

**Desperately Seeking:
Semiotic Nomadism in the Twenty First Century**

by Geoffrey Sykes

Chapter One

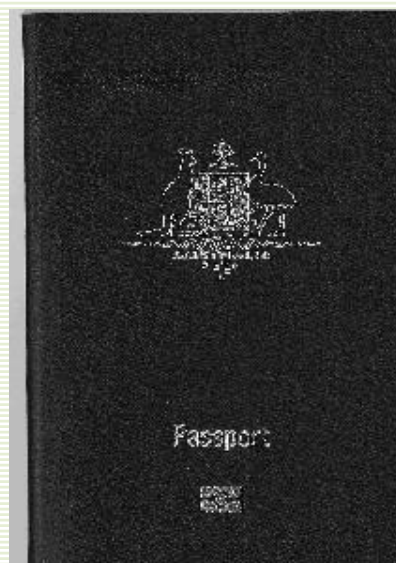
“Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus, start from where you will—sing for our time too.”

2nd June 2010. Coluzzi Bar, Sydney airport, 3pm

I am sitting in the Coluzzi Bar at Sydney airport, regretting the state of flight and fear anxiety that caused me to book in luggage some three hours before my 6pm take off on my carefully prepared, three week three week exodus to Bangkok, Berlin, Finland and Vietnam. I am writing this note in my black and red bordered notebook as if it were intended for some audience at some time, but actually it has only been an hour or less since I decided to start making a journal of this trip at all. Let me explain.

The first thing I did in this unplanned waiting at an airport (an experience now characteristic of citizens of the global village) was to check my personal effects. These were methodically stored in the two side pockets of the smaller bag that I had kept after check in a cabin luggage. It is too bulky to serve that purpose, and I should be shopping for a practical carry bag but there are reasons as I will explain, for not shopping at present.

A passport (new, after weeks of searching for the old one, I will not leave this out of my sight), old travellers’ cheques (from early trip 20 yrs ago), wallet and credit card ticket, info



: study of language, sign and communication as systems. Signs are things – words, hand movements – that refer to one another, a person to another person to the world. The study is the study of the relations, that enable us to live in the world without a mind or the universe.

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itinerary, all located precisely in folders or alone in the zippered side pockets. Thus begins a habit of checking and over-checking that will occur many times each day.

The cabin luggage may be oversized, but it does have copious zippered pockets and sections, and on the side opposite to the two pockets is one longer section that comfortably takes unfolded A4 pages. In this sleeve are the three papers that I will give at the International summer school of semiotics, at the hotel Valtionhotelli, a Russian inspired castle-hotel situated on the Finnish side of the Russian-Finnish border, some 200 km north east of Helsinki. That is a main, perhaps the main, purpose of this international sojourn.

I browse one paper, highlighting the odd line and phrase in pencil but reluctant to undertake any process of revision: they are final drafts, they will do, although the first, titled, “Gesturing in an Indeterminate Field of Signs”, really does need some attention. But I am not in the mood to revise formal papers. The title, now read in this public place, pleases. It sounds appropriate as a conference paper title. So it should: the paper is the most original of the three, with a careful argument about fleeting body language in everyday talk. I feel and check for a memory stick that is securely kept in the bottom of the sleeve. I must have decided this would be the safest place for it. It is there. There are electronic versions of the paper on the memory stick, along with an additional paper published in the international journal of semiotics, *Semiotica*. I am very proud of that publication, and have brought the paper in case it can be cited or circulated in any way on the trip. There are also files of various unpublished notes, quotations, extracts, references, to recent readings. The three papers are also located on an email account on my phone, and on a server – I have left nothing to chance and am well prepared. The content of the smaller pockets is valuable property, but

the paper-clipped papers on the other side of the luggage is equally valuable in another way, as intellectual property. These papers are my passport to a world of ideas and perspectives that is just as essential as the blue document branded by the Commonwealth of Australia. With material clothing already checked, this satchel of ideas becomes my belonging, the lightweight dressage of meanings that will accompany my odyssey into the Northern hemisphere.

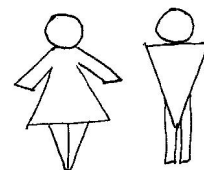
3.15pm, Caluzzi bar

Fifteen minutes have passed. I order coffee. I look around. The café is in a remote southern end of the renovated terminal, it is one I have occupied previously before a flight. Perhaps it is one of the more traditional cafes in the whole departure area. It is also quieter than the more public areas. I have been here before. There used to be a public telephone nearby which I have also used before a previous flight. The phone is probably still there but I do not move. The waitress is busy cleaning tables but finally looks in my direction and I gain her attention. A quick glance at a menu, an order, and pause.



I look back at the crowded vast inner atrium of the departure areas, from where I came less than a hour before. Seemingly innumerable check in row, with branded by names and logos of international carriers: shopping arcades, information desks, and kiosks; toilets; cafes and restaurants; departure boards; customs entrances: all organised by a vast array of notices, labels, lists, directional indicators and brand names.

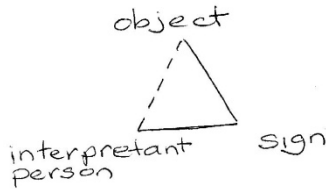
Signage. Signs. If this is my epic odyssey, it seems the way before is well plotted and mapped. Instead of unexpected encounters with creatures of enchantment, my voyage will be guided by a myriad of



clear, well used notices. Instead of steering through imaginary landscapes, I am surrounded by an ocean of guidelines, boundary points, speed humps and channel markers. Every way out from this terminal to the world seems a familiar, well taken route. I know there are innumerable examples of pointing public signs, in our cluttered cities – starting with street and road signs. These seem commonplace and entirely functional. The trip to the airport seemed apparently predictable and straightforward – by rail from my hometown to the underground terminus, my short journey across the departure area. It was only until the airport atrium was negotiated – finding the check in, checking departure time, checking in, checking time, inspecting shops, finding somewhere to sit – that journey seems more complex. Yet it looks like every sort of signage has been bottled and concentrated in the space of the atrium – at least am I suddenly aware of the environment of notices in which we breathe and travel. The environment of signs of the city, and the city railway, and the airport, are not dissimilar – both are complex landscape built on a grid of possible and actual, individual and collective, journeys and pathways. Both can be represented in forms of geometric or diagrammatic maps – layered within the geometric architectural shell of the airport is the intersecting grid of innumerable passengers and their schedules, and pre flight organisation. The only reason that the trip by rail seemed less complex is that it has been travelled before, either all the way to the airport or much more frequently through the main Southern line to Sydney that passes two stops from the airport line. Rail travel in one's own city differs from travel in a foreign place: it becomes more habitual, predictable and familiar. But habits and familiarity can be trap as much as a blessing – hence the adventure of travel, when the habits of own home city and residence are left behind. The city rail network, or underground, of a foreign city, becomes as much an adventure in perception, logistics and imagination as the airport now appears to me.

If someone asked me, sitting here, for a quick, everyday explanation of what signs in practice, I would need look or point no further than the vast display conveniently close at hand in the airport atrium. The space is almost a laboratory of signs, and remind me an early definition of sign as “something that refers to something for somebody in some

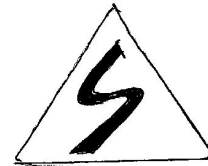
regard.” This is his definition of the indexical or pointing sign, a sign being something that draws attention to something or somebody. He expressed this idea, in terms of a solitary sign, in a well known graph.



This explanation works well enough

for the examples – in physical sciences or nature – that he first gave. As a scientist he was interested

in all sorts of gauges and devices that measure traces or conditions in the weather, or stars, or the land, that cannot be immediately seen. The same principle applies in the instance of an individual road sign – indicating the



condition of a road ahead but out of sight. It works well in many instances at the airport – travellers search for the small gender drawings and accompanying direction arrows in their search for toilets. In addition to its location and direction, there are other things happening in the way both the road and toilet sign communicate – colours, shapes, drawings, words. These are all worth explaining, but not now.

It is also true that a sign does not exist alone. It exists in relation to at least one other object, or place, or person, to which it refers – it connects a person to the world. Yet it also typically exists, in the way we understand and see it, especially in the busy constructed landscape of cities or airports alongside a host of groups of similar, different or competing signs all seeking to direct our attention: to a speed limit, a turn in the road, an intersection, a fast food restaurant, a sports fields, a factory, a shopping arcade. In a country with less strict town planning regulation public and commercial signs proliferate like a world unto themselves, a “world perfuse with signs” as one thinker said. If one disliked the visual pollution of cities one could call this apparently uncontrollable perfusion of street signage a virus, growing of its own accord. Certainly

“The endless variety in the world has not been created by law. It is not the nature of conformity of uniformity to originate variation, nor of law to beget circumstance. When we gaze upon the multifariousness of nature we are looking straight into the face of living spontaneity.”
(Charles Peirce, Collected Volumes, Volume 6.553).

the experience of going through the airport departure hall and its vast arrays of signage can seem confusing. Hence my retreat to this relatively quiet corner.

All if this seems quite reasonable. I feel in lecture mode writing about it now. Why say the obvious?

In my side folder there is a print-out of a second paper, "Culture as Territory: Re-exploring the Human Condition." The paper is sprinkled with phrases from a favourite French author, Gilles Deleuze. How humans emergence or evolution can be started as a process of constant reterritorialisation of the territorial sense of other animal species. How all animals are receptive to signs, and how the intelligence of our prehuman ancestors was doubly receptive to signs of other species. Our ancestors travelled and moved forward: they lived in what he called "a vector of territorialisation" and journeyism that is represented in fluid diagrams. I consider how to travel today, across continents, efficiently, is a modern act of reterritorialisation that is at the limit of our social understanding. In flight we are moving in a border of between our familiar thinking, and a strange non thinking that has much in common with the nomadic state of our human ancestors. I remember Deleuze said a lot about nomadism, and probably coined the term nomadology, although I will not confirm the latter observation just now.

Sitting here realize just how different flight is to other forms of transportation. The suburban train follows familiar paths which it reinforces. However efficient flight is a long passage of endurance that becomes a process or way of life in itself. I look over a crowd gathering at a departure area. Some of them will be on flights or transit for the next 30 hours. *In media res*. In between will assume a life of its own. We joke and prepare and compensate as best we can for long flights, but there is something still to be explained – in spiritual, physical, and anthropological terms – about this protracted experience.

I consider how the geometric elevated patterns of steel and glass rising from ground level to elevated heights perhaps encourage diagrammatic thinking in travellers,

encouraging relaxation as well as distraction from the otherwise stressful practicalities of getting on board. Are the fluted colonnades some archetypical collective accompaniment to our individual pathways? What is this environment, this vast territory of space rolling out under the cloud like ribbed ceiling of sky above? There is something primeval and unexplained in the apparently modern and functional airport amphitheatre. Is this the tribal gathering of small families of travellers, gathered under respective airlines and destinations, crossing and re-crossing the vast concrete savannah plain and its latticed vegetation of check in booths, counters and shopping oasis? If I am suddenly aware of signage, in this laboratory, and decide it is more than being unfamiliar or being less insecure. There is something anthropological in this ritual of human passage, through the neon Peloponnese cliffs.

Part of the café is now completely empty. A waitress stacks dishes, wipes tables, in efficiently mechanical physical actions that have become finely attuned by experience. She is about five tables, some seven metres, away. She looks overworked, and tired. She might have been on duty since 8am. Then she turns, momentarily stops what she does, and seems to ask me if I want another coffee. A lot could be said about the angle of the waitress' head or elbow at that moment – more than I could recollect. Somehow, subliminally, imperceptibly, we invest quite a lot in such nuances of the human body. We can see in the quotidian vortex of body in space, in the mundanity of cleaning tables, a foundation of human experience as a whole. First let's consider a sense of sign present due to the waitress's action that is not part of her communication to me. Before she looked up, the waitress cleared food, stacked dishes and wiped the table. In raising her head in my direction, the waitress does a remarkable thing. She directs the attention of her head and hand, previously focussed on the table, in my direction. That is, in the place of her precise relationship with objects in the world – the dishes and table - she establishes a relationship with another person – myself. I indicate yes, she keeps working. I ask myself, how does she do this, or how did we do this? In the haste and space how did we manage to exchange a distant request, and an answer to a request, as efficiently as stacking dishes? How is such a precise communicative exchange possible?

The linguist John Searle would give another explanation of the coupling of the waitress' look and my response (which I cannot now remember). Together, he would say, they comprise a speech act. He classified speech acts – including promise, request, command, and question – that we use in everyday talk. The nearby family table is alive with promises, requests, and farewells. The problem is that in the instance with the waitress no words were used. So let's call it a sign act, rather than a speech act. Sign study has always had the advantage, compared to linguistics, of allowing the study of non verbal language, including the language of the body and gestures, pictures and music. The problem remains, what types of expressions took place, on this occasion,

Semiosis defines and operates in an ephemeral yet time critical space, between persons, or a human agent and the external world. Signs are like the imperceptible airborne minutiae that inhabit our immediate aerial space. To transliterate Peirce, the air is profuse with signs. Verbal and non verbal indexes are characteristically attenuated in style – compare personal and impersonal pronouns to longer etymologically derived nouns, or the ubiquitous ordinariness of a pointed finger to the elaborate routines of a choreographer. In order to function, indexical signifiers operate in a form of shorthand code that is familiar and easily recognised; for example, the lists and types of pronouns, the characteristic corporeal tokens, of fingers, arms and head, for pointing directions. There are non verbal grammars like there are verbal grammars, and non verbal grammars, referenced by their syntactical function, help explain verbal grammars. These simple punctuated and efficient speech and gestural acts are organised in set typologies and clusters, which we learn, in order to train us to the pragmatic use and effect of gestural acts, without which individual gestural acts could look odd and ambiguous and not serve pragmatic effects. In his earlier writing, Peirce used the notion of habit, to suggest a behavioural dimension of symbolic codes that offset the existential qualities and functionality of indexical signs.

"Gesturing in an indeterminate field of signs."

and how did we know how to deal with them? What was the angle of her head, or time, of eye contact, or posture, that precisely indicated to me her question? And how did I signal consent – that I was ready to order?

Part of the answer is in the immediacy and timing of the gestures and eye contact in themselves. Here everyday observation fails – we need visual aids, photographs, and video, to measure the micro nuances of our body at work. I make a sketch. Another part of the answer to my question about this moment is in the context or sequence of actions – the contrast between her looking up with the preceding physical acts of cleaning up. There would be a pause, separating the physical from the communicative

acts. What would comprise a communicative act would be clear – why else would she pause and look up? Likewise there are limited reasons why she would look my way. The most fleeting, apparently spontaneous gestures can be coded. We are familiar with the type of gesture that indicates an order. It is something that has occurred in another café. A quick glance at a menu, an order, and pause. It is all very functional, neat this explanation of how we interact, neat like rows of street signs or airline names.

