"Atmos-fear"

A psycho-semiotic analysis of messages in New York everyday life

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Abstract: We live in societies emphasizing security and its complementary side of fear. In this work, I analyze the peripheral messages disseminated in the urban environment, whose function is that of regulating human and collective conduct through orienting specific forms of affective meaning-making. According to the perspective of Cultural Psychology of Semiotic Dynamics, affect and cognition work always together. Affect has the primacy in the relationship with the world and on top of affective distinctions we build conceptual distinctions. Thus, I describe a type of semiotic process I have called "atmos-fear," that works through the production of empty representamen that frames meaning. The concept of "atmos-fear" could be fruitfully developed to understand phenomena of politics, communication and construction of the Other in contemporary societies, where the dialogical relationship between security and fear is at stake.

Keywords: affective meaning-making, urban spaces, cultural psychology, administration of fear, atmosphere as sign, affective logic

1 Introduction: Affective meaning-making

I am walking down the New York subway on a regular weekday. I am both visible and invisible to the many other people populating the station. I am physically visible and anyone could potentially scan my face, my clothes, and my bags. Yet in a certain sense, I am also invisible or, better to say, peripheral to the gaze of the others. In a similar way, my gaze can render people and objects in the subway both visible and invisible. Something that was initially peripheral can suddenly call my attention and appear before my sight or my touch, my hearing, etc., The entire journey in the subway, and maybe the journey of life, is characterized by this dance of background and foreground, visible and invisible, central and peripheral. Yet most important, anything peripheral can, under some conditions, become central. It is precisely in such dialogical movement that the potential for

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change is produced. It is not just a matter of shifting attention or allocating cognitive resources. There is a long, though overlooked, tradition in psychology that discusses the relationship between cognition and affect (Lazarus 1999). According to Piaget (1981), affective and cognitive development occur in parallel. "We can postulate that affect does, or may cause the formation of cognitive structures" (Piaget 1962: 129). Also for Vygotsky (1987) affect and cognition, though different systems, were part of a totality. "There exists a dynamic meaningful system that constitutes a unity of affective and intellectual processes" (Vygotsky 1987: 50). More recently, Valsiner (2007, 2014) has stressed the affective basis of human psychological experience, based on a longstanding and neglected tradition of the original formulation of "feeling *into*" (*Einfühlung*) by Lipps (1903), erroneously translated in English as "empathy." According to Valsiner (2014), the process of meaning-making in human communication emerges form a goal-oriented, affective relationship with the environment. The perspective of the Cultural Psychology of Semiotic Dynamics (Valsiner 2007, 2014) assumes that symbolic forms emerge from personal affective relating with the world, guided by some specific social suggestions. Those suggestions of affective guidance are produced by different social institutions in the form of signs disseminated in the specific context by other human beings. The most part of religious art and architecture has been for instance filled with these kind of "suggestions." When entering a church, no matter of which religion, one immediately *feels* something and begins adapting one's own *conduct* in a certain direction (Malm 2014). If in a sacred place one tends to lower the voice, for instance, is not a matter of simple cognition or perception: it is a matter of *Einfühlung*. This is the function plaid by special elements in the environment that mark the threshold, like portals of the churches or turnstiles at the entry of the subway. Whitehouse (2001) offers a nice example of this process in the field of archaeology:

> Thresholds are of great importance in rites of passage and the caves offer a series of natural thresholds from one zone to another, with the most significant being the cave entrance, where one turns one's back on light and the familiar world and climbs into a dark unknown reality … as they move into a chamber large enough to stand up in, they learn through their bodies of the importance of the experience they are undergoing and its transformative nature. (Whitehouse 2001: 166)

