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*Towards a better, stronger and sustainable built environment*

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# A Premediation of Brexit: Genesis, Circulation and Naturalization of an Emblem

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*How does an image become an emblem representing an event? What is the process that allows a visual form to incarnate and reduce the complexity of an event? The paper explores the transformation of a stock shot (the lowering of the Union Jack in front of the European Commission) into a visual form representing the event of Brexit in its entirety. The image circulated widely on TV and on the Web between 2016 and 2021, as observed in the database of the research project CROBORA. We traced the genealogy of this sequence, employing diverse analytical perspectives and methods, including video detection tools. A Sherlock Holmes-style indexical investigation—as Carlo Ginzburg would say—that enabled us to study the path going from genesis to naturalization. Particularly, the circulation of the image is associated with the emotional effects it triggered. Interestingly, the sequence of the Union Jack that circulates most often in the European media is not that of the recording of a ceremony intentionally designed to decree the exit of the UK from the EU, but a generic shot realized several months before the Brexit referendum itself, thus anticipating the event and “premediating” it by waving its specter in front of the public. We show how its circulation creates an emblem by its vast mediatization through the screens.*

Keywords: visual representation, digital visual methods, audiovisual archives.

## 1. Motivation, Context and Structure of the Paper

A flag inherently serves as the conventional symbol of a country. Throughout history, flags have frequently been raised in front of palaces or buildings to signal the advent of a new regime. Its removal, as a symbol, holds even greater power, inviting multiple potential interpretations and signifying the conclusion of something—such as a reign or an alliance. Comparable to the unveiling of a statue, the lowering of a flag heralds the transition from a before to an after, leaving the realm of possibilities wide open for what that after might entail. While hoisting a flag appears to allude to a country's current position or its perceived trajectory, lowering reveals the termination of an era without visualizing what lies ahead. This visual form possesses not only representational power but also allows for interpretive freedom by compelling us to fill a clear void. Within itself, it encapsulates a narrative, akin to a pictogram that encapsulates a complex story through a few juxtapositions (if a flag is removed and captured on film, there is undoubtedly a solemn reason behind it). However, this narrative hangs in suspense, as it proclaims an end without providing any clues about what is to come. By brandishing the unknown, the act of removing a flag becomes not only a nostalgic symbolization that appears to address the past rather than the future, but also hints at the

apprehension of a new world, one that is likely to be worse than its predecessor (at least from the perspective of the flag's country).

We assumed that this might be the case for a sequence that appeared several times in the corpus of the CROBORA project [Crossing Borders Archives is a research project financed by the French National Research Agency (ANR) 2021-2024 and led by the Université Côte d'Azur: <https://croborahypotheses.org/>]: the Union Jack's withdrawal from the European Commission's entrance in Bruxelles. We traced the history of this sequence, pursuing it in a quest that employed several tools, fields and methods—in a Sherlock Holmes-style indexical investigation, as Carlo Ginzburg would say [9]—that enabled us to see its path, from its genesis to its trivialization [12], via its rise (even before the referendum itself) and circulation, the latter based on the pathemic effect it aroused.

Common sense would expect that the media choose as preferred footage that of an intentional and institutional event such as a ceremony. This is coherent with sociological expectancies based on newsworthiness, which favor the institutions and their capacities to shape the mediatic landscape (see [14]). As an example, we have already observed that the signature of the Treaty of Rome is one of the emblems of the European Union—we will come back to the notion of emblem below. Instead, we notice that the media system is partially independent from political institutions and from the intentional construction of symbols. The media follow their rules, which in this case foresaw what would have worked. The emblem of Brexit is in fact a stock shot which circulated months before the referendum, not to say years before the official ceremony in Bruxelles.

The way in which we proceeded has been to collect the largest possible number of occurrences of this visual form (the lowering of the UK flag) in a large perimeter including most of what has been broadcasted in France and in Europe on a few main channels. For France, we accessed the archive built by the French National Audiovisual Institute (INA); for Italy, those collected by RAI and Mediaset, that is, by the most important public and private channels respectively. We started by manual queries and then made use of a video detection software capable of finding similar occurrences of video sequences in very large corpora. The software name is *Snoop*, and it has also been developed by INA. The result was a collection of 143 occurrences of the same visual form.