But it does not fully explain the aesthetic and precision of the act of ordering. There is a big difference between stacking dishes and the conscious act of ordering. However much one can dwell on biology and body language, both actions are highly skilled yet also highly different. What they have in common is respective body parts – head, hands, arms, eyes – and the absence of words. But a lot needs to be explained to know how a physical act (cleaning dishes) turns in a micro second into a communicative sign or gesture.

It occurs that what the ordering does resemble – its momentary intentness, the darting eye to eye contact, its focus across distant and all surrounding events – what it does resemble is the immobile alertness, the heightened awareness, of a primeval hunter who “took his bow and bent it for the bowstring effortlessly” (Homer). The search for drink and coffee, ordered in the vast open space, is a modernised act hunting and gathering – or rather an act of huntings that is internalised, transformed and civilised as part of our communication skills. I decide there is more than meets the eye, so to speak, about the flow and passage of signs in the airport.

There is that word again. Sign. Our discussion of it could and probably will have many meanings, of culture, politics, religion, economics and transportation, and will take us to many places, and countries, but for the moment discussion commences in the most everyday setting of a café. William Blake, the famous English poet, once recommended the virtue of seeing “heaven in a grain of sand”. I seek meaning in a grain, or at least a teaspoon, of sugar. Sign. One virtue of the word is its embrace of the non verbal world, of pictures, hands, buildings and films. The linguistic does not quite extend far enough,

to accommodate the moment that commences my travel. Yet this type of quick, direct gestural interaction is quite common, in the street, in shops, in traffic, in the workplace. The corridor nod, the consensual flow of traffic at an intersection, beckoning at a street stall. 'Signs language', it might be called – the capacity of a picture, of notice, of hand movement, to act as language, to function as words do in communication exchanges.

Somewhere before the arrival of my first cappuccino at the Caluzzi bar I made the decision that could be fundamental to the well being of my trip and perhaps to the well being of my career and my life generally. I have taken out that notebook (brought along for jotting facts and details), turned to find the first blank page, and commenced a journal of my travels. It will be both a documentation of event and a reflection on those events. It will record both a trip and an act of research and reflection on this trip. The trip might provide an unusual informal way of organising ideas, moreso than the formal conference papers. This is what these notes now are: the actual journal written in hasty, rough handwriting first at a small cafe table, with the first pages mainly about the café table.

Time stops, a space is empty. I feel isolated in some far flung corner a vast sea or plain. The coffee is delivered to the table. I stop writing, to notice the vast steel and glass atrium of departure areas, on a scale typical of international airports around the world. What is the reason for a building whose size is so out of proportion to its function? The glass walls face to and from the tarmac – the building does more than provide a viewing platform for flights. Such a view might have been an attraction in the early days of 747 mass international travel, but does anyone want to look out of taxiing planes these days? Is the interior of this place somewhere to empty thoughts, a larger than life green room before travellers are squeezed and catapulted by stimulus and drama on board planes and on to the other side of world. My mind and perception wanders, to a large family group in front, where adults cluster and buzz in talk that is hard to overhear, and children move excitedly by a sense of change and farewell, and by the unexplored and vast space. Two businessmen engage in intent and close conversation. A couple exchange farewell greetings. Social events form and reform in a

vast domain. The café is separate from the newish ones that cluster mid terminal, and is largely empty. This space, that discourages overhearing or even casual meetings, makes the architecture an ideal bubble or membrane in which the mind can wander, and miscellaneous everyday interactions occur.

I suddenly see a young traveller hunched over a pile of documents at a table. A solitary figure studies a map of what looks like a foreign city, along with various guidebooks and tourist brochures. The table is full of scribbles, notes, and pages of loose paper. The young man looks up. His look is one of cunning intelligence – *mētis* – of almost epic proportion. Suddenly the atrium is the quiet space of a vast research library, and all in it are engaged intensely in an intense and hushed study of charts, maps and guides of distant territory and space.

Daydreaming. Musement. This is a form of perception and state of being that Peirce, one source of ideas for two of the papers in my side folder, would entirely approve. Musement, as he termed it, is a process of loose sometimes fallible association of thinking and perception. It begins in an abstract space or page of possibilities. Formally he called this form of thinking abduction, but also used various informal names like day dreaming or intuition. Musing, I like that. I grab my smartphone. My one concession to digital culture. In addition to my satchel there is the little portal to wider learning. “Deep in thought. Contemplation, meditation”, one online dictionary says. I like “meditation” but am not sure of “deep in thought”. Then there is amusing, as in “entertaining, diverting”. Both amusing and musing are digressing and diverting: when we think we entertain ourselves. Both terms share a middle English etymology, to be idle, and an archaic Latin sense, to wonder or marvel. All senses seem appropriate to my daytime dallying: this apparently idle moment is suddenly significant and enriched. Yet the definition goes on, and links to the ancient Greek use of muse as the female gods of arts, and in particular poetry. “Sing to me of the man, Muse.” It is a primeval sense, of being human, to be actively immobile, to rest in shadows or near water away from the fray of the hunt.

The ancient artistic sense encourages me to embellish by daydreaming in a further, literary sense, as a sense of stream of consciousness. I think of Robert Browning and Virginia Woolf, and sit more poised and nuanced in the plastic cafeteria chair. My confession might not have the literary pretension or seriousness of these authors, at least not for the present, but the link to poetry and writing seems to signify these notebook ramblings. I am also perplexed by the association with all things artistic. It is something I will undoubtedly return to: Berlin is on the itinerary for visits to the theatre.

“an element of observation; namely, deduction consists in constructing an icon or diagram the relations of whose parts shall present a complete analogy with those of the parts of the object of reasoning, of experimenting upon this image in the imagination, and of observing the result so as to discover unnoticed and hidden relations among the parts.”(3.363).

I sit back. Turn the page. However solitary the act of writing might seem it is not only a record of an inner world. It is an activity aided by the tools of writing, the notebook, and the environment in which it occurs. The same environment set up to facilitate high volumes departures also allows reflection on possible flights or even impossible ones. It can be playful to notice airlines one has never used, or destination never travelled.

Tourism feeds off this sense of wonder or daydreaming about a hypothetical or possible way of seeing the world, and it is a sense encouraged through the arrays of notices,

advertisements and signs in travel agencies, papers and here at the airport. The airport is a world of signs, and it as easy to digress or dream, as it is to get one with the necessary pre-flight tasks. The airport can be a good environment for imaginary writing, I decide.

I remember Peirce was so serious about understanding the nature of reasoning, the methods used in science and in everyday discourse, that he tried to develop a formal method or system of argument that relied on diagrams, to demonstrate a non linear dimension of apparently linear argument and talk. The diagrams were not only of the mind or logic: they were the myriad patterns by which the universe and the earth itself is known. The experimental scientists, the wandering surveyor of coastlines, planetary

motions, natural forms. We are all cartographers, geographers, surveyors: we are surrounded maps in this place. We buy, store, view, refresh maps every stage of the journey. We are always *in media res*, in between departure and arrivals, in a process of journeying. Nomadology – navigating a globalised world. Rediscovering our collective humanity. The facility allows us to pick up associations not planned or obvious, to vary or play with the neat, orderly pattern of travel. It also provides a form or field for thought. A blog. Anecdotes. Reterritorialising the globe. Defining world and national orders.

*“Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
driven time and again off course.”*

Already my own notebook begins to look pleasantly full and disorganised. A laptop suddenly seems too organised meet current needs. Notebooks feel eccentric, and philosophical. I am glad the old faithful was left at home. I came to the quiet place in the departure area but have already filled it with thoughts and jottings of my own – my personal world of references and signs not competes with the public clutter of the departure area. Rather than feeling enervated by the semiotic bedlam of the airport, I am now invigorated and feel right at home.

This trip has been carefully and ambitiously organised more than any previous international journey of mine. The planning of a trip exists in some pleasing if frustrating form of causative logic, that enables you to decide and predict where you will be, and sleep, and when you will travel, at what hour, many weeks before the actual trip. Within the travel plan is the detailed 4 day conference agenda that I received a week ago – I know within a matter of minutes when I will deliver each paper, in what room, and who will organise that session. There are still unplanned details – the hotel in Hanoi, a train in Finland, opera in Berlin – which still need to be booked. But these undecided details exist within a full itinerary, which ensures a probable and predictable outcome to the trip.

Yet the best laid plans permit gaps and idle hours. Lists are like that.

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AY 5960 02JUN SYDNEY/ SYD SUVARNABH/ BKK 1640 OK O 20K 02DEC
OPERATED BY BRITISH AIRWAYS
AY 96 04JUN SUVARNABH/ BKK HELSINKI/ HEL 0015 OK O 20K 02DEC
AY 911 04JUN HELSINKI/ HEL BERLIN/ TXL 0940 OK O 20K 02DEC
AY 912 10JUN BERLIN/ TXL HELSINKI/ HEL 1215 OK O 20K 02DEC
AY 95 16JUN HELSINKI/ HEL SUVARNABH/ BKK 2340 OK O 20K 02DEC
BA 9 24JUN SUVARNABH/ BKK SYDNEY/ SYD 1810 OK O 20K 02DEC

On a plane late at night, at a café in a hotel room, are unplanned gaps of waiting, resting, intervals for reflection. Musement. Jottings. Meanderings. I am suddenly fascinated by the plastic nature of time, and space. The best laid plan can be put aside, a continuum of time split into small intervals. On a planning scratchpad events can be altered, deferred, flights changed, time expanded as it is compressed. Travel is that, an experiment in time and space as much as a journey. This journal will be a log book of research into the experience of time and space, and I feel now it will become a main activity and project. I think I know myself (and my philosopher companion) well enough to feel these jottings will not end with takeoff.

It occurs again to me that I have drunk coffee at the table or one adjacent several time before, and made a call at the public phone nearby, in years before the ubiquitous mobile had become part of our hand luggage. Was a call then made to Veronica a colleague of the South, or the Finland, or to some colleague here, or to all three? At one or at different times? If a call was made at the beginning of my first round world odyssey, to Veronica in Argentina, then Buenos Aires was some weeks away. I conclude it must have been a home call. LA, Chicago, Mexico City, NY, Buffalo, Buenos Aires. A long detour North to get back to the same latitude as home. But that was another trip, another time, another reflection.

3.35pm

I blink. Whatever I might make in my own half of the world, this trip is North. Time for another coffee. This might seem binge drinking, but a good shot of caffeine helps to get

on top of the head rush of events, takeoff, information. The waitress is still preoccupied cleaning tables some distance away. Once again I manage to get her attention, and in a remarkably short period of time coffee appears. That time, between the characteristic confirmation of an order, and the delivery of the order, seemed no time at all. There was no room or need in the effortless transaction for a menu. I don't remember what I thought or did in that interval – perhaps routinely or reflexively checked passport and credit card again.

Day dreaming is not dead time or no time. It can be

a by product of efficient actions: when the conscious planned activities are completed ahead of schedule, when the crowded intervals of schedules seems less pronounced with the arrival of a second cup of coffee. When hunting is done, senses satiated, I stir sugar, then sip the nice broth or head on the cappuccino, and break the swirling pattern sprinkled on its top. It has an effect. I read the menu. When and why does one read a menu? Sometimes, like the present, I read a menu after ordering. A menu can be used for to raise possibilities or to entertain, as much as enable a efficient and quick decision.

(actual menu here)
Coffee
Cappuccino, flat white, long back
Short black, macchiato
Latte
Mocha
Vienne café
Hot chocolate
Real hot chocolate (white dark or milk choc)
Hazlenut, vanilla, caramel coffee
Affogato

My preferred order of coffee swings back and forth between mocha, flat and cappuccino – a matter of preference and habit that simplifies orders. For the past two years it has stayed the latter. The taste is one thing, but coffee drinking wherever it occurs is more a ritual, an adjunct to at least three activities – socialising and conversation, work or musement. The particular type of coffee-in-itself can seem secondary to its function for social and personal use – another reason for doing without a menu.

In this case, the first touch of hot bubbly froth and colder hard edge of the cup to the lips seems to accompany and guide perceptions and thoughts in a rhythmic series of intervals. First I gaze around the southern walls of the area. 'Coluzzi Bar', I read on the walls the words I first saw on the menu. There is prominent strip of illustrated banners, with pictures of a city cafés. The name suddenly seems familiar – I realize I have visited a Coluzzi café already on several occasions. It is a small decades old shop selling pastries and coffees in Victoria Street on the south side of Kings Cross. The walls of the Victoria Street café are littered with postcards and greetings from around the world, along with signed photographs of celebrities taken on their visit to the cafe over the past 50 years. I contemplate sitting at airport table the nature of the relationship – that one café points to, refers to or copies another.

I put down hot coffee and quickly go to the reception to pay bills and stretch my legs. Sometimes thoughts need spatial distance; there is a theatricality to thinking. She is confused. Our proximity motivates questions. "Is there something wrong?" "Is this the same coffee shop at the Cross? I have been there." She looked surprised, as if in years of working no-one had asked. "No", she said, "it is not owned by one person. It is a franchise. However the coffee is the same."

Return to table, take another sip. This is good coffee. She is right. If the sole function of the name is the supply of coffee then it is worth the effort. For I do not understand how a franchise would work if the name was not known commonly. How could a small shop, an in-the-wall bohemian joint at the Cross, be a flagship for a travellers' rest at the main airport in Australia? As Peirce suggested (in words to same effect), copies ain't copies, copies are always something else.

Too much fun. I suddenly feel marooned or misplaced, staring at pictures of old European street cafes when I am supposed to be flying to the place. I am like the Columbia space shuttle crew – they are locked away for hours on board waiting for the final few minutes of jet assisted take off. Part of me wants to get on with things, the

other takes two steps back. Why dwell on a copy of a European street scene when the reality is two days away? Having exhausted myself preparing somehow I am asked to prepare some more. To get in training, warm up, lay out and press the clothing of the mind as well as the body. Just as well by some intuition or fluke I allowed the time. What if I had arrived at the last minute?

But it is unsettling, to sit settled on a café chair for the first hour of my tour contemplating a commercial image as a sign. It is at least richer than the directional signage for toilets, gates, check-ins, luggage, shops and food that proliferate the surrounding floor space. Many directional signs have illustrations that copy or illustrate to show forth their meaning – the silhouettes of men and women at rest rooms, the arrowed pointing finger. Much could be said about the way we understand or perceive such pictures, especially when they are abstract drawing – such as the generic images of men and women. The faded black and white street café photo is no more detailed but perhaps less functional. This information quality is less to give direction than to embellish or decorate. The Sydney Caluzzi bar/café is part of the tradition of old streetscapes that extend from Sydney's cross, and its walls and style are much more suited to a place of travel and meetings than the open, uncluttered walls of the airport. The airport is full of personal stories, emotions, yet they are all dissipated or displaced by the vast, potentially clinical, emptied spaces. It is appropriate that the one café is a copy of another, and it of others; that there is a visual window to actual places of memory, visitations and greetings.

