

The dynamic object and improvisational creative acts

O objeto dinâmico e os atos criativos improvisados

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Abstract: In Peircean semiotics, a prominent place is given to the dynamic object. Whereas the immediate object is the object as it is represented “in the sign” the dynamic object is what *determines the sign*, what lies behind and gives agency to the semiotic exchange, and ultimately that upon which the final interpretant would eventually settle. In certain improvisatory creative acts, illustrated here by the example of the design of typographic fonts, the creative enterprise is one of inventing stylistics. As opposed to enterprises of discovery, such as is found in the physical sciences, in which a fixed reality is sought through arduous investigations by a “community of scholars,” in improvisational, or “open,” creative acts, there does not seem to be a hidden “real.” Inventive improvisations are often made on an individual and private basis, rather than an evidentiary, community-held basis. In such cases, a dynamic object, if it exists at all, is nearly indistinguishable from opinion, will, whim, or mere happenstance. Such design processes, especially in their early stages, are divergent in character rather than converging toward a final interpretant. That said, the semiosis that occurs in even the most playful and eccentric design processes, eventually begins a conformation process toward harmony and unity. Although this emerging constraining element fits in some ways the notion of a dynamic object, open creative acts cannot be fully explained by the simple Peircean dynamic object that is a pre-existing purported determiner of the sign. The Peircean dynamic object, which is the empirical dynamic object, must be supplemented by two additional varieties of dynamic object: the motivational and the stylistic/affective. Only the empirical dynamic object determines the sign; the motivational dynamic object develops simultaneously with the sign, while the stylistic dynamic object is, in many ways, determined by the signs.

Keywords: Charles Peirce. Creativity. Dynamic object. Font design. Graphic design. Improvisation. Spontaneity. Whitehead.

Resumo: *O objeto dinâmico possui um lugar proeminente na semiótica peirciana. Considerando-se que o objeto imediato é o objeto como é representado “no signo”, o objeto dinâmico é aquilo que determina o signo, que está por trás e proporciona agência ao intercâmbio semiótico e, por fim, sobre o qual o interpretante final eventualmente estabelecerá. Na certa, atos criativos improvisados, ilustrados aqui pelo exemplo do design de fontes tipográficas, o empreendimento criativo é uma das estilísticas inventivas. Como oposto aos empreendimentos de descoberta, tal como é*

encontrado nas ciências físicas, na qual busca-se uma realidade fixada por meio de árduas investigações pela “comunidade de estudiosos,” em atos criativos improvisados, ou “abertos,” não parece haver um “real” oculto. Improvisações inventivas são, muitas vezes, feitas em base individual e privada, em vez de uma base comunitária probatória. Em tais casos, o objeto dinâmico, se ele existir, é quase indistinguível da opinião, vontade, desejo, ou mero acaso. Esses processos de design, em especial, em seus estágios iniciais, são divergentes em caráter em vez de convergirem para um interpretante final. Isso dito, a semiose que ocorre mesmo nos mais divertidos e excêntricos processos de design começa, eventualmente, com um processo de conformação para a harmonia e unidade. Ainda que esse elemento restritivo emergente se adeque, até certo ponto, à noção de um objeto dinâmico, atos criativos abertos não podem ser totalmente explicados pelo simples objeto dinâmico peirciano que é um determinador alegado pré-existente do signo. O objeto dinâmico peirciano, que é o objeto dinâmico empírico, deve ser suplementado pelas duas variedades adicionais do objeto dinâmico: o motivacional e o estilístico/afetivo. Somente o objeto dinâmico empírico determina o signo; o objeto dinâmico motivacional desenvolve simultaneamente com o signo, enquanto o objeto dinâmico estilístico é, de muitos modos, determinado pelos signos.

Palavras-chave: Charles Peirce. Criatividade. Design de fonte. Design gráfico. Improvisação. Espontaneidade. Objeto dinâmico. Whitehead.

1 Views on the dynamic object and its agency in semiosis

Perhaps no part of Peirce’s semiotic system has been more enigmatic than his conception of the dynamic object. For Peirce, it is the dynamic object that determines the sign, while the object as represented in the sign—the immediate object—points toward, or hints at, this always-occluded source. In a letter to Victoria Welby, Peirce states: “The Mediate Object is the Object outside the Sign; I call it the Dynamoid Object. The Sign must indicate it by a hint; and the hint, or its substance, is the Immediate Object.”¹ It is a perspective that sees all of semiosis as the upstream struggle of salmon to successfully return to their spawning waters.

That this notion has initiated a century of perplexed discussion is probably to be expected.

