Rubber Pencil

In her collection of essays, Anecdotal Theory, Jane Gallop proposes an alternative to a formal academic rhetoric by using an initiating personal anecdote as a theoretical basis for a thesis presentation. In order to produce theory with a better sense of humour, theorists who honour the uncanny detail of lived experience.” To apply that principle here, I will begin by recounting an anecdote and then attempt to ‘read’ that account for the theoretical insights it afforded” (2002: 2, emphasis added). “Anecdotal rhetorics argue about something on a page that he claimed to be the eventual, progressive outcome. For instance, John Deely was astonished! I walked over to his desk, picked up a pencil, and performed the “rubber pencil” with it (i.e., rubbing a pencil in the middle between my thumb and index finger and moving it rhythmically up and down to create the appearance of flexibility). John Deely was astonished!

“Where did you get that from?” he demanded.

“Did you put that on my desk?”

Finally, after several minutes of explanation he understood the phenomenon and we went back to arguing about the book pages.

My point here is that, in semiotics, believing in decoding is the same as John Deely believing that he saw me flexing a rubber pencil. And, to some extent, he did. It always looks like rubber when you do that.

The same thesis for decoding. If a semiotician connotes the illusion for a reality, then decoding is, indeed, possible. Still, “decoding,” is, in fact, nothing but an illusion.

Decoding is not really possible, and its “end,” in the sense of a goal of some kind, is seldom considered in semiotics since it necessarily serves as a strategic “myth” (in Roland Barthes’s sense) for the existence of semiotics as a discipline (or whatever it is). There is undoubtedly an agenda, a purpose, a remainder behind the concept of “decoding,” as it enables a belief in the “success” of semiotic analysis — the ability, in other words, to “crack” the code of a given signifying entity.

But, nevertheless, decoding is surely nothing more than what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe call a “literalization which fixes the differences of a relational system” (1985: 114). Or, perhaps one could modify this to read: this, which endows to...

An apt illustration of this is found in the common belief (Priest, Eco, et al.) that “infinite semiosis” is not truly infinite. That a signifier ultimately refers to a transcendental signified, carries with it “the possibility of fixing a meaning which underlies the flow of differences” (1985: 112). Signs, in effect, don’t refer only to other signs, this argument maintains; some sort of end — understanding or knowledge or even truth — will be the eventual, progressive outcome. For instance, Laclau and Mouffe maintain that a signifier ultimately refers to a transcendental signified, despite infinite semiosis. “The impossibility of an ultimate finite of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations — otherwise, the very flow of differences would be impossible. Even in order to differ, to subvert meaning, there has to be a meaning,” they suggest. “Every relation of representation is founded on a fiction that the presence at a certain level of something which, strictly speaking, is absent from it. But because it is at the same time a fiction and a principle organizing actual social relations, representation is in the terrain of a game whose result is not predetermined from the beginning” (199). This argument is not very compelling, however. (In fact, the same contention is also found in reader-response literary criticism that maintains that the reader can’t do just whatever she wants with a text; that the text, in effect, exerts some control of some kind just by virtue of being a text.) Yet this view of semiotic restriction provides an opening for further consideration of the concept of decoding.

A hyperbolic example of this phenomenon can be revealed as a matter of course from the monosyllabic “denotation” (yet another myth) of a word, up to its definition in a dictionary (Ruhl; Simpkins 2002). Then look up the definition of each word in that definition. Et cetera. Rather than leading to an absurdly pointless exercise, eventually some sort of “definition” of that first word will emerge — a sense of what that word means to someone, in effect, through a process of what Gilbert Ryle (1968) and Clifford Geertz (1973) discuss as “thick description.”

For semiotics, acceptance of the visibility of “decoding” arguably serves as a rationale to justify itself. If semiotics can provide an outcome for decoding a sign, leading to the equivalent of a sum or remainder, then sometimes it has an end or purpose. But, as numerous examples can show, it appears that nothing of any certainty or finally can ultimately be “gained” from decoding texts without accepting that these results are manufactured (or to use Nietzsche’s term, “invented” [1876] by the apparatus employed. Ultimately, then, any decoding would simply be a new encoding even further “away” from the truth of a signifying entity. And the process of semiotics carries on, endlessly.

Humans, Nietzsche maintains, have arranged an epistemological “peace treaty” which “brings in its wake something which appears to be the first step toward acquiring that puzzling truth drive; to wit, that which shall count as ‘truth’ from now on is established. That is to say, a uniformly valid and binding designation is invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth” (1873: 889). This is how we “invented knowledge” — “truth is but the residue of a metaphor” (892) or a “conceptual crap game.” “Only by forgetting the primitive world of metaphor, Nietzsche concludes, ‘can one live any more repose, security, and consistency” (893). Given the unarguably human, impersonal, even fabricational component of what we call decoding, Nietzsche’s perspective actually holds positive consequences for semiotics. If it means that decoders don’t just passively decode sign-vehicles; they make them anew. Otherwise, if semioticists continue to pretend that decoding is a disinterested process with no “state” (attributionally similar to some components of the scientific method), they are not being honest or even accurate about what happens in the course of decoding.

This is understandable, after all, for as Stanley Fish notes, the illusion of materiality, or consensus, or reproducibility of results, is undesirably seductive. Fish emphasizes the immense seduction of the materiality of the page in this regard. While he avers that “the objectivity of the text is an illusion,” it nevertheless is “a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically constitutive.” “Even the sufficiency and completeness. A line of print or a page or a book is so obviously there — it can be handled, photographed, or put away — that it seems to be the sole repository of whatever value and meaning we associate with it” (1970: 82). The text, along these lines, then, is
essentially equivalent to the convincing sight of the rubber pencil.

Such dishonesty or inaccuracy, however, is accompanied by a counterintuitive, technological reward, of course. No longer is decoding a fraudulent enterprise, a hat trick, an act of legendary, a tremendous con job – a rubber pencil. Yet, a practice based on a lie remains dishonestly lightly dismissed; he maintains, “To believe that the whole institution of literary education is but a gigantic confidence trick, would strain even a believe that the whole institution of literary education…”

“The claims of schools and universities to offer literary education necessary in order to establish a profession or discipline. Strategic compromises (decoding, for example, or in point of fact, the encoding of the whole system) turn out to be presupposed in the very act of composing a text or in the very act of requiring the interaction of the whole system without which the world do not suffice to make someone a perceptive and competent reader)” (1975: 108-09).

