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7 The visual semiotics of Tarot images: A sociocultural perspective

Abstract: This chapter addresses the visual semiotics of a specific medium represented by Tarot images and investigates their communicative and signifying potential. The chapter argues that Tarot is not just a cultural game but a system of signs grounded in a complementary relation between word and image. Using such sources as Carl Jung's archetypal psychology, Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotics and Yuri Lotman's approach to cultural memory, this chapter demonstrates that the meanings implicit in the Tarot pictures accord with the unorthodox grammar of the symbolic language of the collective unconscious. Importantly, the chapter considers the implications of Tarot pictorial semiotics at the level of present-day social reality and specifically focuses on three images of the Major Arcana, namely: the Devil, the Tower, and the Star. The chapter concludes by presenting an impending Fifth Age of Understanding wherein the integration of visual communication takes place leading to humankind's intelligent and ethical actions.

1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the visual semiotics of a specific medium represented by Tarot images and investigates their communicative and signifying potential. Tarot pictures have been historically excluded from "high" visual art forms such as paintings and relegated to the very "low" end of popular culture (Auger 2004) despite the fact that the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris holds a collection of exquisitely painted Tarot cards documented in the French Court ledger as dating back to 1392. The collection located at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York contains thirty-five picturesque cards from a full deck of seventy-eight, whose origin goes back to the middle of 15th century.

Semiotics – a study of signs, both verbal and non-verbal, and their significance or meanings – considers images and pictures as belonging to the category of signs (Posner 1989; Sonesson 1989): "pictures have a continuous structure [that] induces the reader to [...] read the picture as if it were a written text" (Posner 1989: 276). Tarot cards contain meaningful attributes in the format of pictorial or "graphic symbols [that remain] a semiotically still largely unexplored field of research" (Nöth 1995: 219). Yet pictures are polysemous, that is, they are open to a variety of meanings depending on broad contexts that may adopt a specific cultural code. According to Roland Barthes' now-classic example of the photo of the bald eagle, a physical image serves as a signifier, while the concept per se of

the bald eagle is the signified. The photographic image of an eagle as such, that is, representing the level of denotation, is a sign or a signifier. But importantly it is also a signified at the higher-order level of possible connotations; as such, the signified is polysemic and may connote a plurality of meanings. Functioning as a potential signified, the sign is characterized by a surplus of signification: it may mean either patriotism, or be a symbol of the American flag, or represent endangered species, or whatever else might be associated with it in a given cultural code, thereby producing a sign called by Barthes an associative total. Despite the form remaining the same, the conceptual content – or a sign’s meaning – is polyvalent. An analogous associative process is a backbone behind reading and interpreting the Tarot cards.

Famous philosopher of language Sir Michael Dummett, a pioneer of the so called linguistic turn in philosophy, devoted several monumental volumes to the history and mystery of Tarot; however he addressed it from a rather limited perspective of a merely cultural *game* (e.g. Dummett 1980). Conversely, French philosopher Antoine Faivre presented “Tarot [as] a specific art [...] and] a subject of extensive literature, both scholarly and popular [that] increasingly suffuses our culture [and] through a hermeneutic of situations and characters [...] opens out upon a gnosis” (1994: 96) as deep inner knowledge, which is however expressed not in words but in images. This chapter adopts the latter perspective, which has been extensively researched and summarized in my 2011 book titled *Re-Symbolization of the Self: Human Development and Tarot Hermeneutic*.

The relationship between word and image remains historically, philosophically, and ideologically troubled. Shlain (1989) contrasts the “*linear, sequential, reductionist, and abstract thinking*” (1998: 1; italics in original) pertaining to the verbal mode with “*holistic, simultaneous, synthetic, and concrete*” (Shlain 1998: 4; italics in original) medium of images. Importantly, images “approximate reality [...] The brain simultaneously perceives all parts of the *whole* integrating the parts *synthetically* into a gestalt. The majority of images are perceived in an all-at-once manner” (Shlain 1998: 4; italics in original). The complementarity between word and image as a feature of semiotics is important in the hermeneutic process of Tarot readings (Semetsky 2011). During their interpretations, the meanings of pictures are narrated and articulated; however they are not exhausted by verbal expressions. The words are abstract – but the feelings and emotions that they elicit are concrete and particular and determine our actual actions at the level of cultural practices. These feelings may betray words.

While human consciousness expresses itself in propositional thought and verbal language as a prerogative of Cartesian *Cogito*, feelings and emotions may be buried deep in the unconscious, whose mode of expression is, according to psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, universal or archetypal; thus exceeding personal unconscious posited by Freud as simply repressed and reducible to Oedipal drama. Jungian archetypes “populate”, metaphorically speaking, the field of “collective

unconscious” and may appear in our dreams in the form of multiple archetypal images. For Jung, the effects of the archetypes “can only be explained by assuming them to be deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity” (Jung CW 7, 109). While Jung did not specifically focus on Tarot, he noticed that despite their “obscure origin [...] the set of pictures on Tarot cards were distantly descended from the archetypes of transformation” (Jung in Gad 1994: 179).

Sally Nichols, who was Jung’s student in Zurich, has explicitly connected archetypes with the Tarot images in her book *Jung and Tarot: an Archetypal Journey* (Nichols 1980); and Jung’s biographer Laurens van der Post, in his introduction to Nichols’ book, pointed out her “profound investigation of Tarot, and her illuminated exegesis of its pattern as an authentic attempt at enlargement of possibilities of human perceptions” (in Nichols 1980: xv). Jungian psychologist Irene Gad (1994) connected Tarot cards with the stages of human development along the Jungian process of individuation towards becoming authentic selves and considered their archetypal images “to be [...] trigger symbols, appearing and disappearing throughout history in times of transition and need” (1994: xxxiv).

