

Identity photographs and the process philosophy of signs¹

They are impossible to avoid: by-line photographs; corporate identity shots; marketing snaps; mugshots; email and twitter account photos. When we undertake a task requiring some form of marketing or corporate branding the dreaded questions come. Do you have a photograph we can upload? Can we take a shot for our credits, header, office entry board, lobby, website or in house journal? I always say no and invariably get the answer that such photographs allow people to recognise you or get to know you better. It is nonsense.

Students get to know me by knocking on my office door, the one that says 'James Williams', or meeting me when I lecture, 'Hello, I'm James'. Readers get to know me through my writing. All they can really glean from the miniature photographs is that I am white, male and middle-aged, with very short hair. Even this is deeply unreliable information prone to being out-of-date, posed, staged and doctored. There is a kind of minor art to these images around small acts of individual resistance, such as innovative cropping, gurning, composition, poses, props and co-starring pets. As acts of rebellion they are slight, since they do little to undermine the deeper tyranny of the little token meant to vouch for us.

My aim here is not to draw attention to the preponderance and risible nature of such photographs. Neither is it directly to criticise them on political grounds, though they certainly have worrying functions around corporate power and checks about types of normality. *Is he or she one of 'us' and not one of 'them'?* There is also a micro-political function of allowing kinds of personal identification associated with desire and rejection, whose limit case is the dating page snap. *Oh he looks hot and funny! I must show my good side and hide the comb-over... Look philosophical, James, yeah like that sculpture with the hand and the chin.*

Instead, the point is to show how a process philosophy of the sign can shed light on the way identity photographs work. It is therefore to connect to the recent trend towards philosophies of process, after Whitehead and Deleuze, but also in contemporary philosophy of biology. There hasn't been a full process approach to the sign. Maybe this is because the sign needs to work as a reliable connection of signifier and signified, or expression and content, or sense and reference, or sign and form of life. The sign appears to be a static fusion of two terms, though the coupling can change over time, for instance when an image comes to mean something different.

This is why I have written a book on the process philosophy of signs: to show the critical force and insights allowed by a process view. In process philosophy, change is prior to stasis and becoming is prior to being. There is no reliable static moment which then alters over time from instant to instant, or state to state. Instead, everything is transforming in multiple ways such that representations of fixed states are secondary, incomplete and distorting renditions of deeper ongoing modifications.

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It is less well-known, but in fact more important, that process philosophy is about the limitlessness and multiplicity of process against the boundaries and unity of separate identities. It is not only the stasis of signs that is troublesome, but more so their limits and internal rules for cohesiveness. Static representation hides underlying movements and changing degrees of intensity. Fixed boundaries and internal coherence conceal distant influences and repercussions. The aim of the process philosophy of signs is to incorporate these changing degrees and multiple movements into the definition of the sign, whilst avoiding appeals to fixity, identity and limits.

Imagine a wobbling water-filled balloon dropping towards the unsuspecting head of a passing professor (the one with that pompous, flowing-locked Byronic pose on his website). A still photograph captures and frames the projectile in flight, but the fuller process has to be reconstituted around the different degrees of importance assigned to the wobble, sniggering students, gusting crosswind, wet hit, running hair dye, deflated ego, vengeful ire, fleeing 'criminals' and unjust expulsions. How can we give an account of the sign which does justice to the multiple transformations in the sign as conditions for any secondary representation?

The challenge is to define the sign in a formal manner as a limitless and changing multiplicity without simply seeing it as an unbounded chaos or undifferentiated tangle of lines and components. The point is to have a usable format for the sign which sacrifices only the minimal amount of process to the necessary demands of formal representation. It is also to always leave the sign open to amendments which combat the return of boundaries and fixity.

I define the sign as the concurrent operation of the following processes:

- An unconditioned selection of a set: $\{a, b, c\}$
- A diagram of changing intensities of relations in and around the elements of the selection and its limitless background: $S\{a, b, c\}$
- An ongoing reevaluation of those changing intensities in a suite of diagrams: Vs

So this is the formal definition of any process sign: $S\{a, b, c\}/Vs$. This is a selection of a set, a diagram of the changes in intensities of relations in and around elements, and a series of subsequent diagrams interacting critically with the first.

This is the informal version: a sign is defined by the process of selection of a set of elements, set against a limitless background of processes involving those elements and all others. The set can be thought of as the name of the sign: a sign is named by selecting some set of elements. The selection determines a diagram of changing intensities of relations in and around these elements. This diagram is itself always in a process of change beyond its emerging tendencies and directions.

Here is a simple example. Choose the colour of the shirt you are to wear to an important meeting. The colour is a sign and part of the skill in its analysis will be in the hypothesis about the set that determines

it for a given situation. For instance {green, interviewers, impressions} where the sign is seen as the selection of a colour in relation to interviewers' characters and the impression the colour might make on them. However, as process the sign is much more than this limited selection.

The impressions vary with what you say at the interview. The language changes around the selection. The colour changes with the lighting of the room. There is a change in the colour. Your facial traits interact with the character of the interviewers as the illumination and colours set them off. These are varying degrees that must be mapped on a diagram as changing intensities and directions around singular points such as the blushing and perspiring face and the interviewers' feel for your lack of sincerity. So the sign is now S {green, interviewers, impressions} as formal shorthand for a diagram of changing intensities.

