

Immigrant Semiosis

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The other day I was visiting the mountain home of some Lebanese friends. Worldly people and, fortunately for me, fluent in English, they made pains to accommodate me to my unfamiliar setting. Indeed the surroundings were glorious: scrub-clad mountains descending to valleys thick with olive trees and, further, plunging to the cement factories just south of Tripoli and thence to the sea. The mountain breeze, the scents of frangipani and roasting eggplant, the clatter of jackhammers at the construction site across the valley, the metallic Bach jingling from mobile phones; they all stimulated my senses and my imagination. I clambered around their orchard, sinking my toes in the crumbly red earth, examining the growth of olives, and also, for my friends are keen importers, kiwi fruit and persimmons. On my return, one of my hosts said, "Are you making discoveries? [with a laugh of recognition] The Discovery Channel." Later, as the sun began to cast long shadows in the orchard, another friend pointed to an animal on the opposite hill. "It's a fox. [laugh] The Fox Channel."

Which of my experiences that day were my own, and which came to me pre-formed? An ancient valley bustling with the construction of postwar returnees: do I experience this with my senses or my intellect? Is a kiwi vine in Lebanon a plant or a sign? Is it a fox or a "Fox"? That beautiful afternoon was rich for me with affective experience. But much of it came to me already encoded in concepts that were not mine, nor ours, alone. And that's a Lebanese mountain: what of the billion banal urban milieux impregnated with corporate mediation, like riding a bus through streets thick with signage, advertising posters overhead, Old Spice and CK One wafting from fellow passengers, cell phones jingling bastardized Bach?

In the age of hyper-mediation, how can we have our own experience?

Two accelerations have occurred in the last 150 years. First, the global flow of capital and information has accelerated. Second, and necessitated by the first, the translation of embodied experience into disembodied information has sped up. If, as I will argue, what makes us human is our ability to participate fully in the process of mediation, these accelerations

appear to have a dehumanizing effect. As a result of these two speedings-up, corporate interests have built a faux sociality, in which meanings look like they are the product of democratic human communication but they're not. Corporate meaning is imposed, at a fractal level of detail, on every level of life. Even the meaning of individual, embodied experience appears to be increasingly colonized by corporate culture. My Lebanese mountain anecdote hints at the way corporate branding and other forms of predigested experience permeate the very life of the senses. Other examples abound, like the interesting recent phenomenon that youths who communicate via SMS messages on their mobile phones are starting to grow unprecedentedly large thumbs with extra nerve endings. So I expand my initial question into a series of questions that structure this essay: Where can we find individual experience, at the levels both of embodied sensation and of thought, in the flow of mediated images in which we are enmeshed? How can our experience be meaningful? How can this process be truly social, as opposed to the false sociality by which corporate interests invade our very bodies? Are there people especially capable of immediate experience?

Further along I will suggest that indeed there are such people, who have no choice but to experience first-hand while the rest of us languish in the sweet suffocation of corporate interpellation. These are people who, falling out of official information grids, must forage on the precarious shoals of real experience. In particular, they are immigrants. Not those immigrants who are cautiously solicited, with their master's degrees, marketable skills, and lack of dependents, by the wealthy countries of the West.¹ The agents that I privilege in this essay those who make the crossing out of dogged desperation, immigrants who are unacknowledged and generally illegal. These are Algerians who, having spend their savings on fake papers, smuggle themselves into Spain to work in construction; Afghanis who survive the Channel Tunnel crossing clinging to the underside of the Eurostar; Nigerian women who pay extortionate amounts to a sponsor to become prostitutes; Mexicans who cross the U.S. border by foot through the desert to fill the labor market for fruit pickers and hotel cleaners. Illegal immigrants are not only an essential and disavowed source of cheap labor from Parma to Phoenix but also, I will argue, the twenty-first century's best hope for experience that is immediate, communicable, and meaningful. As part of the process, these agents of social meaning reinvent popular media, such as the internet and the mobile phone, as networks that offer sustenance, exchange, and—when necessary—disappearance from the grid.

To analyze the apparent problems with the speed of mediated information, I rely in the following on two philosophers writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the French Henri Bergson and the American Charles Sanders Peirce. Why these two? Bergson and Peirce, both of whose research was informed by contemporary experiments in psychology, analyzed acutely the rich process of embodied, multisensory perception. Both attempted to define a process by which individuals, through their attentive perception of the world, come up with rich and reliable information about it. Interestingly, both philosophers were defining these capable and relatively autonomous subjects of perception just when European and North American societies were being pervaded by mass-produced image media: photography, advertising, and cinema. Industrial production and mass media were bringing into being a new kind of person, an attentive yet distracted subject susceptible to instrumental control.² Just when the new field of psychology was yielding data on perception, the subject of perception was changing. Thus their efforts to describe the human subjects of attentive recollection (for Bergson) and the semiotic process (for Peirce) have a certain anxious, hortatory, at times even elegiac quality. Yet for these reasons, Bergson and Peirce provide useful models of a sensuous and knowledgeable subject at the beginning of the hyper-mediated age. The complementarity of their thought is attested by their mercurial union in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, which informs my own thinking. I return more frequently to Peirce in this essay, for reasons I will explain later.