Tony Jappy observes that “[...] the sole structuring ‘agency’ in the process is the dynamic object [...] there is nothing in the immediate object, for which the sign serves as support, that hasn’t been as though filtered from the dynamic object.”²

For Joseph Ransdell the dynamical object is “that to which our thoughts conform when they have the value of truth” and the immediate object is “the object as we think it to be.” This approach assumes the viewpoint of an independent observer, outside the flow of semiosis. It necessitates, says Ransdell, a division in the notion of the object: the theorist’s perspective and the analyst’s perspective. While the theorist can take this imaginary position outside semiosis to proffer a judgement

1 EP 2:479.

2 JAPPY, 2017, p. 21.

on the validity or truth-value of an immediate object, the analyst—operating from within the flow of signs—is in no position to make the distinction.

But there is something puzzling here. Since, from the analyst's point of view, none of the content of the immediate object *is* in doubt (for otherwise it would not be the immediate object), it would seem that the analyst cannot draw a *substantive* distinction between it and the dynamical object; for one cannot describe the immediate object as such while denying at the same time that the description is true of the dynamical object.³

For the analyst, the dynamic collapses seemingly into the immediate, and, in practice, we are all analysts!

Nathan Houser discusses the problem of the dynamic object in his introduction to the first volume of *Essential Peirce*. The dynamic object is the “really efficient but not immediately present object,” while the immediate object is the “object as the sign represents it.”⁴ The key point, according to Houser, is that Peirce’s “insistence that every interpretant is related to its object through the mediation of a sign constitutes a denial of intuition; for intuition requires a direct dyadic relation between an interpretant and its object [...] without intervention of a sign.”⁵ The dynamic object is “that object that somehow determines the sign and through the sign mediately determines the interpretant.”⁶ But this introduces a problem: “How can an object that is *external* to the sign (the immediate object is the *internal* object) be a determining force in shaping the interpretant?”⁷ Peirce’s realism comes to the fore here, because in this way the real shapes our mind.

Every sign *represents* an object (in some way or another) to the interpretant. The interpretant is, or helps make up, a habit that “guides” our future and present actions or thought with respect to the object in question, or objects *like* the one in question. If the interpretant is untrue to the object, our behavior will not be (or may not be) successful—reality will have its way with us.”⁸

Reality, in a sense, initiates the process and the process would conclude, in the final interpretant, with an understanding of that cognizable real. The mind represents the world “*in the way it is forced to represent the world by the resistance of the world to error.*”⁹

3 RANSDELL, 2007, italics are Ransdell's.

4 HOUSER, EP 2: xxxix.

5 Idem.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 EP 2: xl. All italics are Houser's.

If there is consensus in these scholars' interpretation of Peirce's concept of a dynamic object, at least as it pertains to its function with regard to ongoing interpretation, it is probably summed up most efficiently by James Lizska: the goal of communication is to achieve "no latitude of interpretation."¹⁰ The dynamic object is acting as a constraining force, a real and efficient source of convergence within semiosis, influencing interpretation, communication, and ultimately, guiding us toward an understanding of the world as it truly is. This is the realist Peirce, who believed the world to be inherently understandable even if the completion of that understanding, the "settling of opinion" is indefinitely (even infinitely) deferred.¹¹

There is another perspective, or at least a different point of emphasis, represented by the commentary of Floyd Merrell, that highlights the interpretive dialogue carried out by a community of communicants. It's a point of view that stresses the multivalent and polysemic process, rather than the constraining and convergent pressures of the dynamic object. For instance, Merrell contrasts Peirce's semiotic with both Frege's *Vorstellung* (idea), which Merrell describes as "subjective, individual, and even idiosyncratic [...] the most unreliable of things,"¹² and *Bedeutung* (meaning). Especially with regard to the latter, Merrell notes the dramatic contrast with the freedom found in Peirce: "[Frege's project] is diametrically opposed to Peirce's notion that meaning of a supple, yet resilient sort plays a major role in the flux and flow of semiosis."¹³ For Merrell, Peirce's advantage over Frege lies precisely in this fluidity of process. While accepting that the world constrains meaning, in Peirce meaning is *being wrought* by the community in which it develops. "Peirce's community, like its shifting, turning repertoire of signs and their meanings, cannot afford the luxury of sitting down for a breather: the rush of semiosis continues to drag it along at the same time that it perpetuates itself. Moreover [...] meaning can also be the product of a community's thought gone astray, as well as of collective anthropomorphisms, ethnocentrism, and prejudices, and personal whims, fancies, and idiosyncrasies. In such cases there is always the possibility that the ways of individuals and communities can be mended, and changes wrought: we learn from our errors."¹⁴

Here we find an agency that is not solely found in a dynamic object that sits "outside" semiosis in austere conformational authority, but also resides sloppily and chaotically within a community of aspirants. They are aspiring to understand, and they cobble together a picture of understanding that is continually adapting, developing toward, one presumes, a final icon of identity with the world. Such is the teleology of the cosmos in Peirce's view, and while Merrell accepts it, he flips the perspective to emphasize the vigor within the on-going tumult, even with all its potential errancy, rather than in the hypothesized, settled, final understanding.

