

Book Review: D. Favareau, (2010) *Essential Readings in Biosemiotics: Anthology and Commentary*. Berlin: Springer Science (pp. 871) by Anna Aragno PhD

Even as we contemplate the possibility that the Hubble Distant Field has identified the earliest star-forming galaxies, enabling us to peer back to the beginnings of time, expert astronomers tell us, that's not far enough! Similarly, if you were thinking that perhaps as a species we have tapped the outer limits of disciplines designed to increase our knowledge and ability to manipulate nature, think again-- up pops a whole new area of research and scholarship: a point of view? a discipline? a gathering of academics posing similar questions? A cutting edge interdisciplinary field, about to become a science!

"Biosemiotics:" what is it? Where did it come from, and where does it hope to go?

If you are curious about any of these questions, the book to turn to is D. Favareau's lively, exhaustive anthology, "Essential Readings in Biosemiotics". This is a definitive text (and source-guide) on the origins and development, the founders and facets, early and current writings, of the colorful cast of characters that formed and now convey this new multinational, interdisciplinary enterprise called 'Biosemiotics.' Along with Barbieri's (ed) "Introduction to Biosemiotics" (2006), Favareau's lovingly compiled compendium provides the basic foundational knowledge that anyone interested in this new field needs to start out. And there is a lot to learn about the "bio" of semiosis, a way of looking at scientific 'metaphors' of yore and uncovering their operative communicative processes. Biosemiotics belongs in an information paradigm oriented toward examining the 'in between' of live interactions taking place all the time, at all systemic levels, within the general unity of life.

Citing from the homepage 'manifesto' of "The International Society for biosemiotic Studies" the Oxford Dictionary of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (1997) defines Biosemiotics as, "The study of signs, of communication, and of information in living organisms" (p 72). Broad enough to extend from the genetic code to inter-synaptic firings, from immunological signs to the language of horses, and on to the origins and interpretation of language, the very amplitude of the definition has given rise to diverse ' offshoot forms,' as well as already contentious 'schools,' within biosemiotics itself: we are introduced to Photosemiotics, Endosemiosis, Zoosemiosis, the Physics and Metaphysics of Biosemiotics , Cybersemiotics and...onward, perhaps, to even more variations on the theme of semiosis as intrinsic to life itself.

As a lead figure, promoter, and spokesman for biosemiotics, Favareau is eminently qualified to author a work that certainly promotes a deeper understanding of what undergirds this field and extends into all the ramifications of its charter. With a BA in philosophy, multiple higher degrees in applied linguistics, an arsenal of professional 'positions,' posts, and affiliations, and as President of the Biosemiotics Society, currently on the faculty of The National University of Singapore, Favareau is that prized intellectual rarity in today's over-specialized world, a truly open – minded, widely read, interdisciplinary thinker. His knowledge and thorough overviews brought to life, for me, the whole history and "meaning" (to stay with a staple term!) behind the field's silent paradigm shift, its old and newer voices, and the enthusiasm with which each contributor is fired by the idea of addressing the semantics of nature. It is also in great part thanks to his commitment to contextualizing each of the authors represented in this anthology that the brief introductory biographical portraits of each add so much to our reading of their ideas. The biographies are a nice addition in such an introductory text, in many cases necessary and informative, and lead naturally into the particular excerpt chosen to encapsulate that contributors' angle.

Much of this work's success is due to its organization and its author's passionate scholarship, touched with genuine multidisciplinary erudition. An ebullient flow of intellectual energy exudes from Favareau's pen, not only because he is well versed in the subject but also because he was "there from the beginning!" Well, not quite: the history of the field's roots goes back to the mid 1800 and early 1900 hundreds, to Charles Sanders Peirce's 'Logic of Signs', J. von Uexküll's 'Theory of Meaning', Charles Morris's study of 'Signs, Language and Behavior,' and J. Mikhajlovic Lotman's 'Universe of Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture', to flower as a fully fledged discipline in its current form through the efforts and works of Thomas A Sebeok. One gets the sense already in Part 1 of the breadth and reach of the novel ideas that sprung from a precursory group of independent thinkers, spread across different lands, gradually bringing together under one umbrella an attempt at a new unity: an integration of organic and cultural 'semiosis,' the goal, "to naturalize semiosis". Parts II, III and IV move chronologically through the evolution of the field from Sebeok's founding project, through independent approaches, to its current interdisciplinary form and swelling literature, ultimately to reach port after one hundred and twenty four further rich pages providing a Commentary Bibliography and Further Readings. This could well serve as a founding course in any university program on Biosemiotics.

Central to the Biosemiotic philosophical base and its underlying agenda is this goal to bridge the divide between nature and culture by demonstrating that semiotic processes of meaning and signification are inherent in, and exist between, all forms of biological life. Tracing the paths and patterns by which organic codes and modes of transmission become vehicular semiotic signals, signs, and symbols of linguistic 'communication' is therefore at the heart of this science's conceptual foundation and the challenge behind its research goals. Underlying this however is a very interesting twist to the very definition of semiosis, a conceptual turn of language and perception that implicitly redefines "semiosis" as that which is relevant or "*significant*" to any living "thing" in terms of its survival in its particular environment. Whatever is 'sensed' within a given 'semiosphere' (and as a psychoanalyst I would add, sensed *unconsciously*, in particular) is endowed with meanings. This vastly expanded definition, which may encompass the 'significance' of sunlight to a flowering plant, the scent of a female lioness to a horny lion, the scampering of a desert rodent to an eagle, or the elaborate courting displays and dances of male bird species to their dazzled female audience, stems from von Uexküll's notion of "ümwelt." Once one has grasped this idea that "meaning" and signification are subjectively perceived morsels of *crucial* information, which may issue from any of the senses, and are ubiquitous throughout the natural world, the challenge of biosemiotics gains appeal by implicating a major epistemological shift. It is evident from this compilation of basic writings how much intellectual energy and creativity this new unity has already generated and heartening to see how this field could, potentially, realize the scientific dreams of B. Russell (to systematize general "forms") as well as, more recently, E.O Wilson's vision of consilience in the gradual merging of science and the humanities.

Well written and exhaustively presented, the book is not, however, without fault: clocking in at 873 pages, it is definitely long and ought to have been placed under the attentive eye of a skilled copyeditor to obliterate the many typos. But all in all it is a remarkable work of consummate scholarship: any interested reader will find in this anthology a remarkable source and guide through the paths and into the verdant pastures of this new way of looking at the omnipresence of signs throughout nature.

I close this brief review with a summative quote from p. 327, in the words of the G.Prodi scholar Felice Cimatti (2000), speaking from the voice of this most poetic of immunologists;

“We are thus nothing but the ultimate transformations of other things, linked, in turn, to many others, and so on, all the way up to those very things we are presently knowing...Thus the world does not account for an a priori distinction between subjects and objects which are separated and differ from each other , but only on more or less complex systems, all tied to an articulated web of relations that coincides with life...subject and object cannot therefore constitute the starting point of knowledge’s developing process. Still they represent the final point, though never wholly attainable, for if such a full separation would ever occur, the biological continuity that links them, would break down. That would mean not just the end of semiosis or knowledge, but of life itself.” (352-353) Indeed.

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