ON READING PEIRCE

Notations by Fred Andersson

Prelude: I am an art historian and received a PhD at Lund University in 2007 with a thesis on the work of the Swedish artist Elis Eriksson (1906-2006). I 2003 I had published, in the Swedish journal *Artes*, an analysis of a collection of Eriksson’s works from the Sixties at the Norrköping museum of art. The text was an experiment to the extent that it aimed at a systematic application of what I at that time considered to be my primary device as an art writer and art historian, namely semiotics (the theory of signs and sign categories). I was looking for a semiotics of a rather different fashion than the version that still dominates Swedish art criticism and aesthetic pedagogy through the work of a certain Gert Z Nordström and his followers. Or, differently put, something else than Nordström’s structuralist models of communication, still tainted by the European debate in the Sixties, diluted and corrupted in the provincial *milieu* of the Swedish art world. Thanks to Göran Sonesson’s seminar in cultural semiotics in Lund, I could gradually move towards a more pragmatic and open theory, partly distancing myself from a structuralism in which all signs and all communication is supposed to resemble one single type of communication (i.e. the spoken and written one).

Of vital importance in this context is the work of the American philosopher and scientist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) who was an enormously productive thinker whose collected writings are still being assembled, and whose so called “typology” of signs has become the most prolific alternative to the Structuralist and European schools. The following fragments are, apart from a few corrections and additions, identical to the ones I distributed to the seminar in cultural semiotics as a preparation for two sessions with the common title “Att läsa Peirce” (On reading Peirce). Certainly these notations are both sketchy and labyrinthine, and in that respect they may bear some resemblance to Peirce’s own writings. Still I hope that they may serve as a starting point for discussion and probably revision.


Before reading the text it may be a good idea to take a look at the diagram at the last page.

For the cultural semiotics seminar (CSS) in Lund 29/9 and 6/10 2004 led by professor Göran Sonesson

[all references are to the texts by Peirce that were distributed at CSS 22/9 and 29/9 2004]
For CSS 29/9

It seems that we have to approach Peirce the wrong way around. Probably most of us have, long before we started to read Peirce ourselves, run upon the distinction between icon, index and symbol. In fact this is the only one of Peirce’s fundamental threefold partitions that has entered common consciousness, and in the most popularized versions it has been reduced to a mere platitude. For example we are being told, in certain art critical writings and in certain overviews of the methods of human sciences, things that even child could easily grasp: that a picture is something else than a word, that a painted picture is something else than a photograph, that a word is a conventional symbol whilst a painted picture is an icon and a photograph an index. On this level we find everyday common sense rather than analytic theory: it is a matter of sheer evidence that the similarity between two objects is something else than the convention that the letter “A” should signify the sound “a”, or that depicting or manually copying something is something else than simply making an imprint or cast of it.

But if we, equipped only with this kind of everyday common sense, dare to claim that icons and indexes as well as symbols are equally signs, we will indeed find ourselves in a bad predicament if we have to battle certain counterarguments. There are several reasons for this, first: If similarity as such were a sufficient condition for sign status, then it would mean that anything would be a sign, because anything can in some respect be said to be similar to anything else. Regarding the indexical, the existence of a contingent link between the indicator and the indicated (whether as a direct imprint, an index finger, or something else) in no way insures the recognition of the thing indicated, let alone the status of the index as a sign. A well known category of semioticians have actually claimed (at least since Hjelmslev) that there is only one valid distinction between signs and non-signs – i.e. that the sign is always a convention, and an arbitrary one. If pictures are to be defined as signs then pictorial meaning, according to this very logic, must be purely arbitrarily founded.

If this is the case it then seems that what we call similarity is only an agreement on similarity, or in Greimas’ parlor a result of figurativization and iconization [as would be the translations of the terms in Greimas, 1979]. What we experience to be an icon or an index must, according to this view, actually be a symbol. If we now intend to present an alternative to the two extremes that we have just illuminated – the one of everyday reasoning and the one of programmatic conventionalism – we must reach beyond the merely popular definitions of the concepts icon, index and symbol. We must make clear that this distinction is in fact founded upon other and more fundamental distinctions that are not nearly as well known. However, because a good narrator always has to start with those facts that are
well known, we still have to start with the *trichotomy* (threefold partition) icon-index-symbol, i.e. the wrong way around.

And then we would be able to read Peirce for real.

The trichotomy icon-index-symbol is only one out of totally ten trichotomies that in Peirce’s logic and *semeiotic* follow from his basic partition of all possible existence into three distinct “universes of existence” (sometimes also “universes of discourse”). I the diagram that has been distributed to the participators in this seminar [see the last page] I intend to demonstrate all these ten derived trichotomies and their relations, i.e. their mutual relations and their relations to the three “universes of existence”.