Peanuts

An article in The New York Times (January 14, 2009) titled “Listening to Schroeder: Peanuts’ Scholar Finds Meaning in the Works of ‘Peanuts’” offers a more descriptive analysis of the content of the strips. A description on the bottom of the front page (declaring “Peanuts” Decoded”) that seemingly reinforced the aforementioned belief that such an action can occur. (Glance up, read the top line, “Deciphering the Peanuts Gang”) A description of the article titled: “Deciphering the Peanuts Gang” [A3]. At first glance, this sense of “decoding” appears to mean that someone believed there actually was a way to crack the code of this American comic strip, but instead the article focuses on William Meredith’s work as the director of the Ira F. Brilliant Center for Beethoven Studies at San Jose State University “When Schroeder - the boy who plays piano in the comic strip - “pounded on his piano, his eyes clenched in a trance, the notes floating above him like conical ink spots drooping the key of G,” we are told from Meredith’s perspective. Schulz carefully chose each snatch of music he drew and transformed that from the score. More than in illustration, the music was a soundtrack to the strip, introducing the characters’ state of emotion, prompting one to ask a question or punctuating an interaction” (C1). Accordingly, instead of detailing the “final” decoding of Peanuts, the article explores how one analyst adds yet another layer to the reader strategies already in place in the analysis of this comic strip. In the case of thick description, this would merely be one more approach to the text. It is clear, however, that the reference to Schulz’s “careful” use of musical intertextuality is not a commentary on the ability for a creator to craft a type of monosemous code of each week’s new puzzling malady. During the course of elaborating on the veiling phenomenon, this is an issue that Hawthorne’s point here is that “the patient withheld some key information that House or his team can literally uncover to produce a substantiable diagnosis. (Everybody lies),” is Dr. House’s motto, and this is exactly what medical semiotics is as it is for semiotics as a whole. In other words, everybody in semiotics lies – a position consistent with Schulz’s fact of comics about semiotics as fundamentally the study of lying (1975:1).

People Watching

Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, “The Man of the Crowd” (which appeared in the journal Atkinson’s Casket [1840]), portrays a related detection scenario where the narrator, while reposing in leisurely convalescence following an illness, prides himself on his ability to perform a typological decoding of the passer-by in the crowds of mid-nineteenth century London. In fact, Poe has repeatedly used this skill successfully over and over again on those who walk past him. “At first my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in relation to the crowd of them in their aggregate relations,” he notes. “Soon, however, I descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable variously tinted faces, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance” (527).

The initial reference to the narrator’s health (“For some months I had been ill in health, but was now convalescent”) (1840): 507 merits commentary at this juncture. Particularly significant is the manner in which Poe explains his leisure activities of people watching, but it may serve as a type of “sic” denominator for his decoding/re-encoding activity, too. In this sense, his especially acute abilities, along with his constant pursuit of decoding the character of the stranger, could be viewed ironically in the end, not unlike when readers recognize that a narrator or his character acted in pursuit of knowledge to be in (as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper”). Accordingly, through this particular narrator’s condition, Poe could be seen as ridiculing the notion of decoding as a viable enterprise, the pursuit only of those who are deliriously ill.

But the narrator suddenly finds himself stymied by one unusual character who does not mesh with his decoding system. Stalled by this inability, he and his team throw out diagnosis code of each week’s new puzzling malady. During the course of elaborating on the veiling phenomenon, this is an issue that Hawthorne’s point here is that “the patient withheld some key information that House or his team can literally uncover to produce a substantiable diagnosis. (Everybody lies),” is Dr. House’s motto, and this is exactly what medical semiotics is as it is for semiotics as a whole. In other words, everybody in semiotics lies – a position consistent with Schulz’s fact of comics about semiotics as fundamentally the study of lying (1975:1).

What Reinhart offers is a completely systemic analysis of the poems that posits, for instance, that “anyone” (given a capital “A” now) is a character named “Anyone.” He does this with four sets of “characters” (Anyone, Someone, Noone, Everyone) and furthermore creates character-ontology corollaries (protagonists and antagonists), specified “team” units (Goofman), and a story/plot. But, as she says, she has to coaxe these characters through the one typographical feature in particular that cummings usually avoids (in fact, he went so far as to use only lowercase letters, spelling of his own—lowercase letters, although Reinhart also changes his name to “Cummings”). The point here is that whatever gains Reinhart makes, comes with an at least equal – if not greater – cost. After all, she is altering data to fit her hypothesis.

The same situation can be found right now on the American television show “House, M.D.,” in which a gifted medical detective trains young doctors through group “differential diagnosis” to crack the code of each new week’s puzzling malady. During the differential, he and his team throw out diagnosis hypotheses based on the syndrome that is suffering from two different maladies at the same time, and thus the second set of otherwise excluded symptoms actually matches up with those characteristic of the second malady. “You’re not an Egyptologist, House,” it outs that the patient withheld some key information that House or his team can literally uncover to produce a substantiable diagnosis. (“Everybody lies”), is Dr. House’s motto, and this is exactly what medical semiotics is as it is for semiotics as a whole. In other words, everybody in semiotics lies – a position consistent with Schulz’s fact of comics about semiotics as fundamentally the study of lying (1975:1).

Veiled Meaning

A useful illustration of this resistance to decodability also appears in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil” (1836), a short story which describes the患beginning when the parsonesses of the Reverend Muster Hooper “beheld the semblance of him” “pacing slowly his meditative way towards the meetinghouse” (37-38). Hawthorne’s description is precise, but in a word, a word or words, in that “semblance” suggests both resemblance as well as an entity that is a lesser version of an original. The only way to understand the story is to wonder that if some strange minister were coming to disturb the cushions of Mr. Hooper’s pulpit (38), let the reader is not given sufficient information to account for this. Consequently, in order to understand only this place “this sight” in the category of what Barthes identifies as an “enigma” (5/2), a signified rendered all the more problematic as it is encoded as something unusual, something escaping or perhaps even preceding intelligibility.

“Are you sure it is our parson?” one of the crowd asks the sexton, who functions apparently as the subject who is supposed to know (38). 38. Again, Hawthorne draws attention to the process of decoding by virtue of this display of inter-observer agreement. When the sexton asserts that “Oh a certainty it is good Mr. Hooper,” on the decoding has to wonder how the sexton knows this or anything in the semiotic universe, for that matter, with “certainty.” To return to the narrator’s identification of Hooper’s “semblance,” the decoder cannot assert definitively that this figure is Hooper himself. This is an issue that Hawthorne furthermore troubles by having the minister block facial recognition by way of wearing a black veil.

