

Merrell Semiology-Semiotics

<http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~fmerrell/linguicentrism.htm>

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## **SEMIOLGY MEETS SEMIOTICS:** A CASE OF LINGERING *LINGUICENTRISM*?

French semiology and North American semiotics: a tale of two species. Species? How so? Species: a kind of appearances, a class of individuals having common attributes and designated by a common name.

Charles Sanders Peirce's [semiotics involves iconic images and signs of feeling and indexically oriented signs of the senses and corporeal flows and twists and jerks in addition to conventional and chiefly abstract symbols or language.](#)

Semiology, derived from linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, remains chiefly language oriented. I wish to give you a feel for this difference, while revealing my own admitted bias toward Peircean semiotics. If I could dance or jazz or act it all out, I would be quite happy to perform the lines of divergence between semiology and semiotics. But blessed with few such talents, I can do none of the above. So, cramped by the restrictions of the verbal mode, I'll do my best to tell my tale. But first, a few ...

### PRELIMINARIES

The question that most obviously crops up is: [Why can't we just say what we want to say and be done with it?](#) [Objectivism](#) tells we can, if we use the right method. [Relativism](#) tells us we can't, because every saying is from some particular perspective or other.

In Western thought over the past half-century, there has often been a retreat from objectivism accompanied by a reluctance to embrace a whole-hog form of relativism.<sup>[1]</sup> W. V. O. Quine's "ontological relativism" (1969), for example, tells us we can't find any certainty of reference between signs and things nor in our translation from one language to another. [Yet languages and the ideas they embody regarding the nature of the world are not simply relative to one another. They are relative to "conceptual schemes" consisting of "networks" of terms and predicates and their respective "frames of reference" and "coordinate systems."](#) Moreover, Quine tells us that the possibility exists for establishing a "translation manual" for comparing and contrasting one conceptual scheme and its corresponding web of relations with another one, irrespective of reference. All this is language and virtually nothing but language: too much talk and too little Peircean semiotics spreading an umbrella over all types of signs.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975), a prime candidate from Continental philosophy, also discards objectivism, but from a radically different view. [According to Gadamer, what we know is known relative to our particular tradition, our "horizon of meaning" we are caught up in, which contains all our particular prejudices and preconceptions.](#) The only way we can hope to understand the traditions of other communities is by bringing about some form of "fusion" between "horizons" such that the meaning of terms within one horizon may give rise to the meanings of terms within another horizon. Following [Gadamer's hermeneutical approach](#), we are still [firmly lodged in texts, language, verbal signs](#). There is hardly any way to the

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<sup>[1]</sup> For a general critique of objectivism from the view of cognitive science, Johnson (1987), Lakoff (1987), Lakoff and Johnson (1999). For a view in favor of relativism, Margolis (1991), and a view against, Harris (1992). In this essay I will lean toward, yet remain wary of, both the relativist and the nonobjectivist posture. With neither time nor space to enter into a dialogue along these lines, I would suggest that my stance is in line with the spirit of Peirce's concept of the sign (merrell 1997).

winks and blinks and nudges and hugs and smells and tastes and rhythms and harmonies embodied in nonlinguistic aspects of *semiosis*. It's still so much *linguicism*.

There is another more recent current of nonobjectivist thought. I allude to those contemporary philosophers who call themselves "neo-pragmatists," most noteworthy from among whom is without doubt Richard Rorty (see especially 1979, 1982, 1989, 1991, 1998). These "post-analytic" philosophers maintain that *any middle way between the two alternatives, objectivism and relativism, is to be found in "textualism"*—which brings them quite in line with much of the poststructuralist strain of Continental thought. One of the chief problems with most textualists is that *we are construed as nothing other than language. We, our selves, are tantamount to our sentences, for in sentences we have the only reality available to us. Words, words, words, and nary a sign of nonlinguistic nature to think with.* There seems to be no answer here either. All too briefly put, this is what standard textualism is about.<sup>2[2]</sup>

However, some textualists, for example Richard Bernstein (1983), take pains to point out that although there are no standards upon which to base ultimate truth and the one and only valid interpretation of texts or of the world, this is no call for anguish and gnashing of teeth. Rather, the lack of iron-clad standards should be a cause for rejoicing: it leaves the door open for unlimited readings, unending interpretations of the world, never-ending inquiries of the universe. Frames of reference and horizons remain open, in spite of any and all attempts to bring them to closure; they are more points of departure than heuristic tools capable of producing fixed results, more ongoing interpretive processes than limiting conditions. If objectivity there cannot be, there is at least some objectivism incorporated in changing conditions regulating historically and culturally situated human practices that include nonlinguistic as well as linguistic signs. And there is a modicum of relativism insofar as all things are relative to all other things with none of them enjoying absolute priority over anything else.

Somewhat in the order of poststructuralism, this broader sort of textualism rejects absolutism, to be sure. Nothing is given absolute priority. There is no reality or principle or practice that is acknowledged to be absolutely superior to all other realities, principles, and practices. Moreover, if everything is relative to everything else, then neither is there any identity. That is to say, if everything is radically interrelated and mutually dependent, then everything depends upon everything else for its correlative, within time and space, somewhere within the context of everything else. The upshot is that there is nothing at all except the "zero degree" between one event and another event both of which are intermittently emerging into the realm of the actuals (compare to Barthes's [1967] "zero degree writing"). In other words, *everything is empty of essence, substance, being, existence. Everything is nothing more than whatever is in the process of becoming; it is the becoming of being as well as the being of becoming. If everything is in the process of becoming or happening, and if everything is mutually dependent, then we are within the horizon we are within, without the capacity objectively to survey it, see it, or say it. And whatever web of language and of all signs and whatever conceptual scheme we are also within, is for us interminable, beyond our grasp.*

This is to imply that *the idea of a line of demarcation between a horizon or conceptual scheme and everything else, as well as between every different and distinct and even incommensurable horizon or conceptual scheme that could have been in place of that which is, is a line of nothingness, of emptiness, of the zero degree.*

It is the emptiness which contains everythingness that could have been in the process of becoming something else at some alternative time and place but is not. This does not imply

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<sup>2[2]</sup> In passing, I might mention that I have written at some length on the problems of textuality in merrell (1997, 1998, 2000).

that any two given horizons or conceptual schemes are either open or closed with respect to one another. It does mean that any and all horizons or conceptual schemes depend upon all others such that there is no absolute or legitimate way to tell where one begins and the other ends. It means that what is here, now, is in the here and the now and nowhere and nowhen else, at least for us within our particular semiotic context.

A rejoinder might be forthcoming: one's self is one's self and that's that, in spite of whatever contextualized moment or place might exist. But, then, the question must be asked: Is that self really any different from its entire context, and does it possess any form of continuity from one moment to another? And then another question arises: If the self is something apart from the context, then how is it that that selfsame self could have arisen from that very context of which it is now not a part?

If the self cannot happen to be becoming within a particular context, then there can hardly be, *for* that self, any fusion of horizons or a struggle with some conceptual scheme, in order that a "transhorizon" or "transconceptual scheme" may be in the process of becoming. There is only interrelationality of everything. According to this interrelationality, there is no cause and effect in the linear sense, but rather, everything is both the cause and the effect of everything else such that what is in the process of becoming is becoming as a consequence and as a result of the impending conditions and from within the context that happens to be emerging in a given here and now for some particular semiotic agent in some respect or capacity. This could be regarded as "textualism"--or "contextualism," as it were—by the textualists of the day, Rorty and so on. Such textualism is to be construed as an interrelated, interdependent, coterminously emerging "intertextuality." It can be construed as a pragmatic concept, if you will.

The key word is **interrelationalism**. In fact, I would go even further: **interdependency, interrelationalism, and interaction**: that, it seems, is the name of the game. It is quite explicit throughout Charles S. Peirce's philosophy, and, if we wish to remain obsessively focused on language, it is at least implicit in semiological practices.