Let me sketch, through a Peircean lens, the relationship between perception and meaning in the information age. For Peirce the semiotic process is a rich and constant process of mediation, a continuum between impression, perception, and thought. This life-giving process invites us, indeed demands us, to feel and sense (Firstness), to distinguish among these feelings and act accordingly (Secondness), and to synthesize and generalize (Thirdness). Everything in the world, from crystals to hard drives (to crystals in hard drives), takes part in this process, a flow so continuous that it is difficult to isolate its separate moments. What makes us humans superior to other beings in the process of semiosis is that we are not only embodied but also have unique imaginative powers.³ What makes us superior to our technologies in the process of semiosis is that we have an unconscious; in the sense that the majority of what goes on in our minds-bodies never enters the narrow light beam of our consciousness. In other words, we are rich in the preconscious field of Firstness, as well as in the synthesizing, symbolizing powers of Thirdness.

Peircean scholar Floyd Merrell suggests that we may characterize different eras according to different relationships among Peirce's categories of First, Second, and Third.⁴ I suggest that our current era, the era of information, is dominated by Secondness, since attention, rather than either raw sensation or synthesis, is the ability called on most often. Nowadays many perceptions arrive to us with ready-made instructions for their use. Traffic signals ask only to be obeyed. Computer games reward quick reflexes. The logo of a brand of ramen noodles elicits salivation in certain individuals. Such perceptions rest in the realm of Secondness, as described by Peirce: they prompt us neither to be open to the broad expanse of perceptible experience, nor to synthesize, but to act. Also they are fairly accessible to consciousness: if we are not aware at the moment that certain images make us salivate, click an icon, or slam on the brakes, it is easy to retrace the process a moment later.

Clearly something is lost in the speed of this semiotic handover. Or rather, two things: the ability to receive our own impressions (Firstness) and the ability to make our own judgments (Thirdness). If experience consists of the lively flow between impression, perception, action, and reflection, then—especially for those of us living in postindustrial, information-dependent societies—these breaks in the semiotic flow make it difficult for us to have our own experience.

In the following I will take a look at these two bottlenecks in the semiotic flow, what comes First and what comes Third in experience. I will ask Bergson as well as Peirce what we gain from these aspects of experience, ask why information culture is weak in them, and suggest ways we and our media might revive the rich and ceaseless flow of experience. If this sojourn has a motto, it is, Take back the flow!

1. Firstness

The moment at which the world first brushes up against our senses and feelings is precious. It is in the movement between First and Second that a metallic jingle jolts me, before I identify it as a personalized cell phone ring. It is here that a sharp, boundaryless pain briefly overwhelms me, before I can identify its source as the piece of broken glass I stepped on. (People who live with chronic pain hover closer to the First end of the continuum, and their suffering reminds us not to romanticize precognitive states.) Research in perceptual psychology suggests that our senses receive about one million times as much "information" as our consciousness processes.⁵ In other words, what takes place First is the property of our sense impressions, which is only very occasionally accessible to our conscious selves.⁶ (More puzzlingly, it is in this

movement of Firstness that joy transports us before we identify its source. The feeling of joy, Peirce says, is already a predicate: “This is delicious.”⁷⁾ I’ve referred to the “movement between First and Second” because we can’t grasp the fleetingness of Firstness in itself: as soon as we perceive something, it is distinguished from other things and ceases to exist for us in itself. Firstness endures only for a flash. But a sense of the flow from feeling to action, or First to Second, is the wellspring of human experience.

The semiotic process is one of constant mediation, but we humans have also developed numerous technologies that carry out mediation for us. When people worry that information culture is creating a population of disembodied subjects, they are reacting to the appearance that signs appear readymade and do not need to be felt, distinguished, and interpreted in the semiotic process. As Tor Nørretranders points out, the so-called information culture is actually poor in information flow. What we receive from our computers, traffic signals, newspaper headlines, etc., is not as rich in Firstness as what we receive from exploring olive groves or stepping on glass.

Information necessarily bypasses the step of Firstness. Its creature, the computer, begins life at Secondness, acting on the basis of distinctions that have already been made by someone else. The computer’s Secondness begins at the digital level. There its signs consist, to use Peircean terminology, of a representamen 0 or 1, an object, off or on; and an interpretant: the convention that 0 always indicates off, 1 on. This sign in turn becomes a representamen for a more sophisticated sign. Thus at a higher degree of complexity exist signs whose representamen is an algorithm, their object a calculation, and their interpretant a guarantee that this algorithm always produces this calculation. Innocent enough exertions of control; we can’t have electrons spilling in the guts of our computers, making calculations unreliable.⁸⁾ It is at a higher level of complexity still that the pre-emption of Firstness in computer-based experience starts to feel coercive. When computer programs prescribe specific choices and make others inadmissible, identify certain calculations as meaningful and have no tools for others, enjoin certain actions and not others, we feel the cramp of no-Firstness. These decisions, of course, are not properties of computers themselves but reflect the interests of their builders and investors.