This emerging diagram is fragile and open to change and challenge, to new events and imperceptible shifts with large and unforeseen effects that can be mapped according to other diagrams. The shades in the room are altered by a bank of clouds, rendering your vibrant choice dull. The inquisitors start to think your character might be as insipid as your taste. The beginning of an interviewer's dyspepsia is worsened by the now sickly shade of green of your shirt. Though the diagram is based on objective observation, it is always open to unpredictable and sometimes drastic change that must be incorporated into a full description of the sign and a suite of critical diagrams: S {green, interviewers, impression}/Vs.

Here is another example. I have a tendency to use the wrong signs of irritation when cycling and cut up by other road users. The gesture I use is a sign that can be defined by a selection {twirling finger, head, shrug, "yes you driver"}. This selection must be accompanied by its intensive diagram. It might have decreasing tension in one direction, but increasing anger in another, decreasing safety, increasing incomprehension between different road users, and so on. Finally, given its lack of limits, whichever diagram is drawn up will be open to dramatic and unforeseen intensity and direction shifts. *Isn't that your boss's hair at the wheel of the Merc?*

So these are the components of any sign. They require different types of description (you'll note that there is an additional one I have not yet spoken of because it is external to the sign yet impinges upon it and gives the sign a wider critical and creative context):

- The selected set: simply described as its elements {a, b, c}
- The diagram of changing intensities: it can be shown as a vector space and set of singular points, or by a more informal description of changing intensities in a field of relations, a vignette or narrative, for instance
- Experimentation with potential revaluations of the diagram, described as alternative diagrams and experimental hypotheses or counterfactuals
- A critical debate with the external stipulations over the selection, diagram and experiments: these stipulations can be described as laws and rules; for instance, scientific theories whose laws deny a given diagram, or moral laws which ban a given diagram or selected sign

The components of the sign are necessarily interconnected. So the boundaries of the selection, distinctions between different diagrams, and the external quality of stipulations must be seen as relative and yet necessary. This combination of relativity and necessity is important because it captures the requirement for a selection, distinction between diagrams and discussion of positions external to the movement of the sign, yet also determines those distinctions as bridged by connections. Thus the selection is shown as relative by the relations given in the diagram between selection and background. Elements are shown to be relative to relations in and around them. Diagrams are relative to interactions with other diagrams. Any stipulation is also a player within diagrams and can also be included in selections. It is external to the sign, but only relatively so and in many different ways.

The diagram shows the directions, singular points and changing intensities set off by a selection, like the significant features and lines denoting rising shock, confusion, ideas of revenge and anger drawn by a cartoonist around the soggy head of the vainglorious professor. Experimentation involves a staging of how these directions might move in unexpected new ways, a form of experimental divination. The external stipulations are the rules, laws and codes which seek to deny the selection and its diagram, for instance the statement that a selection is impossible, or a direction on the diagram given as forbidden, or in a science of the relations affected by the selection. It is important to define the stipulations as external in order to allow for a critical debate around the sign and its diagrams, but for the debate to remain open these stipulations also feature in diagrams and can be included in the selection of a sign.

The process sign is therefore a multiplicity rather than the more familiar dualities of signifier and signified, or sense and reference. This does not mean that there aren't such dualities. It means that they must be selected into the sign, rather than lay claim to be a sufficient definition of any sign: S {signifier, signified, a, b, c, ...}. It also means they must be on the diagram (at different changing intensities, even very low ones). They can be part of a revaluation of the sign (What if we think of the pull of this signified on the diagram?) They are also stipulations over the sign, as external rules about the sign (the claim 'Every sign should be dual', for instance). One advantage of this process definition of the sign, which it shares with some others, is that it allows nesting of signs within signs. Unlike other definitions, though, the process definition has no restrictions on what can be included or nested in the sign as selection.

What does this theory of the sign imply for the by-line photograph? First, it means that we must observe how the identity photograph works as a selection. There can be no final account of the selection, it is always a speculative move, but its diagrams are based on positive descriptions. The selection is unconditioned by definition and always open to challenge and counter suggestions. While allowing for a kind of descriptive positivism, the process philosophy will therefore be essentially creative and critical, not only in its suggestion of a selection, in the naming of the sign as a set, but also in description of the intensive diagram, experimentation with alternative diagrams or scenarios, and critical dialogue with external stipulations over the sign.

I suggest the photograph can generally be seen as the selection of a reductive token, of an individual in a world and of a series of identification aims which can vary on the circumstances of the uses and power

structures around the photograph. For the by-line photograph requested by a workplace the selection might therefore be {James-photo-token, James-teacher, University}. The intensity diagram $S\{\text{James-photo-token, James-teacher, University}\}$ is where the first level critical work takes place.