#### TACKLING THE PROBLEM HEAD-ON

The problem with this essay is that I need to define **semiosis** before I can get down to the task of writing about Peirce's semiotics. That is a difficult task. Difficult, because **semiosis is itself the process of signs becoming other signs**. How can I say what semiosis is if I cannot step out of semiosis in order to say it as an object of my contemplation? This is like the physicist, a collection of subatomic particles, describing subatomic particles: subatomic particles must say what subatomic particles are. In this manner **to know signs, that is to know semiosis, is tantamount to signs knowing themselves, for the sign knower is made up of signs, s/he is, her/himself, a sign**. This is not, mind you, the "prison house of language." No. Semiosis is by no means simply a matter of language and language alone. **Semiosis does not dwell within language, but rather, language is but a minuscule part of semiosis**.

If semiosis is the process of signs becoming other signs, and if we as sign makers and takers are within this process, then we must try to understand **how it is that we interact with signs and how they interact with us**. The *how* of signifying activity bears on signs of the past (what they actually did and what was done to them), of the present (the possibility of semiotic activity in the here-now, which is always moving on to a there-then), and of the future (the potential for semiotic becoming). Past, present, and future: **there can be no semiosis without time, for time is the very river within which semiosis flows, yet semiosis encompasses time as it flows along, slowly unfolding itself in the process**. Since we are in time in the manner in which we are in semiosis, we cannot know semiosis by means of objective study and thought.

We must feel and sense it. Once again we are caught up in the same problem. To feel and sense semiosis is like telling a fish it must feel and sense the water surrounding it. Our

waterworld philosopher-friend responds: "Feel and sense it with respect to what? What do I have other than my water medium against which to gauge that medium?" We, like our baffled denizen of the deep, have nothing against which to measure our understanding of semiosis. We are inextricably included within semiosis. Nevertheless, to say something about semiosis from within it is at least a beginning. Upon saying a few words about semiosis, however, we are semioticians. We are saying something *about* signs. We are using signs to categorize and label the process of semiosis. Our saying, consequently, is false to itself. It is false to itself, since **semiosis, as process, knows of no categories: it is just onstreaming, flowing, perpetually moving, process**. To say what it is is to mutilate it, fracture it, cut it up, and as such it is no longer process. No. Semiosis is definitely not a "prison house of language."

So, let us consider **semiotics** as a *perspective*. If, from within what at least appears as a "prison house of language" we can't say *what* semiosis--the sign process--*is*, then perhaps we can at least say *what* **semiotics--the study of signs--is**. It is the result of our stepping back from the *that* of our communicative acts and asking about the *whys*, the *whats*, and the *hows* of those acts.

**Semiotics** stems from a natural curiosity regarding our world, our culture, our modes of communication. It is **the study of the very acts of communication we bring about on the stage of life**. It is **the study of the life of all our signs**. These signs include our written and spoken language, mathematics, logic, literature, painting, music, architecture, theater, film, television, dress, gesture, and cuisine, as well as interaction with computers, and all forms of communication in the plant and animal world as well as all natural processes insofar as they are interpreted in some form or fashion by some living organism.<sup>3[3]</sup> **We are incessantly immersed in a rich and often bewildering plethora of signs of all sorts, and semiotics entails an attempt to know what it is they have in common, how they are used, and why they are used in the way they are used**. The study of signs is quite obviously challenging. It may even appear ominous. But although it has its severe limitations, it is not an impossible task, I would suggest. For after everything is said and done, making and taking the signs surrounding us in our world is what we do best, and more often than not what we do naturally.

## THE TRADITIONS DISTINGUISHED

In brief, "**semiology**," based primarily on the linguistics of Swiss scholar Ferdinand de Saussure, that during the 1950s and 1960s found popularity chiefly in the continental European tradition and in language and literature departments in the United States, while "semiotics," more recently emerging from the work of North American philosopher, scientist, logician, and mathematician, Charles Sanders Peirce.

Unfortunately, a distinction between the two terms has often been blurred. Students of the late A. J. Greimas prefer to call themselves "semioticians," though they fall within the continental tradition. Numerous other investigators working within the "semiological" framework do the same. Occasionally, the continental concept of the sign occasionally involves a somewhat forced wedding between Saussure and Peirce--Umberto Eco (1976) is a case in point--with the best man appearing in the guise of French linguist Emile Benveniste, Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, or Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev. Be

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<sup>3[3]</sup> In semioticians Charles Sanders Peirce's words, signs include "every picture, diagram, natural cry, pointing finger, wink, knot in one's handkerchief, memory, fancy, concept, indication, token, symptom, letter, numeral, word, sentence, chapter, book, library" (1978:149). And elsewhere, we read that signs include "pictures, symptoms, words, sentences, books, libraries, signals, orders of command, microscopes, legislative representatives, musical concertos, performances of these" (Peirce *MS* 634:18). Peirce even goes so far as to speculate that the entire universe is a "perfusion of signs," if it does not consist entirely of signs, in which case it is, itself, a vast sign, a "poem" (*CP*:5.119, 5.448 n. 1).

that as it may, not an insignificant number of scholars continue to use "semiotics" interchangeably with "semiology," "structuralism," and sometimes even "poststructuralism," which brings on more confusion than illumination.

For example, Terence Hawkes (1977:24) proclaims in *Structuralism and Semiotics*: "The terms semiology and semiotics are both used to refer to [the 'science of signs'], the only difference between them being that semiology is preferred by Europeans, out of deference to Saussure's coinage of the term, and semiotics tends to be preferred by English speakers, out of deference to the American Peirce." Shortly thereafter, Hawkes contends that the boundaries of the "field of semiotics," if indeed there be any, "are coterminous with those of **structuralism**: the interests of the two spheres are not fundamentally separate and, in the long run, both ought properly to be included within the province of a third, embracing discipline called, simply, communication. In such a context, structuralism itself would probably emerge as a method of analysis linking the fields of linguistics, anthropology and semiotics" (Hawkes 1977:24). Regarding Hawkes's sweeping assertions, Thomas Sebeok (1986:80) judiciously warns: "Nothing could be a more deluded misconstrual of the facts of the matter, but the speciousness of this and associated historical deformations are due to our own inertia in having hitherto neglected the serious exploration of our true lineage."

I harbor no pretensions of being able to lay this "semiology/semiotics" conundrum to rest for all time. Rather, I intend to elucidate the problem, and let the chips fall where they may. In so doing, I focus on **the boundary between "semiology" and "semiotics."** Given limited time and space, I must present Peirce as economically as possible. This requires my ignoring some of Peirce's terms that would otherwise become overloaded with undesirable conceptual baggage, paring down parts of his sign theory in order to streamline it—but hopefully without doing it irreparable damage—and bringing "semiotics" to bear on our contemporary multicultural scene. In other words, I will attempt very briefly to present Peirce's concept of the sign, while highlighting those aspects of it that remain relevant to our contemporary world.

My **translating Peirce into our own culture-world** is a necessary step, I believe, for our culture-world is what we made it by means of the signs we have fashioned. Each morning we awaken to William James's "blooming, buzzing confusion," and, as Marcel Proust so aptly describes it throughout his *Remembrance of Things Past*, we gradually become aware of the signs of our culture-world as our consciousness unfolds, opening ourselves to its environment. And we reinitiate our navigation along the stream of *semiosis*, following the current as it meanders along, twisting slightly when entering its gentle eddies, bucking with the whitewater during its less benign periods, steering between bounders and fallen trees, and all the while producing and processing an untold profusion of signs. But it is not simply a matter of us and our signs.

**No sign is a full-blown sign without all signs, for they are all interdependent, and they incessantly engage in interrelated interaction with one another. Moreover, what we take to be "our" signs is virtually nothing outside the entire community of signs producers and processors to which we belong. All signs and all sign makers and takers compose a virtually seamless fabric: it is not a matter of signs and things but of **thought-signs** in the mind and **sign-events** "out there." It is a matter of signs perpetually becoming something other than what they are.**

First and foremost, the idea Saussure discarded but some investigators continue to hold dear is that of **signs stand for something else**, as surrogates of some sort of secondary status replacing genuine articles. Admittedly, Peirce used the term *stand for*--as well as *represent* and *refer to*--with regards to the relation between signs and their respective objects. Quite simply, they were the terms of his day. But he used them as he saw fit, a use that diverged, at times quite sharply, from their customary nineteenth-century and early

twentieth-century usage.

