

The *kosmos* in a timeshell?

Comments on Fernando Andacht's

The Peirce-sistent question of time: *nosce diem*,
the Living Death of the Present

Dear friends,

I thank the organizers of this *VI Advanced Seminar on Peirce's Philosophy and Semiotic* for inviting me to take part in this always deep, proficuous and also festive meeting. It's good to be part of the Peircean community of inquirers.

This is the second time I have the pleasure to work with Andacht here. Two years ago I commented on his semiotic analysis of the documentary “Jogo de Cena” directed by the Brazilian film-maker Coutinho. I recall this because I see an interesting line of research between the text just presented and the previous one: the application of Peirce's semiotic and general philosophy to study complex phenomena that lie in the intervals between reality and fiction, the social and the individual, the self and the *commind* that we are all part of as we share meanings – as we do now.

What is an individual human being from the standpoint of Peirce's philosophy and semiotic? What is a personality? How semiosis and communication, as processes dependent on the action of signs, influence and shape the development of our lives, of our personal histories but also the stories we invent and tell about ourselves, many times in sheer self-deception?

How all sort of media such TV ads, documentaries, fictional narratives etc transform our individualities, our selves, offering opportunities for redemption, growth, rescue from traumatic events and liberation for a better future?

These are some of the questions that Andacht is bringing forth with his continuous inquiry as full professor of Communication Studies at the University of Ottawa, in Canada.

In 2010 I have already praised Andacht for his ability to put Peirce's ideas to use in ways that few semioticians (maybe including even Peirce) had the ability to do. Reading his articles one easily realizes how even our everyday tasks, from a simple baking of a pie to the complex deed of raising our kids are governed by the fundamental continuum that links perception, representation and communication.

Now Andacht boldly states that “ it is around the notion of time, of temporality, that all the key components of Peirce's thought on signs, reality, the self, the cosmos, and most especially the doctrine of the logical continuity of it all appear to come together admirably, and consistently.”

I must now add another praise, which is evident in the text *Andacht* just delivered: his ability to trace the intellectual history of an idea revealing how it was born, developed and arrived to our present time. Reading this essay, which is both scholarly well informed and also full of suggestive connections I find similarities with some of the historians of mentality that I most admire, such as Philippe Ariès, Georges Duby and Carlo Ginzburg.

These historians are specialists in matters of how mentalities developed in the arch of long durations shape our social behaviors and influence the facts of life. They have taught us that we must unite a descriptive account of the causal connections of historical facts with a much more risky, creative and conjectural disposition to interpret the continuum of an idea that connects the isolated happenings.

An example of Andacht ability to find what Henry James once called “figures in the carpet” inside an intellectual narrative is the appearance of the concept of the “specious present” as an illusion.

Andacht reveals that this curious idea does not come from William James, as is usually assumed, but has its first elaboration by Robert Kelly (in the guise of E. R. Clay) in his book *The Alternative: a study in psychology* (1882). Nevertheless, similar theory had already been advanced in Hodgson’s *Philosophy of Reflection* (1878). Both precursors were favorably quoted by William James in his *The Principles of Psychology* (1890).

As Andacht explains, these authors take a very different direction from Peirce's synchistic and evolutionary analysis of time. They profess, in fact, the nominalistic view that the flow of time is just a subjective idealization, that past, present and future are all "non-entities" that are created by our minds during this "specious present". This argumentation seems to be directly affiliated to David Hume's philosophy of sensory perception.

In the final part of my comments, I will try to contribute to Andacht's research on the history of the concept of "specious present" showing that Borges was not only aware of it, but might have criticized it in his short story *Emma Zunz*.

Before going to Andacht's account of Peirce's theory of time, which is the central point of his essay, I would like to point out that the rather nominatist authors quoted by Andacht are still the mainstream in the so called "hard science". Most physicists still adopt the principle that time is a purely causal and deterministic succession of instants, similar to points of a line.

This has been the usual notion adopted by most scientists since at least the works of Newton. believe that the whole development of Physics since Newton is just a prolongation of his *Principia Mathematica*.

