

## Book Review

# Psychosemiotics

**Howard A. Smith**

Peter Lang, 2001.

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I really enjoyed this book. I relished the perspective and relationships between semiotics, psychology, and educational psychology that Professor Smith developed in this text. What is especially and almost singularly attractive is that this text truly reflects years of scholarly research and philosophical exploration. Indeed, it resonates with “at least 12 years (pg. xiii)” of research and professional reading, as well as Howard Smith’s experiences gained studying in Canada, the United States, South America, Australia, and Italy.

Also refreshing is that, early in the book, Professor Smith situates this text as his perspective of semiotics as a dynamic current in understanding human cognition. He neither claims nor attempts typical text book “snapshots” or sanitized versions of either the history of semiotics or of psychology. Instead, as a person who has worked for many years both as a teacher and researcher, he gives his view on how semiotics and psychology are inherently related and why an understanding of semiotics enriches perspectives on human cognition. One aspect I particularly responded to was Dr. Smith’s statements on what he does: “I shall review the essential claims of the two main psychological perspectives,” “I endorse a Darwinian view that supports many claims advanced by evolutionary psychologists,” as well as what he not going to do. In each section of the book he clearly states the resources he draws upon and gives additional reading suggestions at the end of each chapter. One of the fascinating features of the book are the brief adapted Sign segments, some examples are: his treatment of the Rose and its signs (p. 23), the Clouds and Semiosis (p.65), Seven (p. 195), Sauna as Sign (p. 147), and finally and appropriately, The Sign (p. 283). These fit beautifully into a personal, eclectic, multifaceted lens showing how humans over time and across cultures have adapted particular things into meaningful and cogent symbols. These tiny segments are not listed in the Table of Contents and I found myself first delightfully surprised and then unable to resist paging forward to see what other segments existed in the book.

The book is also provocative. Professor Smith uses an interesting framework: cognition as different ways of knowing the world through seven essential “signways.” These signways are an integration of Howard Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences. Smith collapses the intrapersonal and the interpersonal categories of Gardner’s theory into one category, the social-personal, which does seem to me to have more utility when examining relational ways of knowing. The first section of the book provides Smith’s synthesis of human cognitive perspectives, why semiotics, in particular Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics, is intricately a part of human knowing and how culture effects and promotes sign development across the seven signways. Smith provides a reasoned argument for these signways, both critiquing Gardner and pointing out Gardner’s discussion of the important role that symbols (extended to signs) play in cognitive functioning as mediated by culture. I particularly enjoyed Chapter 3, On Nature, and Smith’s discussion of von Uexkull’s *Umwelt* (p. 104). At the time I was reading the book I took that discussion straight into a teacher credentialing course and the students not only responded strongly to the concept but adapted it into their understanding of the dynamics of classroom interaction.

Section two develops the seven signways in detail as semiotic processes. They are clustered into three chapters, Time and Sequence, that deals with linguistic capacity, logical-mathematical signways, and musical development; Space and Place, spatial and bodily-kinesthetic signways, and Completing the Lebenswelt, that deals with the socio-personal and naturalistic signways. Fortunately, section one of the book grounds the theoretical principles that section two relies upon. Section two, which seems to fly past, gains in depth from the earlier discussions. Section three brings the discussion into a highly applied arena, a semiotic approach to educational theory and actual practice. This is not a text that cultural transition adherents would like. Smith describes education as “a semiotic process grounded in meaning-making and that, therefore, the purpose of education should be to promote the making of meanings across the full range of human capacity (p. 254). The emphasis here is that the signways constitute a way of viewing all human culture and cultural expression as well as how well — or, I suppose, not well — individuals incorporate those signs and symbols into a system that they can utilize for their own lives. In insisting that teachers teach for meaning-making and expressive life, teachers are challenged to find the signways that students use. In that sense, this is a Vygotskian perspective; the teacher needs to use his or her knowledge and abilities to bring the students’ expression forward and to find and refine those signways.

I find myself wanting to engage in a dialogue at this point. To ponder with Smith about the signways and wonder if a dialectical model would be interesting — how does learning, for instance, remain situated or hold to specific contexts? Why, if we are learning both relationally and intellectually in schools and in other forums, do we often limit our learning applications? For that matter, why is it that learning is so often site specific? How can we debate with care at school but we are unable to continue that mode of both caring and exploration in personal relationships? Of course, the distinction

between school as a sign and symbol of learning and learning as related to living our lives as learned beings is what Smith is aiming at. He presents Peircian semiotics as a means of decoding and analyzing the complexity of signs in our cultural life and the signways as a means of moving into schools as a multicultural model for reaching and engaging learners, students and teachers alike. It is a book I can recommend, a book I will use. It is also a book that causes me to examine my own assumptions about semiotics and how sign systems permeate and elucidate what I know.