In their development of the causal theory of names, philosophers of language Michael Devitt & Kim Sterelny, following in the footsteps of Saul Kripke, present a Theory of Multiple Grounding in which every act of reference performed while perceiving the referent grounds the name in that object. This requirement of perceiving the object while referring to it presents a complication for how we refer to and ground names in objects we cannot ordinarily observe. To account for this, Devitt & Sterelny propose that in such cases, the acts of grounding and reference take place through perception by way of an instrument. In this essay I develop this line of reasoning further. If perception by way of an instrument can underpin reference to and grounding of names for unobservable objects, it can also do so for observable objects. I then explore if this is true, how much “distance” there can be between the object and the referrer through the instrument for the act of referring and grounding to still occur. I consider these questions with respect to images such as Franz Kline’s Bridge, heavily doctored photographs, and images from the Hubble Telescope. In each of these cases we must decide whether or not the method used to present the referent in two dimensional form should count as an instrument for Devitt & Sterelny’s purposes. To address these questions I draw on philosopher of art Kendall Walton’s work on transparency in photography before considering alternatives to the position I advocate.

Supporting Images

Figure: The Bridge. Franz Kline. ca. 1955. Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute / Art Resource, NY.
Building up the Eskimo Nebula, layer by layer. Four monochrome HST views through different color filters are each assigned a representative color similar to those the human eye would see. The colors are then stacked to produce this breathtaking scene.