While finally offering an explanation for the crowd’s consternation, the narrator begins to provide a decoding framework which, while on the surface (as was the case with Poe’s story) seemingly reduces the significance of the various enigmatic markers which actually serves to open an increasingly larger array of deceptions. The narrator remarks that “the cause of so much amazement appear may sufficiently slight,” in the course of elaborating on the veiling phenomenon, provides a semiotic bombshell of sorts by relating, seemingly obtusely, that this is indeed “Mr.”

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Hooder" (1836: 38). The "one thing remarkable in his appearance," the narrator adds, is "Swathed about our nearest and dearest, and would fain be discovered, though the form, gesture, and voice were those of Mr. Hooper." The parishioners found themselves experiencing "indescribable confusion" and even "amazement," noting to themselves as well feeling "consciousness of the moment they lost sight of the black veil." The veil, it could be said, again heightened attention to the opacity – not genuine transience, and certainly not transparency – characteristic of any significant vehicle in the act of signification. Every sign when "manhandled" (Barthes) by the decoder is treated in this manner, in other words, as a semblance of signification rather than signification itself.

This challenge to the parishioners’ decoding expertise diminishes as they offer interpretative frameworks that gain purchase. "A few of them "shook their suspicions, imagining that they could penetrate the mystery" and even "one or two affirmed that there was no mystery at all, but that Mr. Hooper’s eyes were strengthened by the midnight lamp, as to require a shade" (1836: 40:41). This "naturalization" of the veil’s (also in Barthes’s sense) clearly alters its register, rendering it no longer as imposing the shadow or semiotic system Narrativization rescues the veil from the realm of the unintelligible, in other words, transferring it into one that safely harbours the practice of storytelling. To the narrator, Hooper becomes visible as someone "with a veiled face," with this synecdochic apparently responsible for the "strange and bewildered looks" with which his parishioners "reap" him as he engages in his usual ministrations (41). The narrator registers an enigmatic response from the parishioners by framing the minister’s departure from the scene in a semiotically opaque manner – a glistening of a melancholy smile, and at the moment of closing the door, was observed to look back upon the people, all of whom had their eyes fixed upon the minister. A sad gleam gleamed faintly from beneath his veil, as if he were flickered about his mouth, glimmering as he disappeared.

Yet the response from the group is much more decidedly negative, as indicated by the remarks of "a lady who says, in an impressive tone..." that a simple black veil, such as any woman might wear on her bonnet, should become such a terrible thing on Mr. Hooper’s face?" (emphasis added). The reply of her husband, the local physician, is even more telling, as he remarks: "the strangest part of the affair is the effect this vagary, even on a sober-minded man like myself. The black veil, though it covers only our pastor’s face, throws its influence over the entire congregation, and makes his countenance look as if he were about to go home to secret sorrow."

In order for the townsfolk to satisfactorily decode this resistant signifier, a group was changed with the task to "put the veil’s significative capacity into practice". (n.b. in the following scene something corroborated by inter-observer agreement), along with a similar development pertaining to a young couple he marries, suggest that, indeed, the veil is imbuing Mr. Hooper with extraordinary signifying capabilities (1836: 43).

After performing the ceremony, Mr. Hooper raised a glass of wine to his lips, wishing happiness to the new-married couple, in a strain of mild pleasure that ought to have brightened the features of the guests, like a cheerful gleam from the hearth. At that instant, the figure in the looking-glass, the black veil involved an inner spirit in the horror with which it overwhelmed all others. His face shone with an ashen pallor, and then the veil that was unfastened won upon the case, and rushed forth for the darkness. For the Earth, too, had on her Black Veil. (44)

In Notes from Underground, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s narrative suggests that events were given an opportunity to live uninterfered by impediments, they would immediately want them restored (or new ones created) in order to have something to cause a friction they need in order to have something to complain about. The same would be true if we could somehow achieve “final” semiosis – we would immediately want semiosis to begin oscillating again.

While Mr. Hooper’s performance at a funeral service later that afternoon provides further opportunities for superradical decoding of the veil (Does the corpse have a face? Is the body swaddled over the body in the casket? Did the body shudder at the sight of it, or did it somehow speak?) it also provides the audience with a type of theatrical-intervention which offers a witness to the veil’s mentions in his benediction: “The people trembled, though they but darkly understood him when he prayed that they, and himself, and all of mortal race, might be ready, as soon as the great roll had been, for the dreadful hour that should unmask the veil from their faces” (1836: 42). Of course, although he could be referring to the more common practice of face veiling, the crowd assumes that he is turning his literal veil into a metaphorical reference, one with semiotic implications insofar as it asserts that everyone is an “actor” by facing the image of a woman that is rendered invisibile instead of a transparent (or even just translucent) signifier.

The subsequent superradical associations of some citizens imagining that they see the minister “walking barefoot in the open air,” following this scene (something corroborated by inter-observer agreement), along with a similar development pertaining to a young couple he marries, suggest that, indeed, the veil is imbuing Mr. Hooper with extraordinary signifying capabilities (1836: 43).

The primary consideration remains on the impact on the decoders who find Mr. Hooper’s transmissions manifesting a terrible effect by the veil. Even though he is delivering his usual, “mild” sermon there was something, either in the sentiment of the discourse itself, or in the imagination of the auditors, which made it evident that they had ever heard from their pastor’s lips. It was tinged, rather more darkly than usual, with the gentle gloom of his eye. Mr. Hooper, remarked the view, the view seemed to consist of two folds of crepe, which entirely concealed his features, except the mouth and chin, but, to no one, that intercept had further than to give a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things.” The emphasis on conjecture is clear here, as the narrator refers to these decodings as actions of “semiotic diffusion” as he stresses that:

As is found in film, the narrator appears capable of zooming in on the minister for “closer” inspection. The sympathetic standpoints are now steered away from the narrator’s comments. “Yet perhaps the pale-faced through this altered “lens.” For, now the consideration begins to become an increasingly prominent issue as the story progresses, drawing attention as it does to the encoder’s perspective on those to whom he disseminates messages.

In other cases, therefore, the impression Signified by Mr. Hooper is increasingly steered away from, a positive, or even neutral, perspective. Although Mr. Hooper’s parishioners monotheists, by virtue of semiotically delimiting it as the “one thing remarkable in his appearance,” the narrator notes “He seemed not fully to partake of the prevailing wonder,” the veil becomes in this instance a “mysterious emblem.” “It struck with his measured breath, as he gave...” rather than simply to suggest the insecurity between him and the holy page, as he read the Scriptures; and while he prayed, the veil lay heavily on his upturned countenance. The more he reiterated extrao... into the realm of symbolisms: “Did he seek to hide it from the dead...” The veil’s significative force grows so forcefully that “Such was the effect of this simple piece of crepe, that more than one woman of delicate nerves was forced to leave the meeting-house.”