Yet the person is negotiating her own meaning about the experience, so that she can accept, reject, ignore or find a workable compromise with those social suggestions (Tateo 2017). As in the description of the subway ride, this meaning-making process is possible thanks to the dialogical movement between peripheral and central elements. One example is presented in Figure 1, with a picture taken in New York's High Line Park.
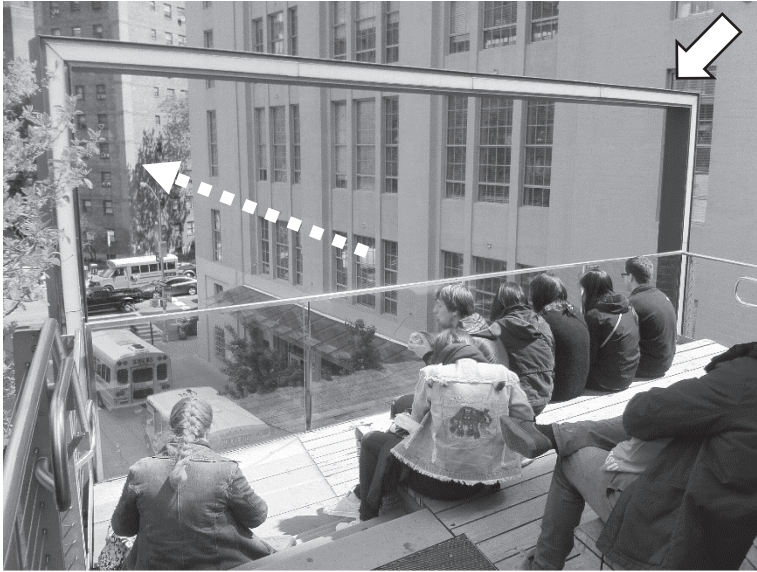
Figure 1: The peripheral framing of gaze (photograph by Tateo 2017).

The old urban railway on the east side of Manhattan has been renovated and transformed into an amazing urban park. The architects have created a very interesting and simple type of artifact: they have made some balconies with seats that overlook some particular spots or streets of the town. Yet the inclusion of glass and iron frames on the edge of the balconies (indicated by the white thick arrow in Figure 1) transforms the place into a *landscape*. The frame is in fact suggesting a specific *direction* to the sight (the dotted arrow in Figure 1). Now the person *can see that place as* a panoramic viewpoint. Thus a peripheral architectonic element is working as a suggestion to *feel* that spot as a landscape. Yet the person can always reject or negotiate the meaning of that experience. In fact, if one focuses on the frame, that becomes then *central*, the trick is revealed. Those peripheral elements in any context of social action are thus signs that the person can use to regulate her own or other's conduct under different conditions, and that can be communicated to other people in different situations. "Human beings are unstoppable generators of signs – as they strive towards future objectives which, by their nature, are necessarily uncertain" (Valsiner 2014: 25). Humans produce and re-produce signs as an action upon the world in order to make sense and manage uncertainty.

In the following section, I will try to apply this theoretical framework to a specific context: how the peripheral messages in the urban environment of New York can produce social suggestions to regulate affective and cognitive states related to the experience of fear.

1.1 Fear in everyday life

According to some authors, the United States are today experiencing a continuous state of fear (Cronick 2002; Ganzel et al. 2007; Skoll 2011; Skoll and Korstanje 2013; Stearns 2012) originated by the 9/11 terrorist attack, that still remains an "immanent past" (Birth 2006). Fear as a tool to orient collective conducts is not a new event in history. "Elites created a culture of fear: a field of meanings within which variable enemies could serve as targets" (Skoll and Korstanje 2013: 348). However, fear can be a very useful emotion in evolutionary terms, but living in a perennial state of fear is not helping. "We need to think about an emotion that too often, in recent decades, has defied thought" (Stearns 2012: x). Emotional experiences, such as fear, are common to all animal species, but emotions as immediate responses to environmental changes are binding us to the *hic et nunc* of an eternal present. Besides, emotions are characterized by a specific object. Being afraid of a scary sound or a scary looking animal can save our life, yet being afraid without knowing why can jeopardize it. Human beings produce and re-produce signs as an action upon the world and upon themselves in order to make sense and manage uncertainty outside an inside us, promoting or inhibiting specific conducts. So, when humans have not been able to name a concrete object of their affective experience, they have created one (Tateo 2016a). Human activity creates universal and abstract representations from situated actions (Wierzbicka 2005). Those representations become traditions, frameworks for meaning detached from the individual, immediate experience. Thus individual acts of violence can become acts of "terrorism" or of "patriotism," depending on the collective process of meaning-making. "Aspects of that 'external' world generated on the basis of firmly shared ecological-cultural background conditions tend to become objectified and acquire the status of social realities" (Rommetveit 1992: 22).