The currently dominant branch of psychology, cognitive science, tends to construct a model of human experience without Firstness, insofar as it retroactively models consciousness on information processing.⁹⁾ The reason cognitive science is hegemonic in academic and corporate

research now is that it offers a model of a human subject that can act on quantified information, as a computer does, and thus can be monitored, quantified, and directed as a computer can. So the reason we in postindustrial societies are acting more like computers is not just some general “alienation,” but because the corporate interests that want to understand and influence human behaviour are applying a powerful model of human psychology based on information processing. We slam on the brakes, salivate on command, and click those damned pop-up windows because corporations consult with cognitive scientists whose computer-derived psychological model, if insulting to the delicate infinity we’d like to imagine is the human being, delivers results.

We can trace the current fixation with information processing and, concomitantly, with applied psychology to the nineteenth-century fascination with *attention*, which, according to Jonathan Crary, became a central category for philosophy and the new field of psychology in the latter quarter of that century. Attention, measured in fractions of a second by Wilhelm Wundt at the world’s first psychology laboratory at the University of Leipzig in 1879,¹⁰ was, of course, a skill newly required for the repetitive work of the assembly line. It meant narrowing the field of perception adequately to concentrate on a given object, but not so much as to become rapt in it. Although it was cultivated by industrialized labor, Crary argues, attention became the privileged form of spectatorship for the new mass art of cinema. Thus the same form of cognitive, reactive information processing came to dominate both work and leisure in the twentieth century. Indeed, Crary points out, Thomas Edison saw his Kinetoscope not as a medium of entertainment so much as a machine for the distribution of quantified and commodified information, along the lines of his earlier invention, the telegraph-stock ticker.¹¹

The implications of this history for early-twenty-first-century perception, at least among us in the first world, are vivid. A century of practice has molded our perceptual processes to privilege Secondness, conscious perception, and attention. We have become very good at paying attention to numerous parallel sources of information, whether working on computers, monitoring aircraft paths, telemarketing, or taking in the latest action movie. In terms of perceptual processes, leisure is just practice for work. This divisive perceptual practice extends to less-mediated activities, like the commodified experience of “quality time.” In all these activities, the narrow band of our semiotic process that is attentive consciousness is hyper-stimulated. The moment of affect, of wonderment in the sensory brush with the world, of latency—of Firstness—is elided.

Yet information culture also introduces a new kind of Firstness into experience. This is actually a condensed Thirdness, contemporary media reintroduce processed information that arrives to our experience as a First. What I might call Information-Firstness occurs in several ways. A first way is by incorporating affect into instrumental goals. Commercial media tend to introduce *symbols* of affect, which harness the embodied response to the affection image.¹² This kind of affection image leads resolutely to action. Epic-action movie director James Cameron insists, “Adrenaline is not an emotion!”¹³ but I think he protests too much. Harnessed affection images arouse bodily responses that lead not inward but onward. Violent computer games employ the conventions of splashing blood and the cries of the vanquished. Burger King ads entice with the glistening beads of grease on a hamburger. Commercial porn employs conventions for arousal—the well-lit genital close-up, the sound loop of ecstatic moaning. These conventions appeal to our conscious attention, and we respond to them as we do to symbols. They operate in the relatively impoverished realm of pre-processed, pre-thought images; they only look like they are embodied. A language that speaks our bodies from without, faux-affect is a powerful tool of colonization.¹⁴

A more promising route back to First is through those media that speak directly to our bodies without harnessing affect to an instrumental chain. This Firstness is not an end in itself but a beginning. As Deleuze writes, “Not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life.”¹⁵ The best way for us to experience our bodies’ stubbornness might be to fall asleep and dream, for there, when our bodies are incapable of acting, the waves of Firstness wash over our unconscious perception. Similarly, our bodies are perhaps most engaged by movies in which nothing much happens: lacking the usual demands upon our attention, perhaps we daydream. Some media objects daydream for us, declining to force these dreams along the path of instrumental meaning. And then, speedy movies that flood our bodies with adrenaline but do not tell us how to interpret this feeling—sublime movies—also facilitate our embodied process of meaning making. Beauty, horror, absurdity seem to lie on the surface of the work for their own sake. Bypassing cognition, they speak to our bodies, announcing our ignorance and hinting at the possibility of knowledge, or better, of life.