2 The archetypal images of Tarot

A Tarot deck comprises 78 images, 22 Major and 56 Minor, called Arcana. The meaning of the word Arcana derives from Latin *arca* as a chest; *arcere* as a verb means to shut or to close; symbolically, Arcanum (singular) is a tightly shut treasure chest holding a secret – its implicit meaning. According to Jung, the universal meanings of common human experiences are hidden in the collective unconscious or “objective psyche” shared at a deeper level by all members of humankind and manifest through archetypal, symbolic and latent, images (Jung 1959). The collective unconscious acts as a symbolic “home” for archetypes that transcend cultural or temporal barriers. The archetypes are structural elements of the collective psyche and “possess a certain autonomy and specific energy which enables them to attract, out of the conscious mind, those contents which are better suited to themselves” (Jung CW 5, 232).

Jung saw archetypes as skeletal patterns, filled in with imagery and motifs that are “mediated to us by the unconscious” (CW 8, 417), the variable contents of which form different archetypal images. He was adamant that the “symbolic process is an experience *in images and of images*” (Jung CW 8i, 82). He insisted that “there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life ... there is something in me that can say things that I do not know and do not intend” (Jung 1963: 183), that is, which act at the unconscious level beyond one’s voluntary control or conscious will. Contemporary post-Jungians consider the archetypes to be both the structuring patterns of the psyche and the dynamical units of information (cf. Semetsky 2008a, 2008b) implicit in the contents of the collective unconscious.

The archetypal images reflected in the Tarot Arcana are the vehicles for/of information embedded in the collective unconscious, and the unconscious is capable of spontaneously producing images “irrespective of wishes and fears of the conscious mind” (Jung CW 11, 745). Thus Tarot pictures lay down a “route to the unconscious. This alternative route uses some of the materials, shapes, signs, and symbols used by artists and our dreams [...] The major arcana [...] are visual aids to the unconscious. They are vivid shorthand portraits” (Hederman 2003: 27). The pictorial images comprising the Major and Minor Arcana in a Tarot deck drawn by Pamela Colman Smith are shown below in Figure 1.

In contrast to a number of popular publications that usually reduce the wealth of potential meanings embodied in Tarot images to their description by a set of keywords, my research (Semetsky 2011) demonstrates that there cannot be a forever-fixed meaning attached to an image; rather meanings are contextualized depending on a particular situation, as well as inferred from specific positions occupied by this or that picture in a typical Tarot layout. While these positions traditionally describe common semantic categories, their “contents” embodied in the imagery do vary. Hence, while the meanings of the Tarot images are codified, their codification is never a fixed given but represents a dynamic evolving “process” that includes a pragmatic dimension. It is our practical experiential “usage [that] renders [a potential meaning] more precise and extends its convention” (Guiraud 1975: 25). Importantly, there is:

a deep affinity between communication [...] and perception. [...] Psychoanalysis – particularly Lacan’s school – considers the manifestations of the unconscious as a mode of communication and a language. Parapsychology, too, postulates the notion of subliminal messages which are not conscious. These notions have been taken up by literary criticism, the study of myth, the psychosociology of behavior [...] under the heading of ‘depth psychology’, and semiology must take this into account. [...] Codification [...] is a process [and] depending on each particular case, signs are *more or less* motivated, and sign systems *more or less* structured. (Guiraud 1975: 22–25)

Jacques Lacan was correct when he said that the unconscious is structured as a language. Even if this language is subtle and non-verbal, it has a communicative potential. Exceeding a solely linguistic representation, it expresses itself in the form of images as iconic information. The reading and interpretation of images makes the implicit meanings explicit, as if creating them anew. Importantly, the collective unconscious encompasses future possibilities, and “[a] purposively interpreted [image], seems like a symbol, seeking to characterize a definite goal with the help of the material at hand, or trace out a line of future psychological development” (Jung CW 6, 720), that is to perform a prospective, “prognostic” function in addition to the one symptomatic, or “diagnostic” as related to the experience of the present.

The meanings implicit in the Tarot pictures are not arbitrary but accord with the unorthodox grammar of the symbolic language of the unconscious (Semetsky



1 Fig. 1: Images of Major and Minor Arcana.

1 All illustrations, unless otherwise specified, are from the Rider-Waite Tarot Deck, also known as the Rider Tarot and the Waite Tarot. Reproduced by permission of US Games Systems Inc., Stamford, CT 06902, USA. Copyright 1971 by US Games Systems, Inc. Further reproduction prohibited.

2010a; 2013) above and beyond verbal expressions of the conscious mind. As Jung made clear, “it is not the personal human being who is making the statement, but the archetype speaking through him” (Jung 1963: 352). In the *Four Archetypes* Jung says: “You need not be insane to hear his [archetype’s] voice. On the contrary, it is the simplest and most natural thing imaginable. [...] You can describe it as mere ‘associating’ [...] or as a ‘meditation’ [and] a real colloquy becomes possible when the ego acknowledges the existence of a partner to the discussion” (CW 9, 236–237). Such “discussion” as a symbolic dialogue between consciousness and the unconscious takes place during Tarot readings when the subtle language of images is being interpreted or translated into verbal expressions thereby communicating meanings implicit in the images. Tarot pictures form a pattern in this or that specific layout which thus functions as a material embodiment of the archetypes by means of which such silent discourse (Semetsky 2010a) can communicate itself.