In fact, Einstein wanted us to believe in a spacialized time. In his general theory of relativity, time is turned into a fourth dimension, and our history, our lives, are turned into a reversible space-time tube.

Quantum theory also accepts the reversibility of time in its equations, but then has to face the mystery of the act of perception, when the quantum system somehow “collapses” in an irreversible way into a precise set of properties. How that happens is not explained by the equations of quantum mechanics, a situation has opened the queries of the physicists imagination to hypothesis such as multiverses or the dependency of reality on the subjectivity of an observer – something very close to the “specious present” of Kelly.

Just recently, Prigogine – in a very Peircean attitude – challenged both the General Theory of Relativity and Quantum Mechanics by proposing that we should start our explanation of the physical world by admitting the reality of time as a creative component of our universe. Time for Prigogine is not a deterministic flow of instants, as pictured by a digital clock, but carries with it spontaneity, novelty in the guise of chaotic fluctuations that, depending on the sensibility of a system, can produce enormous transformations as it continues its time-dependent evolution.

So we have this strange situation in which Einstein's theory of relativity, Bohr's quantum theory and Prigogine's theory of systems far from thermodynamic equilibrium are all proven correct by experiments, but they all disagree in their way of understanding something so fundamental as time.

I think the reason for that is simple: although space might be treated as physical and mathematical, allowing for a number of geometric descriptions, the nature of time is that it is *logical*.

had already given us a hint about this when he declared that space is related to the outer sense and time to the inner sense, electing the schema of time as the fundamental logical syntax that connects the three types of modality: possibility, existence and necessity.

Peirce's contribution was to put down the wall between separating the outer and the inner senses, admitting with his synechism that continuity is the sole guarantee for the intelligibility of the real. This is the Law of Mind, which embraces evolution, growth, causation, semiosis and, certainly, time as the logical ground for the synthesis of judgments.

Having exposed Peirce's metaphysical conception of an evolutionary cosmos as governed by the law of mind, Andacht goes to identify the conceived practical effects of such "grand vision".

This is pragmatism at its best, which Dewey certainly understood. The result is that, contrary to the nominalistic "specious present", Peirce builds a phaneroscopic conception of time that involves the three categories. Past is fundamentally the existential mode, Secondness. The essence of future is the final opinion that will be universally accepted by an ideal community of inquirers, so it is fundamentally Thirdness (although habits are never totally static, so they do carry Firstness as novelty).

The inscrutable present, always indeterminate, has strong tinctures of firstness, but is also the encounter of secondness and thirdness. It is the non-conscious, inscrutable, mysterious synthetical judgement of perception, the firstness of thirness of abduction synthetizing the firstness and secondness of percepts as to produce the firstness and thirdness of general predicates.

As indeterminate, the Present is always vague (because dissolves itself in past memory) and general (because anticipates through desires). So is the “living death” that Andacht finds as the timeshell of Peirce’s conception of the present.

This might sound too abstract, but Andacht has found the perfect example Peirce divised (not so often quoted) to bring all this to our daily life: the baking of an apple pie.

- The two illustrations Andacht brings, the real person Ana and the fictitious character Emma have in common the trauma of the death of their father. Andacht does not emphasize this specific loss of the progenitor as having a special effect in the girls destiny, but it made me recall how Peirce's life changed completely after the death of his father.
- We can see the arch of Peirce's life as a continuous ascension since his childhood up to his tenure at John Hopkins but then, suddenly and precisely in correlation with the death of Benjamin Peirce, in 1880, Charles Peirce began to face an endless series of setbacks that led him to a dramatic state of poverty, illness and despair that characterizes Peirce's last decade of life, the "Endgame" as Brent melancholically puts.

Both narratives that Andacht elected have in common the dilemma produced by a double bind, a situation that necessarily drives the protagonists to paradoxes: they want to do what is the best, but any choice they make will inevitably put the wheel of tragedy in motion. Situations like these have been studied by the so called school of Palo Alto, led by Paul Watzlawick, which has identified in these logical paradoxes the root of many psychological diseases, such as schizophrenic behavior in members of a family.