10 LIZSKA, 1996, p.93.

11 The basis upon which Peirce arrived at this belief or conclusion is beyond the scope of this paper, but likely was rooted in equal measure between his Protestant background and his experience as a scientist.

12 MERRELL, 1997, p. 156.

13 Op. cit.

14 MERRELL, 1997, p. 157.

It is paradoxical that one virtue of Peirce's system—the interpretive diversity found in semiosis—prefigures an inevitable convergence toward a unique, settled and stable, final interpretant. This inherent friction in Peirce's thought, has been remarked upon by T.L. Short:

Peirce often wrote as if the whole truth about a sign's object is its final interpretant [...] That does not comport with the breadth of his semeiotic, wherein interpretants, including final interpretants, may be actions, feelings, or habits, as well as representations: nonrepresentations cannot be truth [...] We are compelled to amend Peirce on this topic.¹⁵

Short's discomfort is palpable, and here we see not only a loosening of what is signified by "final interpretant," but by implication, what the final interpretant(s) can hope to offer with respect to the dynamic object.

Against the background of these tangles engendered by the concept of the dynamic object, then, I pose the question: What is the dynamic object of signs that are both products of, and evolutionary vehicles for, unfolding and inventive creative acts?

In a moment we will consider a concrete case, but before introducing it, I should frame the discussion by pointing out that not all creative acts possess the same degree of creative freedom. Creative actions lie along a spectrum: at one end is the sort of problem-solving activity (found often in engineering) in which a problem is clearly specified, and the ensuing creative actions are quite narrowly targeted to the solving it within stated budgetary, time and other defined constraints; at the other end of the spectrum one finds spontaneous creation (often noted in expressive fine art and certain kinds of jazz) in which the artist or performer lacks a clearly defined goal, yet proceeds to make improvisational marks or notes. I will call the former creative acts "closed" and the latter creative acts "open". It's important to keep in mind that these two cases form the termini of a range in which many—perhaps most—acts of creative innovation in design and the arts¹⁶ partake of various middling degrees of these extreme conditions.¹⁷

Now, in order to make the discussion especially concrete, we turn to a particular kind of creative activity that can serve to illustrate problems faced by the notions of the dynamic object as depicted above. This is an application of creativity that is often overlooked: the design of typefaces, or fonts.¹⁸ Font design offers an excellent vehicle in which to examine the larger, more general questions that occur at both ends of the creative spectrum.

15 SHORT, 2007, p. 190.

16 In this paper, I will usually not distinguish between the design arts and the fine arts. The terms "designer" and "artist" will be used interchangeably unless specially noted.

17 It's also important to note that even closed creative acts may well involve acts of imagination and creativity. We are referring here to the relative degree of constraint under which they are practiced.

18 Technically, a typeface is a specific set of drawings depicting alphabetical characters, whereas a font refers to the entire set of such characters, registered as a digital file, and assigned to keys on the keyboard. For the purposes of this article, however, I will use the terms interchangeably.

2 Of fonts and their design

Some people are amazed to learn that the letters on a page of print need to be designed. It's understandable; in many ways, the reading instruction of a young child is teaching the child to become blind to the letters themselves, lest the attention given to their shapes interfere with the cognition of the verbal content. The letters of the alphabet seem to have been placed on the earth along with rocks and trees. But, of course, every glyph of every text you read has been painstakingly drawn. Today, with tools to design type fonts in everyone's hands, it is estimated that there are over 50,000 professional, commercial, type families available.¹⁹ One must ask, why there need be so many and why they continue to proliferate?²⁰ The great type designer Hermann Zapf always claimed that fonts were not only adaptations to the technology of the times, but more importantly, stylistically reflected the spirit of the age in which they were created.²¹ New fonts are developed so that the communal taste of the culture may be expressed in the reading matter which communicates that society's works of literature and commerce.

If legibility—the ability to read quickly and accurately—were the only criterion, one would need no more than the three or four fonts that tend to score highest for acuity and reading comfort. The design of a perfectly legible typeface is an example of a closed creative act of the engineering variety. But most fonts are developed purely to produce what we in the arts call “unique expression:” a “feel,” a stylistic affective or emotional connection that resonates mostly beneath the conscious awareness and which projects a mood. Innovative, fresh, expressive styles rarely begin with a highly specific, clearly-defined brief, but rather from an almost accidental process of loose sketching.

Most type fonts mingle the twin goals of legibility and expressive style, for few fonts aspire to be illegible or monotonous. For this reason, fonts provide an exceptional vehicle to study the creative spectrum. The emphasis in this article, however, is placed on the expressive, stylistic font—the font that sacrifices some degree of legibility in order to generate a stylistic mood. Stylistic fonts owe a great deal to improvisational whim, so it is the development of stylistic fonts that especially serve to raise provocative questions having to do with the nature of the dynamic object.