The third way our information media reintroduce Firstness is the most important if we are to appreciate the potential of information culture. The elision of Firstness characteristic of the information age is not a

reason to reject all media and go live in the olive grove. The new kinds of experience afforded by hyper-mediation afford their own pleasure and intellectual richness. To describe a third way that information media arrives back to us as First, let me return to Peirce's category of Firstness.

Often what we receive as Firstness is already a condensed Third. The olive tree arrives to me already encoded in my notions of agriculture, of Mediterranean weather, of velvety texture and sharp odour. Even as I engage with it sensuously, my initial approach is informed by prior analysis and belief. These prior knowledges, like memory for Bergson,¹⁶ allow me to perceive more and learn more from the olive tree than if I did not possess them. So with information media. Peirce's concept of the Real, what strikes us as primary experience, is not only what is material and sensuous. In his flexible semiotics, an idea can be primary material, as can a mediated image. What was Third for someone—for example a concept, a video image, or a seductive caress—returns to someone else as primary material, as First.

I have developed a Peircean triad to describe the status of the image in information-capitalist society.¹⁷ It is Experience (1) : Information/Capital (2) : Image (3). Briefly, I argue that in information capitalism experience, which comes First, is selectively taken up by corporate and state interests according to what is useful as Information or as Capital (a brief consideration will reveal that they are practically the same thing). This process yields Images (not just visual) that are not direct translations of Experience but selective crystallizations of Information and Capital. An example of such an Image is a character from the Pokémon game craze, going strong since 1996. From the experience of both game developers and children (First), Nintendo's canny investment and market research (Second) developed the intricate game with its characters so attractive to children (Third). So the character Pikachu is not a visual image but an *argument* that this image will extract money from children (and their parents). The sign Pikachu is dense with information, which in turn is dense with experience, although these are special condensations developed with revenue in mind.

Luckily, though, the richness of Peircean semiosis is that Thirds become, in turn, Firsts of a new and never-ending semiotic spiral. So the Image, though it condenses within it information and experience that may never be unpacked, still returns as a First, as raw material of experience. The Pokémon phenomenon drove crazy parents and aunties (like me) who feared that their children were subsisting bug-eyed in a predigested world composed on information gleaned by the corporation precisely in order to keep kids in thrall. But have you ever watched a child draw

Pikachu or another Pokémon character? There you witness the translation of an image that is entirely Third into a First, the world about to arise to perception, and a series of Seconds, as the child selectively perceives the little figure, and a Third as she or he draws it, ever so carefully, each crayon scrawl a considered judgment. Every Third returns as a First, and each time differently.

Are you not convinced that the Firstness of Pikachu is not as rich as the Firstness of digging your toes in the soil under an olive tree? Bergson can help think through the relative wealth and poverty of these two experiences. Bergson was anxious about photography and other “ready-made” replacements for memory images.¹⁸ Attentive recollection, as Bergson describes it, is like twinned buffet tables between which we bound until deliciously surfeited, on one side, with the dishes of perception, and on the other, with the seasoning of memory.¹⁹ (Or, memory is the dish and perception is the spice: maybe it depends on how old you are.) But what if, to employ a rather disgusting image, each of these tempting arrays is already predigested? For the philosopher of *Matter and Memory*, the danger posed by the new mass media was that the circuit between perception and memory, crucial to the enrichment of each, was closing.

That the objects of perception are becoming ever more homogeneous for us in postindustrial, first-world societies is constantly being demonstrated with more or less cogency. What about the memory buffet table: are our very memories also becoming more homogeneous? In some ways, yes. The example of Pokémon and other heavily scripted games is only one of the ways children and even infants come up having experiences that are not theirs alone. Parents show alphabetic flash cards to babes in the cradle, three-year-olds play with “educational” CD-ROMs. It would seem that to the extent that the experiences that form our memories are homogeneous, our memories will come to resemble each other. And where is the subject then?

Yet I doubt that a heavily symbolic and logocentric early life deprives people of rich experiences of Firstness. Children still play with their excreta and fall into instructive mishaps in even the most antibacterial home. The world is rich with primary stuff that exceeds our grasp of it and our need to grasp it. To the extent that we still have bodies, we will still be capable of unique experience, even in our interactions with densely encoded media objects.

To summarize on an optimistic note: It does seem that we are still capable of having our own experience in the information age. Increasingly

encoded though it is, the world is still rich with Firstness, including the return to a First state of information itself.

But, to keep you reading, let me introduce a gloomy note. Recall that in the model I've introduced, information capital *selectively* adopts those aspects of experience that it deems useful. It bypasses "useless" Firstness, those aspects of experience, such as wiggling your toes in the soil, that do not seem generative of information or money. Thus much of what come to us as Firstness in information media is filtered according to information-capitalist notions of what is meaningful. Meaning is not determined individually, nor by not communitarian, democratic notions of value. This problem forces us along, like leaves in a gutter, to that second semiotic bottleneck, what comes Third in experience.