We can see (Figure 1) that nearly every one of Tarot pictures has an image of a living being, a human figure situated in different contexts. The images symbolically encode information that affects human behaviour when this or that of Jungian archetypes becomes active either at the individual or collective levels. Among Major Arcana the Fool embodies the archetype of the Eternal Child; the Empress is the Great Mother; Hierophant represents the archetype of Persona; the Devil embodies a powerful Shadow (see further below), etc. The human figure travels through the cards, and Tarot Arcana comprise a pictorial text that represents universal human experiences accompanied by what Jung called a feeling-tone. This visual text has its own syntax, semantics, and pragmatics even if not in written linear alphabetic form. Yet, “[b]efore there was writing there were pictures” (Shlain 1998: 45). Each Tarot picture embodies “a meaning that is [...] still beyond our grasp, and cannot be adequately expressed in the familiar words of our language” (Jung in Nöth 1995: 119) but needs a symbolic medium for its very expression, and a Tarot reader functions as a “bi-lingual” interpreter translating the semiotic, nonverbal but visual, messages implicated in pictures into their verbal counterparts.

3 Visual communication

From the perspective of semiotics as the study of signs, communication exceeds a solely verbal mode of expression as in linguistics but covers extra-linguistic modes, including pictures and images. Earlier empirical studies by Russian semioticians equated the phenomenon of Tarot readings squarely with fortune-telling; the cards were used for a specific pragmatic purpose by a fortune-teller whose task was considered to simply “exert a strong influence on the person whose fortune is being told” (Lekomceva and Uspensky 1977: 70). Playing cards were regarded as a simple semiotic system with a limited vocabulary, in which “divination of past and present is a game” (1977: 71) and the future is foretold. In comparison with natural

languages, the formal structure of “the system of cartomancy [as] a language with finite number of states” was considered analogous to “certain artificial languages with a limited semantics” (1977: 73).

In the comprehensive study by Heeren and Mason (1984), the authors, adopting a sociolinguistic method, presented both the ethnography of communication used by contemporary spiritual readers, as well as a therapeutic discourse as guiding their analysis, which focused on the precise form of readers’ statements. They distinguished between the style of everyday life, interview style and visionary style. The latter was characterized as “the most unusual and distinctive” (1984: 197) even as the authors acknowledged the ethnomethodological “et cetera principle” (1984: 200) employed by many readers. They described this principle as analogous to one that functions in “everyday conversation when participants are expected to ‘fill in’ meanings when others make ambiguous statements. [...] It] means that one supplies contextual information to make sense of the indexical expressions of others. So it is in [...] readings. Readers are not expected to spell out precise details of the persons and situations in their clients’ life. Instead clients must play an active part by trying to access the applicability of visionary statements to their life” (1984: 200).

The original study by Aphek and Tobin (1989) has advanced cards reading to the level of complex, dynamic, meta-semiotic systems (cf. Semetsky 2001, 2008a), in which the multiple meanings of the cards were seen as representing “the possible semantic, cultural and social attributes of an umbrella term or theme attributed to that particular card” (Aphek and Tobin 1989: 13). They addressed the dynamic character of Tarot readings within which communication and the perception perform the function of “an individualized autopoietic process” (Aphek and Tobin 1989: 3). Still, as just one of many branches of fortune-telling in general, a case of Tarot readings was considered to be simply “a specific instance of persuasive *dyadic* human communication” (1989: 175; emphasis added), in which both participants were considered as being assigned “well-defined roles” (1989: 33). The *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics* (Sebeok 1994, 1: 99–100) describes Tarot readings “as a branch of divination based upon the symbolic meaning attached to individual Tarot cards or modern decks, interpreted according to the subject or purpose of a reading and modified by their position and relation to each other from their specific location in a formal ‘layout’ or ‘spread’ (1994: 99).

What, however, has been overlooked in the aforementioned studies is an almost complete absence of any informational content in their examples of readings. Informational content is a necessary component for a sign to function as a *genuine* sign, that is, to stand for or to mean something other than itself. My research reconceptualises the phenomenon of Tarot readings and the interpretation of images from the viewpoint of Charles Sanders Peirce’s logic as semiotics and the importance allotted by him to the dynamic process of signs’ evolution and growth called “semiosis”. For Peirce, the whole world is composed of signs that

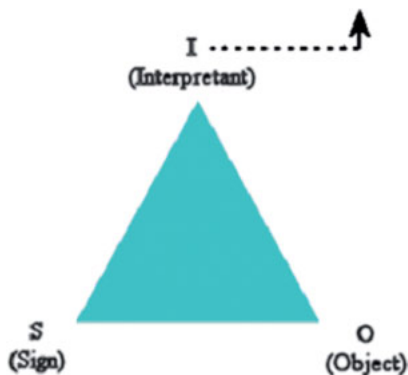


Fig. 2: A genuine sign.

permeate nature, culture and human mind (Semetsky 2013). Due to the evolution of meanings, signs grow and become other as more fully developed. As embedded in a stream of semiosis, we humans too are signs and we can acquire information and come to mean more than before.