I choose entirely to eschew the use of **stand for** (and *correspond* and *represent* and *refer to*) in this essay for two reasons. First, **the stand for idea breeds a tendency to conceive a sign as a sort of static proxy standing in for an equally static thing, the sign. The sign as proxy cannot properly carry out its role of incessantly becoming other signs, along the flow of semiosis.**

With each new instantiation a sign has invariably become a *difference*; it has become a new sign, not merely the same sign *standing for* the same object or event. At the same time, with each new instantiation, although the sign is now something other than what it was, it nevertheless contains itself (as a *trace*) within itself. So the sign *is*, but from another vantage it *is not*, what it *was*.

Second, **the stand for idea tends to generate an implication of the sign function as immediate, rather than mediate.** During his lifetime Peirce worked at developing the idea of the sign's mediary role, for he believed **there is no immediacy of the sign process of which we can be conscious here and now**--in this respect Peirce was in line with Jacques Derrida's (1973) argument against the "**myth of presence.**" The concept of mediation denies our making and taking signs and their respective objects as they are in the here and now. **We do not perceive and conceive our culture-world exactly as it is, but as it was in a moment now past in the river of time, and by way of mediating signs.**

For example, the word "bachelor" does not *stand for*, *refer to*, or *represent* the collection of all unmarried men, past, present and future. The French flag does not *stand for*, *refer to*, or *represent* a political entity that happens to go by the name of France. And smoke does not *stand for*, *refer to*, or *represent* fire. Rather, "bachelor," the French flag, and a cloud of smoke are signs that, upon their being interpreted by semiotic agents--human in this particular case, but any living organism will do--*interact* and *interrelate* with other signs "out there" (as *sign-events*) and in the minds (as *thought-signs*) of those agents. In fact, those agents, upon *interacting* and *interrelating* with signs and other agents, become, themselves, nothing more than signs among signs.

Consequently, **in contrast to signs standing for, referring to, or representing things, more properly speaking they interdependently interrelate and interact with them.** Signs *interdependently interrelate* and *interact* with other signs in the same way they *interdependently interrelate* and *interact* with their meanings and with their makers and takers.

There are no intransigent priorities here, no hierarchy of values, but rather, a rather democratic **process of signs becoming other signs**, of signs taking their place among signs, of signs--ourselves included--lifting themselves up by their own bootstraps.

Although I admittedly depart from the "letter" of Peirce's terminology, I do not abandon the "spirit" of his sign theory. Granted, Peirce endowed the sign with its most general definition as something that *stands for*, *refers to*, and *represents* something to someone (a human or other semiotic agent) *in* some respect or capacity. However, **in order to avoid conjuring up images and thoughts reminiscent of bygone glories and vanished dreams of language as a "picture" of the world, the mind as a "mirror of nature," and of a faithful one-to-one "correspondence" between signs and things, I do away with stand for, refer, and represent entirely.** The watchwords are *interdependency*, *interrelatedness*, and *interaction* between signs.

Enough lingering on this problem. It's time to get on with the Peirce/Saussure problem.

## BINARISM VERSUS TRIADISM

**Ferdinand de Saussure** has been hailed as "the father of modern linguistics," the man who reorganized the systematic study of language "in such a way as to make possible the achievements of twentieth-century linguistics." He has promoted "[semiology](#), the general science of signs," and "[structuralism](#), which has been an important trend in contemporary anthropology and literary criticism as well as in linguistics." He gives us "a clear expression of what we might call the formal strategies of Modernist thought: the ways in which scientists, philosophers, artists, and writers working in the early part of this century tried to [come to terms with a complex and chaotic universe](#)." His theory of language "[focuses on problems which are central to new ways of thinking about man, and especially about the intimate relation between language and the human mind](#)." This is an impressive track record indeed!

**Charles Sanders Peirce**, whose life spans that of Saussure, is a latecomer to the humanities and human sciences in this century. Peirce was truly a polymath. Trained in chemistry, he also studied, logic, mathematics, and philosophy, and to a lesser degree he became versed in the entire range of disciplines that existed during his day. He is the father of "pragmatic philosophy," considered by many to be the only legitimate American philosophical movement.<sup>4[4]</sup> As a scientist and mathematician who acquired an international reputation during his day, he also produced many of the advances in logic (which he equated with semiotics) and scientific methodology, that have made possible a number of further developments ranging from computer science to the history and philosophy of science. Over sixty years ago philosopher Hans Reichenbach (1939) wrote that Peirce anticipated his own groundbreaking work on inductive logic. More recently, Hilary Putnam (1982a:295) was surprised to discover how much that is now quite familiar in modern logic "actually became known to the logical world through the efforts of Peirce." And W. V. O. Quine (1985:767) places the beginning of modern logic in the work of Gottlob Frege and Peirce. Now these are heady credentials also!

Unfortunately, most introductions to "semiology" or "semiotics" pay homage to their respective founder. Then they reverently follow in the footsteps of the master, be he Saussure, Peirce, or whomever. Quite frequently, the authors of such introductions offer a recapitulation of some sign theory or other--many times reductionistic and equivocal--the exposition and rhetoric of which is often alien to current practices in anthropology, linguistics, literary theory, philosophy, and sociology. Yet the ideas are usually presented in rather programmatic fashion, as if handed down from the gods.

In an attempt to improve on this formula of exposition, I must point out that one of the chief distinction between Peirce and Saussure lies in the scope of their theories. [Peirce's semiotics encompasses the range of all possible signs and their human and nonhuman makers and takers alike, regarding both inorganic and organic, and living and nonliving domains--in addition to what is construed by dualists to be the realm of mind.](#)

This all-inclusive semiotic sphere exists in stark contrast to Saussure's call for a "science of signs," which according to the proper conception was destined to become basically a "[linguistic science](#)," thus limited to distinctively human communication. But actually, Saussure was not quite as limited as many of his disciples have made him out to be. His idea had it that since linguistics "would be only part of the general science of semiology," the

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<sup>4[4]</sup> However, it was chiefly the work of William James and John Dewey that put "pragmatism" on the academic map, though Peirce originally coined the term as a label for his philosophy.

laws discovered by semiology, circumscribing "a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts," would be "specifically applicable to language" (Saussure 1966:16). **Semiology according to this broader definition would incorporate all modes of communication found in human societies, including both linguistic expressions and nonverbal devices such as gestures and signals along nonlinguistic channels.**

Visionary pronouncements and the train of future events, however, are often incompatible bedfellows. Not only did Saussure's dream in the wider sense go largely unfulfilled, but, despite his initial subordination of linguistics to the more general "science" of semiology, throughout the *Course* he repeatedly contradicted his initial premise. It gradually became apparent that **for Saussure, language--that is, what he set up as a language-speech (*langue-parole*) dichotomy--to the exclusion of writing, occupies a suffocatingly privileged and unique position among all semiological systems.** This dubious move, which was to be effectively deconstructed by Derrida (1974:1-93), prompted certain semiologists of the 1960s to thrust language to ever greater prominence. The giant step was taken when Roland Barthes (1968:11) declared that "linguistics is not part of the general science of signs, even a privileged part, it is semiology which is a part of linguistics."

Actually, in its most basic form, Saussure's *Course* consists of hardly more than tentative notes on a method for studying phonetics, and at most morphology, with very little in the way of syntax or semantics, to say nothing of pragmatics. Yet Saussure's suggestions were propagated by his followers as a veritable doctrine intended to encompass the entire universe of signification. As a consequence, the *Course* has become lost in a plethora of glosses, commentaries, explanations, offshoots, and outgrowths such that one can hardly separate the wheat from the chaff or see what is touted to be a forest for all the scrubs trying to pass themselves off as legitimate trees. This is quite baffling. Saussure's original strategy was relatively unambiguous: to project a monolithic, undifferentiated, field, language, gradually divide it into sharp distinctions, and then virtually eliminate one of each set of those distinctions. The result was a set of boundaries and a successive narrowing of the corpus to be analyzed. Obviously, Saussure's less disciplined followers did not heed the suggestions of their leader: they took the narrowest of parameters and expended them inordinately.