Some of the trichotomies concern the modes according to which something can exist as a Thing/Object – these are found at the bottom left in my diagram. At the bottom right we find, though, the modes according to which something can exist as an “expression” (my substitution for Peirce’s more complex term *Representamen*). The trichotomies are here Tone-Token-Type and Icon-Index-Symbol. In the upper half of the diagram we find the chief part of the trichotomies, all related to the modes in which a sign is apprehended or interpreted as a sign, i.e. the trichotomies of the Interpretant. These trichotomies are divided into three categories: that of the Immediate interpretant (one trichotomy), that of the Dynamic Interpretant (two trichotomies) and that of the Final interpretant (two trichotomies). However, it seems that Peirce didn’t consider this *trichotomy of trichotomies* to be a genuine trichotomy in itself. In the final analysis and diagram (which can certainly be improved), we therefore end up with ten trichotomies [see *EP*, pp. 483-91].

As a model of the signifying process or *semiosis* the diagram has a circular and reciprocal structure in which that very trichotomy that Peirce in one of his letters to the British aristocrat and logician Lady Victoria Welby (1837-1912) terms “The Nature of the Assurance of the Utterance” acts as a closing link between Object and Interpretant. The sense of this trichotomy is that through the judgments enacted by interpretants, utterances and statements can have assurance thanks to the following three agents:

An instinctive apprehension of what Peirce calls the “normal” or “final” interpretant.
An empirically founded observation of existence and its Things
A competence of logical reasoning, i.e. Form
In this manner we may slowly reconstruct the total and “totalistic” model of semiosis that Peirce aimed at during the last decades of his life: from the early 1890ies until his death in 1914. Initially this long enquiry was focused on the two cornerstones of semiosis, i.e. the Object and the Expression/Representamen. The analyses of the manifold levels of the interpretants weren’t carried out until his last years, and no doubt the correspondence with Lady Welby was of vital importance here. In the texts that I have chosen for these seminars we don’t find much about this later research. I have, though, included the excerpts in EP from a number of letters, written to Lady Welby during 1906-08, in which Peirce describes and names all the ten trichotomies according to the pattern that I have represented in my diagram. De other texts belong partly to a preliminary and foundational phase (1894), partly from an intermediate one (1903).

An account of the three types of “ground” or “assurance” is however present already in the seminal paper “What is a sign?” from 1894. As explained there, they also bring the basic distinction between three “universes of existence” into focus. The totally fictional example that Peirce describes in the paper testifies his genius as a lecturer and pedagogue: he asks us to imagine a man who is sitting in a room, completely self absorbed in a “dreamy state” of mind. The thoughts that come to this daydreamer’s mind exist only in a limited sense of the word. They don’t necessarily refer to any real experiences: they might be just formless “feelings” without any foundation in concepts and conceptual forms. When suddenly the sound of a train whistle interrupts the reverie, the man is however confronted with something that has a factual, exterior existence. The sound is shocking, impossible to ignore. As a stimulus it gives rise to a purely instinctive response: the man lifts his hands to protect his ears. But still there are not necessarily any concepts present: both the sound and its source might be totally unknown to the man, maybe he has never even heard of the existence of such a phenomenon as a train. He opens the door and at the same moment the sound disappears. He repeats his experiment, with the same surprising result. Now an intellectual moment enters into the semiosis: “he is Thinking”. The sound has acquired an identity and a form, namely “the sound that can be stopped by opening doors”. In the rather limited world that the man seems to inhabit, this is at the moment a highly plausible conclusion from the present premises.

He has discovered a rule (even if we know that it’s false), he has discovered a phenomenon that has recurred in an identical fashion (even if it might never recur again), which is more than just a single isolated fact or a single sensation. The three modes of Existence, and the foundational principle of all the future ten trichotomies, then turn out to be:

1) That which is in itself, only to be thought or sensed (Instinct)
2) That which forces itself upon us, thereby existing as a dynamic actuality (Experience)
3) That which recurs, is recognized, and therefore necessarily takes the form of a rule (Form)

This distinction constantly recurs in different versions throughout Peirce’s work. Most commonly it has come to be known as the distinction between Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness: by 1903 these terms had become part of the standard parlor of Peirce’s texts. In the letters to Lady Welby the distinction is explicitly described as an existential distinction between “Modes of Being” or “Universes”, more specifically between possibilities (“Universe of Potentials”), actualities (“Universe of Facts”) and logical necessities (“Universe of Necessitants”). In order to correctly grasp Peirce’s system it’s important to realize that these universes both exclude and include each other. Just like the number 3 excludes the numbers 1 and 2 but at the same time contains the quantities 1 and 2, so will something that is logically necessary exclude that which is just factual or possible, but at the same time it will contain facts and possibilities. A simple example is the logical necessity that a square consists of four equally long sides. This necessity contains the fact that the sides have been shown (measured) to be equally long. At this fact in its turn contains the simple possibility to image something that, in itself, is a perfectly straight side or border (without comparison with anything else).