A designer who is willing to forego absolute maximum legibility, in order to experiment with style, is faced with a tremendous challenge: What style? In contrast to legibility, with respect to stylistics there is nothing to constrain the fancy. Furthermore, if indeed the style of the font is to be novel in some way, then it is not as if the designer chooses a style from the shelf and employs it whole cloth. Instead, the style must be evolved through a series of iterative sketches (Figure 1).

19 From a discussion on a type designer forum, 2015. This figure includes cyrillic and non-western fonts. A single type family includes all the weights in both roman and italic for a design of a specific named style. <http://typedrawers.com/discussion/1289/how-many-fonts-are-there>.

20 Rudolf DeHarak, the mid-century exhibition designer, only used a single typeface family in his career of over thirty years.

21 As a student of Prof. Zapf in the 1980s, we often heard this lecture.

In spite of the fact that the font will inevitably end up being constructed in digital form, font designers continue the historical practice of beginning by making small, rough “thumbnail” sketches by hand. These introductory sketches, predecessors of a long process of iterative exploration, are mere “doodles.” By calling them that, I do not mean to suggest they are unimportant, but rather my intent is to emphasize a process that is almost absent-minded in the sense that, at first, no direction is indicated, and therefore the designer has complete freedom to simply play. The designer doodles without concern, then inspects the results. Once something “of interest” appears, subsequent designs begin to explore variants—alternative aspects of the form. Through this iterative process of absent-minded drafting, with focused observation, certain attributes are retained, echoed, enhanced and made consistent through various trial characters. Eventually, a style begins to emerge.

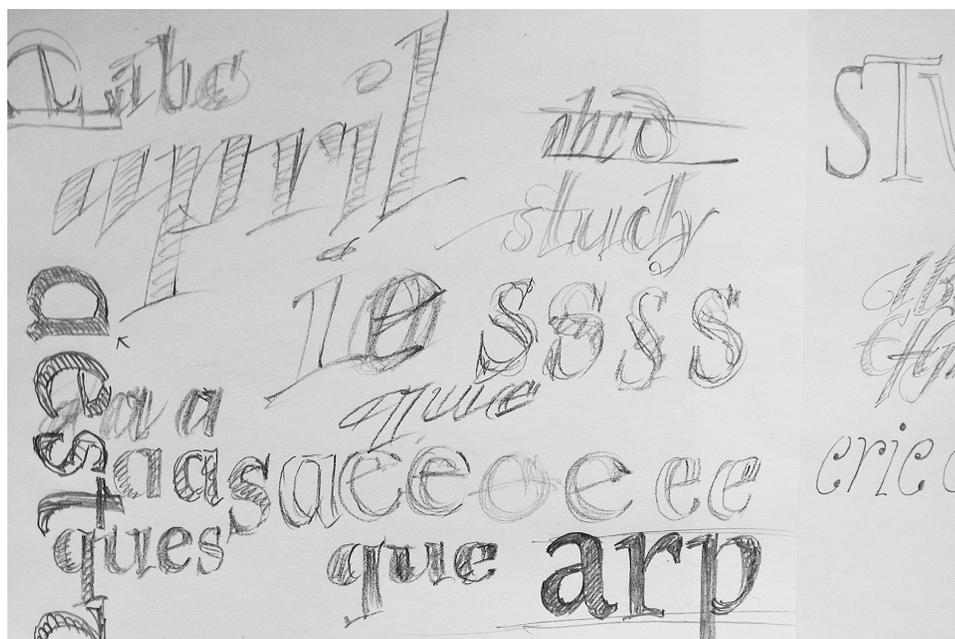


Figure 1. A page of typographic improvisational “doodles.” The arrow points to a character that becomes the inspiration for a font (see figure 3).

3 Where is the dynamic object for initial font sketches?

Let's pause at this point early in the sketching process and ask where the dynamic object has been? Taking the created sketches to be signs, if the dynamic object is supposed to *determine* the sign, then has the dynamic object been in existence all along and only now is being *discovered* through this process? Does every potential font style have its own dynamic object waiting on the shelf in a limbo-world, only finding embodiment in the development of the drawings as they are made? (If all possible stylistics already exist, then what becomes of those that aren't chosen to be

sketched?) Or, is the dynamic object for the font, as a system of stylistically unified characters, being invented right there in those doodles? Or is there no dynamic object at all?

So generalizing, we find these options:

- (a) Dynamic objects exist eternally as that which determine the sign—including these early sketches—constraining all signs (doodles) and the immediate objects (our perceptions) which are imperfect tokens of them.
- (b) Dynamic objects are created simultaneously with the signs (doodles) and the perceptual immediate objects that are the evolving style.
- (c) There is simply no dynamic object early in an open creative process such as the designing of a stylistic font.