**Language, in Saussure's view, floats in an ethereal zone above the physical world. It is arbitrarily contrived and chiefly autonomous.** It creates its own "world," despite the individual language user's whims or wishes to the contrary. Individual words are not, as they were for philosopher John Locke and many philosophers and linguists since his time, mere markers, linguistic window dressing conveying notions about a "world" whose structure is available to the mind through perception of that "world." **The Saussurean "world" is what language says it is, which implies that insofar as language is structured in a particular manner, so also is its "world."**

Thus language consists of a repertoire of signs and the possibility for their use by the speakers of a given community, while thought is a structureless haze lying in wait for language's cutting it up and organizing it into some sort of order. And **both thought and language collaborate and contrive to create a "world," the "world" common to the members of the speech community.** But this is merely the first, and quite vague, step toward a grasp of what Saussure is all about. His interest rested almost exclusively on language.

Let us take a quick look, then, at Peirce's more encompassing concept of the sign.

ONE, TWO, THREE, AND THEN WHAT?

What one can find of Peirce's work is breathtaking in scope and depth. It sparkles with insight, amazes one with occasional pyrotechnical displays of genius, and piques one into thinking what one had never before thought. But there is no readily available master plan. All too often, as a consequence, scholars attempting to mine patches of promising

terrain within Peirce's work become lost in the whole topography, and they resort to digging up a few uncut stones and trying to pass them off as polished gems. I can hardly hope to remedy this problem in a few brief pages. Yet I'll try to offer a sense of what Peircean **semiosis** is all about.

Since Peirce's concept of the **sign implies sign mediation**, it is deeper and more comprehensive than the ordinary expressions "derivation of meaning" or "interpretation."

Engendering and processing signs and making them meaningful is more than merely getting information out of them or making sense of them. It is a matter of an intricate interplay between what Peirce called **Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness**. These categories make up Peirce's fundamental triad of relations as follows:

- (1) *Firstness*: the signification of what there is such as it is, without reference or relation to anything else (i.e. a quality, sensation, sentiment, or in other words, the mere possibility of some consciousness of something).
- (2) *Secondness*: signification of what there is such as it is, in relation to something else, but without relation to any third entity (i.e. it can include the consciousness of the self-conscious *self* of something *other than* itself).
- (3) *Thirdness*: signification of what there is such as it is, insofar as it is capable of bringing a second entity into relation with a first one (i.e. by way of mediation of the categories of Firstness and Secondness).<sup>5[5]</sup>

"**One, Two, Three ...**" At the outset it might seem as simple as that. But from simplicity, complexity quickly emerges. If we include "**Zero**" and "**Infinity**" at the front end and back end of "One, Two, Three ...," then we can see why. Nevertheless, in schematic form, to all appearances the categories are quite straightforward.

**Firstness is quality, Secondness is effect, and Thirdness is product in the process of its becoming.**

**Firstness is possibility (a might be), Secondness is actuality (what happens to be at the moment), and Thirdness is potentiality, probability or necessity (what would be, could be, or should be, given a certain set of conditions).**<sup>6[6]</sup>

In art, Firstness might involve a two-dimensional rectangular patch of color on a Picasso canvas. Secondness in such case would include that patch's interactive interrelations to other rectangular, triangular and irregular patches in the painting. Thirdness would be a matter of the viewer's putting them all together into an imaginary three-dimensional image as if seen from the front, from the back, from the right side, from the left side, from above, and from below, all in simultaneity. In literature, Firstness is embodied in a few lines of *avant garde* poetry as marks on paper in terms of their "possibility" for some reading somewhere and somewhen by some poetry lover. Secondness is involved in their actual reading and their interrelation with the reader's present mindset and memories of the past and readings of many other lines of poetry. Thirdness is the reader's interaction with the lines of poetry in such a manner that meaning emerges for her at that particular moment. In everyday life, Firstness found in a double arch of bright yellowness in the distance. Secondness is the interrelation established by some hungry observer between the parabolically curved, elongated yellowness and a colorful building underneath it. Thirdness is recognition of that familiar establishment as "McDonald's"--since language enters into the picture. Then,

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<sup>5[5]</sup> My use of the term "consciousness" might be disconcerting. The very idea of consciousness was off limits to classical science, since it could not be objectively measured and computed. This taboo held the reins on behavioral psychology, and even exercised its influence on cognitive science during its early years. Only recently have cognitive scientists begun seriously to consider consciousness as a field of inquiry (see especially Damasio 1999).

<sup>6[6]</sup> For further, Almeder (1980), Hookway (1985), Merrell (1995, 1998a), Savan (1987-88).

according to one's culinary habits, one decides to enter the temple of cholesterol and stuff oneself or to continue searching for more aesthetically prepared nutrients. However, like all schematic formulations, this one is somewhat deceptive. In reality,

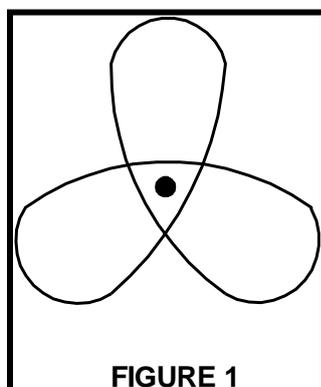
**Firstness**, in and of itself, is not an *actual* concrete quality (like, for example, a mere sensation of the color and form of an apple that we might be looking at at this moment). It is nothing more than a **category of possibility, a pure abstraction**--abstracted, separated from everything else--as something enjoying its own self-presence and nothing more: it cannot (yet) be *present* to some conscious sign taker as such-and-such. **It is an entity without defined or definable parts, without antecedents or subsequents. It simply is what it is as pure possibility.** This "**pure possibility**," it bears mentioning, is almost entirely *absent in the body/mind distinction*, since Western science's obsession rests exclusively with what there purportedly *is*, and what there *is* is what is actualized and can be properly measured, mathematized, and cognized. "Pure possibilities" elude such manipulation, and are therefore categorically ignored.

**What is perceived belongs to the category of Secondness.** It is a matter of something actualized in the manner of *this happening here, now, for some contemplator of the sign (and now, we enter into the domain of Cartesian mind eternally divorced from body).*

As such it is a particularity, a singularity. It is what we had before us as Firstness, such as for example, a vague "red" patch without there (yet) being any consciousness of it or its being identified as such-and-such. Now, a manifestation of Secondness, it has been *set apart from* the self-conscious contemplator, willing and ready to be *seen as*, say, an *apple*.

However, at this point it is not (yet) an "apple," that is, not a word-sign identifying the thing in question and bringing with it a ponderous mass of cultural baggage regarding "apples" (the particular class of *apples* of which the one before us is an example, what in general *apples* are for, their role in the development of North American culture, in folklore, in fairy tales, health lore, and so on). **At the first stage of Secondness, the *apple* is hardly more than the possibility of a physical entity, a "brute fact," as Peirce was wont to put it. It is one more thing of the furniture of the self's physical world. It is *otherness* in the most primitive sense.** If Firstness is what *is as it is* in the purest sense of possibility, Secondness is pure negation insofar as it is *other*, something *other* than that Firstness.

**Thirdness** can be tentatively qualified as that which *brings about mediation* between two other happenings in such a manner that they interrelate with each other in the same way they interrelate with the third happening as a result of its *mediary* role. **This mediation creates a set of interrelations the combination of which is like Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness twisted into a variation of the "Borromean knot"** (Figure 1)



The knot clasps the categories together by means of a central "node" (or better, "**vortex**") in such a way that they become "democratically" interlinked. **Each of the categories can**

intermittently play the role of any of the other categories; yet at a given space-time juncture, one of the three will be a First, one a Second, and one a Third.