In a formalized manner the relation can be explicated as follows:

I = firstness
II = secondness (firstness + firstness = relation)
III = thirdness (relation + rule about relation)

The doctrine also implies that everything imaginable must exist either as Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, because something appearing to be a Fourthness would immediately be dividable into either Secondness + Secondness (relation between relations) or Firstness / Thirdness (quality of a rule). The doctrine also implies that all attempts to deny or refute the basic existential distinction must result in claims that, from a Peircean and pragmatic point of view, are absurd.

Saying, for example, that everything that exists is identical to what can be thought or sensed is tantamount to a purely mentalistic attitude, i.e. a refusal to admit that our ideas about the world can be changed by empirical study of a reality that exists as a Universe of facts. Saying, on the other hand, that everything that exists is recognizable and subject to laws means ending up in a veritable conventionalism, i.e. to refute the existence of anything that can’t be conceptualized.

In this context it is important to remember that Peirce’s logic and semeiotic provided the foundation for a highly influential trend in General theories of Science: a trend in which the dynamic and preliminary character of knowledge is always stressed. The contention that I have tried to illustrate in
my diagram – that semiosis as well as Science is a continuous, non-finalistic process in which hypotheses are constantly being tested and revised – is incommensurable to such static worldviews in which reality is seen as one and indivisible; either as material or mental, either as biological or social. 

To insist upon the preliminary nature of knowledge would therefore be to insist upon the difference between the world such as it is and the world such as it is apprehended; if there was no world outside of our consciousness there would be no ground for dynamic probing.

This is also the sense of Peirce’s distinction between dynamic and immediate objects, and further between dynamic and immediate interpretants. The dynamic object could be shortly defined as a condition that exist “out there” as an object for Consciousness, whilst the immediate object consists of certain aspects of the dynamical object that are made Conscious. An immediate object may be represented by a Sign (Expression/Representamen), but the Sign is apprehended as a sign only through the Interpretant. In a fashion similar to the actualization of certain aspects of the dynamic object through the immediate object, the immediate interpretant will only reveal some very preliminary and limited notion of the Sign. Through the intervention of the dynamic interpretant this notion may however be stabilized as a final interpretant. Through the final interpretant the “effects” of semiosis are manifested either as gratification, action or self control (see diagram).

On the general level Peirce describes semiosis as a process characterized by causal determination of Object into Sign/Expression and of Sign/Expression into Interpretant – the dynamic object determines the immediate object, which in turn determines the Sign/Expression, which in turn determines the immediate interpretant, which determines the dynamic interpretant, which determines the final interpretant, which “finally” stands in relation to the dynamic object or “objective conditions” through the intervention of “assurance” (see above). This “assurance” is what Peirce elsewhere terms “commens”, i.e. the commonly shared notions that form the basis for communication and understanding. Sometimes he suggests that the trichotomy of the modes of assurance actually is identical to the very partition of the sign into Object, Expression and Interpretant [see for example EP, p. 483].

Because all these levels consist of trichotomies according to the basic principle, because every trichotomy is a both inclusive and exclusive relation between “I”, “II” and “III”, and because each level includes all previous levels, the system as a whole is frighteningly complex and difficult to grasp. When reading Peirce, it may often seem as if all trichotomies in the end are one single trichotomy, when in fact we are dealing with different trichotomies based in a common principle. Misunderstandings, oversimplifications and confusions abound in the constant flow of Peircean commentaries.
It may also seem as if the distinction between Object and Sign, alternatively between Object and Expression, is utterly vague or even absent. Apparently nothing is easier than getting the impression that Peirce would define basically everything as a sign, or as a case of semiotics. However, the following definition from Peirce’s “What is a Sign”, paragraph 2, comes as a rescue: “There are three kinds of interest we may take in a thing. First, we may have a primary interest in it for itself. Second, we may have a secondary interest in it, on account of its reaction with other things. Third, we may have a mediatory interest in it, in so far as it conveys to a mind an idea about a thing. In so far as it does this, it is a sign, or representation.” [EP II, p. 5]

The partition of Existence into three modes or universes is here explicated as a distinction between signs and non-signs. The sign is a Thing or an Object that doesn’t interest us because of its own qualities or the way it interacts with other Things, but because it communicates an idea about another, signified Thing. Differently put, we recognize that it is a Sign for this other Thing. Should we then take this to mean that the semiotic function is equal to the third mode of existence, or Thirdness? As it turns out, the answer to this question must be both yes and no. In the fifth article in the manuscript “Of reasoning in general” Peirce provides us with a more specific definition of Sign together with definitions of the Object and the Interpretant: “A sign is a thing which serves to convey knowledge of some other thing, which it is said to stand for or represent. This thing is called the object of the sign; the idea in the mind that the sign excites, which is a mental sign of the same object, is called the interpretant of the sign.” [EP, p. 13]

Here Peirce again stresses the threefold nature of the sign: one thing that represents (Expression or Representamen), another thing that is being represented (Object), and finally a relation that consists in an “idea” about the represented thing. Men evidently the definition makes use of two different notions of the concept Sign: on the one hand Sign in the sense of the thing that signifies (i.e. what I, following Hjelmslev and Sonesson, would call Expression), on the other the Interpretant that is also called a Sign. We may be familiar with this ambiguity from the contexts of everyday life: on the one hand we often use a casual notion of Sign as equivalent to the external, material symbol (usually a “letter”), on the other there is also a specialized and analytic notion that refers to the Sign function.