Our conclusions are that emblems have some conditions of existence which depend from the logics of the media (in our case) or potentially of other discursive fields. Second, the temporality of the media is different from chronological time: the media build up stories in which 'logic' precedes 'chronology', as Barthes (1966) would say [1]. Third, that some images appear to have a stronger potential for becoming emblematic. Finally, the web is still somehow a 'parasite' of television, as the latter greatly influences the circulation of online content [15]. We believe that the study of emblems is important because, beyond the simple fact of quickly referring to complex events, they also orient the reception in an 'ideological' way, inviting the spectator to perform certain inferences instead of others.

## 2. Emblems, Signs, Icons, Symbols... The need for some terminological clarity

Within the context of the present contribution, we encountered the need to theoretically address a precise phenomenon. Sometimes, an event (but it could also be a place, or even an idea) finds a suitable visual representation, which ends up being almost automatically connected to the events. This phenomenon is important enough to deserve empirical and theoretical attention. The reason for this is that a single visual representation may become a biased means, eluding some traits of the represented event (place, or idea) and forcing interpretation into a single direction. It may also be that different interpretive traditions connect diverse meanings to the same image, which therefore hides ambiguity behind the manifest appearance of consensus. It is also interesting to study the conditions under which this phenomenon happens, and eventually ceases to exist, or the visual representation changes its meaning. Also, are there contextual constraints allowing for the manifestation of this association between a visual representation and an event?

In order to work on this phenomenon, we need to give it a name. Searching in relevant literature, several candidates can be found, in particular the always popular terms 'sign', 'icon' and 'symbol'. In everyday talk and in the media, it is common to hear sentences like "The Eiffel Tower is the icon of France" or "The Eiffel Tower is the symbol of France". And some spontaneous interpretation of those sentences would imply that the Eiffel Tower is in connection with the idea of France itself, to the point that an image of the

tower may evoke without much more information the meaning 'France' (however this is defined). The problem with the terms 'sign', 'icon', and 'symbol' is that they are part of a sort of universal "folk semiotics", and are used in a vast number of contexts without meaning the same thing in each of them. The three are ancient words, which have acquired all sorts of connotations along the centuries, making it hard to express important but subtle ideas with them. For each author employing these terms, it's always necessary to understand what is meant, and it is often not at all evident that the author him- or herself is capable of managing a controlled use of the terms all along his or her writing.

For this contribution, we prefer to employ a term whose popularity has been extremely low starting from the beginning of the 20th century. Our choice is based on two reasons: first, it can help us to less ambiguously designate the phenomenon we are interested in; second, this leaves us open the possibility to use the other terms 'sign', 'icon' and 'symbol' in a different and controlled way, so to express precise auxiliary, interconnected ideas. The term we decided to use is *emblem*, which is defined by the Cambridge dictionary as "a picture of an object that is used to represent a particular person, group, or idea". Now what interests us are exactly the emblems as intended in the cited definition. How do emblems come to existence? Which are their historical and contextual conditions of use?

Within the humanities, there has always been great ambiguity in the use of theoretical terms. This was one of the reasons why the project which went under the name of semiotics in the 20th century was welcomed within a broad disciplinary scope. However, if semiotic research enriched the theoretical discussion in the humanities, it did not manage to produce a single conceptual framework capable of becoming common ground for interdisciplinary exchange. Not even within semiotics *stricto sensu* consent has been reached, especially for some vastly polysemic but crucial concepts such as 'sign', 'symbol', or 'icon'. Today these terms keep appearing universally in scientific literature, while still lacking defined boundaries and a common understanding. It seems useless to look for the 'authentic' meaning of these terms; however, it is true that some scholars managed to produce a better understanding of them than others, because of reasons including their aim to cover the largest class of potential applications of terms, and their large encyclopedic knowledge of past and current theorisations. In particular, Umberto Eco produced reflexions capable of differentiating and systematizing phenomena of crucial importance for the humanities. Eco's perspective, developed from the end of the fifties to the beginning of the new millennium, revolved around the concept of interpretation: how do humans respond to existing signs, texts and other cultural productions?