Religion and art provide us with wonderful examples of how fear and imagination work as regulatory systems through the continuous interplay between abstraction and reification. For instance, St John's "Apocalypse" or Dante Alighieri's "Divine Comedy" are powerful heavenly visions of abstract religious concepts but, in return, those imaginative worlds became collective self-regulatory systems of signs for the people listening to the torments of the

wicked or the joys of the blessed. Another example is the widespread artistic *locus* of the *Memento mori* (in Latin "remember [that you have] to die"), especially during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There are very complex systems of iconography, like, for instance, the *Danse Macabre* and the *Triumph of Death* themes (Hallam and Hockey 2001; Figure 2).

Figure 2: *The Triumph of Death*, c. 1562, Museo del Prado, Madrid.[1.]

The powerful painting of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1526/1530–1569) should trigger vivid emotions in sixteenth century of the people caught in the waves of the recent Counter-Reformation, the European wars, and the Plague. An army of skeletons is slaughtering mortals occupied in their everyday activities. The imaginative work behind this representation of caducity should promote *ought* conducts and inhibit *sin* by the light of a future unavoidable event. Yet the *memento mori* is not necessarily so evident and central. In a number of paintings, sculptures, architectural elements, and decorations, the reminder takes the form of a skull or bones on the sides of the artifacts: a peripheral affective reminder that could turn central at any time, and a complex system of signs through which self-regulation and social regulation intertwine on the basis of imaginative processes.

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1 Image source under public license, retrieved 3 January 2015 from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Triumph_of_Death_-_WGA3389.jpg

1.2 Safety in everyday life

If three centuries ago the life expectancy was much shorter and the reasons for a sudden and unwanted death were quite abundant, people today rather prefer to feel safe. We have a quite long life before ourselves and we would really like to enjoy it until its (possibly distant) end. Yet the meaning of everyday discourse about safety and security emerges through its dialogical relationship with the discourse on fear (Tateo 2016b). As Volosinov (1973) already stressed:

> ... each living ideological sign has two faces, like Janus ... This inner dialectic quality of the sign comes out fully in the open only in times of social crises or revolutionary changes. In the ordinary conditions of life, the contradiction embedded in every ideological sign cannot emerge fully because the ideological sign in an established, dominant ideology is always somewhat reactionary, as it were, to stabilize the preceding factoring the dialectical flux of the social generative process, so accentuating yesterday's truth as to make it appear today's. And that is what is responsible for the refracting and distorting peculiarity of the ideological sign within the dominant ideology. (Volosinov 1973: 23–24)

Widespread messages about security and safety ("for your own safety," "for security reasons," etc.) can be found in very different contexts of activities, in airports, shopping malls, schools, and even in supermarkets (Figure 3) and commercials (Figure 4).

Figure 3: We want to be safe when we use things (photo by Tateo 2017).

Figure 4: We want to be safe when we use things (photo by Tateo 2017).

The most part of these messages are placed in the peripheral spaces of our everyday life and we may usually dismiss them. They can become suddenly central under specific conditions, but their function is in general to frame our affective relation with the object presented in the messages. Thus, even school must of course be safe, yet how could one even assume that school can be dangerous? One can find these messages in the peripheral spaces of the subway (Figure 5).

Why should one need "panic protection" in case of a moving subway? A part of the commercials is driven not by the creation of a new need that the product eventually purchased can fulfill. There is a part of marketing that is instead based on fear. The fear of aging, the fear of being single, the fear of moving, the fear of thieves, the fear of terrorism, etc., are powerful selling drives, yet they are often presented through the complementary concept of "safety." As I have argued in the previous section, signs embedded in the environment are specific social suggestions, aimed at orienting the affective experience of the person. These kind of signs must be peripheral and flexible enough to frame socially desirable forms of meaning and to inhibit the unde-sired ones. According to Valsiner (2014), these types of messages are character-ized by what Obeyesekere call the phenomenon of overdetermination of meaning (1990). They must be able to support multiple meanings in order to orient rapid escalation or de-escalation of meaning construction (Obeyesekere 1990). One part of these messages (e.g. "for security reasons" or "protection matters," etc.) refers to an undefined field of meaning that is nevertheless
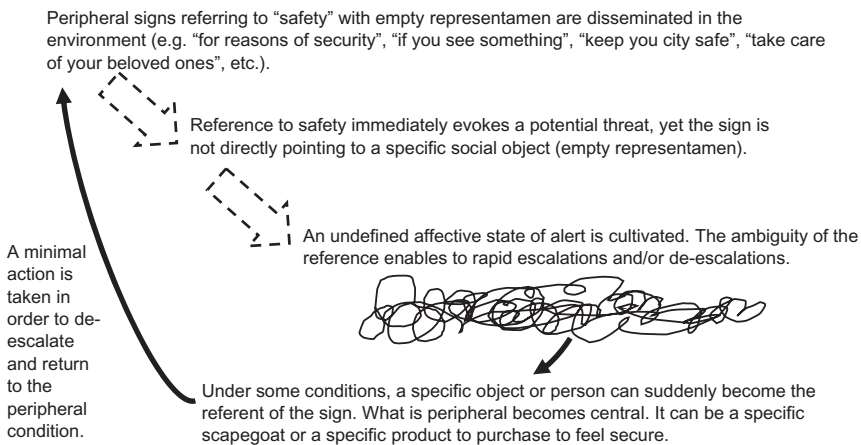
Figure 5: Offering panic protection in the New York Subway (photo by Tateo 2017).