II. Thirdness

Both Bergson and Peirce modelled a process of embodied thinking on a fluid relation between the individual and the world. But for Bergson this was a graciously privileged individual in a somewhat depopulated world. Bergson's model of embodied perception is an ever-widening, quasi-hermeneutic circuit in which perception calls up memory and memory enriches and refines perception. It is a beautiful process, which I experience occasionally and you probably do too. It requires a subject with the leisure to discern and to remember, in order gradually to develop knowledge about the world. But in the hyper-mediated age, who's got the time? Bergson's Marxist critics, Georg Lukács and the more sympathetic Walter Benjamin, argued that the time so precious to Bergson, the time of perception and memory, is a time devoid of community and hence of history. "Bergson in his conception of the *durée* has become ... estranged from history," Benjamin wrote. "The *durée* from which death has been eliminated has the miserable endlessness of a scroll. Tradition has been excluded from it."²⁰ Similarly, Lukács criticized Bergson for ignoring how capitalism distorts the experience of time into a degrading, depersonalized passage.²¹ Memory without history, which for the Frankfurt School critics meant social history, is depopulated. It provides a beautiful sanctuary in which to reflect and recreate, but when power intervenes in the very experience of time, memory can only helplessly hold up its hands (and halt, like a clock whose hands are seized).

Peirce too had in mind an ideal subject of perception, a philosopher-scientist who tests all his or her ideas in a rigorous and ongoing interaction with the world. But unlike Bergson, he was adamant that meaning is produced in an ongoing process of social human interaction with the world. Sociality is the source of meaning and the basis

of the value of thought. We observe the world, through abstraction produce statements about it, and test these statements. This practice, he argues, occurs not in the individual alone. It is the community that guarantees that the signs that circulate within it—words, conventions, laws—are grounded in a democratic and scientific agreement as to their meaning (this is Thirdness) in relation to real objects. As Peirce writes, “A symbol, once in being, spreads and moves among the peoples. In use and in experience, its meaning grows.”²² The value of a sign, then, is its ability to be taken up, to germinate, to communicate.

Corporate signs are certainly taken up with great enthusiasm. The fact that they are taken up differently each time gives these signs a certain vitality, about which Peirce’s semiotics are optimistic. To the extent that the corporate meanings are taken up and circulated, collective action by individuals on corporate signs constitutes a community. This is the argument of studies of fan culture, which emphasize the point in the semiotic flow whereby corporate Thirds return as collective Firsts.

Are Pokémon, Bach, and Fox transformed in their collective use? In the first place, no. Insofar as our societies have erected practical barriers to the transformation of their signs, including copyright law and the application of anti-defamation laws, their signs cannot be freely taken up. These barriers certainly impede the flow of living meaning. But it’s not the main cause of the bottleneck, as lively bootleg cultures attest. If we return to my example of the child drawing the Pokémon character, this is a sort of taking up of a corporate sign that generates new meaning, on an individual level. A mobile phone’s tinny electronic riff on “The Goldberg Variations,” infuriating though it may be to Bach aficionados, makes that piece of music a new object: every return, by every listener, slightly transforms it.²³ If many people take up “The Goldberg Variations” in similar ways, allowing it to summon them to duty or distraction on mobile phones around the world, its meaning as a symbol grows and changes.

But such transformations of corporate signs are not enough to guarantee that experience is meaningful. Peirce did not have much truck with fan clubs. He placed his dearest hope in the cooperative action of a “community of students”²⁴ to ensure the gradual emergence of reliable knowledge. What knowledge do these scholars produce? Not abstractions alone; not art; certainly not money. Their modest, disinterested labour would generate ideas testable in the real world and describing real outcomes. In the gradual, fallible, and collective process he describes with loving minuteness, science would uncover objective truths.²⁵ The purpose of thought, Peirce argued, is to lead to “habits of action”: “what a thing means is simply what habits it involves.”²⁶

So the more important questions are, what meaning do we produce in the ongoing transformation of corporate signs? What habits of action result from this process? And (this is a difficult one for all but the most hard-core Peircean) can they lead to objective truths?

Let us look for the meaning in the experience with which I began. Is it a fox or a Fox? (Or, as Navajo elder Sam Yazzie asked, “Will making movies harm the sheep?”²⁷) Live people seeing real foxes are transforming that sign according to their memory, as Bergson would say, and building a new communal understanding of the sign “fox,” as Peirce would say. What knowledges, what habits can the community of students develop from seeing a fox in light of the Fox Channel. Should we shoot it? Feed it lettuce? Sit it in front of the TV with a nice cold arak? Smug with our superior knowledge (we’ve seen a real fox), should we go back to watching TV, but “resistantly”? (The latter is a term Peirce would surely have disliked, for the purpose of communication is not to block meaning but to make useful meaning.)