In Eco's theoretical perspective, *sign* is the most general term, including any phenomenon which can be interpreted by a human being on the basis of some conventional knowledge, that is, by referring to some cultural information conveyed within a community [6]. Words, images, and any other artifact is a sign in this sense, whether their meaning is entirely conventional (as in the word 'fly') or instead it is partially motivated by its perceptually accessible expression (as the image of a fly). Is important to remark that the interpretation of a sign is never totally automatic—as in a simpler response to a stimulus—nor is it too broadly undefined and open [7].

In this latter case, Eco employs the term *symbol*. More precisely, for Eco any sign can become a symbol as long as the interpreters begin to look for an indefinite meaning [5]. It is therefore the way of interpreting signs, called by Eco the *symbolic mode* of interpretation, which has to be differentiated from ordinary semiotic interpretation. In the latter, interpreters are interested in reaching some intention behind sign production, while symbolic interpretation is vastly open to less conventional enrichment. With an example, the flag of the UK is in itself a sign, conventionally associated to the country; the same flag can become a symbol whenever it is taken as the starting point for broader associations linked to the country (and which in case of countries are often conventional in themselves: greatness, glorious past and future, etc.). The symbolic mode of interpretation is specific, but not exclusive, to certain discourses such as poetry or, in its most extreme form, the occult and conspirationist discourses.

With the term *icon*, Eco refers instead to the visual or otherwise sensorial motivation of signs, which is the relationship between the perceivable expression of the sign and the perceivable appearance of the represented object [6, 8]. 'Iconism' and 'iconicity' therefore have nothing to do with the everyday use of the word 'icon' in sentences such as "The Eiffel Tower is an icon of France". In fact, the idea of France is not perceivable, and even if we associated to the idea of France some graphical representation of its borders, still they would look nothing like the Eiffel Tower. On the other hand, a picture of the Eiffel Tower does have an iconic relationship with the tower itself. The fact of recognizing the tower from a drawing or

picture, without the need of additional written information, accounts for the direct similarity between sign and object, as Ch.S. Peirce intended (see [5]). This does not mean that iconic representation cannot also have a conventional component—on the contrary, for Eco, icons are still signs, and so depend on some cultural understanding. A person living in a culture completely removed from our could have problems recognising the meaning of some icons. On the other hand, some realistic icons are universally recognisable as they offer a *surrogate percept* to the viewer, that is that they reproduce the same conditions of perception of the object from a certain, limited perspective.

It is therefore entirely possible that a certain sign is at the same time an icon and a symbol. A picture of the Eiffel Tower is an icon of the tower and it can be interpreted symbolically with the aim to refer to several aspects of France. These reflections allow us to see that we haven't yet expressed the idea that the Eiffel Tower, or some conventional representation of it, may or may not be also *emblems* of France. An emblem is a sign whose association with its meaning becomes so consensual to almost seem *automatic*. It would be hard to look at the Tour Eiffel and think of something far different from 'France' or 'Paris'. In this sense, emblems work at odds with symbols, restraining interpretation into a single uncritical association; still, an emblem can be interpreted symbolically, opening interpretation to less obvious and consensual traits of the idea of 'France': when seeing the Eiffel Tower we are *forced* to think at France, but then our interpretation may elaborate on this idea in a great number of ways. Some emblems, such as coats of arms or flags, are not icons in that they have no similarity with their object, but they still present an almost automatic association with it.

Resuming these preliminary theoretical reflections, it is better to differentiate *ways of interpreting* signs instead of supposed "kinds of signs", as most philosophers and other scholars did before Eco. One particular way of interpretation is the *emblematic* one, which cuts short and associates some very conventional meaning to a visual representation.

### 3. Emblematic Reductionism

Visual emblems reduce an event to a visual form, caricaturing its traits. This operates through a reduction in which certain features are emphasized and other neutralized. For example, the image of a dove, symbolizing peace, represents a reduction of a part of the Bible (Noah seeing the bird announcing the end of the flood) adopted by Picasso as an emblem opposing war (the whiteness of the dove and the olive branch). In the case of images chosen to visually illustrate an event, when they belong to archives that serve to showcase it, they inevitably become its summary. An image is selected among others due to its properties. In the case of historical events, these properties are often related to the visual rarity of the fact.