Another sip. How many sips are there in a typical cup? How does one use the rhythms of a cup to regulate a conversation? How does one balance a cup and talk, or balance a cup and write? How long can a hot cup last in terms of the temperature of its liquid? How long will I go on sitting here? There really could be a detailed empirical study of the use of a coffee in various activities at a café – its various uses as a tool for conversation, work or reflection. There are probably a dozen studies possible of the way everyday objects – chairs, cigarettes, hats, pencils, luggage, even phones - become part of role play in communication events. In the case of phones they regulate not only

talk at a distance but talk across a table. Even when there is no talk the phone-object can take part in surrounding 'face to face' talk. A phone conversation can also be mixed with surrounding live talk that is relevant or irrelevant to that talk. Multiple conversations. What is happening with the mobile at the adjacent family group? What etiquette or style is involved when your co-contributor to an extended discussion spends half or more of the planned, or expected time, on line to other places or persons. There is no-one else at my table, but conversation can be inner. You can talk to yourself as an extension or substitute for talk with others.

I finish a sip, lick my lips, take up a thick biro, turn the page of the notebook, and reflect about this sense of how café as franchise and copy makes it part of a whole. One understanding of copy as a sign is metonymy. A sign connects and relates places and persons, in this case cafés, and here a part of another place is present via a photograph. It is a fundamental human pursuit, to link one part of a landscape with another, to build associations and pathways. This sense of a photograph being an actual reproduction, a trace or small embodiment of its subject, is less common in our mass commercial society where photographs become commodities and objects of value quite apart from their original subject matter. They lose reference with actual places on the earth. Yet the evidence is that indigenous tribes first encountering a photograph really thought in fear that the image had stolen or taken part of the subject, and to some extent, there is a truth, that what the photograph captures, whether in celluloid film or in digital code, is a unique precise and actual impression of part of the reality of its subject. Metonymy. Or else, the copies make homage and create a richer sense of the original. Tribes fear photographs as they mirrored a spiritual or haunted image of their subject. Metonymy. Not an abstract symbol, but a virtual doubling of the self or place as a sign. The word should be better known. The weather vane directly registers impressions of the wind, hence in a way is changed and become an actual copy of that wind. A broken twig in the bush can be an actual trace and part of the movement of a bushwalker that has gone before. Sometimes great feeling and power can be invested in such memorabilia. Metonymy. How else do we understand everyday life, our talk, our culture? Along with litter and visitors and directional signage, the airport is littered with metonyms.

You find them in souvenir shops. Trinkets, momentos, objects. Not the t-shirt with the graphic title of the country on the front, nor the small plastic replica of the Opera House, nor a cup with some vague picture. But bits of stone, wood, precious rock, fur, red meat, wine – some actual material part of the country, that reproduces or copies or stands for the country as a whole in a material way.

One more sip. Another interval. This is a mixed pleasure, fun but not. Part of me wants to bolt and watch six also ran movies on the BA 10 flight to Bangkok, pig out on every drink, snack, and meal offered, plus more from late night refreshments on the flight deck, re-read the airline magazine back to front ten times, consider buying a duty free watch to replace the one I left behind, doze, and generally veg and time out in economy – anything other than dallying about the nuances of meaning in some obscure commercial sign at the far reach of the terminal. But musement seems to have put the trip on hold. Like some temporal virus it grows in the expanded intervals within planned events. And this is only the first, of gaps left unplanned, or activities that defer to or even substitute for what is planned. I'm sure there will be many to come.

The family seated adjacent continues to be self absorbed hardly noticing the layered effect of dimmed images on a distant wall. Perhaps a child gives them some attention. We must have some subliminal ability for these almost unnoticed and imperceptible images to have any effect. Not part of the subconscious so much as habits of thinking that have been trained and internalised. We do not need to be fully conscious of gestures or objects in the world for them to have meaning but importantly we can, if required, be so conscious. There are levels and degrees of vagueness and subtlety surrounding the focused, conscious brightly immediate world of our everyday selves. The picture in itself operates at a level of vagueness. We do not need to know the actual reference or café depicted – indeed what is confusing and ambiguous in one way is helpful in quite another.

The blurred photograph could be a picture of any café, a representative or blurred image of any number of street cafés in Europe or around the world. In this regard the

picture becomes a type or symbol – one of a set, a representative of a group of images of all street cafes – it allows a generalised meaning to recur in a particular place, it gives what we call significance to a place. It also allows the image to become a commodity, that can be reproduced at convenience, and proliferating for profit if necessary. This recognition or knowledge, of the symbolic café, is not something mental or universal in itself – it is, like all signs, something we have learnt, when young or not so young. It is a generalisation from actual knowledge or instance, of direct experience. Souvenirs can be metonymns or symbols or a bit of both. A picture of the opera house (and there are plenty of those at hand in Terminal 1) is a representative of Sydney or Australia as a whole, as well as being a symbol or type of globally significant cultural object.

End of textbook chapter. Semiotics of everyday life 101. This thinking rolls out in full sentences because I have done it before, but never in a place like this. Not in everyday life. In lecture theatres, in seminar rooms, in published papers, yes, but never in a site that is the subject of study, never seeking a breezy and personal conversational style that matches that of everyday talk. It occurs to me that this table, however odd at first, could be more appropriate than the formal conference hall and art deco sitting rooms of the Valtionhotelli. 'Semiotics', from the ancient Greek, semeiotikos, interpretation of signs: actually the term 'semiosis' is as preferable. Back to phone: "Semiosis (from the Greek: sēmeiōsis, a derivation of the verb, sēmeiō, "to mark") is any form of activity, conduct, or process that involves signs, including the production of meaning. Briefly – semiosis is sign process." That verb sēmeiō – to mark – interests me a lot. I must return to it. The point is, for centuries semiotics, or semiosis, has promised the keys to unlock all kinds of traditional and religious truths, rituals, myths, sayings, meanings. It is an arcane tool of culture and civilization, a concept that Umberto Eco used to decode all kinds of medieval and ancient meanings in Romance of the Rose.

Yet signs are not only an esoteric part of high culture. In the first instance they are a dynamic part of our immediate observation and interactions. Charles said that the world is "perfuse" with signs, and once you get on a roll about their interpretation it is hard to exclude or see anything else. It seems to quite be suitable to write about it in

streets and cafes. I return to the wall picture. Whatever else it conveys, or means, probably the main effect on the two businessmen still huddled over their intimate discussion at the table two to my right, is aesthetic. By this, I mean wallpaper. Eye candy. The visual pleasure principle. Decoration. On blank walls.

Two points about this point. As wallpaper or decoration we can assess the image as we might a painting on a home wall quite abstractly in terms of colour and composition. The photograph is vaguely of a café in another place, but equally a pattern of dots and lines, that fit in and complement the geometry of the wall behind whose structure it connects into a complex sign in itself, what can be called an abstract icon or picture that is the whole departure lounge. The modernist atria that comprise international airport settings are not unattractive. Sitting here, I look forward to seeing again the vaults of Helsinki airport thrusting up and against the birch forests and under mild summer twilight skies of the northern hemisphere. These glass cathedrals gesture towards unlimited expanses; they site and liberate our local selves within a grid of possibilities, an urban landscape, that extend like thin airborne wind blown tendrils connecting all places and persons potentially with each other, this universe of imperceptibility, and this semiotic globe.

One further association. One last sip of coffee. To make a literary allusion, our world can be measured out in coffee sips. Apologies to T.S.Eliot, but the allusion to the everyday world need not at all be as depressing as he made out, when his sad ageing character Prufrock measured out his life in coffee spoons. I am not quite aging, and not sad, and feel quite energised by this immersion in popular culture and a philosophy of language. Speaking of literature, the picture suddenly seems as if it were speaking to me personally, like the businessmen speak to each other, striking up some intimate association. I wait for this intended sense coming from somewhere else, this momentary synchrony of sense. Synchrony, a term coined by Karl Jung, the psychologist and interpreter of signs and myths of the collective unconscious. Synchrony, the uncanny sense of meaning and coincidence of events and persons that defies expectation and probability. Synchrony is a product of a world of possible

connections, out of which one improbable association, that could only be called improbable or fanciful if contemplated before its occurrence, suddenly becomes actual. Synchrony, when objects distant in time and space find unexpected linkage or metonymy, when one becomes part of the other. It seems like the connections have been caused by influences out of our control, even though the result can be so personal. For example, we might think of a person we have not met for ten years and minutes later he appears.

In this instance, I remember now the second of three goals of the trip, that is to revisit and survey the experimental theatre of Berlin. Theatre. I remember why I ever visited the Calluzi café at the Cross. It was not to speculate about language, or rather it was to speculate about one particular dimension of language, which was theatre. Calluzi was a block away and round the corner from Griffin Street and the Griffin Street Theatre, a pokey hole-in-the wall esteemed small theatre space in inner Sydney, that has by Australian standards a long, four- decade old tradition of sponsoring if not new Australian work at least quality works that can be mounted in its five by five odd metre angled stage. Especially on a Monday night, when tickets are discounted. The whole experience included an hour train trip to Sydney, a snack and wander along the other side of Victoria Street through the seedier strip of the Cross, coffee at Caluzzi, then theatre – a pleasant and affordable start to the week. It seems uncanny, this personal association or memory interpreted and unlocked in the dim outlines of a public display. I look up. Suddenly the two businessmen pack up their laptop, end their affable talk and leave hastily. Flights approach, but I am still taxing. I haven't heard a word they say – the space seems designed to distribute or muffle noise to allow privacy within a large population. I remember I am acquainted with a boffin like individual who designs acoustics for the airport. Is his concern with PA or with the sensitivities of speech acoustics of the space in the departures of travellers. I am left to my own peregrination. I'm warming, or whatever metaphors apply. Comparisons such as metaphors – comparing one thing with another based on some feature – are motivated by intense feelings, but at the airport there is enough real and unexpected, enough direct and indirect, to not need metaphoric embellishment. Within the plans, the preparation, the

everyday theatre, is a package of aspirations, meanings, effects and signs that is actual theatre. I sip at the thick layer of froth at the bottom of the cappuccino. It is always welcomed – usually gouged out by spoon, or finger, a slurp, or last sip of the tilted cup. It is not at all a despondent gesture, more a slightly poised eccentric alert and faint gesture to bohemia.

Whatever. The gesture to theatre is probably the most appropriate of all the allusion possible about coffee drinking. At the end of the day, coffee is coffee, and at best a respite or supplement to life as a whole. Some people might have elevated coffee drinking to a social ritual and end in itself – but that can't be the case at the airport, where after almost two hours of drinking the big picture still awaits. The café is a greenroom for the main act which is to follow. All that has happened, all that is ahead. Actually about life, and theatre. How theatre and life relate. The signs of both.

4.20 PM

I've been here well over an hour and a half and the sense of time and space has changed. Time has been compressed and space clearly expanded. I get up to stretch my legs and check the actual time. Chronological time beats at a steady rate, of its own accord, and I must check in to its counter on occasion. I have forgotten my wrist watch, and vow to buy one. The phone has a leather case, and it is annoying to salvage it all the time. Standing, I look down at the notebook sitting near the empty cup and feel a sense of belonging, an almost sentimental attachment to a place and sense of valued time passing. If I left the airport now to go home, I would feel the visit here was worth it, not of course as a substitute to the trip as a whole, but as an event of interest in its own right. I cannot believe there are pages written that were not planned or conceived several hours ago, that a project has been born in a peripheral empty part of a transport terminal, that this backroom ad hoc research into how we connect to the world and make meaning has begun in the way it has.

4.30 PM

I check the clock at the service counter, return to the table, and begin to pack up when a sense of déjà vu binds me to the chair. The space seems to be signalling some further sense. I look around again. Have I missed something, or someone? Has someone just sat down? In fact, it is my memory that holds forth. In an age of mass transportation travellers are usually serial fliers. They do not come to their capital city airport once – despite the airline name there are relatively few “virgin” fliers. Visits are not as special as they might have been in earlier decades. Travellers and visitors come on numerous and often forgotten times. Visits become rituals and sign posts for families growing up, for the stages of an individual’s life, comparable to rites of passage such as baptism or marriages. The aerial atrium truly is a secular cathedral. Airports might be a transitional zone, but one visit can be between or in an interval of ones that have already happened or have yet to occur. One visit links or connects other trips. Although my memory is vague, the sense of sitting in this café before returns. When was that time? Was it before my first trip to Finland, seeking out talk about Charles? Or Thailand, on another flight? Experimental performance at the Volksburn Theatre in the old East Berlin? Or a five hour long expressive joy filled seminar on expressive joyous body language in Buenos Aires. Or a lecture on icons and symbols to the Slavic Institute in Moscow? Or a visit to the home of Charles in Harvard, USA? All these places have already been hot spots in previous pilgrimages of study and inquiry. All or some or any one of them might have commenced at this place. Is this trip a re-run or fulfilment or effect of one’s or others’ past? What connects the past and present, the present and the future? What makes a life whole?

4.45 Food court

I brush aside for the moment time this larger tapestry and trajectory of memory, history, destiny, and past and future possibilities. I could probably take notes in this one place for another three hours but this is not an option. There are parameters and rules limiting idle time. Vagueness cannot be all, otherwise delusion would rule. Sign experiences intersect, the indirect thought with the direct need to board. Out of the

intersection of types of language, consciousness arises. Stream of consciousness is the correct word, to describe immersion and awareness of the world as systems of signs.

The airport is a location, an interaction of space and possibilities, but I have sitting in one particular place for over an hour and a half and suddenly some small anxiety kicks in like some reactive panic that I should be someplace else. I am not sure where this bolt of anxiety comes from, but come it does some hours before any flight, however well prepared I might be. Is it some genetic, primeval urging, of survival? Some self monitoring and warning about over indulgence in time wasting? Some legacy of being in a mobilised campaign whose details and strategies require precise attention? I leave, pacing by long, steady footsteps through a broad promenade of shops, check in counters and other eating places. I progressively push, if not barge, through a phalanx of travellers and their company together on this side of the frontier of customs. As you walk you quickly lose tacit or comfortable knowledge of what comprises “home” – the clusters of familiar and internalised habits that make up everyday commonsense. You begin to lose it somewhere between the city train that brought you to the airport, along the familiar, routinised length of a branch line into the Sydney southern suburbs, and this congested mingling and hubbub of the departures area.

