

A Peircean Approach to the Umwelt

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Abstract

The concept of Umwelt has become so significant in biosemiotics that one may wonder whether Peirce could conceivably have missed it within the broader logical and metaphysical context of his realist pragmaticist semiotic theory. This brief paper suggests that far from having missed it, Peirce tackled it front and center at a most fundamental level.

Keywords: Umwelt, Peirce, manifestation, indeterminate potential, phaneron

When Kalevi Kull observed recently that biosemiotics' central concept of Umwelt was not yet well integrated into semiotic theory, he expressed the need to work out the relationship between Umwelt and sign relations. My initial reaction was that this demanded a prior clarification of the semiotician's conception of reality—a metaphysical issue. But then it occurred to me that it entailed an even more fundamental question, which is that of the genealogy of any experiencing within any organism. A combined feeling of *déjà-vu*, *déjà-lu*, *déjà-entendu* led me back inevitably to Peirce. Indeed, if the concept of Umwelt is so fundamental to biosemiotics, would it at all be conceivable that Peirce would not have thought of it in one form or another, even fundamentally so? Clearly not.

Consider Jakob von Uexküll's stroll through the worlds of animals. Each meadow dweller is imagined to be ensconced in a soap-like bubble filled with perceptions specific to the creature's sensory apparatus and its ability to extract from them vital information that helps map and shape strategies of sustainment and exploration. Uexküll called it at first the *phenomenal world* or the *self-world* of the animal, the world within which they act and conduct their specific interactive life. And then he called it the Umwelt, a spherical world. Essential is the word *phenomenal*. The Umwelt is primarily a continuum of flowing appearances that depend on what gets sensed by specific sensory organs and on how the latter trigger the transmutation of what they convey into a complex of perceptions categorially distributed so that their experiencing gives continuous rise to the Umwelt, inflating the bubble with its selective panorama continuously projected all around on the inner walls of the spherical screen and throughout the sphere.

While appearances depend on sensory organs, they can be easily, even naturally, prescind from them (in Peirce's sense), for it is not the organ that is being sensed, but whatever it is that it triggers through its inquisitive exposure and reaction to whatever suits its receptors. Umwelting is thus the continuous generation of species-specific pan-aesthetics all across the spherical horizon. The "subject" inside the bubble is not a spectator watching the surround-sensing movie. It is rather itself the movie in action, utterly unaware of the sensory projectors themselves. In the world of raw manifestation, there are no spectators and no spectacles. The subject/object duality has no place in it. Manifestation is all there is, and it may well be species-specific, with infinite variations both within and across species. Umweltian bubbles may overlap

one another to some extent, they may coalesce, but they never explode out of spherical existence. Sets of them may belong to (or be within) larger bubbles whenever they share plenty of common characters; in such cases those bubbles show permeability and may communicate with one another. That possibility of intercommunication, itself correlated to cooperation and community, is the stuff the larger bubble is made of. Indeed, manifestation is never a merely individual affair, for individualism implies a dualism that is not at work within phenomenality or phenomenalization. Where there is no subject there are no subjects. The coming into seeming of otherness in all its forms is as *Umwelt*ing as any other appearing.

Peirce was not a biosemiotician despite his assiduous observation of his dog Zola. He was not a phytosemiotician despite his theoretical allusion to representational sunflowers. Therefore, any talk of something *Umwelt*-like in his writings would likely be found in essays vying for considerations more fundamental than in subfields of applied semiotics.

John Deely likened *Umwelt* to the “objective world”, by which he meant the physical world as transformed by semiosis: the world as stood for by signs to interpretants. But that is not fundamental enough. What is it, in Peirce’s writings, that is the permanent and all-encompassing sphere that conditions semiotizability without being, itself, semiotic? It is the uninterpreted bubble, the bubble that is the stuff experiencing is made of prior to any semiotization. The *Umwelt* that surrounds and encompasses semiosis cannot be itself semiosis—but without it there is no semiosis, at least not of the physio type. The argument is that if the *Umwelt* is a fundamental concept of semiotics, then its fundamentality originates in the non-semiotic ground of semiotics. Peirce is looking, in hindsight, not for the *Umwelt* of this or that natural species, but for the *Umwelt* in general, the *Umwelt* of all *Umwelts*, and thus the *Umwelt* of Semiosis herself.

What is it? It has to be that out of which any interpretation can unfold, thus that which is in need of semiosis—that which calls for semiosis, that which actually conditions and even provokes semiosis because it harbors within itself, thus within its potential, a power of determination whose form will end up being triadic. The source of semiosis has therefore to be potent indeterminacy. As Peirce put it, the logic of potentiality is that it shall annul itself because if it did not it would be utterly idle—but then it would not even be a potential, and therefore it cannot but annul itself. It follows that the *Umwelt* of Semiosis is that which cancels itself into Semiosis, continuously and encompassingly so. It is whatever has the power to enter directly any mind, at any time, in any sense, in anyway whatsoever, regardless of its mode of reality, regardless of its factuality, regardless of how it gets perceived or semiotized, and thus regardless of whether it will end up being part of Deely’s objective world, and thus regardless of whether it will become “known.”

Peirce coined a word for it out of ancient Greek language. He called it the *Phaneron*, which he capitalized because he thought there was only one *Umscheinung*, a single continuous spherical pouring of manifestation, which annuls itself into an infinity of tri-categorical implementations in an infinity of organisms. Out of its continuum arises semiosis. Any *Umwelt* is primarily phaneral, and so is semiosis. Its studious experiencing is called phaneroscopy.

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