At first glance, option A would seem to be the version closest to Peirce. The direct object is latent, lying behind *every possible sketch* that is or could be drawn. Each early doodle is, in effect, a selection of a dynamic-object-in-waiting, which is now determining the sketch that is becoming sign. Agency is placed entirely within the “reality” of the dynamic object (even if this reality is a potential, rather than actual, real), and as it determines the sign, much as a muse might whisper the right inspiration, the sign (the doodle sketch) is being driven by the hidden dynamic object. There are derivations of this view that we will return to below.

In option B, the dynamic object simply is the designer’s “idea” made manifest in the sketch. The dynamic object does not exist in a kind of limbo awaiting birth; it does not *precede* the ideas of the designer, but is originated simultaneously with and in those ideas. Notice that this entails that the dynamic object is shifted into the mind or psychological space of the artist. The dynamic object develops or evolves as the designer sees the sketches which are being made. What the designer feels, throughout the evolving sketches, is a more certain direction, and that feeling is a direct result of an evolving dynamic object. In option B, instead of the dynamic object determining the sign, the sign *and the dynamic object* are both co-created seemingly *ex nihilo*.

Option C denies that the dynamic object exists whatsoever in the first moments of improvisational doodle sketching. What is being witnessed in the creation of the doodle sketches are signs—and therefore their immediate objects—that *do not yet possess dynamic objects*. Dynamic objects, if they exist at all in open creative acts, arise only as a result of the decision-making that comes later in the selection and iterative process. Sketches that are created with no clear purpose or reason, as is common in open creative acts, are stylistically unconstrained. Randomness and chance play a large role; there is no *a priori* dynamic object determining the style. In this third scenario, the dynamic object begins to develop only with the establishment of an “interesting direction” and becomes clearer and gains agency coincident with progressively greater awareness of what is required in terms of stylistic consistency.

4 Critiques of the three options

Each of these three options is vulnerable to criticism.

With respect to option A, the quick response is to ask how one can speak of an infinite number of discrete dynamic objects, existing in a quasi-reality in which they are only possible selections. Doesn't this invalidate the very move Peirce was trying to make in proposing the notion of the dynamic object as single actual real, determining signs and toward which understanding will converge? We might try to save the move by suggesting a derivation, alluded to above. The derivation is to claim that the dynamic object exists within "the imagination" of the designer, where the imagination is the ability to conjure (i.e. select) the waiting dynamic objects. But this alternative suffers from two problems: first, it depletes the word "imagination" of its ability to really originate; and second, if the designer has the dynamic object already compelling him from within his imagination (as ready-made infinitely variable stylistic alternatives) it suggests an infinite regression within the mind and psychology of the designer. The designer's idea came from a dynamic object presumably inside his mind. It not only psychologizes²² the semiotic process, but from whence came that dynamic object (now turned inspiration)? From a deeper dynamic object, and so on?²³

Meanwhile, in option B, sketches spontaneously arise without a nudge from a determining dynamic object. Still, surely, these sketches are not completely random chance-like things. They are characters of the alphabet, a constraint that is retained even throughout the doodling process; they are being shaped in certain consistent ways, even though there is variation from one iteration to the next. If the agency for these doodles is the creative designer, then not only does the willfulness of the designer bring them into being, but some latent sense of taste or rightness (whose? from where?) must be partially driving them as well. This sense of appropriateness must have some basis or source, even if that something is mysterious or ineffable. So it is not satisfying to say the designer completely invents them without there being some conditions that constrain and inspire the designer to do the inventing in particular ways or along certain patterns of thought. But what exerts these "moments of will" remains a mystery. If that source is, indeed, the dynamic object, then it is difficult to separate the dynamic object from some combination of the artist's will, cultural moment, or again, psychology. Placing the dynamic object into the mind of the maker is to risk the same traps of infinite regress and psychologizing that we

22 The word "psychologizes" is not meant pejoratively, but simply points to the problem that the logic hasn't been taken far enough. In semiotics, especially of the Peircean rather than Jamesian variety, mechanisms of signification must be explained solely in terms of the structure of sign action, not left to exist in a mental, extra-semiotic, state. The mental must ultimately be described in semiotic terms.

23 The only evasion of the problem would seem to be to claim that the dynamic object itself is *extra-semiotic*: a monadical being of a different kind than us and the semiotic world we inhabit. How can this be, even while providing the agency for semiosis? This is the *Deus ex machina* move, which is to all extents and purposes, the view that God invests the genius of artists. All creation is from God (the highest general expression of the dynamic object). It's a possible ploy (as all things are, with a God move), but not, in my book, coherent.

recounted in option A. We get rid of the souls waiting to be born, but we remain trapped in a kind of double agency in which the dynamic object and the artist struggle for power over a single impulse.