I sit down at an unattended table in a vast crowded restaurant area that is not unlike the mixed food offering at a suburban shopping mall. Japanese, Thai, Indian, Korean - you don't need to travel far to have an international taste sampling. But this is not a place for culinary sampling – it is more a site for muddled mass munching than musement. Departure might be a melting pot of different cultures, but there is no sense of overall intercultural celebration. What rules apply for this rambunctious social gathering? What are the social rules?

Recapping and making new notes my writing changes: it is fluent, fast and episodic – like small portions of fast food. It is digestible, its style responds to the environment. As it grows it evolves. Energy and lines compete with the ebb and flow of peoples. A prior premise, that to survive travel one needs to become an expert, is reaffirmed. An expert

at a practice and theory of interpretation. Of signs. Of cultures, of peoples. You need to understand. The world is a research library. How you are being directed, connected and organised. With others, with airlines, with the rest of world. Travel is a thoroughly semiotic affair. The airport and its atrium are a training space and incubator. Travel is a laboratory. Each of us are researchers and translators of language and signs. We seem to enjoy this 'meta' state. It is as natural as our native language, to be a translator. Globalism has not produced a level playing field. The globe is a crowded proliferation of the competing, different social worlds. Each port of call is a vast plateau or planet in galaxy of signs that the world comprises. No hierarchical or colonial order – perhaps with exception of English. The planets in this constellation may mix more but result is complex.

I stop. Odd phrases go on and on in my head and on paper but seem too unfocused. I



look around. I feel trapped. In cafes, shops, foyers and walkways you try to adjust, focus and follow. Children run in circles. Adults ponder or hug. Chapters in a hundred epic novels of travail, hope and separation are played out. History is enacted, autobiographies unfold, lives become. You only have to see, and listen. The vast cacophony of social life growing organically in this cavernous incubator. Between the familiar and the unfamiliar. I seek inner direction in the outer indicators of flight, rest rooms, customs, duty free shops and fast food. Awkwardness, idleness, and passionate emotions are played against physical anxieties of flight time, practicalities of luggage and security of belongings, announcements, endless refreshments. I feel trapped. Overwhelmed.

I conclude the atrium space invites three states: free thought and musement, hectic intensive interactions and actions, and various rules that organise behaviour overall. Most of the latter have to do with departure procedures. These states, one indirect, the other direct and communicative, the third social, seem fundamental to our ways of seeing and knowing the world. But under the weight of the second, hectic competing

meetings and small groups, I feel trapped, breathless, by the sheer quantum of activity. I need to move.

5.20 pm Seat after customs

Funnelled from the larger space in narrow gates, queues and a low ceiling. The familiar world, the habitualised or naturalised routines of everyday life, of one's 'native' language and region, are left behind at customs at the place of departure, and what one enters is a narrowed, gated, de-naturalised, bared, exfoliated world of codes, passports, instructions, security, inspection – a strangely conformist and obedient ten minutes trial. It is a ritual, a rite of passage, sanctioned by international government order. There is no confusion about rules. Rules are unusually declarative, motivated by security, national borders and customs. The membrane of self and expression is scrubbed bare and exposed, along with the contents of one's baggage, in the first exposure to customs x-rays. This exposure, this baring of the body or layering of language that we usually wear in comfort, without embarrassment or self consciousness, has in varying degrees been peeled back, discarded, folded or hung up, as another layer of barely perceptible clothing.

The nature of this experience, whether akin to being incarcerated or even terrorised by strange environments of language, or liberated in some ritualised transcendence of one's own familiar world, is not fully known at the first departure, except as a frisson, an excitement and nerves. In addition to constant checks on the documents and finances of travel, accommodation and food arrangements, as well as physical safety, it is the excitability of travel into a realm of unknown and unfamiliar signs that is a major source of nervousness and excitability, before and during any trip. Despite all the efficiency and mass organisation of international or global travel, this journey into different horizons of expression and language remains as strong and unsettling as it ever has been, and with opportunities for quick and cheap travel between time zones and continents, if anything fatigue from the lag and proliferation of signs remains as potent as fatigue from time zones and physical relocation.

I have passed through. I am writing from the other side, a liminal, hidden domain which only those certified and sanctified can enter. Is this Australia, or some further layer of transition? It has been a wait, an expectation and an effort to get this far, but the vista is quite disappointing. Duty free. This world is a wall to wall shopping centre. The empire of shops extends triffid-like commercial tendrils beyond nations and localities. It binds nations and territories. An umbilical cord has broken, but I am connected into a jungle of vines of global capitalism. I have to wind my way through wall to wall displays of duty free. These islands of the Lotus Eaters crop up throughout the Peloponnese passage of international travel, trying to satiate the adventure of a long distance quest with the endless seduction of luggage, clothes, souvenirs, perfumes and liquor.



The Mac stand has an empty space. I spring from this precious seat. A chance to test the Ipad.

5.35 pm Bookshop

I am at a bookshop, somewhere on the way to gate 19, scribbling between rows of travel, cooking, new release novels and classics. Will I ever get to the flight? Will I survive the next nine hours to Bangkok? Everything seems suddenly protracted and long. This scribbling habit might come to a sudden halt on the plane. I choose a novel as a safeguard. Trust the blurbs, probably big mistake, best British novel of decade. Indeed. I become quite expert at jotting on the run, and my handwriting becomes progressively dashed and execrable. I am glad I left the laptop at home and don't need to be switching on and off, worrying about batteries, and writing uniform lines and neat fonts. This scribble is much more fun and flexible, and quite literary even quaint. I assume a role of the roaming author and global flaneur. But how strange, writing in a notebook amidst the new releases of an airport bookshop, having spent the past 20 minutes testing out the new Ipad at the Mac stand. They all seemed too neat, the

packaged laptops, netbooks, Ipads, Iphones, cameras, accessories. The stand is first up near the customs exit, as if electronics were more essential for international travel than leather luggage. I re-checked my smartphone – safe in the side pocket it is, although no one has rung for last three hours, and I have tried to use public clocks and flight boards for the time. Will be glad to turn it off on the plane. I spend most of most days transfixed to an LCD screen. Reality is suddenly a long interval between telecommunications. This trip will allow me to renegotiate and reconsider my heavy involvement in all form of electronic devices. The Ipad seemed so dim and colourless compared with the colour of the bookshop. I am suddenly a convert to literary culture and have yet to be converted to the advantage of reading prose on a digital pad.

The thought crosses my mind that I could be doing this as an online diary or blog. Right. Who would read such a thing? Who would want to read twenty pages of caffeine induced speculation before I have boarded the plane? What photos would I supply? High res. images of a coffee cup, or a takeaway? My boarding pass? I choose to savour my words, perhaps edit, extend, amend, my moments in airport cafes – in good old fashioned literary style. I'll blog the universe first before I market ideas in my own street.

First person yes, but not as a blog. First person is unusual enough. This is the first time in first. The voice, the ego, the self, the unconscious, the subjective, the stranger? The perspective as far as writing goes seems taboo or embarrassing. Really, despite vast tracts, never in first. Fiction and papers have always been in third person – I begin to think of myself now in third person, as a character on my own trip, but need to consciously stop using “he” to refer to myself. “He” stood at the bookshop, productively filling in time. My cousin Denise is a counsellor and she thinks a more personal style could be therapeutic, good for me, help me express feelings more directly. She thinks that my existing oeuvre of papers and plays is too formal and impersonal. Not sure if this is what she had in mind, but I will tell her of this breakthrough in style, the end of a writer's block of self. I glance at all the first person genres on offer on the surrounding shelves – travelogues, autobiographies, chronicles, cookbooks, journalism. I am in good

company, and decide then on a subtitle for the three hour long opus – a world of signs. Sounds catchy. The main title still eludes.

I notice a shop nearby retailing aboriginal souvenirs. A familiar yet welcome display of paintings, prints, painted didgeridoos and other indigenous artefacts. The familiar style of dots, markings, scribbles and sketched lines fills the shop – the art work is a diagram, and a representation of a world and landscape seen in the first instance as a diagram. The dreamtime transformed the natural landscape of the Australian continent into pattern of tribal paths, mythic features and personal journeying. Modern and dreamtime stories and meanings are marked and deciphered within the diagrammatic forms. There is something very modern (and semiotic) about the cultural forms of this most ancient people, and our neighbours in the Southern continent. I feel satisfied at this last glimpse for the tourist mall – it is some compensation for the commercial overtones of the arcade as a whole.

It is a pity the artefacts must be seen quickly and at a distance – the chronology of take off kicks in.

Sudden flight and fight instinct kicks. Have I digressed too long amidst myriad manuscripts? Have I digressed too long and forgotten the main goal of being here – to board a plane? What time is it? Is boarding delayed? Have I missed the call? Where is my wrist watch? Where is my phone?

‘BA Flight 10 to Bangkok now boarding. Will passengers please make their way to gate 30?’

Where is the gate? Literal time and space seem strange commodities. Here I am, desperately seeking gate 30 and all that is on the other side.

5.50 pm

Boarding pass and bag in one hand, notebook in another. Home. The primordial survival sense was soon neutralised – by some intuition or good luck I was very close, metres away, from the purpose. Have been in a way for hours. No sweat. No worry. I breathe easy, and deep.

There is a queue, more a clan than a queue, strangers to whom I will belong for what will be compared to the last three hours, an epochful journey to the embers of Civil War in Bangkok, and the embers of world wars in Berlin and Vietnam, and the search for meaning in Finland. The queue is thick now, and I look around in case there might be someone I already know. I check again luggage on both sides, and balance the coat and the packaged book on alternative elbows, and proceed to board.

“Direct me, put me on the road with someone.”

Chapter Two

"Zeus who views the wide world"

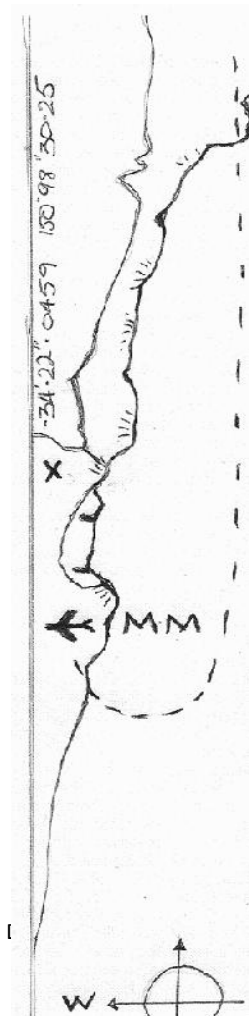
BA 10 Seat 44K. 6.10

A few minutes after takeoff a most dramatic thing happened to the aircraft. Let me explain.

Seated, I realize that the main reason for arriving early at Sydney airport, that I could not book a window or aisle seat on line in the preceding day or so, was not a problem at all. As it turned out, for reasons not fully understood, the plane was half empty. Seat 44K, but the three seats on the right side of the aisle facing front are empty – I have them all to myself. The seat dividers folded up – I can stretch and almost lie down. I prop a note book in various place, as I now do. Heaven. I felt right at home, so to speak. Comfortable. Was this always the case on flights to Europe in Summer in June? Was this

a seasonal thing? Were the empty seats due to deliberate under-booking caused by the BA attendants' strike and consequent understaffing of cabin crew? Wasn't economy always fully booked in international flights, at least in recent years?

I mention the situation with seats because officially I was seated in the aisle but could easily move to the window. Taking off, in a late winter sunset, over Botany Bay and across the south of Sydney, is reason enough to be at the window, propped up, looking over sweeping vistas familiar thoroughfares, suburbs, shopping centres and waterways. Where was I going? I thought I was going to the Northern hemisphere, but the plane goes South, past the Hacking River, but instead of following the trajectory of the George's river as it runs from the Hacking and follows the outer Sydney sandstone basin out to the West, it seems to keep on a straightforward



Southerly path. I know this, because I live South of Sydney, 50 kilometres out, outside the outer Sydney, and outside the metropolis of Sydney, and here we up going all the way down past the protected stretch of National Park coast, its tributaries, bushland, sheer cliffs and hidden beaches, further South until we are over what is unmistakably the first settlement on the coast south of Sydney, the small village of Otford which is virtually my front yard. I tilt my head, looking straight down at Bald Hill, then away to Stanwell Park, then the Tops, and at one sharper angle the whole of the township of Helensburgh in the distance. To one side are the white domes of Hindu temple, sited deliberately by spiritual surveyors of that faith, between streams, mountains and ocean. On the other side of town I see the country railway station where Louise my neighbour dropped me with two bags and a coast. "How can you travel so light," she said. It never occurred to me that I was travelling light, although once reminded it was true, my last minute packing of clothing was modest. "I am flying into a Northern Summer," I replied to her, only four or so hours before. And right below now, truly, my own house. What is going on? Check the lights are on, the door locked? I think I can see the lights on through the shadows at 30,000 ft. I have spent hours already in transit to catch a view of my own home.

I should know how often planes bank and cross and fly over this huge amphitheatre, where the coastal cliffs break inland and the vast southern escarpment commences, 200 metres above sea line, where my small cottage hangs near overhanging rocks out into the expanse of air and sea. Planes regularly approach Sydney from the South from Melbourne flying directly overhead – but I have never seen a plane bank and turn going North as BA10 now does.

6.20 My handwriting has become a true scribble. However slow the turning plane, however compressed the time of turning seemed, in a few minutes the coast begins to fade along with sun. As I look back to dark waters of the Pacific I think I can see the iron roof of Hillcrest, the family home of Lawrence Hargrave, the pioneering aviator. I can certainly see a last glimmer of light in the northern lagoon where he launched kites, and himself on a kite, in erstwhile experiments with southerly gusts, engineering, a

family of four girls, and a remote coast. He is a figure of geometric boxes, primitive engineered flight paths and precision tools engines. I have written a professional produced play on the man, produced professionally some fifteen years before, yet never quite felt so close to him visually as I do now 30000 feet above, after lingering in the prismic shapes of airport foyer. I wonder when and how that performance script will be put on again.