**Peirce's conception of Thirdness, I might add, now diverges radically from the traditional mind/body dichotomy, which is indelibly binary in nature, with no mediating function bringing them together in a liquid *interdependent, interrelated, interactive* embrace.**

To summarize, **Firstness is possibility (a *might be*), Secondness is actuality (what *is*), and Thirdness is *potentiality, probability, or necessity* (what *could be, would be, or should be*, given a certain set of conditions).**

Firstness, in and of itself, is not an identified concrete quality of something (like, for example, the raw feeling of some body of *water* we might happen to glance at). It is nothing more than a **possibility, a pure abstraction**—abstracted, separated from everything else—as something enjoying its own self-presence and nothing more: it cannot (yet) be *present to* some conscious semiotic observer as such-and-such. It is an entity without defined or definable parts, without antecedents or subsequents. As such it is **the bare beginning of something from "emptiness," of something from the possibility of *everything*; it is at once *everything and nothing*, it simply *is*, as possibility.**

**The *whatness* or the *happens-to-be* of that which is perceived belongs to the category of Secondness.** It is a matter of something actualized in the manner of *this entity here*, presented *for some interpreter*. As such it is hardly more than a particularity, a singularity.

**If Firstness is pure affirmation of what *might be*, Secondness is negation insofar as it is *other*.**

**Thirdness** can be further qualified as that which brings about *interrelations* between two of Peirce's three sign components, representamen, semiotic object and interpretant, in such a manner that they are *interrelated* with each other in the same way they are *interrelated* with the third sign component as a result of its **mediary act**.

The **mediary act** is like Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, or representamen, semiotic object and interpretant, twisted into the intertwined Borromean knot that clasps them together by way of a central "**vortex**." Each of the three sign components can trade places with any of the other two, as depicted by the bulbs in Figure 1; yet at any time and any place one of them will be a representamen, one a semiotic object, and one an interpretant. In order for this "democratic" process to continue, there must be **correlations between the three peripheral bulbs by way of the central "vortex" or, so to speak, the "fourth point."**

#### ON WHAT THERE IS NOT

If you will, please **consider this "vortex" comparable to the original Indian concept of "Zero," which was appropriated for use in Western mathematics.**

The "vortex" is "Zero," the three bulbs are the three integers, 1, 2, and 3, that can trade places with one another like musical chairs, and indefinite repetition of the sign flows toward "Infinity." And there you have it.

"Have what?," someone says. It. "It?" Yes, It. The process, **the semiotic process of signs becoming signs by virtue of the universal engenderer, the "vortex," or "Zero."** "Too vague," comes the response. Well, you might visualize the "vortex" or "Zero" as the center of an "axle" that holds the spokes of a wheel together. The wheel is in constant motion, but the central point of the "axle" just sits there: it is the point about which the continuity of movement regarding the whole emerges. **The "vortex" is, then, of the nature of "nothingness," "emptiness." At the same time, it is "Infinity" implied. It is the Alpha and Omega of semiosis.** It is as if we began with either "Zero" or "Infinity" and then went on to "One, Two, Three," and then ended with "Infinity" or "Zero" again. So actually,

**both the center and periphery are "emptiness" or "nothing," and at the same time they are "everything."**

Now it might seem that I am becoming so vague as to border on chaos. And that's correct. **Chaos, and order from chaos, which can become communication, within the semiotic stream. You can't have communication without chaos.**

Yet we abjure, once again. We wish for something more specific, more tangible, something we can distinctly put to the analytical test. We need clarity, distinction, and precision. Otherwise we are in a sea of chaos without any ephemeral islands of order upon which we can get some kind of foothold.

Precision? Clarity and distinction? This entails know-it-all ideological postures and methodological procedures? I'm afraid I can offer few promises in that respect. Yet in order to get on with this essay I must strike out in some direction or other--from chaos, no doubt--that will be able to afford a satisfactory degree of communication. So I'll try to try again, with an extension of one of my examples.

#### HOW THE CONCEPT OF THE SIGN COMES INTO THE PICTURE

Since the bulbs of Figure 1 can be occupied by any of the three categories, **whatever at a given space-time slice happens to be a First is a vague feeling. What is a Second entails bare consciousness of the First on the part of some semiotic agent. What is Third brings the two together and potentially gives them some meaning.**

In terms of our above conversation on **holes and space and time and motion and change, space and time outside any and all considerations of anything else, are Firstness, or better, they are not really anything at all, for they are not something of which we can be consciously aware outside motion and change and the becoming of consciousness.**

**Motion** from here to there of something as a consequence of its interdependent, interrelated, interaction with something else—that something else possibly acted out by ourselves—is **Secondness.**

**Change** of the interdependent interrelationship between the motion of something with respect to something else is a matter of **Thirdness**—that **Thirdness** implying our becoming of awareness and our own *interdependent, interrelated interaction* with the process unfolding itself.

**Space and time** by themselves, spacetime by itself, knows of no objects, acts, or events. Objects are nothing more that warps in space, and acts and events unfold in time as perceived by some consciousness or some other, but there is no consciousness and no other, so acts and events are absent.

Motion, in the order of velocity, requires something and **something else emerging into the attention of some consciousness or some other, hence thingness enters the semiotic scene.**

Change of motion, like acceleration, marks **entry of an interpreters entering into the process.**

Space and time are just that, and no more. They are **stasis** from whatever perspective. Motion, in contrast, is relative. What is motion from one frame of reference could well be considered stasis from another frame of reference, and ultrarapid motion from yet another frame of reference. Change of motion might be radical change from one view, moderate change from another view, and sluggish change of the consistency of cold honey from yet another view. **Thus we have the makings of a non-Euclidean, non-Newtonian concept of relative time and space and of the universe.**

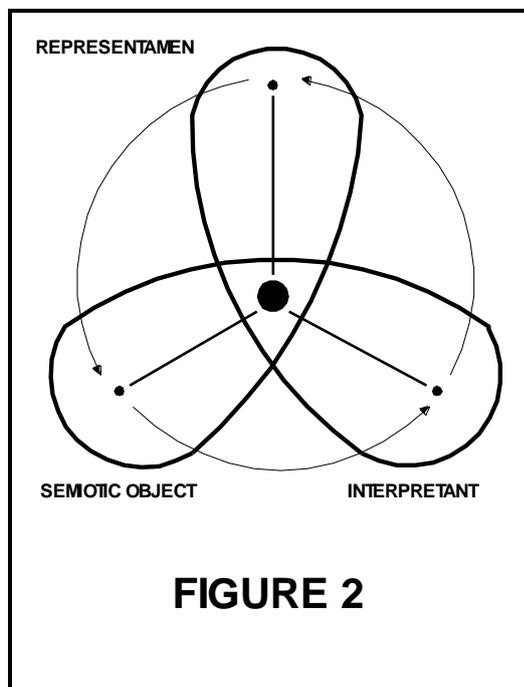
Faithful to this [notion of signs becoming other signs](#), the bulbs of Figure 1 whirl about their axis not on the two-dimensional plane but in [a nonlinear, wobbly, virtually "strange attractor" manner](#), such that at any moment the three legs can change partners, and the dance, now something *other than* what it was, goes on.<sup>7[7]</sup> In order for this "democratic" process to be played out, correlations between the three peripheral "bulbs" exist only by virtue of the "vortex."

This "vortex" can be properly qualified only at a later stage of this disquisition. For the moment you might visualize it as [a "zero point," the "axle" \(or "hole" if you will\) that holds the spokes of a wheel together](#). As described above, the wheels are in constant motion, but the "axle" remains fixed: it contains the grease providing for the continuity of movement regarding the whole. Thus [it is that the interaction of representamen, semiotic object, and interpretant, is not a "standing for" act but an act of relating to and at the same time an interacting with](#).

**I repeat, signs are not mere surrogates for something else. No sign component of the representamen, semiotic object, interpretant triad is an island unto itself. Each component is dependent upon and collaborates and corroborates with all other sign components.**

Upon embarking on a discussion of Peirce's concept of the sign, I should make mention of the notion with which we are now familiar: [there can be neither first sign—unblemished, and of paradisiacal perfection—nor final sign—pregnant with meaning, the \*Sign\* to end all signs. We are in the flow of things, in the manner in which we found ourselves in Figure 1.](#)

This is because thought itself is inextricably bound up with, indeed its very nature is that of, signs. As Peirce himself puts it, [the "woof and warp of all thought" is of the nature of signs, and most particularly, of language \(CP:5.421\)](#). As we can note in Figure 2, Peirce's conception of the *sign* consists of a *representamen* (itself often called a sign), that relates to an *object*. But in order to be a genuine sign it must also relate to a third term, its *interpretant* (very roughly, that which gives the sign its meaning).