In both options A and B, the problem shifts to the mind and will of the artist. What explains a selection from an infinite number of possibles in A? What instigates the “idea,” acts as motivation, in B?

Which leaves us with option C. And while it may be heretical in terms of pure Peircean semiotics, this move evades the problem of infinite regress as well as conferring agency to the designer without the redundancy of a dynamic object. In this option, the earliest sketches flow, *ex nihilo*, from the pen. It is only after the artist observes “favorable” or interesting results that generate additional ideas, that iterations begin to converge upon a particular look. At that point, the *evolving* dynamic object plays an increasingly greater role in the development of further drawings. This captures quite well the experience of creating a stylistic font. Once the style begins to emerge, successive characters must hew to it.

However, the *ex nihilo* aspect in option C, is, to say the least, troubling. How do early doodles begin? Surely the pen is not the agent of them. Something must have been prior to, or motivated, the production of the initial sketches. I hear the designer in me assert the motivation comes from “whatever makes me who I am.” In his studies of creativity, Robert Solso lists, “intention, interest, previous knowledge, movement, unconscious motivation, and context.”²⁴ But now this threatens to become such an amorphous and diffused collection of potential influences on the hand, that it is hardly an improvement. If we are to avoid the infinite regress and psychology hazards, we need to describe such ethereal, non-conceptual, motivational aspects in semiotic terms, or to let go the notion of dynamic object.

Since we are edging close to Peircean heresy, here, let me hurry to ask: Can signs without dynamic objects be, in any way, reconciled with Peirce? Perhaps a reconciliation can be attempted by remembering that Peirce was largely concerned with science—especially the chemical and physical sciences. From this perspective, verifying the truth about the world assumes a relative permanence to physical laws, and an increasing trajectory in our ability to come to understand them. In those cases, the laws of nature would operate from a dynamic object that is fixed, though occluded, and the process is one of convergence upon the final interpretant.

But discovery is different than invention. If open creative acts are to be seen as examples of actual invention (in contrast with empirical discovery), then whatever cultural, psychological, and formal parameters constrain their development must yet permit remarkable fluidity. From these constraints must flow *freedom*. The generation of signs, especially early in the inventive creative act, is a divergent process. It is only when the “look”—the style—begins to be selected by the designer, that subsequent signs are made under an increasingly convergent set of constraints. At that point, the constraining dynamic object, determining the sign, is more obvious—although even then, it is found within the subsequent developing system of signs, rather than in some purported realm external to the sign.

A possible way out of the dilemma is to reconsider what it is to have something “in mind.” In the following discussion, two allowances must be made: first, being *in*

24 SOLSO, 1994, p. 136.

mind need not imply that it is fully conceptualized, conscious, or cognitive; second, it must be something that can be stated in semiotic terms. Indeed, that it is mental at all must be de-emphasized in favor of a stance that sees it as being not within the mind, but rather within semiosis. Its existence as proto-thought would neither negate its actual existence, nor divide it from a purported external reality, while its being *of mind* or *in mind* are subsidiary aspects to its being actually of and in the world of semiosis.

To get at what I am proposing, I'd like to suggest borrowing, for semiotics purposes, Whitehead's notion of actual occurrences. Suppose what is meant by "being in the mind" is just one's entire bundle of prior histories of sign exchange? We can imagine that the context of the pre-sign—that is, the contextual condition prior to some sign being sketched or "uttered"—might encompass all the actual occurrences (here of a semiotic sort) that prefigure this (and subsequent) sign production. This prefiguring does not function as "sign-souls in limbo"—there are no fully formed stylistics awaiting embodiment. Instead, the prefiguring acts as a kind of *motivational impulse* favoring certain vaguely possible gestures, nothing more. This motivational impulse results in the movements that make the sketched doodle. Then, upon witnessing the doodle as it seemingly (to cognition) arrives of its own accord, the interpretant that is bundled with the immediate object in that early perceptual semiotic moment²⁵ is rolled back into the flow of thematized actual occurrences that lead to the subsequent sketches.

Now, this would be a dynamic object that is very close to the "apperceptive mass"²⁶—all of the "content" of a mind that is not in the current perceptual flow of experience. It is latent in the sense that it is ineffable (because it is un- or pre-cognized), yet is able to act with real motivating impulse. But even as it is determining the signs—the initial doodle sketches—it is quasi-independent of them. Then, that which vaguely motivated the initial doodles begins to develop as the sketches lead the designer to a more certain path. There is no super- or meta- dynamic object that exists prior to the doodle sketches—except as that apperceptive, contextual thought-impulse that absolutely requires the subsequent *seeing* on the page in order to begin the process to being fully wrought.