A classical example of such paradoxical situations is given in the classical play of Sophocles, *Antigone*. The protagonist has to choose between breaking the edict issued by the king Creon (condemning the body of her brother Polynices to be left on the plain outside the city to rot and be eaten by animals), or else breaking the law of family ties that demands that any sister is obliged to give a proper burial to her brother. If Antigone obeys Creon, she will face terrible consequences brought by Ate, the "justice who dwells with the gods beneath the earth." But if she obeys the Chthonic gods and bury her brother, she will have to face the Dike, or the justice of the polis incarnated by its king. Antigone "did not want not to bury her brother". Not having psychotherapeutic treatment, Antigone escapes from the terrible choice by hanging herself.

Similar paradox was lived by the girl Ana, who was put in a tragic situation of having to choose between the world view proclaimed and imposed by her mother, who sees her former alcohol addicted husband as facing the consequences of his own actions, and her own world view of a girl who loses her beloved father. The paradox of this situation puts her in a sort suspension of judgment, which is the same as a suspension of her own living. As she cannot live the sorrow of her lost, she condemns herself as not being deign of pleasures such as playing and laughing with her friends. In the case of Ana, though, the knot is untied when she can exercises what we might call, following Maturana and von Foester, the second order observation – that is, when she, through the psychodrama, can observes herself observing the world. She suddenly realizes the reason of her sadness, dives into the sorrow for her lost and recovers the live that had stopped in the moment she felt herself forbidden to mourn her dad.

The short story written by Borges is much subtler and – as I promised before - gives us the opportunity to go back to the conception of subjective “specious time” against the “real” time. Emma Zunz is part of the book “The Aleph” (1949), but it was first published in September 1948 in the magazine Sur. Borges had been researching and writing about the mystery of time during the period he wrote Emma Zunz. In 1947 he had published “A New refutation of Time”, an essay written from 1944 to 1946 in which Borges begins his argumentation by refusing to accept the reality of the continuum of time, claiming that it is an imaginary idealization:

“Every instant is autonomous. Not vengeance nor pardon nor jails nor even oblivion can modify the invulnerable past. No less vain to my mind are hope and fear, for they always refer to future events, that is, to events which will not happen to us, who are the diminutive present. They tell me that the present, the “specious present” of the psychologists, lasts between several seconds and the smallest fraction of a second, which is also how long the history of the universe lasts. Or better, there is no such thing as “the life of a man,” nor even “one night in his life.” Each moment we live exists, not the imaginary sum of those moments. The universe, the sum total of all events, is no less ideal than the sum of all the horses — one, many none? — Shakespeare dreamed between 1592 and 1594. “

Borges, “A New Refutation of Time”.

Isn't it wonderful? Borges here quotes the same "specious present" that Andacht identified in William James' book as a reference to Robert Kelly's ideas. Is Borges a nominalist?

Not so fast... In a dramatic turn, Burges finds out by the end of his essay that refusing the time is a chimera. He then reverses the arrow of his argumentation and refuses his own previous refutation of the reality of time. Interesting enough, by a paradoxical double negation Borges ends up affirming that time is real, the world is real, and so he is:

“To deny temporal succession, to deny the self, to deny the astronomical universe, appear to be acts of desperation and are secret consolations. Our destiny (unlike the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not terrifying because it is unreal; it is terrifying because it is irreversible and iron-bound. Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges.”

Borges, “A New Refutation of Time”.

Andacht and Borges are both pointing out the intellectual purport of time: “to deny temporal succession is to deny the self”.

Well, I think that *Emma Zunz* is a short story written, if not as an illustration of this essay, at least bearing the same preoccupations. There are some hints that seem to justify my claim. While Emma is having sex with an unknown man picked up in the street just to carry her plans of revenge, Borges show how a subjective time might freeze by a trauma, condemning a person to “enslave herself to a rigid, unchangeable identity” (Andacht) that lives outside of time:

“The arduous events are outside of time, either because the immediate past is as if disconnected from the future, or because the parts which form these events do not seem to be consecutive.” (Borges, *Emma Zunz*).