<sup>7[7]</sup> The allusion to "strange attractors" stems from my suggestion that in "chaos theory" (Gleick 1987) and the "physics of complexity" (Prigogine and Stengers 1984) we have some of the most profound manifestations of the semiotics of semiosis (for further, see Merrell 1998b).

The most fundamental of Peirce's sign types consists of **the trichotomy of icons, indices, and symbols**.

**Icons** resemble the objects to which they relate (a circle and the sun), **indices** relate to their objects by some natural connection (smoke and fire), and the relation between symbols and their objects is by habitual sign use and according to cultural convention (a national flag, evincing hardly any similarity with and no natural connection to its object). **Symbols** of the best and most common sort are found in language.

An iron-clad rule, according to Peirce, is that **the meaning of signs, and especially linguistic signs, is found in other signs**. An interpretant gives purpose, direction, meaning to a sign. But this interpretant, upon becoming an interpretant, also becomes in the process another sign, which comes into relation with the first sign in its relation to its object. It can then take on its own object--which can be the same object, now slightly modified--and it engenders its own interpretant. The interpretant then becomes yet another sign, and so on. This ongoing sign process has been dubbed by Umberto Eco (1976:69) "**unlimited semiosis**."<sup>8[8]</sup>

The succession of signs along the semiotic stream thus becomes a network of glosses, or commentaries, of signs on the signs preceding them. Or perhaps better put, signs are alterations or *translations* of their immediately antecedent signs.<sup>9[9]</sup> **This process of signs translated into other signs is endless. Everything is incessantly becoming something other than what it is.**

Consequently, for Peirce **there is no ultimate meaning (interpretant), for the meaning of a given sign is itself a sign of that sign, which must be endowed with its own meaning, which is in turn another sign**. Neither is there any final *translation*, for a given *translation* of a sign calls up another sign upon its being endowed with meaning, that meaning being different from that of the sign being *translated*, and that second meaning becoming yet another sign to be *translated* and given meaning. (Peirce does in fact write of a final interpretant, but it is inaccessible *for us*, it is realizable solely in the theoretical long run, which is at the infinite stretch of the semiotic process.)

But I'm afraid this is all too much too quickly. One needs a little time to digest it. There is, however, a method to my apparent madness for abstractions. In the first place, I bring Peirce's triadic concept of the sign up rather abruptly not for the purpose of engendering confusion but hopefully to set the proper mood for what is to follow. Just as we are indelibly inside semiosis, so also we are both, at this "moment," suspended "inside" this essay, and must try to get some sort of meaning out of it. On so doing, we must cope with a nonlinear, back and forth, spiraling, self-enclosing, text in the making, which gives us pieces from a jig-saw puzzle rather than an *A-B-C* sequential development. **Since this essay about semiosis, and both you and me besides, are inside semiosis, why should I, how could I, expect to render it of a nature any different from semiosis?** The very idea would be presumptuous. Furthermore, since according to Peirce **the universe is perfused through and through with signs, if it does not consist exclusively of signs** (*CP*:5.448, *n.1*), how could this essay hope to give a linear account of a nonlinear domain, whether it be either semiosis or the universe?

Like this modest essay, **the universe or the universe of semiosis is not that deterministic linear, cause-and-effect parade of events envisioned by classical**

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<sup>8[8]</sup> Here we see another radical departure of Peirce's semiotics from Saussure-based semiology. **Peirce's icons and indices are essentially pre-linguistic, though they can usually be given linguistic window dressing in the form of symbols**. Most semiologists rarely consider the equivalent of Peirce's icons and indices in terms other than linguistic (i.e. symbolic). This reveals the generality of Peirce's signs and the limitations of semiology.

<sup>9[9]</sup> See Savan (1987-88) for an excellent exposition of the Peircean concept of signs *translated into signs*.

**science. It is complex, not simple. It is more chaotic than orderly.**

It by and large favors asymmetry over symmetry. Interpreting the universe or the universe of semiosis is not simply like reading a linearly unfolding Agatha Christie thriller. It is, in addition to the element of linearity we may be able to find in it, a recursive, undulating, back and forth reading of the fantasmagoric world of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. **We cannot simply have either linearity or nonlinearity and ignore the other.**

We need both our well-reasoned linearity and our "chaos" principle in order effectively to survive. By the same token, if we construed semiosis as a map we could study with the presumed detachment of a classical scientist studying bacteria under the microscope, we would be destined to deluded hopes and unfulfilled dreams.

**For, unlike the traditional concept of knowledge as a map or mirror of nature, we are squarely *within* the map, and we must find our way about by groping in the dark, by intuition, premonition, inclination, educated guesses, and even sheer chance, as well as by using our faculties of reason.**

Consequently, there is little use trying by linear methods to "get the picture"—the map—of what I am trying to write. For there is no "picture," no "picture" that we can "see" from some imperious outside vantage point at least. To make Peirce's long story short, we are, ourselves, signs among signs.

Like physicist Niels Bohr once remarked with respect to **the world of quantum theory**, we are **both spectators and actors in the great drama of existence**.

**The traditional Western idea of a neutral spectator surveying her world and cramming it into her cognitive map, which mirrors the world in all its brilliance, is rapidly becoming defunct: may it rest in peace.**

So if the Peircean terms, representamen, object, and interpretant remain foreign, at least they have etched some trace or other on your mind. Let them grow on you, and you on them, as both of us attempt to proceed through the remainder of this journey.

In the second place, I would suggest that an initial and tentative understanding of Peirce, like our trying to understand a radically distinct language, culture, religion, philosophy, artistic mode, or scientific theory, requires a certain "shock." I believe a "shock" of sorts of necessary. Of recent, in academic circles and out, we have been deluged with a mind-numbing array of **presumed oppositions: relativism versus absolute truth, idealism versus realism, subjectivity versus objectivity, chance versus necessity, indeterminacy versus predictability, and so on. We are usually enticed, coerced, or indoctrinated into thinking it is a matter of embracing either one term or the other.**

For if not, we will certainly be left with conceptual mush (anarchy, nihilism, an "everything goes" malaise). In other words, the push is more often than not to engage in binary thinking. For the reasons given in the previous pair of chapters, Saussure can quite conveniently be interpreted along the lines of such *either-or* imperatives. This can also engender a smug, condescending view of *other* peoples and *other* cultures when the analyst sees the *other* in terms of her/his own culture, social class, or lifestyle, and analyzes it accordingly.

As a consequence, there are some scholars who pass themselves off as structuralists or semiologists or poststructuralists—and even semioticians—and proceed, at times pompously, to analyze and reveal what was supposedly hitherto concealed from the average (i.e. unaware, uneducated) folks. They pass judgment on political institutions, theological or ideological dogmas, the advertising media, and so on, as if with some special divinity

power they could see what is invisible to the general populace. On the other side of the ledger, some well-intentioned but rather lax disciples of Derrida gleefully and irresponsibly romp in the sporadic field of floating Saussurean signifiers, quite confident that they belong to that privileged club of intellectuals capable of interpreting all texts as misinterpretations upon demonstrating that there are no legitimate interpretations.

Admittedly, many scholars have usually been responsible citizens: Derrida himself, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, and others. My sweeping judgment regarding today's academic milieu was to make a point, which is this.