There is a strong decrease in intensity running from relations around and in James-teacher to those around James-photo, due to the great simplification and standardisation in the move from individual in the world to token. This is true for any by-line photograph, for instance, those used to represent journalists. The topological vector space looks like a funnel running from an open end of many different features and singular points around the individual to a narrowing and simpler direction across the token. We sense the effects of this restriction when we meet those we only knew first through the token. *Such a frightening stare...*

Flowing from living beings to tokens, this funnelling feature of the sign identifies a certain type. We could call them reduction signs where the disparate and yet full series of shifting intensities around living relations is narrowed down to a token and series of rules around its proper function. The token photograph then takes its place alongside similar signs which stand for, yet also reduce and transform a more broad set of relations, such as the operation of monetary value as token (net worth or salary say) or administrative description as political token {James-friend, James-on-the-census-return, social ordering}.

As funnelling the token photograph is therefore a process rather than a relation. The picture does not mean or stand for the living being but rather operates on and between beings and administrative orders, and in principle everything else as shown on the diagram with different vectors and intensities. The selected sign is therefore nothing without the descriptive diagram expressing the narrowing process. This description is itself incomplete without an experimentation which calls it into question and a critical interaction with a range of stipulations running counter to the selection and diagrams.

For instance, against the description of the funnelling process, we can claim that the token is neutral, 'does no harm' or, more theoretically, we can claim that the token is straightforward or neutral signification (*the picture merely stands for X; any signifier can stand for X*). Every sign is an occasion for a critical debate with counter claims to the validity of its selection and accuracy of its diagrams. This is a dialogue afforded by process signs. There are the critical arguments against the selection and counter points against stipulations over the sign. The sign is always at the crux of a political engagement.

Turning to further counter-suggestions to the funnel type of diagram for the identity photograph, there are two uses of them that point to other possibilities and to negative features of those contributing to the funnel effect. I encountered both in Northern Italy, where simple photographs are used in death notices posted around town centres to inform citizens of recent loss and where small identity photographs from different ages are used in posters celebrating upcoming PhD defences.

For the death notices, the photograph contributes in a moving and powerful way to mourning. A familiar face is posted on walls and in windows where the deceased once lived. Why can't by-line and corporate

identity photographs perform in a similar deep manner? It is because they are essentially substitutable. They take their place alongside many others and even in the limit case of a death or other disappearance the empty gap is soon filled by another face presented in the same way on office noticeboards and websites. There is no deep mourning or sadness, but rather a corporate affirmation of the power to exchange faces and operate forms of control on employees. The process of reduction is the condition for this easy swap so important for modern firms and bureaucracies.

The photographs in the PhD defence posters are part of an intricate, comical and frequently irreverent celebration of a life. The small and simple photographs of students as babies, gauche adolescents and posing young adults only work alongside cartoons, poems, extracts from university research, drawing and testimonies. The difference with the reductive token is now in the relation to context and environment. The corporate token appears next to others but always thanks to a framing mechanism which suspends their relation to wider context. This makes substitution easier, but more importantly it makes the reduction possible by setting the image in a neutral and sterilised field. The celebration poster does exactly the opposite. It reconnects a reduced image to the full life among friends, family, colleagues and neighbours.

The process account of the token allows for a debate about its supposed neutrality or innocence by introducing the flow from broad individual to token and by extending this flow to administrative and power functions. This is different from a debate about what the sign 'means' or 'points to' because the sign is not defined as ambiguous or at the intersection of different claims, but rather as the multiple and mobile condition for any debate about such claims.

There is a good way of understanding the stakes of such claims through the changes in intensity and directions in the diagram around two singular points, for instance, 'James-token' and 'James-in-the world'. Compare the different effects of a portrait, such as those collected in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, and the reduced by-line token. Portraits enter into a rich and revealing interaction with the subject in the world through the framing and depth of the portrait. The dying eyes and sagging flesh captured just behind an apparently proud and energetic mien, for instance.

Tokens conceal this richness and reduce it to a few flat features. Portraits have the ability to express changes over time, in the way painting can manipulate erotic charge and affect, or impending sickness and burgeoning health, for instance. They can also connect the subject to eternal sensations and lasting ideas; a portrait endures and yet changes over time. In contrast, tokens are crude cuts in time which separate them from the evolution over periods of the subjects and from their sensual character and drives. That's why we are always being asked to update our tokens, but to no avail in communicating deep forces or characteristics. *I'd never have guessed he was so duplicitous and cruel...*

The diagram of the token has a powerful set of vectors around the motivating force for complying with the demand for such tokens. This could be the enforcement of a request by an institution, such as the university, to have a standardised by-line image and identity photograph, or a standardised header for documents, or format for slides. This means the diagram has a strong pull and increased intensity

towards corporate identity but also control through the token. The individual life is sucked through and channelled by the photograph towards standard and carefully monitored ideas and images, such as corporate brand and vision. The funnelling takes a large and diverse set of living characteristics narrowed down through the token and back out towards a corporate grid of brand, management control and 'vision'. *Smile, comply and wear a tie if you want to work here...*

The process sign is therefore also an occasion for political resistance. Its critical and creative potential allows political forces to be revealed, as they are on the diagram around the corporate photograph-token. The creation of signs and the diagrams of their processes cannot change the world but they are where change commences.

James Williams, August 2015



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