
Robert Innis clearly states the objective of this book: "[this] book explores the bond between perception and semiosis more concretely by foregrounding language and technics as paradigmatic and indispensable embodied forms of sense-giving and sense-reading." Moving in a phenomenological direction, this present work develops the argument Innis makes in more generic terms in Consciousness and Play of Signs. The virtue of Innis's connected but self-reflectively unsystematic mode of philosophy is a careful development of philosophical analysis and critique possible from a platform of consistent pragmatism. Forms of sense, he argues, are the products of 'probes' and tools. Drawing substantially from Polanyi's from-to formulation of perception, Innis broadens the scope of pragmatic language and themes to include the forms of sense that arise within the problematics of language, technology, and semiotic theory in American and European philosophy. What Innis seeks is "the universal feature of consciousness and the essentially integrative process of meaning-making with which it is identified, in all its forms." He cites Polanyi: "All thought contains components of which we are subsidiarily aware in the focal content of our thinking, and . . . all thought dwells in its subsidiaries, as if they were parts of our bodies." (2) The essentially embodied nature of all forms of sense subtends Innis's careful analysis.

One of the most striking things about this book is the way Innis draws key insights from thinkers beyond the fold of canonical pragmatists. We pragmatists (and this is a confessional we) often limit the beginning points of our work to issues raised by a select group of figures. Innis quotes Cassirer in a passage he says motivated this study: "All spiritual mastery of reality is bound to this double act of 'grasping' [Fassen], the conceptual grasp [Begriifen] of reality in linguistic-theoretical thought [Denken] and its material grasp [Erfassen] through the medium of effective action [Wirken]; to, that is, the conceptual as well as the technical process of giving-form to something [Formgebung]." Innis comments, "'Form' and 'technics,' Cassirer strongly affirms, not only are essentially linked but bind us in their charmed circles, which are not always
stable or secure but from which we cannot escape." (209-210) Innis drives his thought and the thought of pragmatists into these charmed circles that construct the bounds of our thought and language, indeed not in order to escape them, but to gather them into our self-understanding with all possible richness.

The highly polished scholarship and the stunning perspicacity of Innis’s philosophical knowledge are often overwhelming. The difficulty a reader might have engaging this technical argument is not so much losing the forest for the trees, because it is so clearly written, as it might be failing to keep pace with a superior mind working at top speed on a set of difficult problems. The last two chapters are a fitting reward for any difficulty with the more technical aspects of the argument, bringing the foundational issues of Dewey and Peirce’s semiotics and aesthetics to bear on the present state of our relationship to tools and technology. Innis successfully expands the concerns of the pragmatists by reflecting them through the prisms of European philosophers and refocusing this reinforced thought back on to questions in our present discourse. The result is a bit of an "aha!" experience concerning the philosophical power of the classical pragmatists, as well as the directions in which pragmatism must expand in contemporary philosophical discourse.

I have two criticisms of Innis’s argument. The first raises the specter of Kant, in particular, Peirce’s Kant. While the general thrust of this book is to approach something universal about consciousness and meaning-making, Innis is careful to avoid the pitfall of suggesting a meta-theoretical perspective or architectonic structure within which the examinations he makes could be located. Perhaps this is the right move, but in such a speculative book I wondered once or twice if there was not room for a little more speculation in an architectonic direction. In particular I found the treatment of semiotic expansion of language unsatisfying because it focused on the modes of expansion rather than the content in relation to which expansion occurs, questions of the direction of inquiry, valuation, and the growth of connection Peirce calls agapism. Peirce, if not Dewey, could be the inspiration for such an architectonic urge, and so this would not carry Innis off his main point of exploring pragmatism more fully. My second criticism emerges from Innis’s careful integration of ideas from disparate sources in his thematic inquiry. Innis seldom points out the error or
misdirections of philosophy, and his argument moves along other lines than strong claims of difference. Such disagreements, however, often are the most efficient means of making important discriminations clear. Innis's goal of exemplifying the connections between European and American philosophers seemed to wash everybody in the same pool. Critical opposition did emerge in the final chapter on technology, and I think this enhanced the flow of that argument. This is a mild criticism relating more to the tone of the argument than the substance.

There is a bit of a cautionary tone in the end of this book. Let me summarize it and conclude with a brief comment. When Innis explores the result of information technologies on the human subject, he concludes, with Peirce, that the aim of our cognitional scheme is concrete reasonableness, which comprises rational habits and is exemplified in self-control and methodical self-reflection. If we are caught up in technical play that reduces capacities for self-control then we have, Innis says, a situation similar to Cassirer's loss of freedom and autonomy(224). In some ways the drift of technology toward an abstraction and disembodiment undermines both our rationality and prospects for self-control. I agree with Innis's diagnosis, however I would respond in a slightly different manner. To the focus on the labyrinthine "charmed circles" I would add the orientation toward the content of perception and language in relation to which self-control corresponds. At least this is the direction my self-reflection began to move as I worked through this book, and the capacity for my self-reflection on these problems was clearly enhanced by this fine philosophical tool. Pragmatists, aesthetes, and semioticians alike owe Innis a debt of gratitude.

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A distinctive feature of many American philosophers is their desire to reconnect philosophy with other areas of thought and practice. In his recent book Becoming John Dewey, Thomas C. Dalton explores the variegated context and