heavily charged with value from the very beginning. Referring to "security" or "law and regulation," which are general and undisputable values – what Valsiner (2014) would call hyper-generalized sign fields – is immediately framing any other message that will be produced in combination with it into a specific social suggestion for meaning-making. Thanks to such a mechanism, for instance, people can accept any request of conduct even if it can appear invasive or sometimes silly (like taking off your shoes or your belt at the airport security check).

The second characteristic of these messages is the fact that they have an empty *representamen*,[2] that is, they do not clearly identify an *object* to which the sign is referring. This implies that the *interpretant*, that is, the conduct that the sign is meant to promote or inhibit, would be impossible to attribute to a specific social object. This overdetermination of the object, understood as the potentiality to attribute a sign to different objects, is what allows for generic message that the person can fill with her own object of fear. Of course, this arbitrariness of the interpretant is also socially bound. So when we have messages evoking safety and protection like those in Figure 3, people can fill in the gaps with any kind of fear or

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2 The approach of Cultural Psychology of Semiotic Dynamics follows a Peircean semiotic model (see Valsiner 2014 for full elaboration).

danger. However, the range of potential candidates to fear is of course bounded by the current public discourse. So, for instance, in the case of Figure 3, "school safe" refers to the growing fear for children food allergies spreading among parents, while Figure 4 orients the meaning towards the environmental issues and the increasing danger of exposure to sun. There are some representamen who are better candidates then others to become the objects of fear-based messages. Yet the overdetermination of meaning is the condition for these kind of messages to work. Even though any security message in the airport today will probably evoke an iconic *representamen* with turban, beard, near-East origins, etc., the flexibility of the sign construction is necessary to function in general terms and easily replace a scapegoat with another. The multiplication of the peripheral over and undetermined signs, based on the dialogical relationship fear/security, creates what I will call from now on an "*atmos-fear*," in analogy with Kurt Lewin's concept of atmosphere, that is "a general cultural atmosphere which is the 'background' for all special situations" (Lewin 1945: 4). Figure 6 presents the functioning of the *atmos-fear* kind of meaning-making.

Peripheral signs referring to "safety" with empty representamen are disseminated in the environment (e.g. "for reasons of security", "if you see something", "keep you city safe", "take care of your beloved ones", etc.).

Reference to safety immediately evokes a potential threat, yet the sign is not directly pointing to a specific social object (empty representamen).

An undefined affective state of alert is cultivated. The ambiguity of the reference enables to rapid escalations and/or de-escalations.

A minimal action is taken in order to de-escalate and return to the peripheral condition.

Under some conditions, a specific object or person can suddenly become the referent of the sign. What is peripheral becomes central. It can be a specific scapegoat or a specific product to purchase to feel secure.

Figure 6: The meaning-making process of *atmos-fear*.

The empty *representamen* consists of a peripheral sign referring to a hyper-generalized affective state. Its role is that of orienting the affective relation towards a necessary and hyper-generalized field of values (e.g. security, nation, future, law, patriotism, etc.). Of course, the complementary field of meaning evoked by the sign is that of fear or threat (Tateo 2016b). Unlike an emotional experience oriented toward an object (i.e. fear of a specific animal), the *atmos-fear* does not

require any immediate action (e.g. fight or flight reaction). It constitutes a peripheral element of the environment, almost a decoration like wallpaper (or a bill), that can at any time move to the foreground. In this case, a particular thing or person can become the object of the hyper-generalized *representamen* (e.g. a bag or a man dressed strangely). The message will require minimal action in order to restore the peripheral condition (i.e. to inform an officer, to look after one's own luggage, etc.; Figure 7).