While analytic philosophy of language grounded in the dyadic logic of the *excluded* middle presented verbal signs as the sole means of communication and representing reality *directly*, the semiotic, or pragmatic, turn (cf. Bernstein 2010) is not illogical. The process of reasoning however is *indirect* or mediated. Peirce's logic is triadic or analogical, and involves interpretation versus direct representation common to the modernity for which, historically, “there could be no *tertium quid*” (Merrell 2002: 204) as an indirect, *mediated*, relation between the two, usually perceived as opposites, things. Rather than being a simple dyad, a genuine (contra degenerate) sign has, according to Peirce, a triadic structure (Fig. 2), in which it is an *interpretant* that mediates between a sign and its object and functions as the *included* middle. It is an interpretant that creates a meaning for the sign by means of “filling” it with a specific informational content the meaning of which, as a result of interpretation, can be communicated.

If there is a lack of *in*-formation, then no *trans*-formation is possible, so the reading remains just a reading without any implication of habit change by virtue of creating a new meaning for – or making sense of – often disturbing and traumatic experiences taking place in human lives, in culture. In my recent volume *Re-Symbolization of the Self: Human Development and Tarot Hermeneutic* (Semetsky 2011) I have presented real-life “case studies” with the interpretations of cards’ meanings in 15 reading sessions. Importantly, one and the same image, however situated in different contexts, may acquire different connotations, that serve to illustrate the concept of polysemy peculiar to Tarot and address the “polyvocality” of visual semiotics with its wealth of potential meanings.

For Peirce, a sign can be represented by image, index or symbol, and a perfect sign combines all three semiotic elements, so that image (or icon) is always already

present in the products of the intellect such as concepts, meanings and conscious judgments. Tarot images are signs that establish a syntactic structure of a layout in the form of a pictorial, extra-linguistic, text. They are purposeful and meaningful semantically and are capable of changing their meanings dynamically depending on the context they are situated in. Functioning as an unorthodox symbolic text communicating messages in a pictorial mode, the Tarot spread can be read and interpreted: importantly, it is “the constitution of messages [that] forms the subject matter of semiotics” (Sebeok 1991: 22). From the Peircean perspective, the function of the semiotic “interpretant” is performed by the language of Tarot images and symbols, which – like any language in general – is represented by a structured semiotic system whose role is to pair expressions (functioning as public aspects, e.g. physical marks as actual pictures) and messages (private aspects as thoughts and concepts), that is, to have a means for mapping between them (cf. Jackendoff 2001) when narrating the meanings of the images. For Peirce, it is his third category of interpretation that, by means of performing a mediative or symbolic function, creates or “brings information [...] [it] determines the idea and gives it body” (Peirce CP 1. 537) at the level of practical action.

It is the Tarot symbolism – the universal language of signs (Semetsky 2006a) – that establishes an unorthodox communicative link functioning as a semiotic interpretant and performing a function of the “included third” of Peirce’s genuine triadic sign capable of creating a semiotic bridge to the Jungian collective unconscious. A Tarot reader converts the pictorial language of the unconscious into verbal expressions, thus facilitating the transformation of information into consciousness. The signs may vary, however the means of symbolic communication remains the same: what takes place is an indirect, mediated, connection akin to the acting principle of synchronicity posited by Jung in collaboration with the famous physicist and Nobel laureate Wolfgang Pauli.

Synchronicity addresses the problematic of meaningful patterns generated in nature and culture alike along the multiple paths of human experiences. The concept of the unconscious extends its boundary tending to the notion of “‘field’ in physics [as] a more general form of ‘connections’ in nature” (Pauli 1994: 164). In his 1952 letter to Jung, Pauli expressed his belief in the gradual discovery of a new, what he called “neutral”, language that functions symbolically to describe the psychic reality of the archetypes and would be capable of crossing over the psycho-physical dualism² that continues to haunt human culture since Descartes. Indeed, mind and matter do not oppose each other but can be reconciled within the process of Peircean semiosis: “Mind is First, Matter is Second, Evolution is Third” (Peirce CP 6. 7).

² See *Atom and Archetype: The Pauli/Jung Letters 1932–1958*. Edited by C. A. Meier, with a preface by Beverley Zabriskie (2001, Princeton University Press). This particular letter is designated in the book as 56P, pp. 81–83. See also my article “The language of signs: Semiosis and the memories of the future” in *SOPHIA: International Journal for philosophy of religion, metaphysical theology and ethics*, 2006, 45/1: 95–116.

The art of Tarot readings belongs to the right hemisphere as a *sympathetic* system capable of what Peirce called the synthetic consciousness in contrast to the left, cerebral, hemisphere, oriented to solely analytic reason. Still, it is when the integration of both sides takes place that the mind is capable of fulfilling its full creative potential. Shlain remarked that the right side of the brain is “wise [...] more familiar with needs and drives stemming from the earlier stages of evolution” (1998: 18). The right hemisphere is permeated by “feeling-states [that] are *authentic* [...] An internal voice verifies the experience [...] The right hemisphere is [...] the portal leading to the world of the invisible” (Shlain 1998: 19; italics in original) comprising a “signosphere” (cf. Deely 2001) that exceeds, yet encompasses, our empirical observable world. The expanded world of semiotic reality becomes available to observation that includes now the deep level of collective psyche full of potential significance at the level of “practical bearings” (Peirce CP 5. 402) in agreement with Peirce’s pragmatic maxim as his theory of meaning.