A further semiotic analysis

If this short story is indeed an illustration about the mysteries of time, then we could go further in our analysis and try to find interpretative keys. I think there are some interesting hints about it, to begin with the title, Emma Zunz, which is the name of the protagonist. In the middle of the text, almost by surprise, Borges explains that:

“she had to repeat and spell out her first and her last name, she had to respond to the vulgar jokes that accompanied the medical examination.” (E.Z)

My argument gets stronger when we read the original:

“tuvo que repetir y deletrear su nombre y su apellido, tuvo que festejar las bromas vulgares que comentan la revisión.” (E.Z)

Borges is calling our attention to the name of the girl. Why? What is hidden in the words Emma Zunz that could cause jokes in the examination or “revisación” (that is a paronomasy of “revision”, which means “review”)?

The question begs an answer even more strongly if we go to the very last words of this short story:

“Actually, the story was incredible, but it impressed everyone because substantially it was true. True was Emma Zunz' tone, true was her shame, true was her hate. True also was the outrage she had suffered: only the circumstances were false, the time, and one or two proper names.” (E.Z)

If we could ask the protagonist about her proper name, she would answer simply Emma Zunz... or, if we pay a bit more attention “m a Zunz”, the short form for “I am a Zunz”. I think we have here another example of a poignant pun, this time authored by Borges.

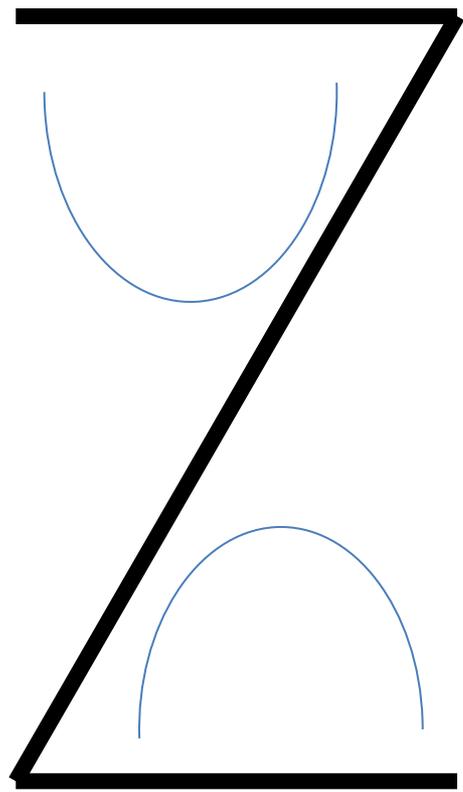
But who or, better yet, what is a Zunz? The word seems to be a special kind of palindrome. Instead of having a left-right symmetry, though, it has the very unusual rotational symmetry. So observe:

zunz

zunz

What sort of object has this peculiar symmetry and can be related to the general them of the story, that we are assuming to be “time”?

A more iconic transformation of the word Zunz might help:



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Finally we get the interpretative key to the whole short story: Emma Zunz is the incarnation of an hour glass, the mechanical device used to measure time as sequence of discrete grains of sand that pours from one bulb to another.

In 1937, ten years before the publication of Emma Zunz, Roman Jakobson had already shown how Edgar Allan Poe poem “The raven” had already in its title the whole phonetic and suggestive possibilities that would be unfolded during the reading. Indeed, “raven” is the anagram of the repeated “never” – the sound made by the bird. No doubt Borges was acquainted with these semiotic strategies used by one of his favorite authors.

Nevertheless, in the preface to the 2004 edition of “Semiótica e Literatura”, Décio Pignatari opposes Borges and Poe as belonging to two different families of writers: on the one side, those who cultivate semiotic enigmas, as Poe certainly is the most pronounced example (see, for instance, Pignatari’s own analysis of *Berenice* and *The House of Usher*); on the other side, those like Borges and Stendhal who cultivate a “limpid” style, without paronomasies or other semiotic games. If my interpretation is correct, then we will have to reconsider such statements.

Be as it might be, I already feel like having Borges peeping through the hole of some Aleph and laughing at me as I read these hypothesis.

Thank you Andacht for calling my attention to these authors and giving me the opportunity to learn from you and from them. This growth of signs is what makes the spending of our time worthwhile.

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