4.1 A new option: Option D

So, if we grant this hypothesis, we arrive at a fourth option:

- (d) The dynamic object in open creative acts is the pre-cognitive context that prefigures and motivates sign production: a purely semiotic actual occurrence. That is, it is a chain of semiosis, one that is both a product of past signification and a progenitor for future signification. This creative, instigating, dynamic object is distinguished from the empirical dynamic object of Peirce the physicist. It has precisely that measure of idealism

25 "Semiotic moment" is a technical term that I use to frame the triadic relation of sign/referent/interpretant. For more discussion on the benefits of employing this term see pages 42-49 of *FireSigns*.

26 The term goes back to Wilhelm Wundt.

as semiosis possesses idealism, and although it partakes of mind, it is trans-mental if by mental we mean the individuated mentality of an ego-imposed self. It transcends self because the heritage of this apperceptive semiosis also shares the cultural flow and the embodied thought-signs of the society, while also being produced by and within the life-history of the artist; it figures into the development of both. This is a dynamic object that provides momentum to action, a *motivational*, rather than an empiricist, dynamical object.

5 Stylistic convergence

Peirce's realism is largely one of the empirical and physicist's sort. Putting aside his late (and questionable) advocacy for agape as a teleological metaphysical principle, he was almost entirely concerned with that which could be verified. The "final interpretant" represents not only settled opinion, but in its settled-ness, also represents a kind of validity that is counter to the thrust of the rest of his semiotics, which as Floyd Merrell shows, abounds in dialog and fallibility. That which *would become* settled represents the real: the world working "dynamic-objectly" in a particular, and ultimately accessible way. It entails that however much our understanding may fall short, the objective (as both goal and source) is not a randomly moving target.²⁷

Peirce had less to say about art, even though aesthetics, in the end, became of prime foundational importance. But the aesthetic—or the admirable *per se*²⁸—first of all is probably never *per se*, and if admirable, its universal admirability is hardly to be expected in the same way as universal agreement over, say, the relative hardness of diamond to chalk. After all, what does it mean to say that listeners arrive at a settled opinion regarding the aesthetic or emotional content of Bach's 3rd Brandenburg Concerto or Jay Z's 3rd CD? Are one person's emotions more correct and another's less correct until arriving at the valid, "truthful" emotions?

When the semiotics of open creative action happens through improvisation, it feels as if a selection is being made, within instants, from an almost infinite variety of choices. But as iterations continue, the will or whim of the artist narrows its focus. One might say will becomes more definite, while whim erodes. When a doodle shows you something that you hadn't expected—something interesting and worth exploring further, you enter that new direction with more iterations. It feels something like entering a door into a darkened room, finding candidates (more sketches) as you go (figure 2). You are soon working out a puzzle that wants to be made complete, but it's a puzzle of your own making. As you work, however, the choices become more defined, more clear. Whereas it is impossible to say an early doodle is "right" or "wrong"—the words seem ludicrous when applied to the exploratory sketches—later in the process not only are those judgments easy to make, but "right" and "wrong" are way too vague and give way, at critique, to specific descriptions of what is wrong and precisely how it can be made right. These later sketches happen after the font as a system of glyphs is attaining a clear style.

27 That this is difficult to square with his tychism remains one of Peirce's enigmas.

28 CP 1.612-613.

In any creative style, there needs to be stylistic aesthetic wholeness—what might be called “novel unity.” The sense of unity is the sense of rightness, of “good fit.”



Figure 2. Late iterations on the lowercase “e” in an unreleased italic typeface. Notice the struggle to “get right” the weight of the thins as well as the inclination. By this stage, of the process, after hundreds of iterations, style is well established, and the stylistic dynamic object is a strong converging force guiding each glyph. The problem is less one of creativity and more a question of craft and skillful drafting.

This sense of novel unity or rightness is the developing *stylistic* dynamic object. Once a style is selected, that style becomes defined only with the creation of more glyphs. And as the style becomes more clear, the dynamic object that is *that style’s novel unity* increasingly constrains subsequent glyphs to stay within the coherence of the style. The mode of production shifts from divergent to convergent. The dynamic object is not only birthed as a particular stylistic manner, but it develops, becoming more clear, narrow and rigid through time with the creation of more of the glyphs. The dynamic object grows from a quite hazy beginning that can be only characterized as “something interesting happening here”, becoming increasingly demonstrable, effable, clear and definite during subsequent work. By the end of a font’s development, it is possible to think of the dynamic object as being the particular novel stylistic unity of the set of glyphs, which each glyph both exemplifies and indexes, and which indeed largely determines any subsequent signs that may be added to the font set (Figure 3).