What if the cable conglomerate aired a documentary on foxes (more likely on the Discovery Channel)? Certainly here would be a wealth of signs for the community of students to go and test. We the students could put its signs into action and thereby learn for ourselves whether foxes should be shot, like lettuce, etc. But most first-worlders see more TV than foxes. So the Fox Channel (and actually, more ominously, the Discovery Channel and other forms of virtual tourism that can act as replacements for interaction with the less-mediated world) is free to make claims about foxes, or other things in the world, that are untestable for most people. We have no way to determine whether its information is true, that is, produces belief that leads to habits of action. (Similar arguments could be made for Pikachu, the Bach jingle, and the other corporate objects I have been toying with.) Locked in a circuit of untestable claims, we are assailed by the undemocratic nature of media knowledge.

The sociality and communicability fundamental to Peirce’s philosophy are at the same time its weak points, for it is here that corporate interests have managed to hijack meaning. Peirce did acknowledge that power corrupts the making of meaning. He condemned social organizations, such as religious hierarchies, that replace scientific inquiry with forced agreement to the dominant ideas of the time.²⁸ Similarly, his disdain for the muddy thinking of contemporary philosophers seems bound up with a critique of their kowtowing to a system of academic privilege.²⁹ He also criticized, with a teacherly disapproval one can hear in his words, the sheer laziness that prevented humans from coming up with clear, substantial, useful ideas. But nagging alone will not

produce good students. Peirce's anxiety reflects the pressure of powerful institutions on the modest, collective efforts of the "community of students."

In terms of meaning production, then, corporate signs introduce a deadening, a closed circuit in the semiotic flow. Yes, we can have our own experience in the information age. Information media allow us to live a rich mesh of experience, both actual and virtual, at both personal and impersonal levels. But not social. Information media in capitalism are not interested in identifying collectives; they are interested in "targeting" "markets." They produce a closed circuit that would rather not be tested in collective experience. We may have rich individual experience of mass phenomena, but the social dimension atrophies. If meaning is a collective, time-based process, our experience is not very meaningful.

III. The semiotic agent

Bergson and Peirce, at the dawn of the information media age, recognized that institutions of power occupy people's mental space for perceiving, thinking, and creating. They worried that corporate symbolization replaces agreement with rhetoric. Each imagined a subject of knowledge—Bergson's "center of indetermination," Peirce's community of scholars—who could continue the project of meaningful experience. But, retrospective as such formulations usually are, the kind of person Bergson and Peirce were describing had already ceased to exist. At best, it persisted only in the leisured classes. The emerging subject of attention described by nineteenth-century psychology was indeed a "center of indetermination" but, like a magnet, capitalist culture had come along to overdetermine it from the outside.

We in postindustrial, first-world societies are especially subject to the strangulation of the process of meaning. Individually we are just not strong enough to rebuild it ourselves: we can have experience, but it is hard to have meaningful experience. Yet collectively we cannot agree on truths as quickly as truths are foisted upon us. It is hard to find a way out of corporate media's short circuit; and frankly, often there's little incentive.

Is there any collective who is capable of taking back the semiotic flow? This was the urgent question of Deleuze, who drew fruitfully upon Bergson and Peirce to describe cinematic thought. But when the question became not, How do we perceive? but, How can we survive?, he turned away from these two and toward the radical thought of Nietzsche and Artaud. He understood that both twenty-first-century media and the people to whom it addressed itself were objects without a centre. The automatic movement of the cinema produces in us a "spiritual automaton" that can

either be subjugated by the new images or mutually transformed with them.³⁰ Between us, the people and the media, there is the possibility of annihilation or of profound creativity but no simple muddling along. The new acephalic, plural subject, the “collective automaton” has succeeded the individual. The era of luxurious, individual contemplation is over, at least in the postindustrial, hyper-mediated world. But the collective automaton might be capable of new forms of creativity and new forms of life. It must be, if we are to survive as more than slaves.

Deleuze was more interested in the way powerlessness forces us to believe in life, at least to believe in the body—the First that makes possible a new Third—than in searching for an agent of change. Where there might have been an agent, Deleuze discovered a double absence, “the people who are missing and the I who is absent, between which memory is a membrane.”³¹ Yet in this double absence there is also an agent precisely because it cannot work alone yet does not form part of an identifiable collective. It is the very “people who are missing,” citizens of nowhere, for whom independent perception and thought is not a luxury but a necessity.

In another writing I have described in detail how the cinema of colonized people derives fabulous new forms of life from the very untenability of their present situation.³² Now I ask, Who is in a position to bypass the corporate hijacking of the semiotic process? The answer is, people it’s not made for. Unemployed people with time to observe the world for themselves. People in third-world countries where corporate semiosis is slower, whether through lack of access to corporate information or through the bricolage of information from different sources that demands a testing and winnowing process.