When symbolically represented in Tarot images, the transpersonal and transcendental realm of the collective unconscious is being brought, so to speak, down to earth by virtue of its embodiment in the material reality, confirming Jung’s insight that “psyche and matter are two different aspects of one and the same thing” (Jung CW 8, 418). They are united during readings, thus defying the ghost of the dualistic schism both in theory and, significantly, in practice. The levels of sociocultural *praxis* as encompassing human behaviours, decision making or choosing a particular course of action is of utmost significance! Jung was adamant that the general rules of human conduct are “at most provisional solutions, but never lead to those critical decisions which are the turning-points in a man’s life. [...] ‘The diversity and complexity of the situation makes it impossible for us to lay down any theoretical rule for ethical behaviour’” (Jung in Neumann 1969: 13).³ It is not only in theory but, significantly, in our practical experience that each and every Tarot reading (Semetsky 2011) becomes a step toward the realisation of the deepest meaning of a particular situation at the level of social reality.

4 Social reality

The field of communication phenomena as part of the typology of cultures calls for the identification of specific semiotic systems representing their “languages”. Accordingly, human experiences cross over the boundaries of individual minds and expand to the level of the whole of culture. In this respect culture partakes of a text containing collective memory (cf. Lotman 1990) that unfolds in the process of the evolutionary process of communication during which the nature of objects is

³ From Foreword by C. G. Jung to E. Neumann’s book *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic*. Jung’s Foreword copyright © 1968 by the Bollingen Foundation, New York.

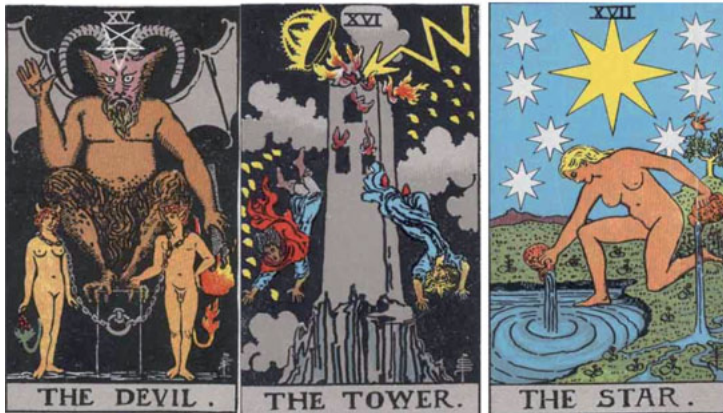


Fig. 3: Major Arcana images.

gradually revealed to human subjects-in-kinship. In semiotic terms, memory is considered a specific capacity to preserve and reproduce information. In this respect a Tarot deck represents a semiotic system in the format of a nonverbal “lexicon”, and each Tarot layout comprising the constellations of images is a symbolic text full of information and implicit “memories” of which we becomes aware due to an unorthodox communicative link between consciousness and the unconscious.

The journey through the cards’ imagery not only contributes to individual self-knowledge but also expands to the relationships with significant others in diverse social contexts and amidst events taking place in human culture. Cultural events become meaningful signs “filled” with a semiotic or communicative potential; they carry social and political significance and represent symbolic texts to be read and interpreted. As pictorial artefacts, Tarot images embody the patterns of thoughts, affects, emotions, feelings and behaviors implicit in collective experiences and social events that transcend times, places, language barriers, and disparate beliefs and values. As Marshall McLuhan famously made clear, the medium is the message. The medium of Tarot pictures becomes, rather than being “merely a passive conduit for the transmission of information, an active force in creating new social patterns and new perceptual realities” (Logan 1986: 24).

Often, the action of Jungian archetypes is such that they can possess the psyche in the guise of the unconscious Shadow. Jung saw how powerfully this archetype worked behind the scenes, implicitly affecting the psyche and explicitly influencing people to behave in a neurotic or compulsive manner. Among Major Arcana, the Shadow archetype corresponds to the Arcanum XV called the Devil, the fallen angel, the dark precursor in the evolution toward two subsequent cards called the Tower and the Star (Figure 3).

In the guise of the Shadow, the Devil can easily possess one’s psyche and, importantly, the Shadow can often become projected onto others (Semetsky 2005b),

and one may very well attribute to significant others those qualities that one is tempted to deny in oneself. The concept of Shadow describes a cluster of impulses, complexes, shameful and unacknowledged desires, self-indulgences and being a slave to one's own primitive instincts. Sexual compulsion, poor impulse control, or plain old greed are some behavioural patterns that may manifest in real life. It may be a fear or a superficial complex of superiority when in fact deep inside one feels rather inferior. On the picture, the two naked figures chained to the Devil's throne in the underworld appear to have lost the ability of clear judgment and seem helpless. The Devil's heavy chains represent our self-destructive tendencies and weaknesses; bondage and fear. In interpersonal relationships, the Devil can reflect upon co-dependency issues. It may be a deeply ingrained fear of breaking free, similar to battered women unable to leave and continuing to stay in abusive relationships, overwhelmed by submissiveness or sexual/economic dependency.

At the collective level, the Shadow encompasses those outside "the norm" of the established order and social system, such as "criminals, psychotics, misfits, scapegoats" (Samuels 1985: 66). It is not only that these shadowy figures appear to stand outside culture, but importantly culture itself fails to assimilate its own Shadow. The Devil Arcanum is a symbol of the ultimate slave morality, in the Nietzschean sense, in the relationship between the oppressor and those oppressed. It represents a moment of psychological denial and the implementation of scapegoat policy by the dominant culture or nation, while in the meantime projecting onto some generic Other one's own inferior and shadowy qualities. The scapegoat psychology is associated with what Erich Neumann called old ethics, and it is an ethical attitude indeed that is central with regard to the Shadow archetype.