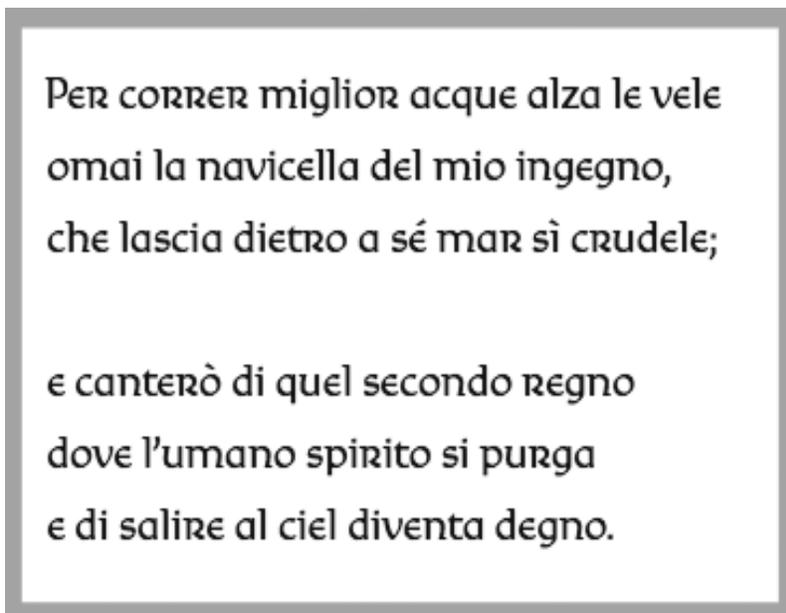


Figure 3. The typeface Rieven Uncial completed in 2010. The lowercase “a” with the arrow in figure 1 above became the seed character for the development of this font. The text is the opening of Dante’s *Purgatorio*.

6 Conclusion: five propositions concerning the dynamic object of creative acts

If the open creative act presents us with a paradox that requires us to re-examine the dynamic object, so the recounting of its application in open creative acts leads us to two distinct additional forms, or manifestations, of dynamic objects found there.

The first is the motivational dynamic object that is represented by the actual occurrence of the apperceptive semiotic context. The second is the developing, evolving, stylistic dynamic object that increasingly constrains iterative sketches converging toward a novel, consistent, unified look. These two manifestations, it seems to me, cannot be reduced further, nor can they be neatly folded into Peirce’s original (empirical) dynamic object. Therefore, we need to admit three distinct versions of dynamic object: empirical, motivational, and stylistic. The empirical dynamic object determines the sign, is convergent, and leads to discovery. The motivational dynamic object is the store of individuated apperceptive context which leads one to active improvisation. Divergent, it instigates open creative acts and leads to invention. The stylistic dynamic object is determined by semiosis through iterative exploration, is convergent, and leads to harmony and unity.

At this point in the discussion, I would like to make a summation by suggesting the following five propositions which pertain to open creative acts and their relation to dynamic objects.

Five claims pertaining to the dynamic object with respect to open creative acts:

- (1) In open creative acts, early trials and sketches are set in motion by the motivational dynamic object which is comprised of the apperceptive actual occurrences contextual to the semiotic moment.
- (2) The designer's selection and iterative exploration of early sketches serves to develop and eventually determine the evolving stylistic dynamic object.
- (3) Unlike in the physical sciences, where the empirical dynamic object is stable and an interpreter's agency is irrelevant to that stability, early in open creative acts, the embryonic stylistic dynamic object is unstable and highly dependent upon the agency of the artist or designer.
- (4) The stylistic dynamic object develops clarity and becomes a more potent constraining influence through the iterative design process.
- (5) Determinacy: Whereas, in traditional Peircean semiotics, the dynamic object always determines signs, this is true only of empirical dynamic objects. In stylistic dynamic objects, this happens only *well into* the design process, after many iterations, as the process shifts from divergent to convergent modes of invention. Indeed, reversing Peirce's model, early in the process it is the signs (sketches) that determine the evolving of the stylistic dynamic object. The motivational dynamic object induces the sign production, but has very little if any additional potency in determining the signs that are produced, and certainly does not determine the full character of the eventual sign system (e.g. the stylistics of a font).

This article, which has emphasized improvisatory, open creative acts, has not developed the role of the dynamical object in closed creative acts. Closed creative acts can be expected to fall somewhere between the circumstances of physical sciences and those of open creative acts, with the design brief indexing, albeit imperfectly, the dynamic object represented as a design objective. But a deserving, full account of that will have to await another time.

I have always found in Peirce a source for imagination and a catalyst for building points of view that cohere to artistic and design experience. That some of the consequences of these views are notions that are not purely in line with pragmatism's founder's own constructions may be an indication that the views I am suggesting are, in some manner, incoherent, illogical or wrong. On the other hand, should we expect that even the greatest minds are able to anticipate all the possibilities of the ideas they have birthed? Putting Peirce's ideas to the grindstone of creative experience both sharpens them and provides insight into the lasting forcefulness of his thought. His notion of a dynamic object is one of those catalytic ideas.

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Data de recebimento: 14-11-2018

Data de aprovação: 17-12-2018