# Saussure

# Some problems.

?

# Issues in "Course in General Linguistics"

# Bracketing the referent

[tree]

# [bracketing]

- No interest in the 'real'

- A system of connections within the mind

- Abstracted away from reality–immaterial

- You can say "tree" without there being a tree

- Language-centric

# Structure

- Saussure is *structural*–interested in relations between things–not the things themselves

- *Structures* suggest|require|enable *systems*

- The system limits arbitrariness

# Structure

"A **one-term language** is an impossibility because its single term could be applied to everything and differentiate nothing; it requires at least one other term to give it definition"

—John Sturrock, *Structuralism*

# Systems

- Saussure seems uninterested in **systems**

- "*How did it get this way?*" and "*How does it stay this way?*" are questions he actively avoids.

- But those seem like pretty good questions, right?

# Binary oppositions

- A binary opposition is building block of structure

- *Night vs. day*

- *Raw vs. cooked*

- *Mac vs. Windows*

- *Coffee vs. tea*

- *Design vs. [hey! you tell me.]*

# Question

- Can you posit a binary opposition without **privileging** one element over another?

# Arbitrariness

- How arbitrary?

- What are the **constraints**?

- How can we understand and develop **new** expressions?

# Saussure

- Is only interested in **spoken language**

- Gives little thought to signs that are not arbitrary

- "brackets the referent" - that is, the real world is not part of the discussion, only signs. Meaning comes from relations within the system.

- Visual, tactile, olfactory and gustatory signs are minimized

- How do non-human sign users fit in?

# Questions

- If we "agree" on the meaning of arbitrary signs, **how** is this agreement reached?

- How do we deal with signs for which there is no previous agreement - for example, how are new terms created?

# The big question for us:

How do we adapt an approach based on *language* to *visual communication, and beyond?*

C.S. Peirce

# Some problems.

# Logic vs. Language

Peirce sees semiotics as part of **logic** - the ability to move from one true statement to another.

# CS Peirce

- Often mis-applied - there are three **modes** of signification, not three types of signs

- Are **icons** and **symbols** distinct, or is there a gradient between them?

- How do **indexical** signs actually work?

# Modes, not types

Signs can have multiple modes

# Icon vs. Symbol

Likeness/shared quality vs. convention

# Legisigns

- Unlike sinsigns (indices) they can be repeated

- Meaning is governed by a general rule

# Qualisigns

- Meaning comes from an abstract quality - colour, form, sound, feelings

- They cannot exist without some physical aspect

- They are attributes of things

# Indexes

- animals can learn them, or know them by instinct

- they "point to" their meaning

- have to be correlated with their meaning

# Photographs

- Can be mistaken for the real thing

- Physical relationship between photograph and what is being photographed

Louis Daguerre (1838)

First Xerox photocopy, 1938
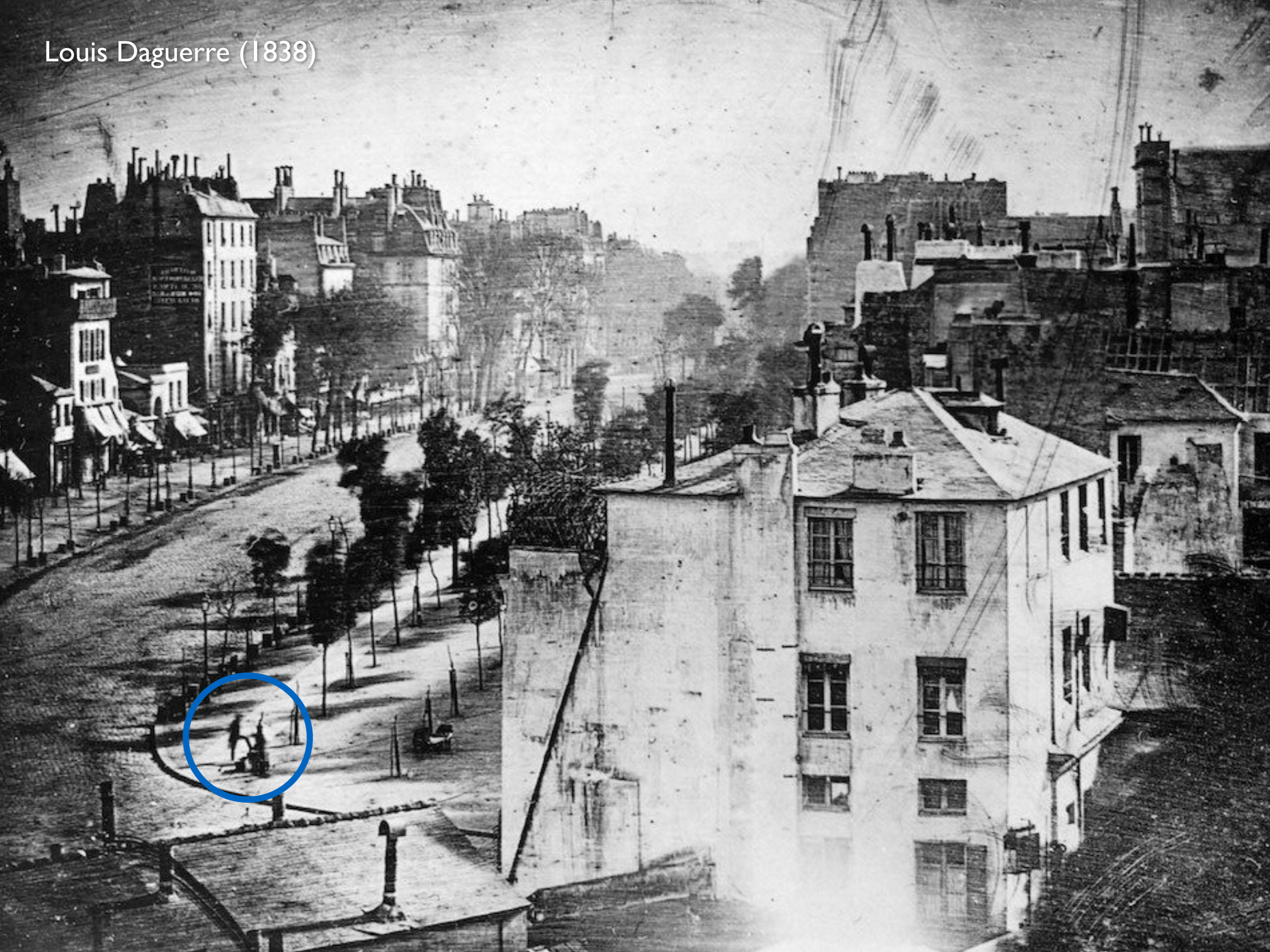
Red Army soldier raises Soviet flag , Berlin, 1945

Nick Knight
Tatjana Patitz for Jil Sander
1992

This is generated by machine learning.
It is still working on ears.

# Indices and singularity

- One way of looking at indexical signs is that they are **singular**

- Are never exactly repeated

- Are part of the physical world

- Pierce called these *sinsigns*

# Non-Verbal Signs

- Bodily contact

- Distance

- Facial expressions and posture

- Gestures

- Clothing and appearance - hairstyle, tattoos, etc.

# Verbal vs. Non-Verbal Signs

- Saussuere's semiotics is about verbal signs.

- Modern semiotics is about all types of signs, as was Peirce's.

- This makes semiotics much **broader** than the Saussurean model might be able to support.

- And Peirce's model is too **ill-defined** to really apply.