

# The Face that Doesn't Watch

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I once took a course with Umberto Eco on the subject of semiotics. It was a 3-month course on *La Semiotica dell'Orologio* (semiotics of the watch).

Semiotics is the study of signs. Linguistics is a subset of semiotics. The root, *seme*, is seed. We all know that the world is full of an infinite number of varieties of seeds (or might as well be). There is another side of universalism that gets a lot less attention. Universalism usually tries to convert diversity into oneness, but the other side is the multiness, where the universal is simply not very relevant. In fact, in order to have meaning, a thing does not have to belong to a class at all. It can simply be a statement of itself. The statement of itself simply consists of not being some other "thing." It is the difference among things that creates individuality, and ultimately, meaning. And of course, this is not simply a hodgepodge but a taxonomy with a grammar, which allows its "meaning" to emerge.

The grammar of the watch would consist of a face, some means of telling time, a winder, a band. Each of these elements would break down in to further grammars. All grammars are conventional. A watch without a face would not be a watch.

From simple information theory, it is always true that a message consists of an emitter and a receiver. So when we buy a watch, we are choosing to emit the message about ourselves that we want others to see. When we see the watch another is watching, we get a subtle message about them. Some form of reciprocation usually follows. The message, in turn, is suspended in what I call social mind, convention.

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During my own short lifetime I have seen the semiotics of watches effloresce. As a child, I remember my grandfather, who wore a three-piece suit to the bank every day, had a watchfob, a cold chain with a bar on the end, which caught into the eyelette of his vest while the "railroad" watch flopped in his vest pocket. He did not have a wrist watch until he was given one upon retirement. As a VP, he received a gold watch with a black leather band (he was one of the lower level VPs so he didn't get the gold wristband as well). My father, on the other hand, had a silver watch, heavy and prominent with a black dial. His dream, which he eventually fulfilled, was to have a Bulova self-winding acutron watch. He wanted all the accuracy, but not the effort of winding it.

We can see an evolutionary path here from time (ho hum) to materialist treasure (gold). The gap to be filled was between the "gold" standard and something other could afford and still make prominent statements about themselves. I think the "acutron" idea (run by tiny tuning forks), was the way to the future of watches. The "acutron" brought battery life into the watch. Once there, many other transformations were possible. And technical transformations are usually accompanied by aesthetic transformation as well. The technology can expand not only to the core of time-keeping, but to its surroundings: water tight, illumination, elastics, and the lettering itself. Each assembly of components is a new statement about the owner.

For fun, I've collected a non-exhaustive group of watches. We can muse over them.

This one says: I am an ultra-tech person who doesn't really care about convention but I love the technology that makes this possible. Aesthetics are unimportant. You only need to know that I love to calculate things all the time, as I do with this watch face. I think it's ok that you can't look on and even determine that this is a watch. I don't feel sorry that you don't know how to read the time from it.



Fig. 1

This one says: You had better know that I do care about the time. I'm not a showy person and simple plastic and leather are ok as far as I'm concerned. I place most value on the functionality of this object. I like the way it is easy to read the numbers, which are so distinct they are easy for me and you to read, if you need to. It's not a very expensive watch, but I like that too, as I'll just get another one when this wears out or the battery goes. Oh, and as a bonus, I have a stopwatch always with me. Don't know when I'll need it, but someday... you never know.



Fig. 2

This next watch is not really very important as a watch. Sometimes I need to know what time it is, so, among my bracelets, I can see the time. No big deal about seconds, but I's ok that it's there. I like the traditional Celtic design in the circle around the face. Because it is almost invisible, I can easily change its surroundings by changing bracelets.

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Fig. 3

The steel band of this watch tells you that I might go swimming (as all metal bands to), but that I still have a purpose which is not quite so athletic. The obviously sealed cover of the face is more like an elegant flat plane. The decoration underneath, particularly the triangle, tells you that I have a side of me

that appreciates mathematics, but you probably won't figure out the time if you look at it. That's private. Only I can read it (5:16). I am not afraid of the face being scratched or broken because it is made of really thick and hard material. I'm tough and hard to read. I can devise clever thoughts.



Fig. 4

The nail here can be associated with the apparent holes in my watch. The watch is rather like a technical lace, so I have a delicate side that you should not try to break. My nail is bent around my wrist. I am fragile or else it would not fit over my hand. Technology is a mere decoration.



Fig. 5

This is the one I like the best but would not buy. Its band would have to be replaced and I would have to struggle wrapping it on each day. What I like is the openness of the dial and the originality of the hours that are affixed to radii. Also, the knob looks big enough the actually turn when the hour needs a change. I react thinking it is unfortunate they had to put “quartz” on the face, as I have no interest in their technology. I like the black because it might look nice with a jacket.



Fig. 6

This one is for the motorcycle guy. The face is heavily protected from crashes and it is obsessed with time. A person on a bicycle wouldn't need this. They don't wear leathers. The soft leather band would probably be a comfort in the event of a crash. The eagle insignia probably goes with Harley.



Fig. 7

Just for grins, look at your watch. What does it say? Why are you different from others? What are you telling them? How do you expect them to respond?