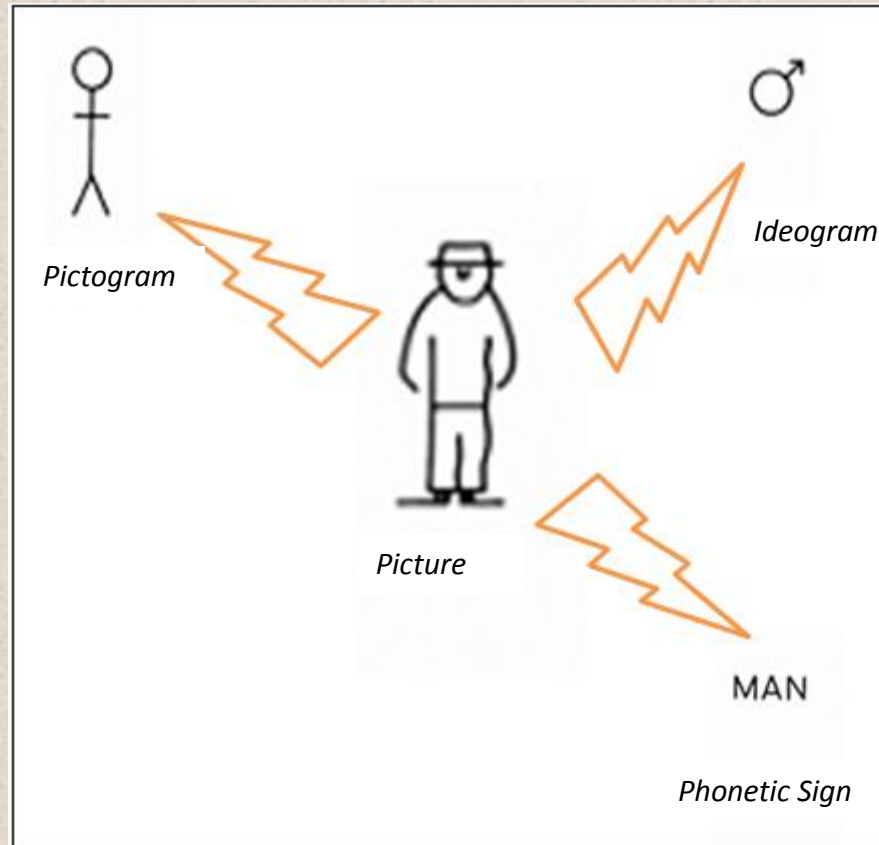
 <p><i>Picture</i></p> <p><i>Picture</i></p>	 <p><i>Pictogram</i></p> <p><i>Pictogram</i></p>	 <p><i>Ideogram</i></p> <p><i>Ideogram</i></p>	<p>MAN</p> <p><i>Phonetic Sign</i></p> <p><i>Phonetic Sign</i></p>
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W.J.T. Mitchell's translation of speech into a visible code

Presentation 18:

Mitchell, W.J.T. *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology.*
The University of Chicago Press, 1986; p. 27.

- W.J.T. Mitchell's Presentation 18 implies a linear chain of inference moments which in fact cannot be deduced from multistability. More appropriate would be Presentation 19 of an explosion of possibilities:



Presentation 19:
The Big Bang of the multistability of the sign

SIGN-PRESENTATIONS AND THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ENGINE

- When presentations of a technology include the alter-ego and become itself a communicative technology, being used now as *a sign or signs outside the original context*, it can assume the role of an “epistemological engine”.
 - “An “epistemology engine” is a technology or a set of technologies that through use frequently become explicit models for describing how knowledge is produced.”
(Ihde, Don and Selinger, Evan. “Merleau-Ponty and Epistemology Engines”. Springer Publisher, 2004.)
- For Don Ihde, technology precedes science, and that means that a explanative demonstrative presentation must first be converted into a communicative technology (sign) before it can work as an explanation.

The End

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