Then, however, the narrator introduces a directional reversal into this dynamic by speculating on the encoder’s perspective: “For the veil, in effect, alters the semiotic effect of those Mr. Hooper sees through this altered “lens.” For, now the consideration turns to the ensemble: “Yet perhaps the pale-faced congregation was almost as fearful a sight to the minister, as his black veil to them” (1836: 39). This becomes an increasingly prominent issue as the story progresses, drawing attention as it does to the encoder’s perspective on those to whom he disseminates messages.

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can (including the presumed class of signs deemed transparently "iconic").

Mr. Hooper nevertheless endeavours to engage in this very procedure, but the impact of infinite semiosis cannot be explained. "This veil is a type and a symbol," he says (by way of the speech genre of what is assumed to be an "explanation"), "and I am bound to wear it even, but it is caused by me and darkness, in solitude and before the gaze of multitudes, and with as strangers, so with my familiar friends. No mortal eye will see it withdrawn. This dark shade must separate me from the world; even you, Elizabeth, never can come behind it."

When Mrs. Hooper asks her husband to decode the veil's signified for her, he draws upon an explicitly semiotic framework, although expressing it in the guise of a declarative: "When the veil exists, it is not for eternity! Oh! there is nothing terrible in this piece of crêpe, except that it hides a face which I always glad to look upon. Come, good sir, let the sun shine from behind the cloud. First lay aside your black veil; then tell me why you put it on?" (1836: 45). Here, Mrs. Hooper engages in a bid for mutual encoding– decoding by way of a given (narrative) agent. A similar situation arises at the conclusion of James Thurber's "The Catbird Seat," in which the only plausible decoding is based on character history and the extreme response of the narrator (see Stimpson 2001). Or, again, see the refused decoding following the vision given to the main character in Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation," in which Ruby Torpin doesn't want to accept a message from God, apparently. Or, finally, see the ways in which a non-response (silence) leads to a nevertheless transparent decoding in June Auster's "House of Leaves", The Writer's House, when the main character has to refuse an indecipherable ride proposal without actually saying so while being scrutinized at the same time by an audience of women who are just dying to know... As will be discussed later, this becomes essentially what Barthes posits: the signifier without a signified. A signifier that effectively conveys only itself instead of a relational "unit: "No", she said, and, alighting, extended her hand to her husband. A non-linguistic signifier of the veil: (1836: 46). Here, Mrs. Hooper engages in a bid for mutual encoding–decoding by way of a given (narrative) agent. A similar situation arises at the conclusion of James Thurber's "The Catbird Seat," in which the only plausible decoding is based on character history and the extreme response of the narrator (see Stimpson 2001). Or, again, see the refused decoding following the vision given to the main character in Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation," in which Ruby Torpin doesn't want to accept a message from God, apparently. Or, finally, see the ways in which a non-response (silence) leads to a nevertheless transparent decoding in June Auster's "House of Leaves", The Writer's House, when the main character has to refuse an indecipherable ride proposal without actually saying so while being scrutinized at the same time by an audience of women who are just dying to know...

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By Anna Cabak Rédei

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The organization of the volume is chronological. The reader is carefully led through Victoria Welby's own writings as they develop, and their linkage to contemporary intellectual and scientific streams of thought, by Petrelli's sensitive "ear." There is also a rich selection from the archives of Victoria Welby's correspondence and papers, as well as reviews of those, in the closing chapters of the book, which ends with appendices and bibliographies of great value for anyone interested in further studies of Lady Welby and the Signific Movement. The integrated archival material, such as hitherto unpublished letters and/or illustrative representative writings selected by Petrelli, and the Signific Movement. The integrated archival


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The selection of writings indicates Lady Welby's contribution to the Signific Movement in the 1890s, which eventually flourished in the Netherlands within the Dutch Significs Group.

Petrelli's ambition with this book is to communicate the theoretical bedrocks of significs and its evolution with a special focus on issues connected to the problem of "signs, meaning and understanding," i.e., with "language and communication" (iv).

The organization of the volume is chronological. The reader is carefully led through Victoria Welby's own writings as they develop, and their linkage to contemporary intellectual and scientific streams of thought, by Petrelli's sensitive "ear." There is also a rich selection from the archives of Victoria Welby's correspondence and papers, as well as reviews of those, in the closing chapters of the book, which ends with appendices and bibliographies of great value for anyone interested in further studies of Lady Welby and the Signific Movement. The integrated archival material, such as hitherto unpublished letters and/or illustrative representative writings selected by Petrelli, and the Signific Movement. The integrated archival
after Queen Alexandra Victoria, who was her godmother. In 1863 she married Sir William, the Earls Welby. Lady Welby lacked formal education. She studied on her own through, among other things, travelling, reading and experiencing life with her mother as a child and later on through her extensive correspondence, Lady Welby communicated with 450 interlocutors, who were to make up the ‘Welby Circle’. Lady Welby’s intellectual work was very much developed in dialogue with others.

In 1875–80 Lady Welby expanded her correspondence significantly and it came to include a wide range of interests, and many important names within contemporary Anglophone philosophy such as Charles Sanders Peirce, Henri L. Bergson, Michel Benaï, Rudolph Carnap, Thomas A. Huxley, Henry and William James, Charles K. Ogden, Bertrand Russell, Ferdinand C. S. Schiller, George Bernard Shaw, and Ferdinand Tönnies. Last but not least, Lady Welby’s correspondence with women such as Lucy L. Clifford and Mary Everst Boole was important for her intellectual work. 

In connection with Welby’s semiotic approach she wanted, on the one hand, to criticize what she thought was the restrictive side of the term ‘common sense’ (‘simple’ meaning), and on the other, as something a priori to language. Welby theorized the latter (already present in Lois and Caus from 1883) Welby within the frames of her conception “mother-sense,” or “primal sense” (142).

Another substantial contribution to the field was the ‘Welby Prize’ for the best essay on the science of signs, Mind, which Welby announced in 1896. The German sociologist and philosopher Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) was granted the prize for his essay ‘Philosophical Terminology’ (‘Phänomenologische Terminologie’). This essay was written as part of a larger work on language and notes on the prize are appended, as are the one by Tönnies (225, 245).