The Tank Man of Tiananmen Square represents opposition to the regime, and the image itself is not stunningly violent. The student in a white shirt just positions himself in the tank's trajectory, and appears to stop by himself the entire line of tanks. This image reduces the complexity of the event by showing only the students' perspective, and overlooking the Chinese regime's tragic reaction, which was disastrous for the students themselves. The symbol is in this sense essentially reductive, an interpretative effort is required to understand it and a contextualization would be necessary to deepen the fact.

One could argue that emblems have a life span. At the beginning, they emphasize some traits which are important to interpret the event. In a second moment, these traits turn into a banalisation of the event: the visual form becomes a simulacrum [3], as if the image merely stood for itself rather than opening up possibilities for better understanding the event which generated it. The emblem ends up 'closing' interpretation and limiting the social potential of reality. Still, in a third moment, the emblem may end up being associated with other events, and function as an association of the new events to the old one now reduced to an emblem. The emblem becomes in this perspective an empty form, which acquires very different meanings according to the new events becoming associated with it.

Our example is peculiar, because the emblem was created *before the event*. The event of Brexit was already a 'type', as there were strong expectations about its consequences. Therefore, the strength of the image *diminished* once the event it announced and premediated finally occurred.

### 4. Genealogy of the "Lowering of the Flag" Sequence



On January 31, 2020, the Union Jack was removed from institutional buildings of the European Union. This necessary gesture was staged and publicized to illustrate the official departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union. It is, therefore, an exemplary case of how the media can conventionally represent Brexit through images, using it as an emblem. Dozens of similar cases exist throughout history, from the flags of Eastern European countries being raised in front of the European Commission in 2001 to the withdrawal of the Union Jack from Hong Kong to signify the end of British colonial rule and its return to China in 1997.

Data collection immediately revealed a surprising fact. In January 2020, officials removed the Union Jack from the Council of Europe and carefully folded it in front of photographers. This lowering took place on January 31 at night and inside of the building (*Picture 1*): this represents the official event determining the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union. Another lowering of the Union Jack is a stock image shot during the day and outside of the building of the European Commission. This second sequence doesn't officially represent Brexit (*Picture 2*).



Figure 1: Official ceremony of Brexit at the European Commission (January 31, 2020, Arte Journal)



Figure 2: Stock image often used for representing Brexit in the media: (ARTE Journal, February 2021).

Yet it is this second sequence that is most often used by the media to emblematically signify Brexit. We found 143 occurrences of this 'unofficial' sequence in the corpus of the ANR CROBORA project. The project collected around 35k stock images, taken from the evening newscasts of six French and Italian TV channels (*Rai Uno, Rai Due, Canale 5, France 2, TF1* and *Arte*) between 2001 and 2021 and related to the Construction of the European Union. This corpus was supplemented by 56k videos from French web

archives dealing with European themes (the collection was made by INA). *Snoop*, a video detection software developed by INA, was used to find all occurrences of this video in the corpus [4].

Thanks to the use of *Snoop*, we were able to extend our search from the French and Italian TV archives to the legal deposit of the French web [The legal deposit of the Web held by INA is the archiving of all videos published online in France (see [13]).]. We were thus able to find 75 occurrences (in addition to the 68 from the TV archives), mainly from *YouTube* (63), *DailyMotion* (4), *Twitter* (4), *ArteTv* (2) and *FranceTV* (2). It's interesting to note that all these web presences are reuses of videos originally broadcast on television, on *France 24* (29), *Euronews* (17) and a few hits on *Arte*, *France 2*, *RTL*, *France 5*, *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *BFM TV* and the Chinese satellite channel *CGTN*. With the exception of *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, which are newspapers, the stock image's appearances are all taken from television videos. This would seem to confirm Rebillard *et al.*'s (2012) [15] assertion that what the web offers is largely a rehash of content produced by the other audiovisual industries.