A particularly acute semiotic agency is called for from immigrants, colonized people who arrive in the land of the colonizer. Immigrants arrive in unfamiliar circumstances, often literally unable to read the signs. Much of the knowledge they possessed become suddenly useless. At the same time, they are to some degree immune to the corporate semiotic process that seizes others. Unable to buy and benefit from the closed-circuit “services” corporations provide (with the exception, say, of telephone cards and wire transfer companies like Western Union, which in any given city advertise in the languages most widely spoken by immigrants there), they are relatively free from the enchaining of meaning so compelling for people who are corporations’ target markets. Interestingly, Peirce recognized the agency of intercultural exchange in knowledge. Departing from a critique of religious regimes from Europe to Siam, he notes that even in the most oppressive society people exist who “possess a wider

sort of social feeling” and are able to compare their beliefs with those of other cultures.³³

Immigrants cannot rely on prefabricated “truths.” Their hypotheses are testable in life-or-death (or expulsion) circumstances. Their perceptual awareness and ability to make fine distinctions, the First and Second of the semiotic process, engage acutely in smelling an edible meal or “smelling” a bad deal, differentiating taxis and cop cars, samaritans and con artists. The process is nothing if not social, for every gleaning of information spreads by word of mouth. If the truth of information must be evaluated according to the habits of action it produces, and these “habits” are such grave things as legal residence, gainful employment, freedom from persecution, and outwitting those who prey on the powerless—and all this is urgently tested against the experiences of others—then immigrants are the most accomplished “community of students” of our time. They are taking back the semiotic flow, making meaning that matters.

Similar arguments could be made on behalf of other socially marginal groups, such as poor people, or people with disabilities, in a given culture. I hesitate to name women, or children, as the agents of this process. Though both need to engage sensory, embodied awareness in order to read between the signs of unfamiliar or oppressive situations, both are well-established targets of corporate semiotics. I note that mobile phone-wielding youths are not only growing bigger thumbs; they are also developing new forms of sociality, and new languages adapted to the economical format of SMS messaging. But Nokia encourages them to do just that. So I maintain that immigrants, marginal to the power structures of both corporation and state and possessing subterranean communication networks, seem best to embody Peirce’s criteria of autonomy and democracy.

What are the media of these democratic fora, of true Thirdness? Two-way media: cellular telephones; e-mail; electronic word of mouth. Immigrants also bend unilateral communications media so they become almost interactive: low-watt radio establishes a local community, for example for migrant workers, and can be quickly dismantled; pirated cable television from back home functions as a quasi-interactive medium, as immigrants avidly cultivate knowledge about the country they left. But the new two-way, computer-based communications, decentered, accessible from (most) anywhere, and untraceable “off the grid,” provide ideal communications for illegal immigrants. The beauty of a numeric, placeless address is that the users are accessible as long as they in a satellite footprint or near an internet café—if they want to be. And by the same

token, they can disappear from the reaches of all those who seek contact—creditors, employers, even family—merely by canceling the account.

But indeed any medium, including Fox TV, is transformed by immigrant semiosis. That slowing-down that first-worlders must work at, in order to taste the freshness of Firstness, is a basic principle for immigrants. Anybody can cultivate their own immigrant semiosis in order to see the world anew. From the velvety olive to the sleek Fox, the estrangement of fresh perception can urge us backward to the social, to seek a community of interlocutors with whom we can debate their meaning. But only if we agree that there is more meaning than information media hands down to us. The questions, what actions will result from these new perceptions? what meaning might arise from these actions? introduces social life back into the very First of experience.

A last note of modesty and caution. Meaning is destined for the future. In his later writings Peirce increasingly emphasized that thought is more powerful and more vital than the material world, including individual, passing human beings. The surprising sentence “Matter is effete mind, inveterate habits becoming physical laws”³⁴ is another way of saying that the value of thought is in its connection to other thoughts, whether in communication between people or in the succession of an individual’s thought. So it’s not the community, but the thought that outlasts the community, that is ultimately valuable. Put otherwise, future community is the guarantee of present meaning. “Individual man,” Peirce writes, “...is only a negation” to the process of meaning-making, insofar as he or she is separate from the community and the future.³⁵

This cold faith in future knowledge might seem at odds with the warm hope I place in immigrant knowledge. Peirce’s grail was objectivity, even at the expense of the communities that produced it. Immigrant semiosis, like that of others with little power, produces solid quasi-objective truth because it is *interested*, not disinterested. The habits of action immigrants come up with, based on their rigorous testing, may not be true for all time, *pace* Peirce. But immigrant semiosis breaks the circuit of faux corporate meaning with a vigor that a disinterested community of scientists lacks. For such future when the community of scholars might come (back?) into being, immigrant semiosis guards a triadic toolbox: Remember your body; remember how to think; keep learning how to communicate.³⁶

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¹ Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (formerly Bill C-11), passed December 2001, emphasizes marketable skills while "closing the

back door to criminals” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, www.cic.gc.ca/english/irpa/c11-overview.html). In 2000 Germany “welcomed” the 10,000 desperately needed foreign information-technology workers, but only for a five-year stint before it booted them back to their homes in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia.