In 1911 Welby published her second book Significs and Language: The Articulate Form of Our Expressive and Interpretative Ressources. Many of Welby’s essays are published conference papers. Although she was not connected to any academic institution, she was a member of distinguished academic bodies like the Aristotelian Society, Anthropological Institute, and the Sociological Society. Petrelli has mentioned several of Welby’s unpublished lectures, which deal with issues relating to mental evolution and cognition, and are thus important for the history of modern semiotics, as the (latter) paper contains references to Darwin, among others, with “her studies on the relation between signs and life, signs and evolution” (129). and she anticipated a specific field of modern semiotics, namely biosemiotics, or “global semiotics” (the latter).

For we begin with a vague “sense” which is a response to stimulus. This becomes gradually more conscious, converging to that level which we call “feeling,” and involving more and more definitively that which we call “mind”, a word which in its turn suggestively connotes in popular usage, will, desire, intention, memory [i.e. some sort of General] in Peirce’s terms: my note (in Petrelli, 23, n.1)

Welby’s triad indicates three levels of meaning:

- Firstness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, with respect to a second but regardless of any third. Secondness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third into relation to each other (in Petrelli, 396).

In the early essays “Meaning and Metaphor” (1893) and “Interpretation” (1896) that preceded What is Meaning? Welby was specifically occupied with the problem of language, meaning and interpretation.

In any case, meaning – in the widest sense such as the one of whatever “fact” presents itself to us. Without this, to observe and record appearances or occurrences would become impossible. The only meaningful or significant is the one which is completely free from any sign and sign system to another” (20-21).

In 1896 in the essay “Sense, Meaning and Interpretation,” Welby introduced the term ‘Significs’, alongside ‘Sensifics’, referring to ‘Sensifics’ as a possible alternative. Petrelli (255) writes: “Significs” breaks the verb ‘to signify’ which is an extension of the dual semantic valency of the concept of meaning, linguistic and evaluative; and different from ‘semantics’, it was completely free from technical associations.

However, as we have seen, Peirce viewed Welby’s triad as part of logic but Welby insisted (in a letter to Peirce on the 18th Nov. 1903) that ‘Significs’, as a philosophy
of ‘significance’ (the third level of her meaning), was to be regarded as a ‘practical extension’ of the triad of categories (as part of his ideoscope). For Peirce, time belongs to the world of ideas (Thirdness), and in connection with his thought field of ‘signs’ as parts of such a world, one may perhaps conclude he meant that the latter is determinate. Be that as it may, only the indeterminate belongs to ideas” (397) because, as Petrilli sums up (1904), “Peirce maintains that from the point of view of the subsequent the previous is indeterminate and fixed, instead from the point of view of the previous

The discussion on time, which is here accounted for, to some extent at least, illustrates Petrilli’s polyphonic (1995) use of the term “translation” by showing Welby’s ideas, namely by showing (in the form of excerpts and appendices) the context in which they emerged. In What is Meaning? Welby also introduced the term “translation” by underlining its broad scope; much in line with Roman Jakobson’s (1896–1982) notions of intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic translations from the essay “Cultural Aspects of Translation” (1959) which have been further developed by Petrilli elsewhere. In order to elucidate her ideas on translation and analogy, Welby presented and 397, “Peirce criticizes Welby for not including thirdness within her conception of time, than excluding an idea of the future. Otherwise put, as Huizinga Wennemer brings forth in his outlines of Peirce’s philosophical system:

One reason for regarding laws as thoughts is that a law like a thought is ‘general’ in referring to all possible things. But such a ‘general’ law is further restricted to those happen to exist” (1.420). [...] Peirce formulates this point, which can be said to be a common-place in relation to Peirce, according to Huizinga Wennemer with reference to Letter to Lady Welby, my addition, by saying that Thirdness is not reducible to Secondness (1.420) Wennonener 1902: 380.

The above provisioning describes the link between ‘general’ to ‘.thirdness and fits well into the discussion on time between Welby and Peirce. Petrilli writes “and only as the temporal relation grows in surface and volume does it acquire secondness and thirdness. Thus, Welby proposes to that which is absolutely determinable, fixed [...] as the future which is living, plastic, and determinable, is a pure idea of Secondness [...]” (in Petrilli, 397)

Welby included the idea of “mother-sense” in her conception of time, expressed as follows in a letter to Peirce (20 Nov. 1904): “To the race-relation there is and can be no difference in existential reality between the past and the future any more than between a mile just left behind and a mile just entered upon” (in Petrilli, 399). These lines suffice to illustrate the divergent views on time of Welby and Peirce.

However, Welby was not alone in viewing time as being dependent on space. The French contemporary philosopher Henri Bergson, for instance, held a similar view, as is stated in the following excerpts (translated into English by G. F. Stout (1903–1905). Now, the issue of time was dealt with before her essay of 1907 in her correspondence, and appended excerpts from it may give some idea of how she turns the discussion. Of note here are comments on Welby’s papers by W.R. Sorley (also from 1903–1905) which touch upon themes mixed by Peirce’s philosophical problem of the connection between language, mind and the state of things in the world. Sorley asks:

‘Translative thinking’ converges with signifying and transposing religious language into a physiological one. She also made an inverted translation experiment: a translation of Dr. Hughlings Jackson’s “Translation” (1959) which have been further developed in the light of Peirce’s three fundamental concepts of “common language” (from What is Meaning?), also expressed in terms of “common sense” or “common meaning” and Rossi-Landi’s concept of “common speech” later developed in the light of the term “social reproduction” (542–3). Petrilli relates “common sense” to the meaning of “signific” to underline the idea that different languages are part a term for something else, its meaning, which is generated for something else, its meaning, which is generated in Peirce’s “translative thinking,” method when conveying these experiments fit well with Welby’s general idea of translation as an intellectual process. As Petrilli puts it: “Translative thinking” converges with signifying and transposing religious language into a physiological one.

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The connection between Mother-sense and Significs may be put like this: Primal Sense is what takes up and supplies to us the material of immediate awareness, conscious and interpretative. It is thus at once primal and universal, at all stages of human development [...]. (in Petrilli, 574)

However, as Welby stresses in the same paper, “the greatest of all special gifts, the rationalising Intellect: which has not only to criticize, but also to reason out and construct from, the domain of Mother-sense - its warnings, its insights and insights, its revelations, its swift reading of worth, its penetrative reality” (in Petrilli, 574). If we look at Peirce’s discussion in an undated manuscript published in Collected Papers with the title “Forms of Consciousness,” we may establish some possible links to Lady Welby.