Figure 7: New York port authority campaign (photo by Tateo 2017).

The message contained in the New York Port Authority's campaign is built around a series of complementarities embodied by the two males in Figure 7: safe/unsafe; active/passive; inside/outside; military/civilian; dark/bright. The figure of the African-American officer, with dark clothes and a huge gun on display, is juxtaposed to the figure of the white man, with his "weapons" consisting of ears and a

(smart)phone. It is worth noticing, that the explicit content refers to safety rather than fear and does not mention any specific threat. What kind of event or person should the wise white man report? And who is the policeman supposed to shoot with his gun? There is no explicit suggestion in the image, yet the suggestion is affective and it is oriented through the *atmos-fear*.

Through this process, the social object will be interpreted by the affective suggestions of the *atmos-fear*, that will orient the person towards one preferential meaning. As I will show in the next section, through an analysis of the peripheral messages in the New York subway, the particular nature of this communication cultivates a general sense of fear, without being possible to ascribe it to a specific affective object.

2 If you see something: The case of New York security campaign

At the end of 2002, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority of New York City launched a Security Awareness Campaign to maintain awareness of the continued terrorist threat to public safety. To date, the MTA has made nine different versions of the campaign titled "If You See Something, Say Something." The campaign, elaborated by Pulsar Advertising and Arcade Creative Group, has been echoed by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which in 2010 started a national campaign with the same slogan (Reeves 2012). The campaign materials include several 30 second and 15 second television commercials, print ads, and posters on subways, buses, and trains.

Of course, it is not my intention to criticize either the validity or the effectiveness of this campaign in preventing any form of criminal action. I have no element to express any opinion or judgment on this subject matter. My interest in the campaign arises from the characteristics of its presence in the urban environment and my analysis is limited to the psycho-semiotic aspects. Having said this, let me go back to my descent into the subway (Figure 8).

All the messages of the campaign "If you see something, say something" are characterized by some common elements. The first one is the use of "lay people" of different ethnic origin. The idea is that everyone is involved, despite the condition. The identity promoted is "to be a New Yorker" (Figure 8). The second element is that the messages are constructed in the form of short stories or *exempla*: short moral stories aimed at providing a line of proper conduct (Figure 9).

Figure 8: A sign of the MTA campaign in a subway station (photo Tateo 2017).

Figure 9: *Exemplum* of New Yorkers' "ought" conduct (photo by Tateo 2017).

The affective regulation through an empty *representamen* is quite evident in this example. An affective state ("I felt brave") is the consequence of a minimal action. An actual condition of danger is not even required. The overdetermination of meaning (Obeyesekere 1990) does not have to refer to a polysemy of actual meanings, yet can easily refer to imaginative or hypothetical future conditions ("I might have saved lives"). There is no straight connection between a *representamen* and a social object because it is impossible to identify a specimen. The whole message works exactly because of its *under-* and *over-*determination of meaning: what is "something"? The function of the empty *representamen* ("something") is that of reifying a social object framed by affective relation. I see something because there *must* be something to see. The person will negotiate her personal meaning of that something, yet the social suggestions provide of course some candidates more suitable than others.