While the ego-consciousness focuses on indubitable and unequivocal moral principles, these very principles crumble under the "*compensatory significance of the shadow* in the light of ethical responsibility" (Jung in Neumann 1969: 12; italics in original). The neglect of this responsibility tends to precipitate multiple evil consequences in the world. While old ethics is the ethics of illusionary perfection and absolute Good that necessarily leads to the appearance of its polar opposite, absolute Evil, the new ethics consists in recognising our own dark side, that is, making the darkness conscious. The old ethics is "partial" (Neumann 1969: 74) as belonging solely to the isolated and self-centred conscious Ego; the new ethics devoted to the integration of the unconscious Shadow is, however, holistic and ideally represented by the Jungian archetype of the Self. The Self – as a *whole* – emerges only when the opposites exist as a harmonious whole and neither side is suppressed or eliminated.

In his book *Tarot: Talisman or Taboo? Reading the World as Symbol*, Irish philosopher and monk Mark Patrick Hederman (2003) points out that the Devil's (or Satan's) other name is Lucifer, he who brings the Light in order to illuminate the darkness. In this allegory, "the evil that is the shadow side of everything that is bright and good remains hidden" (Hederman 2003: 176) or invisible. The perpetual

presence of the shadow must be recognised, made visible, and integrated into consciousness; otherwise, it will fall into the depth of the unconscious where it will continue to crystallise. The absence of freedom, lack of hope, and total powerlessness will reach their critical mass and will start acting from within the psyche, spreading spontaneously until reaching a destructive climax. Non-incidentally, the picture that immediately follows the Devil in the deck, called the Tower (Figure 3), represents this upcoming climax.

In the Tarot feminist interpretation (Gearhart and Rennie 1981), the imagery of the Tower signifies radical intervention, revolution and the overthrowing of false consciousness, violent social conflict and change, destruction of the old order on a grand scale, and release from imprisonment in the patriarchal structure during the very process of its demolition. Jung spoke about the archetypal *temenos* in one's psychic structure that in Greek means a sacred precinct like a temple; a synonym for it is a hermetically sealed vessel or, for that matter, the Tower. *Temenos*, as employed in Jungian analysis, acquired psychological connotations as the psychically charged area surrounding a complex, and may be experienced sometimes through the symbolism of any closed container such as a womb or a prison. Because the vessel is sealed hermetically, the force looking for its way out will be ultimately felt as acting from within in an erratic, horrifying and unpredictable manner (Semetsky 2000) reflected in the imagery of this card.

Regarding real events in human culture at the social level, the imagery of the Tower – which in some decks is called The House of Destruction – has an uncanny resemblance with the image of the destroyed towers on September 11 (Figure 4; Photo courtesy FEMA.):



Fig. 4: WTC towers on 11 September 2001.

Jean Baudrillard (2002), in his analysis of the spirit of terrorism, talks about the shift of the struggle into the symbolic sphere where an initial event – “as quite a good illustration of chaos theory” (2002: 23) – becomes subjected to unforesee-

able consequences. Such a singular event – like the destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11 – propagates unpredictably, causing the chain of effects “not just in the direct economic, political, financial slump in the whole of the system – and the resulting moral and psychological downturn – but the slump in the value-system” (2002: 31–32) *per se*. The collapse of the towers represents the fact that “the whole system has reached a critical mass which makes it vulnerable to any aggression” (2002: 33). No longer projected inward, the released darkness becomes directed into the outer space. Baudrillard points out that not only terrorism itself is blind but so were the actual towers – “no longer opening to the outside world, but subject to artificial conditioning” (2002: 43): air conditioning, or mental conditioning alike – similar to the Tower in the Tarot picture that was sealed at the top when suddenly struck by lightning.

The Tower image is an embodiment of contradiction and the conflict of opposites; Jung used the notion of contradiction with regard to the meaning of the tower which he, at a symbolic level, identified with the tower of Babel as a symbol of false omnipotence and mistaken certainty, *a priori* condemned to destruction during the most powerful and confusing instance of contradiction and mutual misunderstanding: the confusion of tongues, indeed. Jung pointed out that it is the excess of pride and passion that “raises a man not only above himself, but also above the bounds of his mortality and earthliness, and by the very act of raising him, it destroys him. This ‘rising above himself’ is expressed mythologically in the building of the heaven-high tower of Babel that brought confusion to mankind” (Jung, CW 5, 171). The picture in Figure 5 below, from the deck called *The Lovers’ Tarot*, incorporates elements of the famous masterpiece by Pieter Brueghel the Elder:



Fig. 5: The Tower.⁴

⁴ This image is from the deck called *The Lovers’ Tarot*, by Jane Lyle; Illustration Copyright © Oliver Burston 1982. Published by Connections (January 2000) in the UK and St. Martin’s Press in the US.



Fig. 6: WTC following the 11September 2011 attack.