Feeling is the momentarily present contents of consciousness taken in its pristine simplicity, and might be called primsense; Alonseness is the consciousness of a directly present other, standing us. Maleness is the consciousness of a thirdness, or medium between primsense and alonseness, leading from the former to the latter. It is the consciousness of a process of bringing to mind: [...] Aloneseness has two modes, Sensation and Will. Maleness has three modes, Abstraction, Suggestion, Association. (CP 5:55 in Petrilli, 577)

One is tempted to connect Welby’s notions of mother-sense and common meaning through Peirce’s definition of alonseness, and in doing so, establish a link (at least in some respects) between the former term, in its turn, to this triad of Peirce (as mother-sense gives rise to the “rationalizing Intellect,” also called “father reason,” with which it is in a dialectical relation). Petrilli, on the basis of the correspondence between Welby and Peirce, extends these connections, when writing: “Opening the basis of the correspondence between Welby and Peirce, (as mother-sense gives rise to the ‘rationalizing Intellect,’ also called ‘father reason,’ with which it is in a dialectical relation). Petrilli’s work in the archives is priceless for the research field, not only concerning Significs, but also of semiotics and semantics. However, Petrilli’s outlining of Welby’s ‘thought system’ might have gained from a more rigorous editing, as the reader is from time to time interrupted by the many appended texts within Petrilli’s compelling discussions. These appendices might have been assembled at the end of the chapters, or preferably perhaps at the end of the book.

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References


2010 McLAREN-LAMBART AWARD

Alan Chełodenko is the recipient of the 2010 McLaren-Lambart Award for Best Scholarly Article on animation, for his essay “The Animation of ‘Cinema,’” which appeared in The Semiotic Review of Books 18.2 (2009) 1-10.

The journal is delighted to be acknowledged as the publisher of this prize-winning essay. It may be found online in the SRB Archives at http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/semiotics/.

This article revisits the idea of animation as a precursor to the cinematic form, drawing on research into the works of one of its historical progenitors, Emile Reynaud. This is a reconstructionist text that references related arguments from the author, providing a deeper excavation of the contention that ‘cinema is animation,’ while offering a detailed account of Reynaud’s pre-film work. The selection committee was comprised of Tom Klein (Chair), Richard Stamp, Chris Carter, Adam de Beer, and Romana Turina. Dr. Cholodenko is former Head of Department and Senior Lecturer in Film and Animation Studies at the University of Sydney, where he now holds the title of Honorary Associate.

The McLaren-Lambart Award is an annual honour bestowed by the Society for Animation Studies (S.A.S.) to one of its members, recognizing an outstanding contribution made to animation studies in the previous 2 years. Tracing the origins of this prize to a collaborative award with Canada’s National Film Board, it is named for NFB animators Norman McLaren and Evelyn Lambart.
This review essay is a series of musings inspired by Brier's "Information Enough: Cybersemiotics: Why information is not enough (2008). It is almost ironic how instrumental rationality in the modern science of organization and mysticism is now facing a pair of binary opposites. While acknowledging what the pure reason of modernity considered to be a supernatural action, any attempt to explain it was made in the terms of modern science from the perspective of the logic of explanation and causality. "Naturally enough" the term natural has been habitually taken in its reductive sense of a linear direct cause-effect connection pertaining to the two possible extremes of David Hume’s philosophy. Hume’s masterwork "Meditations on First Philosophy" also known as the Glass Bead Game and which is a mode of playing with the total contents and values of the whole world in nature not unlike the organ pipes on the organ. However the range of this magisterial "organ" is the entire intellectual cosmos and, hence, is capable of reproducing, at least in theory, the full intellectual content of the universe.

The game is played with ‘ideas’ like with musical notes in a fugue and partakes of the new symbolic language that can simultaneously represent the structure immanent to the ideas it expresses; as well as having its own means of symbolism, albeit hieroglyphic, expression. Brier concludes that "Meditations Laid in a manifesto for the reintegration of intellectual life with the ‘real’ world, of intellectual and mystic enlightenment with practice… We are in serious need of a broader global view of knowledge and lightenment to individuals as well as in society" (443).

The word ‘enlightenment’ in this context seems, however, to be slightly problematic. Rather than using a specific word that traditionally highlights reason as the over-rationalization of modern thought, I think that creative postmodern illumination will have captured Brier’s idea better. Indeed, Peirce (as Brier’s major intellectual inspiration) appears to be the first post-modern (post-postmodern) philosopher (Deely 2003; Griffin 1993) and his semiotics as the science of signs partakes of post-modern critique of the Cartesian subject who stays forever separated from the world of objects that he can observe with the cool gaze of an independent spectator, a scientist, informed by the positivist paradigm stemming from modernity’s culture of Enlightenment.

The tridic nature of a Peircean sign, however, makes a ‘scientific observer’ the very participant in the process of semiosis. A genuine sign such as encompasses a triad comprising, as John Dewey said, “the observer, the observing, and the observed” (Dewey 1991: 97). The act of observing plays the role of a Peircean interpretant: knowledge is embodied in action making a transaction defined as an ‘unframed observation’ (Bld.3) the minimal unit of analysis. Such participation in the reality of what is produced was indeed a distinguished feature of mystical, pre-modern, thought. In this regard, Brier’s reference to Peirce’s mysticism and transcendentalism (383) is very appropriate even if Peirce himself emphasized intelligence as specifically scientific yet inseparable from experience. Peirce asked “what must be the character of knowledge used by a ‘scientific’ intelligence, that is to say, by an intelligence capable of learning by experience” (CP 2.227, Peirce’s italics).

Herman Hesse’s conceptualizations are Peircean to the core. The boundary between science and mysticism is blurred when both coalesce to form unitary “evolutionary cosmos, in which all regularities of nature and mind are regarded as products of growth” (Peirce quoted in Brier, 382). As Niels Bohr who coined the term “complementarity” pointed out, the extremes of materialism and mysticism alike must be avoided by means of balancing analysis and synthesis. Whether information, then? Not enough or just the right amount?

Brier concludes his book by telling his readers that he “developed an informational theory that accepts several ‘levels of existence’” (457). In this respect it has cybersemiotics, to be placed alongside such contemporary paradigms as a broad contemporary paradigm applicable to natural and socio-cultural systems alike (cf. Cilliers 1998; Byrne 1998). What is the governing dynamic of multidimensional systems? It is the “infinite causality” of the Peircean ternary, the founder of general systems theory, who was first to address the insufficiency of analytical procedures of classical science based on linear causality. He showed that two basic variables are attracted to our attention to “new categories of interaction, teleology, transaction, teleology” (1972: xii) as problematizing the old mechanistic paradigm.