What is the function of the peripheral messages in the subway? They cultivate an affective condition; they orient people's understanding of the situation exactly to the extent that they are not invasive. People have to "keep an eye out" (Figure 10). At any moment this complex of messages in the background, in the periphery of the everyday perception of the New Yorker, the commuter or the tourist in the subway, can move to the fore thanks to its flexible emptiness of reference.
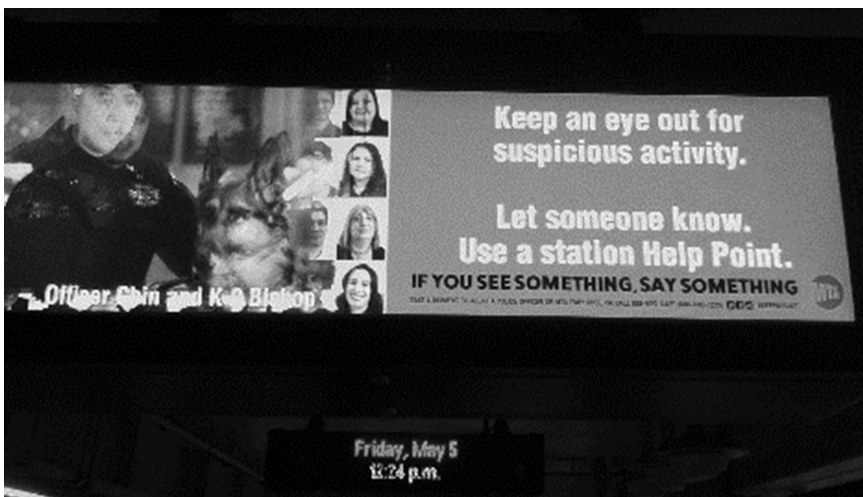

Figure 10: Example of indeterminacy (photo by Tateo 2017).

Figure 10 is apparently aimed at providing a sense of security, with the image of the policeman and his dog and the idea that there is always a "help point" somewhere. The image actually produces more anxiety than security exactly

because one cannot *name* the danger with precision ("suspicious activity"). The whole burden of negotiating the meaning of "suspicious" is given to the citizen. The vagueness of the terms ("suspicious activity," "something," "let someone know") are not particularly effective in terms of reporting (probably telling me what "exactly" is dangerous or suspicious would help me to report it). In terms of social control it perfectly works, instead. In the context of *atmos-fear*, the meaning of suspicious conduct is so loose that people would try to avoid doing anything than can look even remotely "suspicious."

Social institutions are very generous in providing more or less blatant suggestions about unusual or suspicious conducts. They can tell us who can be the "bad hombres" – a great example of empty representamen by the current American president Donald J. Trump – in a given historical moment. Although it is the person who negotiates her own meaning of those messages, their peripheral nature lets them go almost unattended, until something call them in the center of the attention (Valsiner 2014). I can report a shameful personal experience of this kind during an intercontinental flight between Europe and US, when an aged and respectable Muslim man (easily identifiable by his clothes and his prayer mat) started to pray just near one of the airplane's emergency doors. Despite my claims of not being prejudiced, I must confess my reprehensibly sense of uneasiness for what in other conditions could have been a very normal scene. But this does not occur at the level of reflexivity; it has rather to do with the affective framing of the experience that orients the way on see a person *as* something else, for instance, a potential suspect.

3 Conclusion

We live in societies in which the emphasis on security is the complementary side of the *atmos-fear*. As I have tried to show with the examples above, the peripheral messages disseminated in the urban environments work as a contemporary *memento mori*: their function is that of regulating human and collective conduct through orienting specific forms of affective meaning-making. In our times, the multiplied sequences of destruction broadcasted on media have replaced the iconography of the *Danse Macabre*. The *memento mori* has been replaced by the peripheral signs as those in the New York subways or as the commercials of beauty products that foster the fear of aging, or the insurance advertisements that remind us how the fatalities can happen at any time. In secular societies, the issue is no longer selling salvation but selling products. Once mankind has developed in its history the capability of imagining and representing the causes

of its fears, it has gained the opportunity of handling it by distancing from it, for both overcoming fear itself and for using it as a way of regulating collective life. Affect has been then confined in a lower realm of irrationality, while cognition has gained the first place in orienting human conduct. Yet as we have argued in this work, affect and cognition always work together. Affect has the primacy in the relationship with the world and on top of affective distinctions we build conceptual distinctions. The type of semiotic processes I have called "*atmos-fear*" work through the production of empty representamen that frames meaning (see Figure 5). The person will negotiate her personal meaning of the messages and will orient her conduct accordingly. People are not just passive receptors of these peripheral messages (Valsiner 2014). They actively elaborate them, by for instance over-reacting to it (how many false positives the campaign can have produced?), by simply ignoring it (but the *atmos-fear* will be still embedded in the environment), or finally by rejecting them (as the proliferation of ironic memes about the campaign shows). Even though this is just an initial exploration of the concept of *atmos-fear*, I claim that it could be fruitfully developed to understand phenomena of politics, communication and construction of the Other in contemporary societies, where the dialogical relationship between security and fear is at stake.

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