It is now necessary to quickly recall the history of Brexit, at least according to the most important steps that marked its chronology. The referendum took place on June 26, 2016. It was a gamble by David Cameron, who believed that opposition to Brexit would triumph. The result was a political earthquake within the European Union that was not necessarily expected. After Cameron's resignation and Theresa May's appointment, negotiations for the UK's exit from the EU began with a number of obstacles and difficulties. During this time, the specter of a no-deal Brexit (withdrawal without agreement) was often raised. Negotiations begin a year after the referendum in June 2017 [17]. In 2019, Theresa May also resigns. January 31, 2020 is the official date when the UK leaves the European Union. Ceremonies to remove flags from official buildings therefore take place on this date.

With an investigation among the project's partner broadcasters—in February 2016 the sequence appeared on *Rai Due* and *Canale 5* in Italy, on *Euronews* and *France 2* in France—we were able to find what appears to be its origin: a generic sequence broadcasted by Reuters and subsequently reused by Mediaset.

This emblematic representation of Brexit thus began circulating six months before the referendum, as a generic sequence, filmed probably by a Reuters operator who saw in the trivial removal of the UK flag in front of the European Commission—probably following a visit by Cameron to Brussels—a possible sign of the event to come. The image's circulation is then spreading throughout the European media: the news channels in particular are beginning to use it with the clear intention of signifying Brexit generically. What is meant by the use of this stock image is not just the event itself, which is already happening, but a future event, that of the no-deal Brexit in particular, raising the specter of an uncertain future, but which seems likely to prove problematic both for the UK and for the rest of Europe.

Almost half of the instances before 2020 use this sequence at the beginning or, more often, at the end of the news subjects (58 occurrences: 19 found at the beginning and 39 at the end). News about the negotiations therefore often end with this image, which concludes the video and its narrative, while opening into the uncertainty of what will happen next. As it circulates, this sequence becomes emblematic, emotively representing something that moves the spectators. The other half of the occurrences, not appearing neither at the beginning nor at the end of the news subjects, are used as background for interviewees or for alarming headlines. Voice-overs are often dysphoric when used in conjunction with the sequence. The sequence's meaning is thus associated with negative values, loading the next future. This is how a generic image, shot long before an event, becomes emblematic of it: the image represents not only the most objective features of Brexit, but more importantly the changing emotions and expectations linked to all subsequent phases. The image adapts to Brexit while keeping referring to it as a whole to the eyes of the viewers, and it also contributes to maintaining an interpretative framing of it.



Figure 3: Stock shot often used to represent the European Commission (20h France 2, November 28, 2011)

Only after January 31, 2020, this sequence no longer appears at the end or beginning of news subjects, and is found instead in the middle of them, to signify that the event of the Brexit has therefore already taken place and has moved to the background. The video sequence often appears juxtaposed with other sequences showing the official Union Jack withdrawal ceremonies from European buildings—but, interestingly, our stock sequence keeps reappearing even if other, more formal shots are available. It has earned its place in the media landscape and cannot be so easily replaced.

This is a kind of naturalization of the sequence, which no longer keeps its emotional impact (or, at least, it is no longer used for evident emotive purposes), but is integrated into the media infrastructure as a conventional representation of a past event. This is the last phase in this emblem's lifespan: the visual sequence began as anticipation, then became a powerful visual argument, and at last, once the event has taken place, remains as a conventional representation. It is an example of the genesis of a visual memory [18], what might also be seen as a *flashbulb memory* in the way Andrew Hoskins defines the concept [11], through its repetition in the media.

### 5. The Visual Distinctiveness of the Stock Sequence

Why did the media 'choose' this sequence instead of other, more official images? The Berlaymont building is undoubtedly one of the least iconic elements of global institutions. Starting from the fact that the criterion of rarity is rather difficult to apply in this case: apart from its rather singular planimetry, in the shape of an *x*, it's a rather plain building with no real recognizable sign [16]. The entrance to the building is often shown by the media: in fact, the expression "European Commission" hangs over it. This is evidence that the European Union still lacks iconic and symbolic strength: it is necessary to show a written expression because there are no visual forms sufficiently conventionalized and recognizable on their own (this is not the case for other national institutions: there is no need to write 'Élysée', "Downing Street", or "Palazzo Chigi").