This was the wrong place to invent an aeroplane. The winds are not typical nor is the land flat. He tried to beat the Wright brothers but obviously failed, yet what was wrong landscape for practicalities of powered flight also located Hargrave in a landscape of fantasy, exotica and colour – truly part of a dream of flight in years before its was turned into a successful killing machine in the First World War. Here is another memory of the airport: the departure atrium as a fantasy, an imaginary space, as a theatre of dreams and a territory of hope. He was a dreamer as well as a scientist, a pacifist and internationalist. Knowledge was to be shared, without patents, for the benefit of mankind. The territory of the airport is an expansive memorial, an imaginary craft, that amplifies and envelopes the hard bodied shells of modern aeroplanes in a sense of the aerial, lighter than air wonder that was possessed by early flying machines. Yet when squeezed against a cabin window at 30,000 metres, banking into the late setting sun basking the vast southern continent in gold green hues and rays, it is possible to share that vision of the earth as a whole, of unlimited distant clear horizons, of separation from the finitude of earthbound perceptions. Territorial boundaries, ancient and modern, of states, homelands, countries, kingdoms, fade in the transversal of the planetary geographical planes along which the planes wanders in gentle curves and lines. These are the combinatory coordinates and numinous numbers that flicker on the cockpit panels, signs abstracted at one level from the earthbound geography below, indicators and global positioning that very much calculate the modern age and current century as much as any political or aesthetic movement on the last hundred years.

This concept of the whole, arched earth in space wider space is not necessarily part of ancient or tribal knowledge of humans: it is a relatively modern idea, born in poetry, in some modern religious belief, in the history of flight and especially early flight (when the act of flight was more speculative and unrushed than efficient or functional), and of course, through the plethora montage of space craft shots of the earth from space, even from the moon, that have become implanted on our collective consciousness in recent decades. It is a perception at once modern yet also primal, a primitive vision of origins and creation, of the earth as a plane of abstract possibilities, landforms as pristine patterns, oceans as concentric liquid bowls, the earth in its potentiality, before it is plotted, owned, named, organised by eons of human history. It is this visual consciousness that has underpinned and occurred at the same time as the sense of the earth as one organism, as an independence of landforms, seas, climate, atmosphere, forests and cities. The untainted lyrical novelty of unfolding horizons seen from a balloon or glider or light monoplane a century or more ago has been replaced from scientific and experiential knowledge of the puzzle and problem that now exists in popular culture. The planet from space. Subatmospheric flight. The plane reaches between space and earth, it seems to embrace the planet. No wonder, some hours before, I sat for some hours under the thrusting shafts of steel and glass panels. Not a modernist abstract place, but a stage for imagining, in particular a continual restaging of the idealist dreams of a first aviator, who invented less than two kilometres from my back door. I remember the huge frames of interlaced cloth and woods that we hung in the play. The world, the earth, as a way of seeing, created from patterns and structures.

From my back door I look down on the rooftop of Hargrave's home, and now I look on the same rooftop glimpsed and imagined from this sealed embryonic-shaped cabin. From this womb like capsule we will all be reborn into Bangkok city in seven hours. Yet this capsule is itself born out of forms, drawings, models, objects built on a verandah of that dimly distant house below. Well may the wings of this modern jet tilt wings in homage to the signature structures and ideas that gave it birth, from which it is copied, reproduced. Life is an evolving sign, constantly adjusting and growing in environments like this plane moves in currents of air. Less than 100 years ago Hargrave would have

looked up daily to the spot on escarpment where I customarily write. I feel place in a museum of ideas and shapes, in layers of meytonymic history and technology, built on a structure and pattern template that is so local and close to home.

6.30 The plane tilts even more as it turns West, and opens up a full landscape of the settlements below. I dimly glimpse familiar sites below. Not as some unspoilt open tract of nature, but as a patchwork of private estates, suburban street, environmental zones, national park, parks. Walker, Parkes, Gills, Lawrence Hargrave Drive, Kelly's Falls – when you know a landscape well, when its your first or second home, its porthole sighting from 30,000 feet is very much like zooming in on a Google map. In no time your visual memory has focused on street view and close up maps and satellite contours, especially when these have been etched into long term memory as a political battleground, where you were bloodied, bullied, bruised and baptised into public controversy, sited on faultlines of the sensitive natural environment.

Below is the subdued form of Mt Mitchell, 220 metres up on the south side of the amphitheatre. Just to the North of that, parallel to the Hillcrest House, is the small headland between two lagoons where Major Mitchell, an a-list explorer (and NSW Survey General) of nineteenth century Australia, retired into the first English house of any substance build in this area. An unhappy retirement really, after decades of searching for a great fertile inland to the continent. The rainforest, cabbage palm, towering eucalypts and crystal lagoons of the area were not enough balm for thwarted ambitions. Mitchell, the surveyor, who saw the country as West and North as a geography of lines, grids, boundaries and unbuilt roads.

That sense of place is what Mitchell did not quite find. In the thousands of earthbound miles Mitchell travel, within NSW and North of Australia, he did not follow the song lines of traditional owners of the land. The help was always there, if you know how to ask. It is not as if early human culture did not settle and territorialise the vastness of the land, segment and organise its wholeness in strict tribal boundaries. Somewhere down there below and transversing the black body of the continent stretching forth to

the West are the myriad of almost invisible, dimly remembered, walking tracks, geographical features, tribal boundaries and dreamtime events that criss cross this vast island continent. This plane will fly over 250 ancient indigenous nation territories before it flies over another modern national state. The problem for someone like Mitchell is that he had such a proud, individualist and competitive view of his own achievement: he did not seek to benefit or follow or learn from the millennia of collected human knowledge. To be fair, no one at the time of Mitchell really knew how the continent for 60000 years was plotted and settled, that human settlement was like an ancient and very successful human civilisation than the terra nullius or unmapped, unbounded place claimed by Joseph Banks just over 200 years ago on behalf of the British crown. When you travel across this land, you see it not only in its modern sense of a whole, interdependent earth: you see an archaeology, a deep sense of your own society, layered trove of the present, past and distant past.

Too quite different, significant historical figures: Lawrence Hargrave, the Edwardian patrician man of science, who gave up his income for an ideal of a world based on new perception of the earth and airborne travel; and Thomas Mitchell, early nineteenth century man of exploration, settlement, Empire, acquisition of wealth, fallibly intersecting with indigenous society. Two quite different senses of geography and science. I have written about Mitchell, although as with Hargrave never actually while living where I do today. The coincidence, of coming for another reason to a place already in my imagination, increases the imaginary value of the landscape below. I breathe deep, sink into the chair. It is as if fresh fragrance and energy flows through the air jet above, along with oxygen.

6.45 The passenger in front pushes their seat back to the maximum. 30 minutes into the flight and I am out of my comfort zone. Economy is a risky class. I stand, move to the aisle, stretch up to the luggage container, and from the side pocket of the bag extract my third printed paper. I sit in the aisle seat, and position papers on the second seat, feeling replete with the luxury of space. Why am I leaving, with such treasures on one's doorstep? Somehow the Elysium of Northern sights has enchanted, but for the

moment world below seems vast in its history and place. In the darkened cocoon of the plane's cabin, flying over a shadowy primordial land of mythology, of deeply gorged ancient rocks and vast seas and protruding plateaus of the escarpment mountains that ring Sydney, I read my argument about the signs of territory, about the connections and patterns by which humans first surveyed the landscape.

My paper derives from the theory of semiotics of another Frenchman, Claude Lévi Strauss, who like Foucault spent a lot of time in Parisian cafes and lecture halls. For an anthropologist, limited field work was risky. Soon we will fly over the territory of Arunta people on around Alice Springs. Claude wrote a huge book full of diagrams and codes and interpretation of the systems of signs and meanings of this people – of their kinship, marriage, food, ceremonies, taboos and law. Yet he never visited Central Australia. He relied on third party field study, more interested in the structures, and logic and complex organisation identified in tribal life. His work was called structuralism. 30,000 metres below I sense structures that I cannot see, patterns of landforms, lines of narratives, demarcations and boundaries, of white and black settlement. By now we have flown over several ancient nations of the first people of this continent. This flight passes over more than the artificially straight state borders of modern Australia but also over the undulating borders dreamtime tapestry of the hundreds of tribal lands, as they follow features of landform, mountains and streams. What Claude affirmed was the complexity and logic in what first white settlers saw as the simple life of nomadic aboriginals. If Claude had visited the continent he might also have begun to understand the structure of its dreamtime map.

I read my argument about signs of southern geography, about a new structuralism, a semiology of the land. I am a little proud of this argument – it seems distinct. I am resurrecting Claude whose structuralism is somewhat out of favour. I read all this above the grid, the pattern, of connections, between plateaus and hollows of ancient human culture, this continental field of signs that goes much deeper into the spirit, the first birth and continued rebirth of the human culture, than the clean vertical lines and cluttered horizontals of the airport.

Peirce would approve of anything integrating geography and language. His main work was part time with the US Coastal Survey, although his geodesic research was scientific. Sitting now in plane I feel onto something really in the spirit of my mentor. I tick off my paper, paragraph by paragraph – flying over the continent that it takes as its case study the argument is attested, affirmed, celebrated.

7.00. Go to put away notebook. But suddenly it occurs how special were the last 40 minutes. It was as if that interval of time was compressed and charged, in a way unlike any of the segments at the airport - how the position of the plane became a meaningful sign, connecting to the story of trip with past stories on the grounds, in such a way as to give the trip a special purpose. Suddenly the trip, from the southern to the northern hemispheres, viewed from its start from this visually stunning perspective, seemed important even epic in proportion. Am I delivering some good news to the darkened Northern regions? Am I exploring? Am I making some conquest of ideas inverting the thrust of colonial conquest which has flowed from the North to the South?

I suddenly have this sense of persons being near. I am not talking about the young lady who jolts and rocks in the extended window seat one to the front. There are numerous empty seats in the plane, but the two adjacent seem uncannily intended for unseen visitors. I stare at names on the papers now on the chair next, the middle chair in the row of three, as if the papers were reservation tickets. It is as if I am flying with unseen friends or colleagues, in this case with Charles and Claude. Veronica is a long time acquaintance in Buenos Aires, and when I told Veronica of my use of these two thinkers she said I was working in good company, namely in the company of two of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century. Certainly the two great semiotic thinkers.

A geopolitical semiology. I always had a thing about geography. The last time flying north out of the country in 2007 was to Hong Kong to teach communication to students of a college attached to Hong Kong Baptist University. a friend of a friend taught Geography as a subject, and I spontaneously offered to give a spontaneous talk to a

large first year cohort. Not sure what said or how but it worked and he asked after how did you do that? Talk about geography. It must be in the blood, in intuition, this evolving inquiry into space, pattern, place, culture.

What more can be said after last 20 minutes about trip? The travellers, this flying clan, have settled in a calm, introspective hyper conscious state mode, ready for the seven hours to Bangkok. This space, once defined by its entrance and extension from the terminal, is now no space at all in an extensional sense. Gestures are reduced in a micro proxemic environment of one economy seats. This distance, one to another, is precisely allocated and costed – for 50% premium you can have additional space, and for 100% or more you can stretch flat in business – the opportunities for physical and gestural expression are strictly determined by the physical surrounds. However seated, a tiredness and repose is imposed – most options for exercise or relaxation are excluded.

I settle into the aisle, and flick through a video and audio selection.

8.45 pm Dinner has come and gone. My first tourist ritual. Simple pleasures of wine and light food. Enjoyable consumption. Now confronted with a dominant presence of media – and an embarrassing amount of choice of channels all within reach on touch screen on rear of seat in front. I am suddenly immersed in part or previews viewing of several films, moments from television comedy, then Robyn Williams in a parody raunchy Los Angeles. What is comedy? What does comedy do to the stuff of life as it copies and mimics? Why do we laugh? I ask questions about how comedy and media reproduce and transform like but do not go very far. I have spent a lot of time on the language of media but this trip does not seem the right place. Especially when features are being delivered in a 6*5 inch screen. I watch, for hours, but don't recant my earlier impatience with digital media and telephones at Sydney airport. My journey is backwards, to realities left unexplored or overlooked from gaze of media. But media is the modern heart of culture and language; it is the hub of any study of language of signs. Media also has functions, and for moment I succumb to this cabin candy, this

subliminal dim glaze of private entertainment, this cognitive munching that follows dinner.

10.40 I get up for the toilet and stretch. As you look back there is the sight, a paradigm vision of a global society, of the whole cabin hardwired into an individual compartmentalised booths of late night, stratospheric media consumption. The rear seat touch screens flicker and pulse, like some appendage, or mental feeding, or monitors of the well being of passengers, reclining in a gentle induced coma in this flying ward.

1pm Turbulence, a rumble unsettles the hypnotic regularity of rhythm of flight. There is some undercurrent that restricts whatever freedom had. The turbulence seems a suitable reminder for the city I am about to visit. Two weeks earlier there was a civil war in the streets of Bangkok – the nightly and on line news showed a city burning, streets blockades, and the army shooting at civilians. The sense of social rules and codes as something inherently stable broke down. I had to change plans once to use Bangkok as a stopover on the way to Finland, and friends advise caution. There were protests in the city in April, when I first booked the flight, so perhaps that is one reason I chose that city – although the last weeks have been much worse than anyone imagined.

Chapter Three

“in media res”

1.15 am (Bangkok time) Bangkok airport. Not the leisurely barn of tourism of Sydney. Not at 1.10 am local time. BA 10 disembowels its clan. Transitions. Ongoing. Disembarking. Hasty retreat of musings. Quick movement through zones of time and space. Flight and fight to find baggage belt. Cash. Passport. Immigration. Customs. Only pause is sign that import or export for prohibited intellectual property not permitted. I laugh to myself. What is such a thing? Do my papers qualify? Are my ideas at all revolutionary or prohibited in this country at war with itself?

1.50 Grand Silom Hotel. There was this multi storied cavern of help, queues, information, touts, travellers, bus stops, guides waving. Help desk. Taxi. A Babel spaghetti bowl of intersecting trajectories, cultures and locals. It was all a different place, unexplored for me; I manoeuvred into a battered, bartered taxi for half an hour into city centre. The grand Grand Silom, but no response. What is this hotel booked through an agency back home? I say Silom Road, response. Driver has patchy English, the trip was quiet. The airport intense and bright in its confusion, but in the back streets and outskirts of Bangkok the atmosphere was dark and fractured. Large lit billboards of the king ironically signpost the airport surrounds and highway in a society that has not by any account been happy or well governed. For weeks the city has become an icon on international news – bigger than life, a symbol in itself of civil unrest. I enter a myth and a deep problem for my studies. Semiotics has been a pursuit born of twentieth century modernism – of the guise of progress, that this is best of all possible times, and that through knowledge, or arts, some universal understanding of the human is true. That premise, as vague as it might be put, is true enough. The problem is that the twentieth century has its black holes – it was not the holiday century that most presumed it would be 100 years ago. And it's my conscious aim to revisit the site of two of those holes – Berlin and Hanoi. How to presume a stable settled view of society – through a theory of sociology or signs or whatever - in the aftermath of the holocaust of peoples and nations and mass devastation of civilians of the past century?

