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Like a Watermark: Notes on ‘Signature’

Nothing can signify, unless something—call it “signature”—is signed prior to the (f)act of signifying. This signing, this *faire une signe*, not only anchors the link between a signifier and a signified but, beyond the semiotic level, also grounds the discursive plane, upon which signifiers articulate themselves as representations of reality. This paper demonstrates how signature functions to make sense-making possible. Two examples are used to illustrate the point. The first example draws from the recent discovery, made by art historian Marianne Berandi, of the letters J-A-K-O-N P-O-L-L-A-C-K in Pollock’s 1943 breakthrough piece, Mural. The second example is a passage taken from one of earliest texts on the theory of painting in Chinese history, Zou Chuan. The first example will help illustrate what, following Agamben, I will call the “logic of inclusive exclusion” that governs semiosis along the register of (spatial) extension. And the second example will be discussed as an exemplification of an retroactive or deferred imaging that underlies the reflections of things in I/eye and of an I/eye in things according to the baroque folding, which I will term the “logic of ‘already but not yet’ (*deja pas encore*).”

Much of current media criticism takes for granted the idea the media texts are a reflection (or symptomatic) of the social condition which produces them. By working through the idea of “signature,” this paper will argue that not only is the reflection model dominant in media criticism theoretically naïve, but, worse yet, it is itself also an integral part of the very ideology that it purports to contest.