During Tarot readings the appearance of the Tower card may indicate a catharsis, that is, a dramatic and forceful replay of the unconscious material that exceeds the boundaries of the current “circumference” of the mind and forces the darkness at a very deep level to break through into the surface of consciousness. Significantly, the enforced evacuation, breaking all defences, frees one from being incarcerated in the symbolic tower of one’s own making, whether it is psychological, ideological, cultural, or of any other belief system. Thunder and lightning, as per the image of the Tower, are universal signs of the wrath of gods; the symbolism of which also indicates a swift – and painful – alteration at the level of collective consciousness when it observes the aftermath of the destruction of the self-erected unstable structure. The ultimate destruction – a body turned into a lifeless skeleton – is seen in this other poignant and maximally real image of 9/11 also published on the Internet (Figure 6; U.S. Navy photo by Journalist 1st Class Preston Keres).

Any unforeseen cataclysmic event that suddenly brings people down to earth by disturbing the existing norm and order of things through the abruptly terminated current psychological state or a break-up in a set of values privileged by a given culture, necessarily raises the level of consciousness. The breakdown in existing order simultaneously creates conditions for the potential production of a new order. Thus the image of The Tower card is a sign not only of a breakdown but a breakthrough when the darkness embodied in the preceding image of the Shadow-Devil is illuminated and made conscious. I agree with Mark Patrick Hederman (2003) who warns of a danger to ourselves and others if and when we choose to remain unconscious of the Shadow. If history and culture have taught us anything, it is that in the 20th century The Devil manifested as:

a hell on earth and that this hell was a human creation. It was a hell of cruelty and mayhem resulting from the incapacity of the powerful people to decipher their unconscious motivation [...]. Each of us has to discover and explore the labyrinth of the dark, the unconscious [...] Its language is incomprehensible, even inaudible to most. But, no matter how difficult it is to decipher, such work must be undertaken. We must recognize that most of our past, whether personal or historical, took place underground, in silent rivers, ancient springs, blind pools, dark sewers. While the task of making them accessible to our consciousness is difficult, it is nonetheless imperative. Even more so at the beginning of a new century when we hope to outline some plausible tracks into a better future. We have to read the signs of the times [...] (Hederman 2003: 21).

The signs of the times may come from the earth, such as volcanos or earthquakes; or from water such as tsunamis; or from the air such as the attack on September 11; or from the fire when drought causes famine; in all cases the results are disastrous. Still, human lives can be saved because it is all four elements of nature – air, water, earth and fire corresponding to the four suits in a deck (swords, cups, pentacles, and wands) that are trying to communicate with us in the form of images representing real significant events that encode symbolic messages about the behavioural and cultural patterns which have caused (or will have caused) them. To decode these messages through the vibrant language of the unconscious embodied in the symbolic system of Tarot is not a utopian dream for the future but the reality of the present because this code is already available and can be used to communicate the meanings encoded in the Tarot imagery (Semetsky 2008b, 2011; 2013).

Sure enough, the future can still be skewed because prevailing ideologies or grand meta-narratives are still here and remain the means “of imposing our own myopic architecture, of obliterating the splendour of what might have been: the future perfect” (Hederman 2003: 22). The least we can do is to have hope for a better future. But, in accord with Jung’s reference to the foreknowledge by virtue of symbols as purposive, healing, and numinous, the better future may already “will have been”. Tarot readings perform an amplifying function in agreement with the Jungian synthetic method (contra reductive Freudian psychoanalysis, as we said earlier) that implies the emergence of new meanings as carrying the utmost significance. The synthetic method reflects the future-oriented path to knowledge, and the archetypes do determine “the nature of the configurational process and the course it will follow, with seeming foreknowledge, or as if it were already in a possession of the goal” (Jung CW 8, 411). Ditto for Peirce: semiosis as the action of signs across nature, culture and human mind is evolutionary and includes all three time-dimensions: “A man denotes whatever is the object of his attention at the moment; he connotes whatever he knows or feels of this object, and is the incarnation of this form [...]; his interpretant is the future memory of this cognition, his future self” (Peirce CP 7. 591). Peirce’s semiotics thus makes commonsensical the future dimension of experience peculiar to Tarot readings; yet, without the vulgarity associated with fortune-telling as a habitual perception of this phenomenon prevalent in contemporary culture.

Significantly, the polyvalence of the image that follows the Tower in a deck, called the Star, connotes the field of meanings which include hope, healing, inspiration, creativity, and the realisation of our spiritual dreams. Hence, we do understand the message that the Tower of destruction, which preceded the Star temporarily, was only a stage in the directed-forward evolution of consciousness and the development of humankind. We have learned our moral lesson embedded in the Tower. The presence of the Star in a deck, as a natural progression from the Tower, is a symbolic message that the Tower image, with its abysmal real-life effects, is a precursor to the renewal and the creation of new psychic space in human culture as aligned with nature. The image of the Star convenes our oneness with nature symbolised by the naked woman pouring waters from the two vessels. The vessels are red, this colour representing full flesh-and-blood humanity in unity with spiritual essence represented by water, colour blue. As the first figure in the sequence of the Major Arcana – importantly, feminine – without any clothes on, the Star is a symbol of being finally stripped of the outlived habits and values by bringing them to the level of conscious awareness – illuminating them, indeed.

Reading and interpreting the meanings of Tarot images leads to transcending the current level of consciousness. Jung posited the transcendent function that arises from the tension between consciousness and the unconscious and effectuates their union. He called this function transcendent because of its ability to make the transition from the unconscious into consciousness, “from one attitude to another organically possible” (Jung, CW 8, 145). This new attitude embodied in the Star is represented by a sense of hope, healing, inspiration and the forthcoming new Aquarian age; in fact, this Arcanum is sometimes called The Star of Hope: the hope for new understanding and the revaluation of values! In the current global climate permeated by diverse beliefs, disparate values and cultural conflicts when different ideologies compete with each other, leading to destruction on the scale of the Tower on September 11, the universal value of hope is paramount.