**On the one hand, between the Scylla of one pole of the above set of oppositions and the Charybdis of the other, there is more often than not little communication and few concessions.**

**On the other hand, Peirce's triadology, and most particular, his notion of the interpretant, seem to suggest that it is possible to steer a *mediary* course, in the process opening new doors of perception and conception.**

This is not to say that opposites can be united into a harmonious, conjugal embrace. It is to say that although the tension, the struggles, the imbalance and asymmetry of the oppositions remain, they potentially afford a glimpse into the forces that motivate both sides of the equation. The fact of the matter is that when bouncing signs back and forth during our daily affairs, more often than not we understand much of what we hear, we sort of slither and slide through the rest, and we usually get along swimmingly, as if we knew what we were doing all along. It is **as if we were tacitly capable of overcoming the double-bind character of the oppositions while hardly giving them any mind.**

In this light, perhaps you have now been at least mildly shaken from your slumber regarding what signs are all about and what you expected to encounter in this essay. If you have, then I accomplished my initial goal of setting the "proper mood."

So much for the preliminary salad on Peirce on the sign. Now for a plate of meat and potatoes.

NOT A MATTER OF THREE, BUT THREES

Since, **as Peirce tells us, virtually anything can be a sign, though there must be something about it that is other than a sign, his definition of a sign must indeed be of the most general sort. It is not simply a matter of the questions "What *is* a sign?" but rather,**

**"What *is it like to become* a sign?"**

Peirce in this manner lifted the study of signs to a new level. Anything may function as a sign. However, signs are not special kinds of things, but rather, **anything is a sign insofar as it manifests sign functions, which I have defined in terms of *interdependency, interrelatedness, and interaction.*** I have already expressed my displeasure with the notion of *standing for* (as well as *referring* and *corresponding to* and *representing*). More properly, **a sign is *interrelated with something (its object), but it is also interrelated with the someone processing it, and to whatever it is processed into (its interpretant), which in turn becomes another sign by way of its triadic relations with the sign, the object, and the interpreter.***

In 1902 Peirce defined a sign as "anything that determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its object) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*" (CP:2.303; brackets mine).

Let me offer an example. A sign, or representamen as it were, say, the word "cross," relates to (signifies) a general interpretant (roughly concept, meaning) of the sign within a particular religious community regarding conventional ceremonies and everyday life.<sup>10[10]</sup> The function of the sign and interpretant remains incomplete unless there is interrelatedness with an object. Suppose the object is a particular *cross* in some chapel with which you are familiar. Upon the sign and interpretant being interrelated with their object, the interpretant (which mediates between the sign and its object) becomes in its own turn another sign (representamen) within *this* particular context in *this* chapel. The sign then engenders its own interpretant regarding *this* activity within *this* context. And as the formal religious ceremony proceeds, at each and every juncture the sign (representamen), its interpretant, and its object take in a successive string of different (*translated*) countenances as they become something *other* than what they were during the moment of *their* antecedent signness. In other words, with each verbal evocation, "cross," with each furtive glance at the *cross* "out there," and with each feeling or thought of the cross as a sign of religious activity and religious signification, whether engendered from the object (*cross*), from a previous instantiation of the word "cross," or from the interpretant (feeling or thought--meaning), becomes another sign.

In this sense, and given the thrust of this essay, I would slightly rephrase Peirce's definition of the sign as:

ANYTHING THAT IS *INTERDEPENDENT UPON, AND INTERRELATED AND INTERACTIVE WITH, ITS INTERPRETANT IN SUCH A MANNER THAT THAT INTERPRETANT IS INTERDEPENDENT UPON AND INTERRELATED AND INTERACTIVE WITH THE OBJECT OF THE SIGN IN THE SAME WAY THE SIGN IS INTERDEPENDENT UPON AND INTERRELATED AND INTERACTIVE WITH IT, SUCH INTERDEPENDENCY, INTERRELATION, AND INTERACTION SERVING TO ENGENDER ANOTHER SIGN FROM THE INTERPRETANT, AND THE PROCESS CONTINUES, WITHOUT END.*

In this re-definition, I have still taken my cue once again from Peirce, who writes: **"The essential function of a sign is to render inefficient relations efficient.... Knowledge in some way renders them efficient; and a sign is something by knowing which we know something more"** (CP:8.332).

Ideas and thoughts themselves are signs, thus as *sign-events* in the world and *feeling-signs* and *thought-signs* in the mind multiply and grow, so also knowledge. **The concept of semiosis, process rather than product, interrelations rather than things, is wider and more encompassing than representation.** And, **since semiosis implies mediation, it is deeper and more comprehensive than the derivation of meaning or interpretation.** At the risk of repeating myself inordinately, I might add that **engendering and processing signs and making them meaningful is much more than merely getting information out of them or making sense of them.** It is a matter of an interplay between what Peirce's categories, as summarily defined above.

Now for a crucial question.

WHAT IS THERE OTHER THAN WHAT IS PERCEIVED AND CONCEIVED AS A SIGN?  
If, as Peirce speculated, everything that is consists of signs, then **what is there from within which signs become signs, what constitutes the ground upon which the semiotic process does its thing?**

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<sup>10[10]</sup> As I mentioned in passing, the terms "sign" and "representamen" are often used interchangeably, though they are not the same. All components of a sign (representamen, object, and interpretant) are, or can become, themselves signs in their own right. Consequently, what within one context is construed to be a representamen, an object, or an interpretant, in another context could be the object of another sign, and vice versa.

A sticky question. Yet an intriguing question. Allow me the liberty of alluding to Peirce's three sign types, icons, indices, and symbols, in formulating a possible response.

Assume we have apple image in mind, which appears in the guise of an image or icon. If we put the image in the form of an utterance we have "This is an apple." We have the "This" as an index that draws our attention to the icon. And we have "apple" as a solitary symbol in search of a sentence and a text in order that its function as symbol may be brought to fruition. This symbol, "apple," interacts with the index and the icon through the "This is a" to compose a sentence, a composite symbol.

With this in mind, we might say that

(1) the **icon** is in the *image of, a schematic\_diagram that depicts, or is similar to*, something (a positivity, or a sign),

(2) the **index** *relates to something in terms of what the icon is not* (negativity, or a semiotic object), and

(3) the **potential interpretant of the sign brings the *is* and the *is not* together and mediates between them in such a way that there is both the *is* and the *is not* and at the same time there is neither the *is* nor the *is not*.**

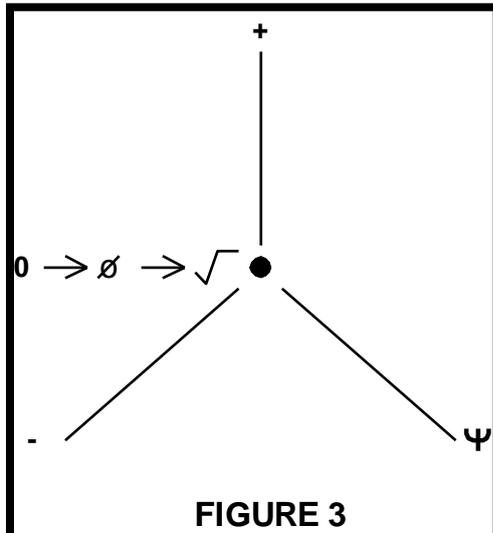
We see the apple image as an *apple* while deep down we know full well that the image itself is not an *apple* but *the interdependent, interrelated, interaction (in the traditional term, "representation")* of our apple image with an *apple*. We can talk interminably about this apple image and any number of absent apple images and actual *apples* and the word "apple" and other words having to do with "apples" and so on. Or an actual "*Jonathan apple*" can become a sign of something else entirely. It can become a symbol for pedagogical purposes in elementary school classroom, it can be a candidate for a cook book, it can relate to folklore, and as such it is doubly not merely an apple or an "apple" but enters into an entirely different field of discourse. We can do all this and more, and then more, virtually without end. And *we may become increasingly confused in the process. We no longer know we know but know many ways in which we perhaps know not but we are not really sure because the not is now many steps removed from that most fundamental initial not.*

So, finally, let us return to that **fundamental not**--as if we could, but we can't, yet let's suppose we can.

If the icon *is like* something or other, a positivity, and the index *is not* what the icon *is*, a negativity, then let us provisionally call the *is* and the *is not* "+" and "-" for the purpose of illustration. *If the sign emerges out of "emptiness," out of "nothingness," or "no-thingness,"* then it enters into the range of anticipations and expectations and hopes and desires and fears. It is initially experienced as "*some-thing*" that is like "*some-thing*" else that might bring on pleasantness or unpleasantness, depending upon the experiencer and the context.