In my play on Lawrence Hargrave – whose house we just visited and flew over some hours ago – I ended with him dying during World War one after hearing about the death of his son at Gallipoli and also, importantly the use of early Wright build aircraft on the western front. My play was done at a small theatre (Theatre South) some 30 kilometres down on the coast was called 'Dream Machines', yet the dream was one that ended not long after it commenced. The utopian fantasies of the Edwardian pre war times, and ideals of scientists like Hargrave and also Charles were dashed by the inflammation of war. The flying machine became a war machine, and whatever the

merit of mass travel the facts are that most aircraft built at present and for the past one hundred years have been for the military.

I awkwardly ask why am I here? What lessons am I seeking? The nature of violence? Death? The end of meaning as well as the beginning? Mass destruction? How to talk about a country where funeral of civilians killed by their own army have hardly occurred, where protestors are still on the run? Are protestors hiding in the shanties and dark shops that line the main highway as we hurtle fitfully towards the city centre? Are incomplete buildings burnt or just unfinished? Are lights dimmed due to the curfew?

I turn back in my notes for the first time. Scribbles fades into illegibility but the notes on territories and geography of my homeland written hours before remain ingrained as if etched or cleared in my memory – I could recite the phrases - “geography narratives, demarcations, boundaries, of spirit”, “of the first birth and continued rebirth of the human”, “in this grid, this pattern, of connections, between plateaus”, “a field of signs that embodies and deepens the clean vertical lines and cluttered horizontals of the airport.” Without reading them. This inquiry into people, places, regions and politics becomes somehow relevant. Here I am, very early morning in a country and a city fractured by divisions, street by street, region by region. Here as in countless other states of the global society the neat units of the nation state, created in the wakes of the great period of world empires, can crack, splinter, split. The poor North. The muslim South. Wat pathumwanaram temple grounds. This or that region of the capital. Thailand, its region and its capital are fragilely united, its traditional heart at sea on turbulent waters of the early 21st century.

My paper asks if nation states need to be re-negotiated. It argues for a kind of federalism of decentralised regions, and in Australia it boldly suggests this new federation should boundaries of tribes in homage to ancient civilization. But I am out of my depth in Bangkok. I forget paper and ideas and look out again at dark city below. The real world is below, yet hidden. Silom Road, 2.10 am. It looks like a curfew but that

perception could mainly be prompted by my mainly late night insomniacal state. This is near tourist places, just down road, the driver said, as he dumped luggage near what looked like a building site. The grand entrance to the grand hotel is boarded, the reception a cluttered temporary desk, tarps are on the staircase and the corridors open to the humid night air. A sign apologies for the mess, but I am too tired and it is too late to do anything and the room itself is fancy enough. I know there were street battles nearby – can I see any clue? Darkened steel skeletons are over the road. Was that building burnt out when the city burnt two weeks before?

I sit in an empty room in an empty half renovated uncomfortable hotel in a foreign city and think about Peirce. My mind, it's musings, seem less like a flowering pattern that it might at Sydney airport – now it is like a butterfly, flying furtively, fitfully, between dispersed isolated flowers finding strange nectars and colours. Suddenly I settle on Peirce again. Another metaphor for this strange cognition of a sense of company or synchrony with a person long diseased. Channelling. Words and ideas spring forth as if prompted by another person, as if there was a second voice in the room. 'I am an optimist even idealist I admit', that voice says. 'I assume humans have the ability to consensually meet and decide on rules of social behaviour in the same way scientists seek through a community of inquiry and research to verify the rules to apply to the natural world.' Cable television never stops, and the local 24/7 news channel replays a spirited debate between Thai politicians and commentators about the fallout of three months of civil unrest. 'I need to work hard to explain the processes other than inquiry that can control social order.' The voice in the room continues. 'By understanding these forces we can explain why the process of inquiry can fail, and social conflict result.' The voices on the television are fresh even tearful in accusations of terrorism, injustice, criminality. Here is a spotlit sleep deprived televisual window into the darkened world outside the window of the room. There is a forum of anger and tears spilling out from the screen. Black Saturday, less than 2 weeks before. 'Autocracy can substitute for inquiry Inquiry can be admit fallibility but authority does not know itself ...' Financial hurt, deaths, injustice. Sudden trepidation, panic. Not about flying. I shut down, turn channels. Am overloaded with thoughts, it's been 21 hours since I woke, its

now 3 am. I am squeezed in time if expanded in space. I turn off both channels, in my mind and on the screen, roll back the sheets, touch the phone alarm, watch some 'mindless' Thai entertainment channel and pretend for the 15 min before sleep that I am a merely casual visitor on a stopover in a popular tourist destination.

6.00 am Breakfast/reception area, 4th floor, Grand Silom Hotel. I am up early, long before the phone rings. Travel squeezes sleep, in between bouts of excitement, novelty and anxiety. I have only one full long day in the capital and there is research to done, questions to be answered and sites to be followed up. I have been in this city years before also on stopover to Europe but at that time barely moved from the 4 star condominium/hotel with its pool, sauna and restaurant. Where was that hotel? Where am I in the city?

Breakfast is decent but modest in an area adjacent to the temporary reception desk. The customary hand made Thai omelette with vegetables, yoghurt, cereals, toast. The top floor and swimming pool is out of action – end of the notion of basking in late afternoon sun and swimming before the long haul north. Not 4 star. Barely 3. I will seek a refund.

7.10 Delifrance. Silom Road. Good thing about this hotel is it pushes you out onto the street early. There is a hubbub of street stalls even at this hour. Takeaway breakfasts of fried pastries and eggs are already being served at street stalls. My imagination is still in overdrive and alert probably due to lack of sleep. 3 hours in the past 26, none of the flight. No rest for the wicked inquisitive traveller. I cannot decide if it is my mind, the time of day or if the city itself that is quiet and sombre. By twenty past six I decide it is a mix of all three – certainly the city seems empty of tourists. A large billboard of the king oversees Silom Road with almost enforced peace. It dominates at the front of the office building next to the Francophile global franchised eatery. Who can afford to eat and drink here? The prices are the same as the same franchise in Sydney. Not many it seems – the place is empty. Overpriced low quality cappuccino. I am blatantly short changed until I check and insist on correction. All done with a fake global style. O well, it

is the only shop café I can find. And I need to retreat, and write a little. The tincture of French, however fake, the symbolic colours and pastries, gives a slim context to my thinking. Yet what is thin in reality also allows thick personal association to grow.

For it is true that Charles was exceptional for his American peers, that he was a Francophile and notoriously had a relationship and marriage with Juliette, and probably met (we cannot be sure) on one of his international research/soirees to Europe and the French capital. It is also the case that I have spent a major amount of reading and study in modern French philosophers. Derrida, Deleuze, Ricoeur, Bachelard and Foucault. Despite the approbation these names can bring I have read and valued and learnt from them all, although I will not attempt to explain what and when and how and why at present while the morning sun strokes a streetscape of street cleaners and queues of tidily dressed young ladies and office workers, and a sudden phalanx of breakfast stalls. I realize the café is not the right place to experience local culture but it seems more suited to my recently found persona as a chronicler and author of first person ruminations. For these names indeed are people and mentors I have sought out as intellectual companions in recent years. I know this habit that I develop of called famous and/or deceased writers “companions” or “friends” can seem unusual, however many years ago a young peer David introduced me to the turn of phrase. Turning to a book on his shelves, he boasted how he felt as past philosophers as he did to actual friends, how he regarded them as friends. I remember this advice, from many years before, sitting in the Delifrance.

Regardless, this café, despite its French pretensions, is scarcely a suitable location to reflect on the one French thinker that comes to mind at present. I make an exception to the embargo on French philosophers just imposed, and that exception is to the ideas on power and language of Michel Foucault. This café is not suitable for Foucault even though he would feel right at home in this city. The time is the problem – he would not be here at 7am. He would most probably be sleeping all morning after a night at home in the back streets, bars, clubs, saunas, crims and dealers that proliferate here. Not much evidence of any neon spangled flesh pots in Silom Road at this hour, even though

the taxi driver last night reminded me they are not far from here. To speak of the girls and clubs that are part of the allure of Bangkok, in the same breath as Foucault, is not to denigrate either. Foucault would find in the brassy unclad intimacy of bath houses and bars an inverted dark glamour more honest and assuring than the bright commercial glamour of public world. In the working poor of prostitutes and escorts, both male and females, he would find a candour, comedy and camaraderie, a solidarity with an under class, against layers of oppression and lies of power and language in public life.

I read the morning paper, the Bangkok Post. '60% of country own 20% of wealth' 'Top 20% own 55% wealth.' 'income inequality'. The litany of statistics would intrigue Foucault, who presumed a far left wing ideology about class and distribution of wealth. 'use of live bullets', 'black Saturday April', 'bloody crisis may 19'. He would have been right at home in the May 19 street barricades and confrontation of protestors and police. It would have reminded him of the civil conflict in May 1968 in Paris. But how relevant are books penned on the intellectually privileged left bank of the Seine in 1968 to turmoil in South East Asia 42 years later? What would interest him directly in both is the propaganda used especially by those in power. Power is maintained in words and symbols as much as in bullets. The system is sanitised, crimes at the demonstration whitewashed. In the global ideology of control and fear against all those interrupt the control of corporations, the protestors are branded by columnists in the Post as criminals, or terrorists, or insurgents. It is a global discourse or rhetoric of terror applied at convenience wherever direct action against power interest overplays or truly threatens the status quo. Michel would be absorbed. He would nod in agreement to other columnists bemoaning how state control 'represses debate', how 'dehumanisation' has occurred, how 'anger and hate is still high at restriction of the freedom of speech?', how the 'rule of law' had been sacrificed. Michel would have loved the politics and the sexuality of 2010 Bangkok. I sit writing all this and remember again the airport sign, against import of prohibited intellectual property. In the light of day I consider the possibility that this might apply to me.

It is fun to imagine those French thinkers commenting on places like this instead of spending most of their life in cafes and lectures halls in Paris. That is where I first encountered Foucault. I say encounter in the sense of having some form of personal contact – after his death – apart from reading his published books. What do I mean? Let me digress a moment. In 2000 I was invited to give a guest talk in Paris. My phone now tells me it was for the Groupe d'Etudes sur le Pragmatisme, otherwise known as Pragmatismes et philosophie américaine. That is what I write down carefully. How much does international roaming cost? Yes, there are archives, and my talk is there, December 2000, it was the inaugural meeting of a group that has continued since then and attracted a good number of speakers to Paris on subjects related to American philosophy. I had met Guillaume at Niagara Falls earlier on in my self organised round world lecture tour of that year. I mentioned that the year before Gerard Deledalle had been the reader of my thesis on Charles Peirce. Gerard was well known exponent in Europe of all things to do with American philosophy. On July 9 this year Alexander Klein from California State spoke on William James, Metaphysical Commitments, and the Object of Psychology. James was a very close friend and benefactor of Charles. I am in the right company. The lecture program looks like a what and who of topics on language and self and mind shared across the Atlantic and underpinning a hundred years of thought. From the turbulent uncertainty and flow of possibility of the falls I had the honour to be escorted from lunch to a self contained lecture room and study for the inaugural lecture on American philosophy in France. Now ten years on, I less auspiciously using my phone again I try to find the name of that lecture room. Salle Pasteur? Bibliothèque Mouffetard? 74 rue Mouffetard, Paris 5e? I can't remember. I do remember a mainly French speaking audience being courteous about talk given too fast and in English – the copious lines and labels with which I managed to fill the old chalkboard. The talk went reasonably well. I spoke on Foucault, and Deleuze, and Peirce. At the end Gerard told me that the room was the same one in which Foucault has several lectures series and indeed established himself. How could that happen? In France there is tradition that teaching lectures are open to public. Hence a lecture series starting with core of enrolled students could grow by word of mouth and rumour until it was packed out at its end. This was part of a tradition of informal colleges and

occasional lectures that Charles was used to at Harvard in his time. Who would have thought lectures could work in the same way as viral videos on you tube? The institutions of knowledge have come full circle, and on line world of mouth and websites can often rival centres within academies. Is this why I am dwelling in my notes on past intellectual practices in the present moment? Do I anticipate some word of mouth, some viral effect or audience, flowing on from these humble writings? Apart from the gracious reception and farewell I achieved little follow on benefit from my auspicious Paris lecture. Perhaps I still seek an audience for the same ideas.

I remember the effect of Guillaume's words for another reason. Places can give a sense of history, a sense of encounter and contact. Places provides metonymic association, the physical furniture in a room is a part of a whole that connects to persons and events long gone. The lecturn that I used became a material sign for a philosopher, it became an significant embodiment for a whole philosophy. Tourism might seem part of an anonymous global village and as far as resorts, and major hotels, and casinos, and amusement parks, and similar popular destination, a uniformity of service and features and costs seems to be apply. As Seneca the Roman philosopher said, "to be everywhere is to be nowhere". Bearing superficial dressage, and some features of climate and nature, one place could be anyplace, Tahiti could be Penang, Las Vegas could be Monte Carlo, the Mediterrean could be the Bahamas. But within the rubric of produced destinations, there remain the reality of remnants of history, that can take travellers halfway around the world to see a grave, a memorial, a writer's home, a museum, a gallery, a renaissance church, or a roman site. What endures from history where the body is gone is the material surrounds, and these become part of the whole that was, a metonymic sign, that allows the visitor today some direct, actual link, touch or encounter with the event or person long gone.

The small French association franchised at the Delifrance Silom Road is not an example of such an association. This is the second café of my trip (discounting the rushed cafeteria at Helsinki), and both were franchises, yet this franchise is much more symbolic and constructed than the Bar Caluzzi, where there was an authentic "parent"

café less than 10 kilometres away. Any French “connection” is thin. It’s authenticity in this regard is playful at best, or ersatz or pretentious at worse, achieved through threadbare manufactured symbols – the colour of the French flag, pastries, coffee. These associations are highly generalised, not the same as being in the same room or using the same lectern that Michel used 30 years before. Technically they are metaphors than any form or part of a direct copy of a French café. The Delifrance is like a French café, in some abstract or generalised idea. If it was full of tables and chairs from France, or actual pictures or mirrors, of furnishing, and a full menu of cuisine, then the resemblance to something in Paris would be more substantial and in some degree or in part real.

The waiter who ripped me off 30 minutes before looks over, without shame. Despite the long queues of workers at stalls outside the front windows the tables inside the café is still almost empty – no wonder with the *4 price differential between local and franchised fare. He keeps looking, in a manner more officious than stylish. If this is a Francophile Thai manner then I’m off. No insult to Thai culture, but I have philosophy on the mind, and this sterile degraded example of culinary colonialism will not do the trick. I’m off, onto the street, a hunter gatherer of ideas and events and observation.

