My discussion on semiotics in tourism in ATR 38(2) (Lau 2011) has been critiqued by Knudsen and Rickly-Boyd (2012). On the sign concept, Peirce speaks of sign (aka representamen), designatum (the object) and interpretant, the mental image created by sign on interpreter; while Saussure, abstracting from the referent (real-world objects), of signifier and signified.

MacCannell (1999: 109, 117) states:

> In … Peirce’s original formulation … :
> [represents/ something / to someone] sign
> [marker / sight / tourist] attraction

... The most important discovery of … Peirce and … Saussure, was the principle of the arbitrariness of the relationship between the signifier and the signified.

Thus, with reference to Peirce, sight corresponds to designatum, what MacCannell calls marker to representamen, and the tourist to interpreter. With reference to Saussure, MacCannell equates signifier to marker and signified to sights.

MacCannell’s adoption of Peirce and Saussure is confused. He equates sight (unproblematically) to Peirce’s designatum and (problematically) to Saussure’s signified, but it is actually interpretant that is similar to signified (Chandler 2002: 33). Signifier and signified are Saussure’s, not Peirce’s, terms. The stress on arbitrariness is Saussure’s, not Peirce’s: of Peirce’s three types of signs, the representamens of index and icon are not
arbitrary; even concerning symbol (the type closest to signifier), Peirce rarely directly mentions arbitrariness (Chandler 2002: 39). Further, marker corresponds neither to representamen nor signifier.

Nonetheless, MacCannell’s thesis still holds interest. Arguing that the relationship between markers (signifiers) and sights (signified) is arbitrary, he speaks of ‘The domination of a sight [signified] by its markers [signifier]’. It can be seen that MacCannell utilizes Peirce (the sign-designatum relationship), but within a Saussurean framework, since the ‘domination’ thesis utilizes Saussurean concepts (signifier and signified) and the Saussurean emphasis on arbitrariness. In Lau (2011), I focused on one form of such ‘domination’ called ‘the last transformations’.

Because MacCannell uses Peirce within Saussure’s framework, in Lau (2011: 711), after mentioning both Peirce and Saussure, I said I would focus on Saussure. Further, the ‘domination’ thesis appears to endorse anti-essentialism, which has been developed, most eloquently by Derrida, on the basis of Saussure. This is why the Saussure scholar and Derrida follower Culler eagerly appropriates MacCannell, and why Urry, who uses Saussurean terminology only, follows suit. Culler and Urry were main targets of my critique (Lau 2011: 711, 713). I argued that MacCannell’s ‘last-transformation’ cases can, once MacCannell’s faulty formulation is rectified, indeed be conceptualized in semiotic terms that are complementary to his essentialist concepts of authenticity and pilgrimage, and hence Culler’s and Urry’s unsubstantiated anti-essentialist generalization from them is invalid.

Knudsen and Rickly-Boyd (2012: 1252) state: ‘Lau fails to recognize that MacCannell’s original formulation actually engaged Peircean semiotics … Lau wrongly conflates the semiotics of Saussure and Peirce and thereby implies MacCannell utilized Saussurian semiotics’. From the above, it is clear that it is not me but my critics who conflate Peirce and Saussure, and hence fail to recognize that MacCannell uses Peirce within Saussure’s framework. My critics then broaden their critique of me concerning both Lau (2010) and Lau (2011): ‘he has made tourism essentialist when most theorists and practitioners readily admit [sic] it is anti-essentialist, subjective, constructive [sic], and performative’ (pp. 1253-1254).

To label my position essentialist is to misunderstand the contemporary realist position that I adopt. I am a realist insofar as I find anti-objectivist epistemic relativism untenable, but
I also see constructionism as possessing valuable insights complementary to realism. Hence, my reconceptualization of authenticity explicitly incorporates constructionist insights into it (Lau 2010: 491-3). And in Lau (2011), I precisely argue that semiotic concepts deployed exclusively by anti-realists can be complementary to realist concepts. In short, I think that after decades of dispute between realism and anti-realism, we should have become wise enough to abandon one-sided partisanship.

This can also be illustrated by the performativity concept mentioned by my critics. According to Butler (1993), by adopting a gamut of attributes labeled as ‘feminine’ such as wearing makeup, girls perform gender, thereby constituting themselves as girls. This supposedly shows gender to be non-objective. However, consider, for instance, a tourist attraction of a crucial battle site in a nation’s founding. It can be argued that the performative act of nationals visiting it constitutes them as patriots. But the site’s objective attribute as where the battle was fought is certainly crucial, since nationals choose not just any but this particular site to engage in their performance. Pilgrimage and performance can hence be complementary to one another. In Lau (2011: 713), I remarked that semiotic concepts can be applied to non-pilgrimage sites, but ‘any such argument needs to be carefully substantiated individually’. The same applies to the performance concept.

Let me finally comment on regarding the social as symbolic in general. In one sense, this is a truism, since the social is inherently mediated by the symbolic system of language. MacCannell (2012: 186, 189, emphasis added) has recently remarked that ‘Between tourist and other there are only symbolic constructs’; but he also says that this ‘does not mean that they [city and countryside] are any less consequential as frameworks for human existence’, and endorses a newspaper correspondent’s contrast between the authentic and the inauthentic in tourism (p. 192). In sum, unless there is nothing real (e.g. human existence) in the referents (e.g. city and countryside) mediated by symbols, that the social is symbolic does not entail anti-objectivist conclusions.

REFERENCES
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