

COVID couture

Description

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Why cover your nose and mouth with fabric during an epidemic? Apart from any practical advantages, and disadvantages, a face mask is a sign. Whether or not they are effective in blocking viruses, (non-surgical) face masks transmit messages. Before the current crisis I wrote a book on the founder of semiotics Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). So, I feel bound to address the sign function of face covering. The signifying aspect of face masks is all but suppressed in current reports on the crucial importance, and scarcity, of PPE (personal protective equipment).

Wasting time

But Iâ??ll start with pastimes (hobbies), about which there is also a great deal of interest in light of the current lockdown. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) demonstrated how certain leisure activities serve as signs by people who are so wealthy that they have excess time on their hands. They donâ??t need to spend as much time as the rest of us on working for a living. Pastimes not only pass the time but they show that wealthy people have the time to pass.

> â??Abstention from labour is the conventional evidence of wealth and is therefore the conventional mark of social standing; and this insistence on the meritoriousness of wealth leads to a more strenuous insistence on leisureâ?• (26-27).

Veblen wrote about wasting time and wasting goods as conspicuous demonstrations of wealth. The rich can afford to undertake time-consuming hobbies, practices and habits, like learning the mandolin, hunting, travelling the world, climbing mountains, gambling, raising pets and embroidery. In fact, the rest of the population tend to mimic what they think rich people do. Without the resources to put themselves in the truly leisured class, as far as they are able the middle classes adopt the signs of wealth without the substance.

The conspicuous demonstration of spare time applies to intellectual pursuits as well. Veblen includes a remark in Latin, â??*Nota notae est nota rei ipsius*â?• (27), which he translates as â??The sign of a sign is the sign of the thing itselfâ?• (27). That reference is a bit of a joke, as elsewhere in the book he brands learning â??classic speechâ?• (Latin and Greek) as a time-wasting affectation amongst the

leisured classes. Words delivered in classic speech â??are reputable because they are cumbrous and out of date, and therefore argue waste of time and exemption from the use and the need of direct and forcible speechâ?• (244). The same charge of pretentious time-filling intellectual pursuit could be levelled at those who would master cryptic crosswords, brain train, learn Klingon, read French philosophy, and blog.

Coping

Veblen was writing at the end of the nineteenth century, when work was poorly paid and harder, and there were a few privileged nobles and gentlefolk who lived off rental income and the labours of others. But even then, as now, people derived enjoyment from pastimes other than for conspicuous display. Pastimes kept them active and healthy, engendered skills, helped them socialise, diverted them from the routine challenges of life, and helped them â??cope.â?•



Now, we see such pastimes prepare us for emergencies, while under the currently imposed surplus time. Iâ??ve looked at a couple of reports about how people pass the time at home, when otherwise they would be travelling and gathering, socialising, mixing with friends and family, clubbing, hanging out, visiting the sick and shopping. See for example a report by the UK Office for National Statistics about what people are doing to â??copeâ?• with the lockdown. Hereâ??s their list ordered from most to least popular: staying in touch with family and friends remotely (e.g. over the phone or on social media); watching films; spending time with others that you live with; exercising outside of your home once a day (e.g. run, walk or cycle); exercising within your home or garden; reading; gardening; cooking; working; using other online sources of support and information; learning something new; other.

We might not always think of leisure pursuits and hobbies as a means of *coping*. The NerdBear website offers the following list of peopleâ??s CORONA-19 pastimes: watching tv shows and movies; reading; working out; arts and crafts; board games; DIY; yoga; baking; gardening; video games; meditation; audiobooks and podcasts; writing; learning a language; learning an instrument. My list of â??othersâ?• would include creative ironing and preparing to venture outside.

Caring

Veblen attended lectures by C.S. Peirce. Other than the quote above, Veblen doesnâ??t make overt reference to semiotics or sign systems in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Iâ??ve browsed academic publications on Google Scholar that examine what they say about consumption, labour and society. But I think Veblenâ??s observations about pastimes provides an excellent illustration of how signs operate, and the primacy of sign systems in human practices, thoughts and sociability. Many scholars concur that Peircean semiotics serves to merge appearance and practicality: a sign is never just a sign.



That brings me back to face masks. Hygiene procedures figure as a meeting of practical necessity and habit, coalescing in the idea of the sign. Hand washing has a ritualistic (semiotic) and practical role in religious observance for example. It takes time, fills time, and focusses attention. To take time is to deliberate. Iâ??m reminded of Marina Abromovicâ??s YouTube video in which she takes several minutes to sip from a glass of water. Taking 20 seconds to wash your hands in a public washroom not only reduces the risk from residual virus, but serves as a sign to self and others in proximity that you are doing what everyone thinks we should. It shows we are in the team.

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Masks are signs in that way as well. If fashioned, embroidered or turned into *heut couture*, then face masks might arguably fit within Veblenâ??s surplus time category. More likely, masks serve as signs of solidarity, concern, and care. If you are wearing a mask then you are probably also taking care of other hygiene matters as well. Thatâ??s important in the current climate. How certain can we be that others in the shop, pavement or public transport are taking COVID-19 precautions seriously?

Coverings to the nose and mouth also signal reverence for breath, a sophisticated understanding of personal space, and inside-outside relationships, which have greater applicability in some cultural contexts than others. More needs to be said, but Iâ??ve used up my time.

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1. Culture

Tags

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2. hygiene
3. Peirce
4. semiotics
5. sign

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