The interactions between more than the two objects create, sure enough, an unsolvable problem – but only within the equations of classical mechanics, at the level of Peircean Interactions certain interactions pertain to Peircean Thirdness, to the evolutionary process of semiosis and signs-becoming-otherwise in the process of ‘reorganization’ as the acquisition of meaning. Importantly, the “interactions do not have to be physical; they can also be thought of as a transference of information” (Cilliers 1998: 3).

Such transference is the defining feature of the new science of coordination dynamics as a paradigm for “The Comprehensive Nature” which is also the title of the book by J.A. Scott Kelso and David A. Engstrom (2000). While Peirce’s genuine sign represents a self-referential semiotic structure, it was “sentience and self-reference that have been making trouble for philosophers for centuries” (2006: 253). A self-referential relativity is what establishes that self-referential correlations between/ across the different levels constituting a complex system.

Different disciplines have their own complementary pairs that, rather than being alien to each other in the manner of Cartesian dualism, are connected via what Kelso and Engstrom specify and present as coordination dynamics. Among complementary pairs in which the terms are related, or coordinated in a bipolar interdependent manner are the following: cause/effect; so-called ‘no-externus’ rationalism empiricism; science/humanities; organism/environment; immanence/transcendence; body/mind; nature/nurture; yin-yang becoming/having certain resemblance; material/spiritual; and so on ad infinitum.

Different “selfother” (self-non-self) pairs do belong to the variety of discourses, their communality derived from the same relational dynamics, which is “contained” in the logic of the included middle. Brier’s one chief “encyclo” is logic – but I think we should be careful here not to confuse the logic of the eschall middle that continues to haunt us since the time of Aristotle with the creative logic of the included middle (cf. Semenov 2005) which is foundational for semiotics understood as the science of signs; notwithstanding the fact that the same logic was also a province of mystical experiences (even if unknown to mystics per se).

The included middle is grounded in the relational dynamics enabled by likeness; sympathy; correspondence, or any other terms that belong to different levels of reality. Peirce, for example, emphasized the utility of likeness to mathematicians and compared an algebraic formula to an iconic sign, rendered such by the rules of community, association and distribution of the symbols. Such an unorthodox logic as semiotics (really, a contradiction in terms within a strictly analytic reasoning) is akin to what contemporary mathematician Louis Kauffman calls virtual, or archaic, logic “that goes beyond reason into a world of beauty, communication and possibility” (Kauffman 1996: 293) as well as beyond given given never-necessary signifiers, symbols, meanings and values. The emphasis on communication indicates that there is an interdependent network in which each level of ‘speaks’ to each other, desperately trying to reach the other’s expressive ‘language’, thus creating bland meanings along the communicative link expressed by the tilde.

Mind and nature therefore cease being binary opposites and truly coordinated complement a theoretical episteme with practical praxis resulting from the feedback between language and action. The apparent dichotomies and antinomies of ‘either’ or ‘habitual thinking are transcended and traversed by virtue of the “both-and” science of coordination dynamics equally applicable to natural and socio-cultural systems that together are embedded in a flow of semiosis. The infamous ‘observer’ (one or many) comprising the
human experience per se, would be "located" precisely at this included middle-in-between what appears to us as two disparate Cartesian substances of body and mind.

As Deely points out, "at the heart of semiotics is the realization that the whole of human experience is located at the different level of order, which is virtual or informational. The fundamental stuff in the informational universe is relation, or sign-based; and we must include all things, both yes and no simultaneously; this means that the informational universe is relation-, or sign-based.

"Signs are the patterns of coordinated, interactive activity comprising "embodied cognition" (Kelso and Engstrom 2006: 89) analogous to that invoked by Brier (referring to Lakoff and Johnson). However, according to Deely, the informational universe-or the signs, dynamics is the interaction (the included third, the interpretant in the Peircean triad) is a priori information, and the dynamical (or sign) systems are "informationally based" (Kelso and Engstrom 2006: 9). Information is what establishes psychophysical unity thereby confirming what Peirce was saying more than a century ago: "The old dualistic notion of mind and matter, so prominent in Cartesianism, as two radically different kinds of substance, will hardly find defenders today" (Peirce CP 6.24, quoted in Brier, 203).

What is sure enough is our perception of information as solely quantitative or measurable. It is meaningful in a pragmatic, Peircean sense as productive of observable effects. Hence, according to Peirce's pragmatic maxim, we speak of the results or objective and a prescription for communication. Language is a type of functional information. It can change the coordination patterns. Functional information is, in short, the very use of signs - by a composite semiosis - a dyad or pair, in which an interpretant is designated by a symbol of recognition, "..." and which serves as a "stand-in" for the real (i.e., a corpse faced sign). Coordination dynamics as such offers a "ubiquitous science of life" (Kelso and Engstrom 2006: 76) permeated with "functional information" (ibid., 98). Reconceptualizing information as functional makes the "ubiquitous science of life" (Kellson and Engstrom 2006: 78) permeated with "functional information" (ibid., 98).

Applying this "bit" (pur pur) intended of information in our practical life at the level of action - by saying it - makes this information meaningful. But the field of potential meanings was always already implicated at the different level of order, which is virtual or informational. In this sense, it is not that "information is not enough"; rather, it is more than enough. The semantic codeability (cf. Hoffmeier and Emmeche 1993) seems to be thereby patterned on, the fifth, quintessential element, it is appropriate here to restate Deely's assertion that, at some point, "this physical universe ceases to be merely physical [that is, conforming merely to its classical description]" (Deely 2001: 621; brackets mine) it is perfused with signs, indeed. 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Disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge stay in a complementary relation to each other. Disciplinary, in turn, knowledge is based on the classical logic of the excluded middle that induces a separation between subject and object and reduces the meaning of knowledge to knowing merely the facts of the external world. The new transdisciplinary or in vivo knowledge is founded on the logic of the included middle so that subject and object correspond to each other. They are in a triadic contra dyadic relation; they are in correspondence (NB Francisco Varela designated such a correspondence as a communication between different beings, autopoietic, that is, self-referential, system structured, sure enough, as a network of signs; Brier indeed acknowledges the importance of Varela’s contribution to his cybersemiotics; see Index p 470).