In some later papers by Peirce, for example in our texts from 1903, it however becomes clear that by Sign in the sense of Representamen he didn’t necessarily mean an external, material “sign” (such as a letter or a sound). The trichotomy of Quali-, Sin- and Legisigns, later reformulated as Tones, Tokens and Types (see diagram) is basically a partition of Expressions that doesn’t consist in anything else than immaterial qualities (tones), Expressions that have material existence (tokens) and Expressions
that rely on rules and laws (types). This means that a singular quality, i.e. a Firstness, might be *its own interpretant* as an apprehension in a mind. Or, differently put: it might be its own Thirdness. This means in turn that a Tone (in a more general sense than just “musical tone”) always is an Icon, but it also means that an Icon not necessarily has to be a Tone – because it can also be “embodied” (token) and refer to an iconic rule (type). This more complicated level of reasoning isn’t explicitly carried out in earlier texts such as that from 1894. However, it is certainly implied, by means of the constant examples of signs that contain other signs. And this might be a good topic to focus on in our seminar.

We may also discuss:

Clear and less clear passages in the texts as regards the distinction between signs and non-signs

The statement than an Icon “doesn’t convey the slightest information” [EP II p. 7]

The statement that Icons as well as Indexes never “assert anything” [EP II p. 16]

/FA 2004-09-28

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*For CSS 6/10:*

In their highly condensed form, with their web of definitions and sub-definitions that mutually condition each other and constantly reappear in new guises, these texts may at the first occasions of reading appear to be almost insurmountable. However, things become clearer after a while, as soon as one understands that many definitions and terms that initially seem to be separate indeed refer to the same trichotomies. I have hinted at an overview of the system in my diagram, but because it is far from evident how all these relations should be demonstrated graphically a few comments may be needed.

In the opening section of the long and demanding paper “Sundry Logical Conceptions”, the relation between Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness is explained in a more precise manner. With a number of supplementary distinctions Peirce here straightens out some of the ambiguities that puzzled us last time: especially the relation between “information” and “assertion”, and between “Sign” and “Thirdness”. Doing so, he proceeds in a manner that wouldn’t leave any doubt about his knowledge of traditional logic. Consequently he names the procedures that would make it possible to separate
Firstness from Secondness and Secondness from Thirdness in any possible phenomenon. He names these procedures, in order: Dissociation, Precission, Discrimination. The first procedure singles out Firstness as that which exists as such, cut loose (dis-sociated) from everything else. Redness as a singular idea, liberated from all connections to existing red things, is an example of a Firstness in this manner [EP II, p. 268: “For an example of Firstness, look at anything red. That redness is positively what it is”]. The redness, or the goodness, tiredness, crookedness etc., cannot be apprehended with reference so some other quality, but must be taken for granted in every given statement (“that is red”, “she is a good person”, etc).

The other procedure, precission, differently singles out Secondness as factual existence, containing or “embodying” a Firstness. The red that we see in a specific thing is a Secondness, and not identical to the Firstness that consists in redness as such. It might also be called a “variable” in relation to a typical or general redness. The third procedure, discrimination, consists in the distinction between two entities that are completely independent of each other but still united by a relation: a Thirdness. If I imagine a red thing, of whatever kind, it is evident that it can be the subject and its redness the predicate in a possible utterance: S is P, the thing is red. It is also evident that the definition of S is independent of the definition of P: the redness can be dissociated from the thing. The form for the Thirdness expressed in the utterance then is the copula: a symbol that literally connects the two terms involved. For example “_is_”, “_is not_”, “&_”, “_or_”.

If we turn for a moment to structural linguistics and semantics (see for example Hjelmslev 1943) we find a quite similar division, here defined as interdependency, determination and constellation. This division concerns the relation between elements in the syntagmatic chain. Determination means that the differences between various ways of expressing something in a language are determined by certain features that are constant throughout the variants. So if the actual, instant expression (word, sentence, text, discourse) is a bit like a Secondness, then the constant as a more abstract entity could be said to be “embodied” through this Secondness. Interdependency and constellation, however, are quite different matters:

- Interdependency: for example between the phone “h” and the phone “e” when they together form the word “he” (relation between constant and constant)

- Determination: various ways of pronouncing “he” are recognized as different just because they relate to a constant (relation between constant and variable)
• Constellation: a certain phrase such as “he is sick” is actually a constellation of units (words) that are independent of each other because they don’t share the same constant (relation between variable and variable)