² See Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Boston: MIT Press, 2000).

³ Vincent M. Colapietro, *Peirce’s Approach to the Self: A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 70.

⁴ Floyd Merrell, *Peirce’s Semiotics Now: A Primer* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 1995).

⁵ Tor Nørretranders, *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size*, translated by Jonathan Sydenham (New York: Penguin, 1998), 143. Nørretranders, a popular science writer, gives these examples: eyes receive ten million bits per second, while the conscious bandwidth of vision is 40 bits per second; the skin receives one million bits of information per second, while the conscious bandwidth of touch is one bit per second. The method of quantification sounds a bit fishy to me, but the results are compelling nonetheless.

⁶ The categories preconscious and conscious do not overlap precisely with First and Second. Like other pragmatic philosophers, Peirce privileged the element of choice in perception, a view negated by recent findings in cognitive science. Thus much of the decision making that Peirce designated as Second still takes place below the threshold of consciousness.

⁷ C.S. Peirce, “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,” in Justus Buchler, ed., *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover, 1955), 238.

⁸ For a manifesto for the free movement of electrons, see my essay “How Electrons Remember,” in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2002), **pages**.

⁹ Within cognitive science, work on embodied cognition offer a much more nuanced model of human consciousness. See for example Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), Rafael Nunez and Walter J. Freeman, eds., *Reclaiming Cognition: The Primacy of Action, Intention, and Emotion* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2000), Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow,*

and the Feeling Brain (Orlando: Harcourt, 2003), and **Lakoff and Johnston?**

¹⁰ Crary, 29.

¹¹ Crary, 32–33.

¹² When Deleuze first criticized the unfreedom of movement-image cinema, he described the pull into action that is the underlying principle of continuity editing. Now something different is going on in popular media. In commercial movies, advertising, computer games, and music television, continuity is a thing of the past. Jump cuts, reflexivity, shock, and spectacle call attention to the film as a constructed object. But there is nothing subversive about these films' anti-illusionism.

¹³ Cameron said this in a discussion with students following his receipt of an honorary doctorate at Carleton University in May 1997. He argued that his films arouse more complex responses than the mere production of adrenaline.

¹⁴ Is the collective awe people feel on viewing a glorious sunset different from the collective awe produces by a Steven Spielberg movie or a Céline Dion recording? I think so. Neither is natural—there is some social consensus that a sunset is glorious—but the sunset is not trying to compel us to its ends, as the powers behind Spielberg and Dion are.

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 189.

¹⁶ With the exception that these prior analyses are not mine alone, as memory is for Bergson, but social.

¹⁷ See Laura U. Marks, "Invisible Media," in *Digitextuality: Theses on Convergence Media and Digital Reproduction*, edited by Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

¹⁸ Crary, 326.

¹⁹ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, translated by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone, 1988), 105.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 185.

²¹ Crary, 327 n 107.

²² Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in Buchler, 115.

²³ I believe this is especially true of music, which, like smell, has a strong affective relationship to precise, individual, spatiotemporal memories.

²⁴ Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in Buchler, 99.

²⁵ It's a bit difficult to share Peirce's faith in science, given how science is embedded in, its very questions and methodologies determined by, institutions of power. See Sandra Harding, *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), for a summary of various sciences' colonial, capitalist, racial, androcentric, and other investments of power. Yet the fluid exchange between materialism and idealism in his semiotic process gives me hope that at least some truths in our world are Peircean truths.

²⁶ Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in Buchler, 30.

²⁷ Ethnographic filmmakers Sol Worth and John Adair wanted to train Navajo people to film so that they could capture their own perceptions of the world and, it was hoped, their own perceptual processes. When the elder had confirmed that filming would neither harm nor help the sheep, he asked, "Then why make movies?" Sol Worth and John Adair, *Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972). But the Peircean mode suggests that making movies *does* have an effect on the sheep.

²⁸ Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," in Buchler, 13–14.

²⁹ To this system Peirce, a philosopher whose massive oeuvre remained largely unpublished and who was never offered a tenured post by the university, owed nothing.

³⁰ Deleuze, 157.

³¹ Deleuze, 221.

³² In *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), especially chapter 1.

³³ Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," in Buchler, 14.

³⁴ C. S. Peirce, "Tychism," in *Collected Papers*, vol. 6, *Scientific Metaphysics*, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 20 (6:24).

³⁵ Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," in Buchler, 250.

³⁶ I am deeply indebted to Ali Ferdi Ahmani, a master of immigrant semiosis, for showing me how humans can build meaning with senses alert and communications, even from jingling mobile phones, richly democratic. I am also grateful to Martin Lefebvre, a much more exacting Peircean than am I, for his generously thoughtful comments.

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