

The Creosote Code

Description

I asked a colleague if she was going to buy a new wafer-thin iPad. “Yes they are waafre-thin,” she echoed in pseudo French. “I never took you for a fan of [Monty Python](#),” I said. “I’m not. Oh, is that where it comes from?” came the response, “We often say something is ‘waafre-thin’ in our household, though I never knew why.”

This anecdote brings to mind the derivative and dynamic nature of language and the role of peculiar catch phrases often repeated and transmitted, but also the role of esoteric codes in communications amongst intimates. When overhearing a conversation amongst friends, certain words and phrases stand out, but without knowing the context of the discussion the eavesdropper doesn’t know to what they are referring.

Some people are even adept at conversing on a sensitive topic while in the company of others, who are none the wiser about the topic of conversation.

I like to think of this phenomenon in spatial terms. Esoteric codes understood only by one’s associates is a way of defining and claiming space, ie territory. There are many ways to mark territory: settling into a public place with a laptop, a mobile phone or iPad, or simply wearing earplugs put a claim on space, more so when such activity involves broadcasting and reinforcing that claim through gesture, sound and conversation: “this is my/our space.”

Inserting one’s private code, recognizable by some but that can’t be interpreted by strangers, adds potency to territorial claims. Your presence is noted but without the transfer and distraction of overt meaning.

One of the ways that storytellers and filmmakers induce a sense that the protagonists are encroaching on someone else’s territory is to suggest the presence of inscriptions, marks, sounds, and other alien codes unknown to the protagonists. In Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*, the travellers found that:

At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering in the air high over our heads, till the first break of day. Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell.

In the film *The Blair Witch Project*, the discovery of twigs fashioned into signs in an unknown language contrives similar menace and a sense of trespass.



Territories are defined as much by secret conventions as they are by

walls and boundaries. Esoteric coding is complicit in the conflictual, agonistic, and territorial aspects of spatial experience.

Something similar happens with online media. I think I understand the tweets on this iPhone screen image taken soon after 25 January 2011, but I'm not sure everyone does. Whether deliberate or accidental, in so far as online media operate with secret codings they define territory.

At least, if online media are to have any claim on space as cyberspace, then perhaps it operates through secret coding rather than clear and universally articulated representation. At least the secret codings of online media have as much of a role in defining cyberspace as anything else.

Category

1. Voice and text

Tags

1. Creosote
2. cyberspace
3. esoteric
4. space

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Author

rcoyne99