A *revolution* in the societal value system can in fact be brought about not by a physical upheaval but by our *participation* in the process of *evolution*. As signs among signs we are an organic part of semiosis as the growth and development of signs expressed *symbolically* in our journey through the Tarot images. Thus we can become able to transform the potentiality into our very reality by virtue of the lived-through meanings contained in the Tarot symbolism. The Star is a symbol of being finally stripped of the one-sided “left-brain” (cf. Shlain 1998) outlived values and typically masculine ideologies permeating social world. As Shlain indicates, “writing of any kind will realign the gender politics of any culture” (1998: 184); and it is the Tarot legible images that will realign our Western culture with its long-lost feminine dimension, which is symbolically represented by the female figure in The Star picture.

5 The Fifth Age of Understanding

Philo, a philosopher in ancient Alexandria, asserted that the real wisdom functions through Logos or the Word used later in the Gospel of John: In the beginning was the Word. This creative symbol, the Word, should not be understood literally as verbal or linguistic! Shlain argues, significantly, that “[I]n the beginning was the image” (1998: 432). A return to iconic, visual, information represents a shift toward an alternative – feminine, as expressed in *The Star* – mode of communication and action that “will prepare us for the *next* great communication revolution, in which we are already deeply engaged” (Shlain 1998: 429; italics in original). Learning the Tarot symbolic language by means of training the right-hemispheric mode of perception and expression will recover the lost respect for iconic information – and not only through the medium of personal computers. The interpretation of Tarot images employs the same “pattern recognition inherent in ideographic language [that] enmeshes users in a web of interpersonal relationships” (Shlain 1998: 185) and which – as embedded in the shared field of meanings – can therefore be improved.

Reading and understanding the language of images “can bring our two hemispheres into greater equilibrium and allow both individuals and cultures to become more balanced” (Shlain 1998: 429). A return to iconic information represented through the ancient medium of Tarot images should now become the core of semiotic research in order to establish what contemporary semiotician Winfried Nöth designated as an “intercultural competence” (2010: 9). This is an urgent matter in the present geopolitical context that displays diverse and polyvalent signs of the times (cf. Semetsky 2010b) amidst cultural conflicts and clashes of values. The language of signs that can communicate in characters reflecting meanings and values as shared by humankind needs to be understood. Ultimately, Tarot functions in accordance with the universal, speculative, grammar; “speculum” expressing the correspondence between the two kinds of signs: words and things. For Peirce, everything in the world is a sign: yet, paradoxically, “nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign” (Peirce CP 2. 308). The presence of a Peircean interpretant, as the included middle, or the third in its relation to words and things, blends all three in a single event, a sign always having a triadic structure. Signs are relational, and they form a process-structure as a network of relations between events. The structure is dynamical because an interpretant as embedded in a triadic process necessarily becomes an object of the next sign (Figure 2).

John Deely, in his survey of philosophy from ancient times to the turn of the 21st century (Deely 2001) speaks of the four Ages of Understanding, tracing the development of philosophical thought from antiquity to postmodern philosophers, the first of which, for Deely, was Charles S. Peirce. These four Ages, connected intellectually and historically by the theory of signs as their dominant theme, cover Ancient Greek philosophy, the Latin age of European philosophy from the 4th to

the 17th centuries, then the Modern period beginning with Descartes and Locke, followed by the Post-modern period that began with Peirce and continues today. It is only logical that in order to participate fully in the process of signs' evolution and growth we have to learn how to read and understand the language of signs.

Reading Tarot signs and learning from significant events – especially from the catastrophic ones as displayed in the Tower – will contribute to the integration of the iconic information and will bring a holistic dimension to moral life at personal, social and ecological levels. This holistic intelligence is necessarily equipped with deep Gnostic knowledge that encompasses meanings and values. It is this knowledge symbolically represented in Tarot images that should enable our “reading the emotional state, needs, and intentions of others” (Noddings 2010: 170). Thus it should move us closer into what I believe (and paraphrasing Deely) can become the New, fifth, Age of Understanding. This New Age shall provide us with unprecedented semiotic freedom to act intelligently and wisely in the world perfused with signs. This New Age of Understanding can become:

a new Golden Age [...] in which the right-hemispheric values of tolerance, caring, and respect for nature will begin to ameliorate the conditions that have prevailed for the too-long period during which left-hemispheric values were dominant. Images [...] are the balm bringing about this worldwide healing (Shlain 1998: 432).

Tarot empowers us with the ability to make sense out of the chaotic flux of experiences when it is being unfolded in front of our very eyes. The images displayed in Tarot pictures “were conceived deep in the guts of human experience, at the most profound level of the human psyche. It is to this level in ourselves that they will speak” (Nichols 1980: 5) whenever we participate in the process of semiosis and, along such a lifelong path, continue to learn from our experiences (Semetsky 2011) so that becoming able to make decisions and choose ethical actions in unity and harmony with the Jungian *unus mundus* as *one* undivided world. The present 21st century is itself symbolic of this forthcoming transformation towards new understanding: is it a coincidence that the last Major Arcanum in a deck called the World is numbered XXI? Its symbolic meaning partakes of humanity comprising integrated Selves capable of living in harmony with Others. Such inter-relational human beings can and should take ethical responsibility for the social and natural world – the World – that they inhabit.

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