About constellations one might then say that when words referring to completely different things are joined in syntax, there is some similarity to the notion of different things being joined as a Thirdness. Moreover, a single phone (a sound feature) is rather similar to a Firstness. But the similarities with Peirce’s system end here, because whilst a Firstness is explicitly defined by him as something that is “positively what it is” without reference to anything else, this can never be the case with any linguistic unit as conceptualized by Hjelmslev. As Jacques Derrida famously pointed out some decades later, there are only differences in language. Each phoneme or morpheme is defined in opposition to what it is not – for example “h” in opposition to “w”, “he” to “we”. They are articulated, determined by the language structure as a whole. This principle, that has been useful when applied to linguistics, becomes problematic when it is elevated to the status of ontological principle, as apparently happened in the work of Julien Algirdas Greimas [Greimas 1979]. The world as a universe of significance is then defined in relation to a total absence of significance. Are we to take this literally we would then have to deny that anything can exist without being known: there is nothing outside of the system of oppositions, and the unknown is being defined in purely negative terms. According to this position the tree that falls to the ground in an unknown forest would not exist indeed, and the distinction between Thirdness and Secondness would be totally superfluous. In our text Peirce comments and criticizes the related opinion of Bishop Berkeley – this programmatic empiricist who maintained that there is nothing in the world except of our own sensations, bound by laws laid down by an almighty God. Peirce admits that Berkeley’s criticism is to a certain extent valid, but that it also presupposes a final definition of what it actually means that something exists, i.e. a highly dogmatic ontology.

For Peirce ontologies with such tendencies are neither necessary nor desirable: “if we abstain from attempting to attach any definite idea to existence, there will be nothing inconsistent in the supposition of things acting on one another without any predetermined law whatever” [EP II, p. 270]. Peirce’s general theory of Science, and later that of Popper, rather involves the possibility that new and hitherto unknown facts might very well make us reconsider even that knowledge that before was considered to be absolutely undisputed and “self evident”. Herein rests the significance of well known distinction in pragmatic theory of Science between abduction, induction and deduction – a distinction that again presupposes the fundamental partition of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. The abduction is an evident notion that sometimes comes as a total surprise, and that at the moment doesn’t need any additional proof to be acknowledged. It has the existential mode of a Firstness. The facts that a triangle has three sides and that the sum of its inner angles is always 180 degrees are, for example, abductions
and Firstnesses that don’t warrant any observation of “actually” and materially existing triangles. If we however assume a relationship between one entity and another, i.e. a Secondness, the assumption could be verified or falsified by means of induction. The assumption “all triangles are blue” could for example immediately be proven false – it’s enough to just draw a red triangle. But if we see only two corners of a geometric shape and if both corners are 90 degrees, then we can at least deduce that it can’t be a triangle: “if sum of angles > 180 degrees, then – triangle”; “sum is > 180 degrees, ergo – triangle”. In such phrases, elements such as “if _ then _” are copulae that tie Firstnesses together into a Thirdness, here in the form of a deductive conclusion. There is, however, no absolute guarantee that the Firstness on which the conclusion is founded, i.e. the single observation that both corners of the partly hidden shape are 90 degrees, is valid. Indeed, one of the corners may indeed on closer measure turn out to be something like 89.5 degrees, in the case of which the shape might actually be a triangle, albeit with a very distant apex.

Apropos induction, Peirce makes an interesting distinction between true and meaningful utterances. Utterances such as “Every Phoenix, rising from its ashes, sings Yankee Doodle” or “every triangle with four sides is blue” would according to this distinction be completely true, because there will never be any inductive observation to falsify them. They are, however, not meaningful – as least not as long as no one has ever seen such illustrious things as a triangle with four sides or a resurrected Phoenix that, on top of it, even sings Yankee Doodle. Peirce further remarks that the statement “Man is a two legged creature” would be equally meaningless if there were no examples of human being with two legs [EP II, p. 279]. Here, it however seems that he has forgotten to add a pertinent clarification. Could the absurd idea of a triangle with four sides really be meaningless in the same way or at the same level as the idea of a resurrected Phoenix? Hardly so, because we can easily evoke an inner image of such a bird, and some skilled person can even animate a moving image in which it might quite convincingly sing Yankee Doodle. A triangle with four sides is, however, impossible even as an evocation of pure fantasy. And its impossibility even as idea makes it, in Peircean terms, impossible in an abductive and instinctive sense, not merely in an inductive and experiential sense.

Compare the paragraph in the previous seminar notes concerning the assurance of utterances as founded in instinct (commens), experience (of the world of empirical facts) and form (semiosis). Regarding the Phoenix that sings Yankee Doodle in our imagined movie one could then remark that it exists in a certain, limited sense, namely as a Sign. Here we would probably need some additional clarification to fully understand what Peirce had in mind when he claimed that “things” can either be possible, existing or semiotic. A quite satisfying clarification is included in the final section of “Sundry Logical Conceptions”, more precisely on p. 272 in EP II. It seems to be quite valuable for the understanding of the system as a whole. On a general level we learn from this passage that any
Firstness can be present in three different “forms”, or as Peirce writes “in the forms of” Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. The same rule holds true for any Secondness and any Thirdness. We then get the following:

FIRSTNESS (possibility) – the very Idea that we have of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness

SECONDNESS (existence) – actually existing Firstness (Qualia), Secondness (brute facts) and Thirdness (signs)

THIRDNESS (signs) – Signs of Firstness (feelings), signs of Secondness (actions), signs of Thirdness (thoughts)

Any meaningful utterance would then be on the one hand a Thirdness of a Second (an existing sign) and on the other a Thirdness of a Third (an expressed thought). Would this, again, imply that Thirdness = Sign? Not unambiguously so. According to my reading of “Sundry Logical Conceptions”, especially as related to the later letters to Lady Welby, Peirce says that there are in all existing things (i.e. all “facts”) a certain “capacity” for Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. On December 23 1908 he explicitly tells Lady Welby that “Each of these two Objects [the Dynamic and the Immediate] may be said to be capable of either of the three Modalities” [EP II, p. 480].

Here we discern an apparent reservation: “may be said to be capable”. What does it imply? In accordance to the scheme above it would seem to imply that everything that exists (i.e. everything that is a Second) either exists as “qualia”, “facts” or “signs”, i.e. either as features, things or signs. It would further imply that that which is a Thing and not a Sign cannot be a Thirdness in a full sense, but that it “may be said to be capable” of Thirdness. A relation between a Thing and its Qualia, for example between a tomato and its Redness, would according to this notion have no “full” or separate existence. Only the tomato (as Secondness of a Second) and the Redness (as Firstness of a Second) would exist as something to be perceived. However, the Thirdness of this relation can turn into the denoted Object of a Sign, for example in the statement “The tomato is red” in which the copula “is” denotes the relation. In this case it must be the “capacity” for Thirdness in the thing, here the relation between “tomatoness” and “redness” in the tomato, that turns it into a potential Object of a Sign. Without Thirdness, i.e. without knowledge of the potentially semiotic relations of “tomatoness”, we wouldn’t be able to identify the Object of any utterance or picture.

/Regarding some questions from the previous seminar / When Peirce states that iconic and symbolic signs can’t communicate any “information” he must be referring to the evident notion (if we
acknowledge his definitions of icons and symbols) that icons and symbols can’t communicate anything but Firstness and Thirdness. A Firstness such as “redness” (the general notion of redness or a pictorial message that is nothing but a red surface) cannot inform us about anything except of itself. A Thirdness, on the other hand, has no separate existence in the form of a “fact”, and therefore it doesn’t necessarily refers to any factual, existing things. There we may, in some as yet imaginary movie, see the Phoenix rise from its own ashes, happily singing Yankee Doodle. We must simply always consider the possibility that icons and symbols may not be truthful. An index, on the contrary, wouldn’t be an index if it didn’t refer to something that actually exists. This is maybe the simplest lesson to be drawn from Peirce’s doctrine that a sign is always determined by its Object, and that the “sign” in the form of a Representamen/Expression in its turn determines the “mental idea” that is manifested in the Interpretant [EP II, p. 483]. The notion of “object” should then be understood as the capacity in existing Things for Firstness, Secondness or Thirdness. In “Sundry Logical Conceptions” we actually even find a consequent distinction between Thing and Object [see EP II, p. 274] which I overlooked in the last seminar. Mea culpa.

Because the signified object consists in a capacity for either Firstness, Secondness or Thirdness, and because the sign as a whole is likewise characterized by either Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, Peirce had to invent another terminology to name the triadic relation formed by the very elements of the Sign: object, expression and interpretant. The solution of this problem, as explicitly stated in the syllable on “Speculative Grammar” in “Sundry Logical Conceptions”, is to refer to these relata of the sign as “a First”, “a Second” and “a Third”. The First is then something that is immediately present, i.e. an Expression that represents a Second (Object) through the mediation of a Third (Interpretant).

See my first diagram on the last page: the simplified version of the sign model. The four trichotomies that I have arranged in the lower half of the second diagram could then be explicated as follows:

**DYNAMIC OBJECT** [see EP, p. 480] Due to its determination by the dynamic object and its capacity for either Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, a sign can be either an “Abstractive” (such as Redness, Beauty), a “Concretive” (such as “this red”) or a “Collective” (such as “all reds”).

**IMMEDIATE OBJECT** [see EP, pp. 275 ff, 292 f, 484-488] Due to its determination by the immediate object and its capacity for Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, a sign can be either a Rheme (for example “red” as a possible alternative in the incomplete phrase “P is _”), a Dicent (for exemple a reference to something existing that is red) or an Argument (such as “If red, then P. We’ve got red, ergo P”). The triad Rheme, Dicent, Argument is introduced in “Nomenclature and Triadic Divisions of signs…” and has as its immediate equivalent in “Sundry Logical Conceptions” the triad Sumisigns, Dicisigns and Suadisigns. Etymology: Sumi from the Latin *Sum* = being; Rheme from archaic Greek
$\rho\mu\alpha\varepsilon$ = utterance, word (compare Plato’s $\kappaρ\alphaυ\lambda\omicron\sigma$). 