But now **we are a far cry from mere "emptiness."** **It is like going from zero, 0, to the empty set, . Zero is just zero. It is emptied of everything, including even the mere memory of numbers.**

**The empty set**, in contrast, is just that: something that happens to be empty. It is the "noticed absence" of something that was or could have been or might possibly be there partially or wholly to fill the unoccupied container. So we have "**pure emptiness**" and the "noticed absence" of somethingness and the plus (a icon sign) and the minus (the sign's object). **What has been left out of the picture is the sign's interpretant. The icon (or sign or representamen) as Firstness and the index (or semiotic object) as Secondness needs a symbol (or interpretant) to perform the role of Thirdness, of mediation.**



Consider, in this light, and with respect to Figure 3,  $-1$ , which is given the label,  $i$ , by mathematicians. The sign, " $-1$ ," embodies what *is* and what *is not*, without any possibility of deciding which should be foregrounded and which backgrounded. There can be only oscillation between two contradictory values. *The sign,  $i$ , on the other hand, just is what it is, neither positive nor negative and also in the same breath both positive and negative. By the same token the role of the interpretant, as mediator and moderator and media minimizing agent, is, in and of its own accord, neither positive nor negative and at the same time both positive and negative.*

"Now how can there be such illogic if interpretants, meaning, interpretation, always entail slapping some sort of prioritized, privileged, hierarchized, prejudicial, discriminatory value on any and all signs by way of logical justification and rational legitimation?"

I would suggest that *in spite of our wish for logical cogency and rational aplomb, we invariably fall into inconsistencies at one step or another in the long walk of our everyday affairs. That is what makes us human, perhaps all too human. And occasionally quite unfortunately so.*

But let's try to leave our humanity behind for a moment and *let ourselves simply be*; ... no, that's not right, *let ourselves become in the process of becoming, let ourselves go, just let go.* Upon our so doing, nothing has any real, existent, necessary, biased self-seeking, self-indulgent, ego-centered value. *There is nothing, no-thing at all, for everything, every-thing is mere possibility; that is, every-thing just is or is possibly in the process of becoming, without any-thing having actually become. It is all like  $i$ .*

Better still, let us conjure up an alternate sign for  $i$ , say, this: " $∅$ ". Now let us take another look at Figure 3. What *is* in the positive sense is related to what *is not* in the negative sense, though under other circumstances the *is not* could have been the *is* and the *is* the *is not*. **The positivity and the negativity are given an undecidable oscillatory " $+/-/+/-/+/-... n$ " value** at the core of the sign map where " $∅$ " lies, which just *is*. It is *neither positive nor negative* and at the same time it is *both positive and negative*. The " $∅$ " is comparable, if I might suggest, to T. S. Eliot's "**still point**" about which the dance unfolds:

Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered....  
... Except for the point, the still point.

There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. (Eliot 1943:143)  
In the timeless "still point," " , " about which gyrate "+," "-", " and " , " we have, then, the **counterparts to "Emptiness" (0), the "Empty set" ( ), and Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, Peirce's three categories.**

"Quaint, but inordinately abstract," I overhear someone quip.  
Yes. I'm afraid it might look that way. But please bear with me, for I believe this apparently vacuous map of the sign is actually quite germane to the topic at hand.

In the first place, **the map is necessary, for the sign cannot emerge from mere "emptiness." The semiotic agent must already have some notion or other of what has been in the past and what might be in the present and what the future possibly or probably holds in store.**

This involves anticipations and expectations and hopes and desires and fears regarding the "noticed absence," the "empty set" to be filled with one or more of the virtually unlimited **range of superposed possibilities.** In other words, in our above example, the apple is an apple, because "An apple (icon or image) *is* an 'apple' (a symbol) *is* an apple (as indexed) *is* an apple (the actual article)." But at the same time it *is not* an apple, since "An 'apple' (symbol) *is not* an apple (icon or image) *is not* an apple (as indexed)." So we have the plus side and the minus side. But **there is no solution to the quandary regarding what *is* and what *is not*, at least within this most primitive of domains, unless we consult , which, like *i*, is *neither the one nor the other and both the one and the other.***

In any event, we see that the *not* cannot be absent in the sign processing. Given the *not*, we must concede that **nothing is fixed and everything is impermanent. All is flux, including identity and self-identity, even including the "I" or self.**<sup>11[11]</sup>

Actually the Buddhist sage tells us so much, if I might say so. He tells us that the notion of impermanence implies that there is no fixed self or self-identity, no persistent subject that knows or object that is known. The hopeful idea of a fixed, rugged, hell-bent-for-leather individual self is a pipe dream, illusion, another way of saying *maya*--in Buddhism the intellection of reality that is far removed from the "real" and has no "reality."

Obsession with the idea of a separate self, **captain of its own ship**, clawing and punching and scratching for "what's in it for me" with little regard for anyone else or the world, is a dead-end alley.

What's in the present meditation on signs for all of us is **the suggestion that the self is in an incessant process of emerging as is the world plus the self, the world minus the self, the world and the self as . The self, the ego, the "I", has no real independent existence.**

Rather, **it is perpetually in the process of emerging codependently with the emergence of everything else. In essence there is no essence, matter is of no matter, and never mind mind, for there are no grounds for any of all that, there is only 0 and and + and -, all of which makes up -1, which we have incorporated into .**

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<sup>11[11]</sup> All this, I should mention, goes against the grain of Umberto Eco (1976, 1984, 1991), who sets up the capacity to lie as a prerequisite for distinctively *human semiotics*. Lying, it hardly needs saying at this juncture, is dependent upon negation, the ability to say something that *is not* the case *as if* it were the case. What I am here suggesting here is that all semiotic activity, human or nonhuman and living signs and inorganic phenomena processed as signs, are equally dependent upon the *not*.

**Our groping for permanent grounds or for anything else of durable countenance can only end in frustration.**

Hence, "'Is not an apple' is not an apple." A distinction is made between a sign and what it *is not*. It *is not* an apple. O.K. The distinction comes to the fore. Since it *is not* an apple, the meaning isn't *in* the apple. Since the "This" *is not* an apple, meaning isn't *in* the index. Since "pipe" *is not* an apple, meaning isn't *in* the sign. We can even extrapolate from the self-reflecting predicate to surmise that since the apple image *is not* an apple, meaning isn't in the image or icon. If there is quite obviously no apple *in* the head or *in* the world except that the head of some semiotic agent and some event in the world codependently arise as an apple-event, then meaning *isn't* in the head either.

**Meaning is neither seen nor read nor is it in the head. It just is, it is . It is in the mediated interrelations, the pattern, the patterning.**<sup>12[12]</sup>

WRAPPING IT UP

I would hope that **the "presemiotic" 0, , and , along with the idea of *interdependent, interrelated, interactive mediated* patterning at the heart of all semiotic practices, gives a sense of the all-encompassing Peircean sign in contrast to semiology, given its "linguicentrically" laden Saussurean sign.**

This presents possibilities for the study of literature and the arts, that, first and foremost, place a spotlight on the iconic and indexical facets, the Firstness and Secondness, of the *semiotic process*.

The Peircean sign emphasizes extralinguistic meaning that is felt before it is explicitly acknowledged, sensed before it is articulated, tacitly experienced before it is conceptualized. It is Firstness and Secondness before it is Thirdness.

**Without feeling and sensing and experiencing the sign before acknowledging it and articulating it as a sign set off and against other signs, as a sign of something or other, and as a sign endowed with such-and-such a set of characteristics, that sign cannot but remain impoverished, hardly more than just one more word among words, a naked signifier without a signified, a mere simulacrum among simulacra.**

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<sup>12[12]</sup> Regarding meaning as outside the head and the sign and the object of the sign and the media through which the information travels, Hilary Putnam (1982b, 1983) presents a number of knock-down arguments (see Merrell [1997] for a discussion).

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