The parade of European flags in front of one of Berlaymont's wings, however, displays an effective visual singularity. Among the banality of European buildings, the media have found a distinctive expression (an icon) in this composition. Andrea Scaranari (Mediaset) says that the contrast between the verticality of the flagpoles and the horizontality of the building's windows is an interesting visual trait (see *Picture 2*), enough to make it a 'preziosa': literally a precious image, as professionals at Mediaset call the stock images collected by the enterprise as ready made and reusable visual elements. We might add that the uniformity of the blue flags set against the regularity of the parallel horizontal and vertical lines, and the circularity of the yellow stars of Europe at the center of the flags, make this a rather recognizable image. Of course, in itself, it represents nothing: the parade of blue flags can only indicate the European institutions. This generic

shot thus became the already-known image used to support a second meaning, that of Brexit. Which means that on the one hand we have a generic stock shot, often used by the media to represent European institutions (see *Picture 3*) and on the other hand we have the image of Brexit deepening its meaning by creating something new.

The presence of the British flag—the only national flag among European Union ones—that gives the image a special character: the UK is not anymore as the other states, it is not anymore visually ‘diluted’ in the Union. On the other hand, the image of the official Brexit ceremony (*Picture 1*), presents all the national flags, and does not send the same message. Actually, similar images with one national flag next to the European flags in front of Berlaymont are used to refer visually to the relationships of one member state (such as Greece) with the Union.

The lowering of the Union Jack is also an event whose connotations are relatively easy to apprehend by a large number of viewers. It has been used recently for signifying the death of a member of the British Royal House (Queen Elisabeth II, Prince Philip). It is also associated with the end of the British Empire, as in images of lowerings in Jamaica. Lowerings in Hong Kong, for its return to the People’s Republic of China, have slightly different connotations (as they seem to talk more about the future of Hong Kong than about that of the UK). This may be the reason why *Picture 2* is never interpreted as a raising, even when shown as a still image. The stock sequence we are studying in this contribution manages therefore to bring together two recognizable visual forms and compose a visual message with a clear meaning.

## 6. Conclusion: Premediation and Readability

In his book *Premediation*, Richard Grusin writes that: The current cultural moment, on the other hand, is marked by the logic of premediation, in which not just the past and present, but the future as well, has already been remediated, already exists as a feature on the media landscape of the present. [P]remediation seeks to remediate potentialities, future events or occurrences which may or may not ever happen. The media regime of premediation marks not the desire for a virtual reality, but an engagement with the reality of the virtual, what Deleuze understands as ‘virtuality’ or ‘potentiality.’ [10]

The use of this stock image is therefore an example of premediation. The use of a Reuters generic image since January 2016 shows that the media anticipated Brexit and represented it visually in a form that circulates in the media before the event itself. While visual representations of events usually come after the events themselves, functioning as a sort of visual summary, in the case of the Brexit we find a sequence that plays a richer role, adapting its meaning and guiding viewers in the deployment of the event.

The circulation of images interests more than just specialists in media archives, because emblems have the power to become *interpretants* (in the sense of Charles S. Peirce, see [6]) of events and thus, especially in the case of premediation, to act on the shaping of public opinion and of the collective imaginary. The circulation of the stock image studied here made Brexit more ‘acceptable’ by viewers, because the event was given a place beforehand, giving it also a *readability* [2]. Something totally unknown cannot be given a meaning; we need to anchor novelty to existing schemas and routines (see [8]). And Brexit really was something new, as no other nation ever quit the Union. People from all over the EU, including the UK at that time, were asking whether and how this was really possible, juridically as well as practically. Still today, a few years after Brexit, it is not entirely clear how to manage certain situations that are completely banalised within the European Union.

Since the first appearance of the stock sequence, the media ‘decided’ to frame Brexit as a “problematic divorce”. This was the narrative of reference, all steps had to be seen through this light. It is surely not only the stock sequence that managed to impose this frame, but for the reasons presented above it was most apt to manifest it visually. Even in its simplicity and apparent neutrality, the sequence as an emblem incarnates an anti-Brexit perspective, at least for a European viewer.

As an opening for future research, it would be interesting to compare this sequence to other ways in which Brexit has been represented visually, especially in the UK and by Brexiters. Such a study would require access to audiovisual archives of UK television and web, and so it goes beyond the perimeter of the project CROBORA upon which the present research is based.

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