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**Abstract:** Charles S. Peirce's late-nineteenth-century semiotic theory has long been considered one of the key frameworks for analysing the photograph as a visual sign. This article, however, proposes a closer look at Peirce's contemporaneous philosophy of pragmatism as a fundamental component of the visual, cultural, and intellectual context within which the photographic halftone first emerged. When, exactly, did it begin to matter if a photographic image made up of a certain arrangement of graphic marks was read differently from a photographic image made up of a different arrangement of graphic marks? Such pragmatist questions were crucial to the early reception of halftone reproductions, which were often integrated into illustrated magazines as simply one element within an already diverse array of graphic codes. Turning to Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) as a case study, this article argues that reading the halftone as a chiefly photographic sign was not in fact an inevitable outcome of its introduction into the illustrated press in the 1880s and 1890s, but required instead a constant negotiation of both visual and conceptual imprecision – an imprecision eventually smoothed over in favour of an association of halftone technology with photographic ontology by the early twentieth century.

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