Dicent from Latin $Dico$ = to tell, to utter. Suadi from Latin $Suadeo$, as in $Persuadeo$ = convince, talk someone into something. In the letters to Lady Welby Peirce uses, among other variants, the terms Descriptive, Denominative and Copulative for the same trichotomy. Also observe that Peirce remarks that it is not “literally true” that the immediate object is capable of all three Modes of Being [EP II, p. 480].

**EXPRESSION** [see EP II p. 291, compare pp. 483-84] Due to the Expression of the sign, or in Peirce’s own parlor the Representamen, and its immediate existence as either Firstness, Secondness or Thirdness, a sign can be either a Qualisign, a Sinsign or a Legisign. (Quali from Latin $Qualis$ = status, property; Sin probably from Latin $Sino$ = lay down, put into place or “letting happen”, but unclear, must be checked. Legi from Latin $Lego$ = impose a law.) Equivalent terms in the later papers are Tone, Token, Type.

**TYPE OF RELATION BETWEEN OBJECT AND EXPRESSION** [see EP II pp 273 ff, 276-77 and 291 f] Due to the relation between the Representamen (here: Expression) and the Object a sign can be either an Icon, and Index or a Symbol. The Icon is the only category of signs in which the object and the interpretant may be identical [EP II, p. 276] An index, however, can never be its own interpretant, because then there would be no difference between an Index and a mere Secondness [ibid., compare Göran Sonesson’s enquiries regarding the notion of the Ground of a sign]

The divisions above (especially the trichotomy icon-index-symbol) may be further specified in the Seminar. If necessary we might also have an opportunity to explain why the number of possible combinations of the ten trichotomies (i.e. the total number of possible signs in the universe of signs) is not $59.049 (= 3$ raised to the tenth power) but rather, as Peirce himself sardonically remarks “only 66” [see EP II, p. 481]. It is in fact rather simple – it has to do with the rule that a Firstness can be determined only by another Firstness (a Qualisign, for example, can only be an Abstractive and a Rheme as for its determination by its dynamic and immediate objects), whilst a Thirdness can only determine another Thirdness (as for example an Argument can only be expressed by means of Symbols).

In order to understand in a more contextual manner Pierce’s distinction between dynamic and immediate objects, it’s important to comprehend the extent to which his pragmaticism or “pragmatism” (the name under which it was later popularized) in its very foundations is a realism. Yes, even to the extent of being, as Peirce writes in a letter that is often being quoted, “an extreme realism”. This extreme realism presupposes that we are actually capable of apprehending the world
such as it is (how would it otherwise be possible to demystify illusions?) and that it is not pragmatic or useful to assume differently.

There are entertaining passages in Peirce’s papers in which he allows himself a relentless mockery at the expense of Nominalism. An when Nelson Goodman half a century later made his case against the national philosophy that Pragmatism had turned into, that case could certainly be seen as the revenge of a convinced nominalist upon the greatest realist of the American continent. What was basically repeating itself here, on American ground, was the medieval dissent regarding *universalia*. A realist, or more specifically a conceptual realist, would presuppose that each concept corresponds to something commonly shared by all those objects that are subsumed under the concept. For a nominalist such as Goodman this remains naïve and even laughable. Each one of us are of course able to realize that regarding for example the concept “red” it is completely arbitrary where to draw the line between the color samples that we designate as “red” and those that we call “orange, violet” etc. And where is the dividing line between tree and bush, mountain and hill, house and shelter?

The answer from the realist, or the pragmatist, would be that it would still be more sensible to suppose that redness is actually something like a qualitative dynamic object, determining its own description as an immediate object [see EP II, p. 484]. Or differently put: that the redness is actually *out there*, irrespective of how it’s named or designated (or “de-nominated”, see ibid. p. 484 on the distinction between “descriptives” and “denominatives”). What Peirce calls a QualiSign, defined as “any quality in so far as it’s a sign” [EP II p. 294] would then presumably be a *distinctive* quality – a quality that is significant of a category of things. Peirce writes that the qualisign certainly cannot “act” as a sign as long as it is not “embodied” (i.e. as a sinsign), but that on the other hand “the embodiment has nothing to do with its character as a sign” [EP II p. 291]. In accordance to this, the qualisign (or tone) would be a pure apprehension, a purely mental reality. As such it may have a mediating sign character, in the function of an equivalent to a corresponding quality in a number *n* of material or “embodied” objects. As a sign the qualisign also represents the logical possibility of a Rheme in statements such as “if P, then S” (if we find the quality P, then we have S). [Compare EP II, p. 294]