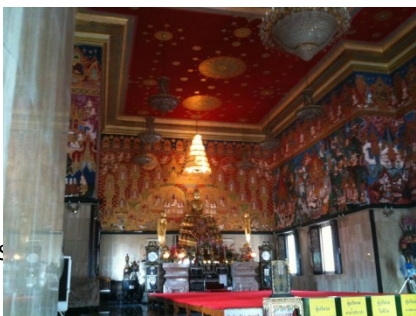
8.50. Outside the temple. Minutes before I was dropped at the gates of a main city temple complex by taxi after having cheap service recommended by one of the few tourists to be found at the end of Silom. A middle aged Australian was with a local Thai young man, but what was most unusual about the meeting was how few tourists were in the town that week. ‘Taxis are cheap’, he advised, as well they might be in the low economic times. But he was right, if you can keep the metre on, taxis are cheap. But one thing at a time. Before jumping the cab and arriving in this pantheon of holy figures painted on the high domed spiral towers, I wandered from the café to the far end of Silom, through the morning rush of vendors, queues, workers, motorbikes, tut tut taxies, taxis, buses and occasional upmarket private car, and an endless parade of deep fried flour balls, eggs or bacon rice paper wrapping, omelette, pastries, sweets and more sweets. It was Levi Strauss who studies the uncanny order in the proliferation of

foodstuffs in different cultures. It is one thing how Thai cooking is exported at suburban restaurants all over Sydney. It is another thing how the basic takeaway offerings are itemised, repeated, varied and catalogued in their indigenous setting. The everyday stuff of culture is neatly presented, in stalls and hole in the wall shops, and if my schedule was not set I would take a camera, and another notebook, and an interpreter, and catalogue to logic of sameness and differences in cooked foods and markets. And somewhere within this choice, and routine and ritual of eating that is displayed a communal sense, a fabric of the village in the city, a logic of fraternity that is born of co-presence, would emerge. I feel distant to that elusive intangible sense of belonging in tangible surrounds that comes from being a local, that indefinable sense of identity born from shared practices, symbols, needs and place.

9.00 Temple. Coming to the place of enchantment I was stroked by an angel. She dropped from a sunlit ledge, massaged my body with her smooth hair, penetrated and hypnotised with her slitted olive eyes penetrate, and bore bears gifts from the Buddha who sits in grand residence in front. This visitor is an ancestral spectral visitor, dropping from the ancient story of good and evil, and creation, and earthly kingdoms that decorate the ceiling. I wake, slouched against the wall and marble floor.

The inner sanctum of the temple and its shines and stories is suddenly blurred, a pattern of fretted doorways, intricate lace, golden gateways, waves of symmetry, mazes of marble, the space in defined within a most intricate rhythms of patterns. Charles was entirely right, visual diagrams underpin all our habits, they are templates of the soul. The world is a temple suffused with diagrams, the temple is a world, a sign and diagram complete unto itself. My anxiety falls away. I succumb to peace that was always there.

9.15. A bells sounds. I look out from the summons. Suddenly I realize that my phone alarm sounds. Sleep was three hours shorter to that planned at 3.00 am last night. I am blinded by sunlight coming from the colonnaded, forested courtyard, and



also above from the vast chandeliers that illuminate the heavens. I had noticed the light before but now as if penetrates my soul they are intense and blinding. I feel whole, at one, rested. I look around. The angel has gone. The attendant left. A solitary Thai devotee bows. It is almost as if for this small interval of time this whole sanctuary, as it has been preserved for centuries, is intended for my meditation, my purification, myself. We each have different selves, different ways of seeing and knowing and being, and each self can be known and understood as a process of signs. Time can shift rapidly in a matter of one as well as five thousand kilometres. The world is a construction and illusion that unfolds like pages in book of signs and narratives. Whatever the lingering tragedy of civil war, and unspeakable loss of life a matter of days before, I now stand in respect not only to the dead but also the spiritually living. We can be prostrate before barricades of power and also shrines of grace. This is a secret of the Thai character that maintains a continuum of peace while evading, erupting, manipulating, ducking and weaving in the thick traffic of the everyday.



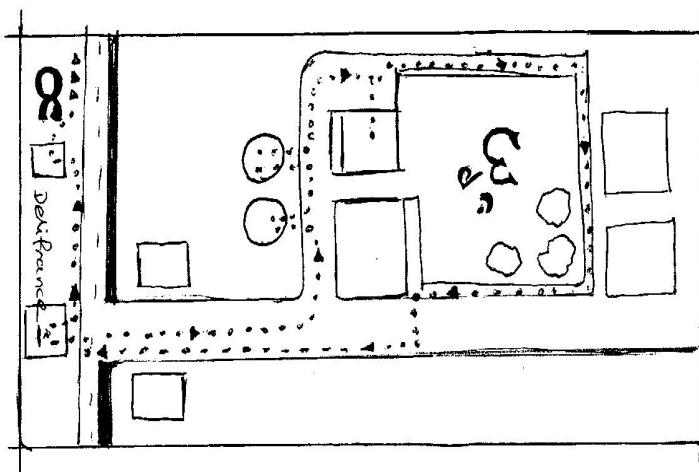
10.30 Courtyard, Royal Palace. Another quick taxi through the old quarters of the capital brings me to the royal walled splendour of royal palace. I am in the courtyard. The experience is very different from a private world in the city temple. Instead of the company of one or two I am surrounded by hoards of visitors along with local and overseas guides. The guides are everywhere, hawking their services in the long passageway from the front gates to the inner walls. They help groups of adoring locals and intrigued tourists along wooded corridors, up stone steps and into resplendent pavilions, with histories of the spiralled spectacles and royal tradition. To be honest I do not understand this baroque form of classical Buddhism. Buddhism in the West is a much more subjective affair. Meditation, yoga, good eating, self discipline, good thinking. One seeks to transform oneself into a whole, to find signs of harmony and peace in oneself. But the edifices here, breaking out in bold colours from their centuries of privileged seclusion, confuse. I need a guide.

Having already befriended him, can I somewhat humorously imagine Michel nearby, squinting in morning light and searching out take away coffee. "This holy quarter is not what it seems, religion is not a way of knowing eternal truth. These signs of religion are signs of power. Look at this architecture. The spires are behind several internal walls. Their mystery commands from long distance away for all who approach. Power is encoded and centralised in the networks of road of old Thailand that led to this



repository. The decorations are like a chant or costume of the government. The will of Buddha is in accord with the sovereign.' This commentary competes with many others, in Thai and English and Japanese, now giving a faithful account of the longitudinal, painted mosaic of King Rama Sita that is rolled out like a tapestry around the entire circumference of the inner side of walls. I hear snippets. "Heavenly statues, 4 faced Buddha." "1 kilo long, 178 sections." "retelling the King Rama story, monkeys, demons." I overhear snippets of the official guides, while all the time Foucault whispers his own subversive subtexts. 'But look, the gates are open," I say. "Locals can come in free. The palace and its temples belong to locals and visitors. Look at the devotion of hundred of locals praying up the heritage ceiling and gold tinted walks. At least parts of the Thai royal palace are opened to the public? More than can be said for Buckingham Palace. What government was like in the past is no longer true. Surely this is an example of democracy at work?" "True," he says. "Power should be decentred and democratised. That is the best we can hope for. But this edifice is a salutary lesson of how in the public world symbols and language are controlled to suit the agenda and vested interests. This palace is encrusted with military and state control – the Buddha is part of the minions of court. All the rituals are indexes of obedience. It is ambiguous – is this a Buddhist or a Royal kingdom. There should be plaques in places like these noting the function of symbols and architectures. This should be a political as well as religious museum. In view of the turmoil in this country today and accusations of control and corruption flying about you would think that this function of should be clearly noted. We need to remember that power such as represented here has not ended. It is present in different forms in society, the

government, the army. When people come here they are seduced by symbols of state power that still exist.” Although I am not sure how fair Michel is being to Thai culture or government or the monarch, his comments seem true to his own theories.



12.00 Delifrance, le bon pain, temple gates. My last impression of the palace apart from the hawkers at the entrance and unsolicited guides inside its gate and sprucely dressed military guards and police was a room full of swords, calibres, and flag, the tools of ceremony and

warfare. Despite my claims to interpret I was confused by the displays of paraphernalia, and retreated to another French inspired franchise for thought. Whatever the effect of the palace is diminished by its commodification in trinkets, cheap pictures, photos and teaspoons, by hawkers outside the front gate. Inside, the Delifrance offers little chance for reflection. An army figure in full regalia and on mobile sits at the next table. Check wallet and belongings. I leave.

12.30 Roadside. I decided to walk back. It is quite some way to Silom Road, many kilometres, but this precinct of open walks, lakes, families, walled government areas, and boulevards is wide and attractive compared to other city street and makes me start the walk back. I have passed pigeon feeders who besieged me more than any birds with packets of bread crumbs and demands for petty cash. How desperate is this underbelly of small hawkers? Taking crumbs or making eye contact with the pigeon feeders would be as good as getting an invoice. I notice large awnings in the distance. Although empty now this space is dedicated for public celebrations and events. This is the quiet time; commerce is not as desperate as might appear. The hawkers have their dedicated area and indigenous custom, the bartering is a social transaction I do not understand. What are the rules of transaction? What is an economy, money? Cash is a sign; it is connected

to rules of social encounter that might be seen in suspension by casual tourists. What is the economy of signs? This is a huge topic and I feel as overwhelmed by it as by the four lanes of traffic I tried to cross minutes ago before settling on the bench.

The day like its note-taking runs away. Let me recollect. Just after the pigeon feeders and after the temple hawkers I was interrupted by the sight of a man sitting on a square of cloth on the sidewalk. I am not sure if I actually almost walked over him but did consciously step to one side. This made me look twice at the battered books, diagrams, cards and other paper paraphernalia on the pavement, and in particular at a small sign which says 'I speak English'. The man is hunched a little, focused on his paper goods. I could not tell his age – he could be anything from 40 to 80 – but what is unusual is that unlike every other street vendor he does not solicit my attention or money. There is a self contained frugality in his gait and presentation. After the pigeon feeders it was with some trepidation that I voluntarily approached the fortune teller. I could guess that was his craft, even though there was no notice to advertise or say what he did, and until I was almost seated he barely acknowledged me. Having sidestepped the street food stalls in Silom Road, it seemed that I have suddenly encountered an authentic part of old Bangkok.

I remember looking from the taxi that brought me, seeing faces in buses of those who looked sixty years or more, seeing the gaze of experience that developed with age, and it is fascinating to consider the epochs of history, upheaval and civil war in a country like this that individuals have lived through. In one day one cannot hope to meet and discuss in English such local knowledge. However now I was seated next to a retiring yet alert soul, who warmly welcomed once he realized I was genuinely interested. 'Seventy five' he said, even though he didn't look much over 50. The spoken English was very patchy, and I relied on key words terms to make sense of the full hour of interpretation of the stars, numbers, card and palm that would follow.

I checked that no onerous financial burden would be involved or extracted – free he said, meaning that any sum would be at my discretion. First an inventory. My date of

birth. My time of birth. I blanked out on latter, but vaguely remember it was early morning. He began a ritual of moving concentric circles on a star chart, and scribbling numbers and calculations on a note sheet. This went on for what seemed like many minutes, scribbling, adjusting, reading, muttering to himself. I have decided that what seemed like disinterest to me as passer-by in his gait was in fact his deep preoccupation. His conversation was not with everyday, but with states of the universe, signs of stars and trajectory of planets. I was touched to receive his attention, not only at a personal level for he seems a genuinely humble honest soul, but also for his potential as a sage of meanings beyond the everyday.

I might be channelling Charles, in some ironic way, but he is channelling the universe, quite seriously. I suddenly satisfied, like someone who has found a source of higher order or secret magic. But what am I, a scholar of sign theory, to make of this situation? There are diagrams, symbols, charts, numbers in abundance – Charles would be fascinated with this example of reasoning with diagrams. The problem is that charts and diagrams were as he said existential in nature – part of existential or practical reasoning. Now as a scientist Charles would realize that there is an objective dimension to knowledge – he was well practiced in astronomy charts and geographic maps. However innovative map technique might be the content had to correspond to features of observation of the universe and the coast. However his theory of graphs was an extension of logic and also as logic was applied to communication. Existential graphs were a tool of argument and social debate. Now even though X did not speak for the first 10 minutes of our encounter one could say that astrology was a great conversation topic. But the pavement and thread bare carpet was lot more than an after dinner coffee table. X was focused on more than me, or at least his focus on my self was in terms of the universe as a whole. The numbers were signs of things quite unseen and distant from our meeting. We can say that the numbers and charts were motivated or connected to universal or natural phenomena. This extraordinary, paranormal connection was the reference of the signs and token and numbers of his gaze, while the everyday, business and social world harried by. What are we to make of this extraordinary display of semiotic paraphernalia?

While X goes back and forth from chart to astrology tables, muttering to himself and the stars in Thai with occasional broken English, I flash through a theory of signs in my mind. In two or three minutes comments that I could readily share with a first year class unfold. My introductory reflections go: modern semiotics is mainly modern focused on social signs. It has little to say about signs being caused by direct association with god, or the Gaia earth, or with universal feelings, or ancient heroes, or for that matter religion in general. Yet to many people that is precisely what signs are – apart from signage and road sign, signs are symbols that carry special universal often secret meanings. Colours can be signs of emotions; animal symbols of personal characteristic; religious symbols are inspired by supernatural or religious truths; the Catholic Church communion does not only represent Jesus but directly embodies or becomes the body of Christ. I consider the limitation of modern theories, including those of Charles, that seem so secular and scientific.

Occasionally X breaks into an English phrase and I look intent. It is as if he is formulating or rehearsing a full script, or is on the verge of a discovery. Then he returns mesmerised by stars and I return to my speculation. Rudolf Steiner and Karl Jung are part of a vast literature, often in new age circles, about the divine, unconscious or paranormal significance of symbols. Meaning for those thinkers is inherent, it is a natural or universal part of the sign function of objects or, the case of Jung, dreams. The problem is that what is presumed in popular culture about symbology is generally left unexplained or misunderstood in modern studies of signs.

We could compare X's charts and wheels to instruments that measure states of nature or inner states of the body that cannot be seen directly. He looks up, as if recognising, even patronising, my feeble efforts to understand. The divine intelligence and configuration of constellations, and a physical disease or an atmospheric wind pattern, might involve some indirect cause and effect that can be measured directly using instruments. However to assume relation between the configuration of vast bodies in the solar system and other galaxies, and my own personal fortunes, involves a

philosophy of reality and causation far in excess that the parameters of most physical or medical science. Having said that something I've read or heard about dark energy and black matter, about the many unknowns in current cosmology, ticks away. Besides, the more implausible the science some form of trust or faith or openness is asked – which in this instance is nothing else is entertaining. I'm asked to contemplate extraordinary links between past causes and dates, and future events, unseen and distant in my own life. To see my own self as a sign of the universe.