Transdisciplinary knowledge is based on the logic where terms form a bipolar unity: Every stalk against being binaries opposite. In vivo knowledge is not a static knowledge of the facts per se but a dynamic understanding of meanings that by necessity brings in the dimension of values which is traditionally (in vivo) considered ‘subjective’, that is, located outside ‘normal science’. Epistemology and ethics alike transcend the confines of an individual ego or Cartesian Cogito and cannot be separated from the collective, social, domain: the individual society, too, is a complementary pair in which the terms of the triadic relation sustain each other by the reconciling symbol. I.5. In the latest issue of the journal Transdisciplinarity in Science and Religion, Nicolescu (2009: 2470) points out that “a new system of values can appear only through the dialogue between different domains of knowledge, between different cultures and different religions. This system does yet not exist.”

I think that this ethical dimension should now become the core of semiotic research so in establishing what Noth has recently called ‘intercultural competence’ (2011: 9) and which is an urgent matter in the present content that displays diverse “signs of the times” (Semetsky 2010: 13) amidst cultural conflicts and the clash of values at the global level. The language of signs that can ‘speak’ in characters denoting meanings and values – shared meanings and values – needs to be understood.

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References


Wikileaks provides a familiar glimpse into the future of networked knowledge. It is an effect of the slow erosion of the distinction between classified and declassified information. This erosion is the consequence of the manner in which documents are stored and accessed and the inability of their keepers to make guarantees about their security once digitized and archived. This is both familiar and startling at the same time.

Dutch digital culture expert Geert Lovink (2010) put it well last August. Wikileaks is more of a quantitative leap than a qualitative game changer. It provides the leaked materials as content courtesy of their data harvesters. As US Army sideman Bradley Manning, charged in May 2010 with leaking the Afghan War documents (after the hacker-informant Adrian Lamo turned him in; see Goldstein 2010), and does a reasonable job at presentation by offering a few pointers about the characteristics of the kinds of documents at issue, such as the difference between layers of classification, etc. It may edit these documents in some manner, and attempt to verify them, but it doesn’t generate a discourse or context of interpretation; it does provide access to original documents, however, which deepens reporting. For much of this it relies, rather, on established journalist partners, especially The Guardian, Der Spiegel, El País, Le Monde, and on-and-off again The New York Times.

Make no mistake, Wikileaks is putting its shoulder squarely into the mountain of classified documents, and raises a few storms of dust, at least momentarily. Recent attempts to estimate the extent of classification of documents suggests that it contrives declassification by three to five times (Galison 2004). Wikileaks cannot possibly catch-up and right this democratic deficit or keep pace in any serious way, despite its impressive stock of captured materials. Its source documents are quantitatively arresting, but not in the context of what is measured against, especially over time.

The fact that Wikileaks is so readily reducible to the figure of non-editor-in-chief Julian Assange is one of the reasons why as an organization it is vulnerable. Certainly, Assange has made some deals with blue chip mainstream news corporations and has a group of hackers - Anonymous - to defend his interests and countersignature (via what they call a LOIC Low Orbit Ion Cannon type of DOSX attack under the rubric of ‘Operation Payback’) against the financial service sector players like MasterCard, VISA, and PayPal that have closed its accounts (and the blocking of the site for Library of Congress staff). Wikileaks’ counterassay that credit card companies like more stable revenue streams from porn and gambling is acute. Still, this is redoubtably understandable because use of the LOIC is traceable and, as has been recently shown, not ‘anonymous’ for hacktivists at all (Peau et al. 2010). Either this is a bad mistake and everybody downloading LOIC should have been warned or Wikileaks really believes in transparency at any cost.

When Assange is personally threatened, his only recourse is to up the ante by more and more spectacular disclosures. His behaviour becomes less complex and more fragmented. He doesn’t deepen our understanding of what he is doing and why. Rather, he plunges everyone into a politics in which he becomes a case, lepely, and psychopolitically, and this is what comes to dominate and drive the story, while the material awaits constructive narratives and actionability.

On the other side of the menu, there are the state agencies which lament their loss of control over secure information, and their right to privatize it, feeding the growing creature of the security industry. Then the security intellectuals enter the fray. Some, like University of Calgary’s Tom Flanagan (Wilton 2010), can’t control themselves and seek frontier justice. The fact is that the universities, too, want in on this frenzied commodification of information. They want to rush through the revolving door arm-in-arm with the state and private business the ‘cyberprofessionals’ wading Deep Packet Inspection tools sanctioned under US Cybersecurity Act of 2009, see Project Censored 2010) to get in on the game to which they have been summoned as newly minted entrepreneurs. Academics, too, can play at and with secrecy, despite the openness of the profession and protocols around the presentation of research results. These, too, are changing.


The lesson of Wikileaks is not revealed in the content; we knew that diplomats are paid to lie and that the military get paid for shooting civilians. But in the actuation of solidarity, complexity and collaboration between independent part-timers, between cognitive workers of various kinds: hardware technicians, programmers, journalists who work together and share the same goal of destabilising totalitarian power. From this lesson, the rebels find their way to self-organization of the general intellect.

Recourse to a revived Marxist concept of ‘general intellect’ underlines how general human semiosis is mobilized by a self-organizing cognitariat, otherwise exploited within the extensive electronic networks of post-Fordist production, in defence of Wikileaks. The traits of these semiotic modalities are heterogeneous and scattered across the cybersphere, yet seem to lack a corporeal body. The offline bodies of the hackers working to further the Wikileaks adventure have not yet appeared in this drama. For Bifo, diverse elements of the cognitariat are self-organizing and assembling a general intellect that doesn’t require, at least in its preliminary phases, an identifiable body, but rather coalesces semiotically around a common political project against state secrecy and for the catch and release of hitherto sensed knowledge. Against security—that is the timely call to the cognitariat to destabilize the master narrative of our time (Neodelous 2008), the critique of which exposuremen, hackers and vigilantes, in support of Wikileaks:…

The breakthrough into the world of classified information that Wikileaks has provided will need to be followed by more robust and sophisticated qualitative and, ultimately, actionable assessments of the dataset and the consequences of these interpretations will be the measure of this unfolding lesson for the sons and daughters of Wikileaks.

Gary Genosko is editor of The Semiotic Review of Books.

References


The Semiotic Review of Books is a multi-disciplinary journal publishing review articles and original research. It endeavours to monitor these domains in the humanities, the Social and the Natural Sciences which bear upon symbolic and communicative behaviour, culture and innovation, cognitive systems and processes, and the study of information, meaning and signification in all forms.

The SRB is published three times each year.

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