This is conceptual realism in a pure and “extreme” form. The significant character of concept and qualities is seen as independent of any embodiment in *n* objects that would belong to a category. In accordance with this, a concept is not seen as an entity X that is inductively arrived at by means of observation of the cases 1, 2, 3, 4, *n*…, but on the contrary an initial and necessary condition for the recognition of any separate “cases” at all. This is indeed a view far removed from inductivism, and if we have learnt from modern linguistics to define the Expression (E) of the sign as something materially present but thematically absent, and the Content (C) as something materially absent but
thematically present, then we must here try to adapt ourselves to a completely different way of thinking. In a qualisign there can be no thematization in this sense, because a quality is single and indivisible. As Peirce himself writes in our initial paper (“What is a Sign?”) the sign (or representation) is something that “conveys to a mind an idea about a thing” [EP II, p. 5]

But for him there was no reason to assume that this “something” would necessarily be of an external, material providence. Truly, he later defines a Representamen as a First, i.e. as something immediately present. But this immediate presence can be just a sensation, without any outer existence. An icon is, on the other hand, defined as the only type of sign in which the Interpretant may be identical to the object [EP II, p. 277]. And because an interpretant per definitionem is a mediation, or “an idea in the mind that the sign excites” [EP II, p. 13], neither the object that is identical to its interpretant has any external existence. The iconic qualisign as a mental entity would then be constituted by a Representamen that determines an Interpretant that is identical to an Object that in its turn determines the very Representamen [compare EP II, p. 294]. The wider sense of this would then be that those things that have “sign character” without “acting” as signs, and that would rather be defined as “content without expression”, are already “interpreted” as signs through an Interpretant.

But for these statements to have any meaning we must still assume that the qualities that are signified by the qualisigns, in their respect of being purely mental entities, are those that we actually find “out there” in the material world. Differently put: that we see the red color because the red color is actually there, and not because some unconscious inductive conclusions (or some nominalistic god) “makes us” see the color. This state of affairs is difficult to name in any other way than that suggested by Peirce: as the presence of an interpretant. The genus of this term is rather telling as regards its meaning: it’s not the case of an interpreta-tion, and much less of an “interpret-or”. It’s a case of an “interpret-ant”, a neuter, a thing, an instrument (but an instrument that acts on its own). Just as little as the “act-ant” of structural semantics it can be connected to any individual mind or consciousness.

The function of the interpretant is, in accordance with this neuter character, defining for the collective character of semiosis. The interpretant, or more specifically the ground of the final interpretant (se my diagram) is explicitly defined by Peirce as commens [see EP II, p. 478]. If we were to find a more precise way to define this ground in everyday terms, we might refer to the manner in which various characteristics are sometimes referred to as “significant”. One may for example say something like “it is significant for those people that they never look into your eyes”. The significant quality, i.e. the quality that the people referred to don’t possess, would then be “direct appeal”. We refer to this quality as if it was in itself significant, indeed a sign. If a sign, it would then signify because, as Peirce submits, it is or rather “carries” its own interpretant. [Compare EP II, pp 273 and 291]
It’s no wonder that European Structuralists, being guardians of a radically opposed tradition in the philosophy of language, have met with difficulties when trying to grasp this. Greimas & Courtés account of Peirce’s divisions, headed under the entry “Signe” in *Dictionnaire*, is bluntly misleading. They apparently suppose that 1) Peirce’s Object would be the equivalent of the linguistic Referent that they themselves wouldn’t recognize; 2) Peirce’s Representamen would be identical to Saussure’s *Signifiant* (Hjelmslev’s *Udtryk*) and 3) Peirce’s Interpretant would be identical to Saussure’s *Signifié* (Hjelmslev’s *Indhold*). If it really were so, then we would correctly have to accuse Peirce of making no distinction between Expression and Content, and thereby neither between Thing and Sign. But the very point of the observation that there are iconic qualisigns, in which Object and Interpretant are identical, isn’t simply that a thing/object can as such be a sign. In that case every single piece of matter, every “fact” in Peirce’s parlor, would indeed be a sinsign. We cannot sensibly draw such a conclusion from his explications, as manifested in the referred papers. Nothing can possibly be a sinsign if it doesn’t also involve a qualisign: “it will embody a Qualisign” [EP II, p. 294] An the object of the qualisign is, as we have seen, not any external object but on the contrary a property that can be “significant” of some external object (of whatever kind). It’s a question of a pure possibility, a Firstness. If we were to use Saussure’s and Hjelmslev’s terms (as I have, indeed, done in my diagrams), it would be more fitting to say that the object, or more correctly the immediate object, is a Content. Through its interpretant this Content can then be represented “as if” it were an Expression, and this “as if” can then be defined as a fundamental condition for the semiotic function.

/FA, 2004-10-05

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*The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. II, Bloomington 1998, the following papers:

“What is a Sign?” (1894)

“Sundry Logical Conceptions” (1903)

“Nomenclature and Triadic Divisions of Signs, as far as They are Determined” (1903)

“Excerpts from letters to Lady Welby” (1906)
Peirce’s sign model, simple variant:

3. Interpretant (thought: “triangle”)

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Peirce’s sign model, full variant:

1) Feeling (1st mode of existence)
2) Actuality (2nd mode of existence)
3) Rules and contracts (3rd mode of existence)