At the very least in the face of the unknown or hypothetical one can become an experimental science. Charles would certainly approve. If there are no dangers or side effects in this personal situation, then treat it like an experiment and be open to its results, if the results work that one can give some credibility to astrology whether it is an art or science. As Charles would say, assess the phenomenon and belief by its pragmatic effects, not as a theory. He certainly checked out paranormal phenomenon – séances and probably fortune telling – especially when his life seems a bit out of control in the 1890's. I am not sure he ever extended his interested in graphs and reasoning to the paranormal. Interesting thought, perhaps for a paper. A title comes to mind – “Existential graphs and the universe of signs” – I start to pull out my notebook but was interrupted.

X exclaims, in Thai. He looks up, deeply satisfied. I am right to call this behaviour a ritual. By any standard it is a type of religious knowledge, a practice, one shared with Hinduism the 'mother' religion of Buddhism. I remember how Bhatta and Krishna, the priests I first know at the Sri Venkataswara Temple near when I live, offered readings along with the offering of fruits blessed for gods, and while I have tearfully in thanks taken and partaken the offerings to deities this reading on the dusty pavement in front of the Royal Palace is my first such astrological prediction. My thoughts about past prayers at the Hindu bush chapel near my house are interrupted by a steady declamation. Like a scientist of the soul, X publishes his results. It takes minutes. Between long stuttering and broken repetitive English, much of which I cannot follow, he pronounces phrases of 'next may', 'this year', 'birth this may', I hear keywords

'ascending', 'prosperity', 'love', 'lucky', 'fame', 'work', 'success'. 'I am on a trip,' he says, speaking the obvious. But then less obvious to a stranger, he says 'I am seeking fame and prosperity as if I was a young man.' I sit upright. It is true, I am seeking. Seeking work opportunities, seeking audiences, for scholarship and perhaps theatre. Seriously. How does he know that? 'You look for work, for money. You seek money by travelling.' His faltering English spits out uncanny truths. True, I have been under-employed for some years. True, my association with a nearby campus has been increasingly insecure, especially when a summer subject was cancelled suddenly last year, and one or two possible positions in other were not taken up.

Now whatever he thought of the methods of astrology I sense Charles would have identified with these actual predictions. I might not be channelling the universe on the Bangkok pavement but I still have this uncanny sense of channelling Charles, wherever I go. Like me, his association with a local campus (in his case John Hopkins, in 1885) was suddenly rocky, when his position was suddenly cancelled. Like me, he wrote and inquired seeking an explanation, somewhat more vociferously to be sure than myself. Like me, he replied on occasional freelance guest lectures and publications for exposure and motivation. So he would have been interested in any prediction about the future, and unexpected fame and fortune, because frankly this is what he sought and expected for the last three long decades of his life. Perhaps I am living out and fulfilling the dreams of poor Charles one hundred years on?

I dash this apparent delusion. But when X. mentions one year, from "May this year" until "next year", again, the non proverbial hairs on my skin stand out. His words resound with some deep largely unexpressed hopes of my own – always seeking, desperately, for a victory out of the void, for creative fulfilment where least expected, including a number of known and unknown hopes for this very trip. At the very least X speaks as a wise counsellor to the inner me. He whispers in a dialect of mystery and the unconscious secrets of my inner self that I barely mouth to myself. With such utterance no wonder I think again of Charles and include him this strange foreign communion of thoughts, possibilities, and musement.

X hands over the page of astrological calculation. They seem as valuable for research as a manuscript by a famous thinker, and also like precious thoughts with the intensity and passion of a love letter. He reads my palm – a complimentary extra he says, but I don't remember any bills or implied invoice in all the eye contact and exchange that has already taken place. Perhaps there is a secret here, an answer to my recently commenced inquiry into the economy of signs, and in particular money. The essential things, the secrets, the meditation, the angelic visits, the wisdom and musings – none of this can be part of an economy. It is the incidental that is charged, and always problematically- hence the endless bartering and argument about money, because really, if life was fulfilled and a whole we should not need to charge for any of its parts. I don't remember much about the palm reading, even now so soon after it, I was so distracted by the consequences of the stars and self, but do remember the word 'passion' being scratched in one palm line both in the hand and by X's own determined index finger. "Passionate" – I suppose that is true in the business of preparing for this trip for instance it is not a word to readily come to mind but now the stopover is almost over, and I am a matter of hours from flying to my actual destination, and things seem more and more prepared in terms of all the luggage one needs for an all round journey – personal, economic, clothing and intellectual property – then yes it is passion that drives. But passion for what?

Suddenly I am jolted out of optimism. X has suddenly laid out a Tarot suite. King, Jack, traveller, it all goes well, predictably so, it echoes news from the heavens, until a black widow? Card is overturned. X stops. He looks embarrassed. The furrows of weathered wisdom on his face suddenly seem pronounced. How old is my seer? I asked him when we met and he said 75. This is astounding – it can't be exposure to tropical extremes that makes him look 50, and I put longevity down to a spiritual quality. A paradox of life: the good is what keep a person young in mind and looks.



'Is something wrong?' 'The dark woman,' he says, touching the deck. 'A dark woman comes into your life for two years.' He shakes head. Was it concern, or confusion? I don't like this moment. 'Is she sexual?' 'Maybe.' 'Is she dark in skin, not white?' I repeat myself to clarify this one point and generally. What was being said? I have only a minute or two to get clarity or the whole session is lost and ambiguous and that is the last thing I need about an individual I will probably never see again and an event that seems to have been born in deep synchrony and unrepeatable circumstances. 'Maybe. Maybe.' For the first time X is uncommitted – that is the last thing I need. Is this the figure of death? Of disease? 'Mystery. Wisdom. She will be in your life for some time, Maybe two years, then go, then all good.' Is the woman therefore bad, or good in influence? 'So the dark lady is a figure of mystery, a help? Wisdom?' X let's me put words into his mouth. 'Yes wisdom, knowledge.' I suddenly have a blinding insight, as if I have read or completed the reading for myself, as if finally I myself am connected to a destiny or pattern outside of myself, and only my own future experience will make full sense of the cards. There meaning comes from the universe and is known in the future. I suddenly realize that all the vicarious company and mentors and sources I have brought on this trip are males – Charles, Paul, Jacques, Michel, Gilles, Gerard, Robert ... the list goes on. Apart from Julie Kristeva, the French philosopher of language and signs, it is a true boy's club of thought. Well that will not do at all. There needs to be some gender balance – and if this has not already occurred it is something outstanding for the trip. Women of wisdom, female sages, ladies of light yet to be met.

I ask X for his card. I give him 150BHT, then another 100. \$10Australian is all he will take. I promise to come back here on my stopover on way to Vietnam - especially if the news from trip is good. As soon as I left X I felt refreshed, with new energy. A lightness of foot, a near dance like stride. I had just been given the second passport for the trip, a passport of life. The pigeon feed hawkers seem to have gone. A very large flock of pigeons suddenly rise from the under the spreading trees, it seems random at first in formation but then, as if following some secret imperceptible signals moves in a v-shape between two trees in front. They fly directly over close by, muster again over the

street and traffic, then disperse up and off over the old capital. I feel liberated, and in flight.

4.30 Taxi. Jottings in taxi as whizzed past the spectra of walled exotic temples of old Bangkok. Suddenly the city seems like a medieval kingdom, when towers of gold melt like the heart in a heavy air of tropical grace. I wanted to walk back most of the way but tiredness and time have eclipsed that plan. Sometimes schedules need to be sped up not delayed. Yet in this speed, there is vision. New perception can be explored in slow motion and also with speed, like a fast forward video. In my exhilarated tiredness I dream of a city of spires, of a city of unending peace where the earth and heavens are one. The rival skyscraper towers of commerce fade, hardly to be seen in the blinding light of spiritual truth. All aspects of life in the one true just kingdom of Buddha on earth.

4.50. Hindu temple. Silom Road. I wake up from a deep short sleep across city and a thankfully metered city taxi ride. 'Silom Road' came from the front seat. I would have begrudged paying more for a 15 taxi trip than an hour of prophecy. I am dropped outside the Hindu temple that is very near my hotel but until now had gone unnoticed from my gaze. The temple is odd compared to the other offerings of the precinct, yet after the Buddhist shrines its mix of incense, milk bathed flowers, festooned dimly housed deities, sweet fragrances, bells and Sanskrit chants seem as familiar as Eucalypt trees and surfing beaches. If this temple is meant to embody the divine and heavenly then it is strangely familiar. The association of Australian bush and Hindu temple is not accidental; the bush temple as I used to call the southern Indian shrine built only a kilometre or so from my house twenty years ago helped bless and layer the landscape of my home with a symbolic layering of images and gods and prayers. This sense of domestic *deja vu* is uncanny. It includes the devotees who might well have driven along the expressway through the national park south of Sydney to make their prayers. Here the symbols of the universe are truly at work. Transcendental signs - the universe visible in black smoke stained receptacles, walls of incense, fire balls, and clouds of chanting. What do believers make of this array of mystical artistry? What do modern

scholars of culture make of these manifestations of meaning? Do gods actually dwell in those stone in-buildings? Or do the stones and crystals and figures gain in value, become divine, as they are worn and rubbed and touched by thousands of devotees? I struggle for a term of explanation for this process, where an ordinary object assumes extraordinary value as it is invested with spiritual and manual labour by believers. The stone is not part of a whole, it is not taken away, but is the centre, it grows to be the whole, it is the whole becoming. I cannot readily find an available term for a practice that seems so central to how human make objects significant – to call it a habit or convention would ignore its special religious nature. Let's say its value and meaning comes through practice (pragmatic) through which transcendental or universal knowledge is gained. "Transcendental pragmatics" is the term I coin, as I kneel in front of my notebook and the deity, near the gate, unobtrusive to crowd milling for peak time pooja. I suspect the term is necessary, and indeed the process it conveys absolutely fundamental to the formation and practice of human culture.

5.35. Dining Room, Ground Floor, Narai Hotel Silom Road. Here I am directly across from first hotel and my bags, definitely in four star dining surrounds. A huge industrial plate glass window separates me from the passing street fare and ensconces me in a menu of dips, breads, fine soups, and well announced mains. The hotel is empty – the civil strife still takes its toll – I am courted by the overstaffed eatery. The occasional foreigner and Thai girl walk hand in hand outside, in apparent silence. Buses are packed. Street merchants open and close. Happy massages are on offer on both sides of the street. The noise and heat outside still echoed and bathed the body despite air-conditioning and empty corridors within. I book a room for three weeks ahead.

1800BKT same price as last night. Write email to agent to change booking. Pause. Clear. The trip is a lot more than this stopover. Check passport.

6.45 Street seat. Too soon to taxi out, too soon and too early, kind hotel door keeper says, in this peak hour. Normally 35 minutes, there is plenty of time for midnight flight. Of course there is, but I have chilled out and am ready to get on with the journey. Look at a shop of herbal soaps, oils and incense. Talk to vendor. Would I like massage in my room? A voice from behind. I have no room, I have booked out. Sudden disinterest in

transaction leads to casual talk. She is 25 years old. From poor region of country. Dispatches money home each month. Needs 10,000 BKT (\$400 Australian) a month minimum, 20,000 really. 2000 in rent to person who owns stall. Worried about quiet trade also worried about drought at home. I feel privileged to talk with someone here candidly, and also modest about her needs. Earnest, charming, like so many youth. Adaptable. Survivor. I would be just like this, attentive, modest, if in circumstance. Without education, without benefits, without middle class. Sense of inequalities that trigger May 19. Youth left behind, expectations rose to be dashed. Not enough trickle down in corporate capitalism. Too much frugality, struggle, midst wealth. Too many unanswered questions, about the economy of signs, about money, about survival.

8.00 Taxi. The charmed diligence of the hotel attendant. Find taxi. All fair. I am touched by the earnest efforts of the young seeking to find a foothold a place in the system of economy.

9.00 NY Deli, airport. Checked in. Flight and fight has put me in the New York Deli 2 ½ hours early. I need to get over this habit for early arrivals for late departures. Bide time over small cans of diet coke and orange juice. Have eaten well recently and will soon eat again. Give the 100 varieties of Gelato and New York club sandwiches a miss. Play game spending down remaining loose cash, forgetting will be will be back here again in two weeks en route.

9.15 Just driving into airport for first time saw the vaulted temple like shapes. Will view again in daylight and comment on effect. Am becoming scholar of international airports and airport architecture. Surely there are books on architecture but will let a body of literature spoil the pleasure of experience? Check wallet, passport.

9.35 I take notes on space, Gaston Bachelard, self discovery, on past studies, on Peirce, on beginning and end of search for Peirce, on teaching semiotics, on Hong Kong and teaching

9.50 More notes, on Gerard and the Mediterranean, meeting Umberto Eco, midnights in Finland, St. Petersburg, and Harvard. I wonder where this rush of energy and ideas are coming from, and then decide I know. I know where it is coming from, and make a note. I mark all these topics for future completion, at date on trip to be determined. It seems pretentious to keep on too much now. It is so late. All inspiration wilts after 4 hours sleep in 34.

10.10 Almost nod off, lean over table head down. Another coke. Better than hot coffee in weather.

10.20 Have just walked around. NY Deli at un-renovated end of airport. Main airport is long stretch of wall to wall upmarket duty free. All reproduced twice at either end for main sets of gates. I walk the whole stretch, and back. Sameness and difference at play in shops, in products, in colours, in names, here and almost every other international port on globe. Franchised elitism, the club of copies, exquisite expense and expanse. Less is much more. What would Levi Strauss say about structuralism at play, logic of wines, grooming, perfumes, dresses, electronics, luggage, books. Organised commerce, competing but not. Paradigm set of shops, the corporate tribe of brands and labels. Each differentiated within a whole system. Neat, logical, neat, produced.

11.00 Want to leave now. Told by agent that Finnair has super new fleet of airbus. Just want to watch movies on bright new touch screen, eat, drink anything on offer, sleep at least four hours, try to read a dodgy British novel and fly across Central Asia and Russia in ten hours to top of world without thought of cultures between. There is something streamlined about this leg of trip to Scandinavia, something modern and clean about Finland that suits the tenor of much semiotic study, that a systematic sketch of language and culture possible. That explains why the subject receives so much more attention in a country of 5 million than ever in my own country of 22 million. But that difference is also true of other things - like classical music.

11.35 Boarding call on screen. Check passport, ticket, wallet, for fifth time today. I'm off.

