

Jie Zhang and Hongbing Yu\*

# Semiotics – Another Window on the World

On the series “Select Works of Eminent Contemporary Semioticians”<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Contemporary semiotics proceeds and progresses along two major paths of human intellectual inquiry in general: One is to constantly extend and deepen social studies; the other is to use theoretical and logical reasoning to examine and even predict the laws of nature and the universe. To highlight these two paths and reflect the latest trends in current semiotic inquiry, we have launched the book series of “Select Works of Eminent Contemporary Semioticians,” published by the Nanjing Normal University Press. The first five English monographs included in this book series are *Basics of semiotics* (eighth expanded edition) and *Logic as a liberal art* by John Deely, *Marshall McLuhan: The unwitting semiotician* by Marcel Danesi, *Signs in society and culture* by Arthur Asa Berger, and *The way of logic* by Christopher S. Morrissey. These five books afford not only revelations in the ways of knowing and the dimensions of thought, but also new perspectives for interpreting contemporary sociocultural phenomena and their developments.

**Keywords:** logic; McLuhan; semiology; semioticians

---

\*Corresponding author, Hongbing Yu: Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China, e-mail: njnubrandon@126.com

Jie Zhang: Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China, e-mail: z-jie1016@hotmail.com

The intelligentsia nowadays is characterized by diversity in ways of knowing the world. Facing the vastness and complexity of society, nature and the universe, humans have a deeply felt sense of their tininess and powerlessness, yet on the other hand, they have always actively explored new ways of looking into the world. Since ancient times, there have been two major paths of human

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the preface to the book series “Select Works of Eminent Contemporary Semioticians,” edited by Jie Zhang and Hongbing Yu and published by the Nanjing Normal University Press in 2018, with permission to reproduce in this form by Nanjing Normal University Press.

intellectual inquiry. One is to constantly extend and deepen social studies; the other is to use theoretical and logical reasoning to examine and even predict the laws of nature and the universe. It is precisely along these two paths that contemporary semiotics proceeds and progresses. To highlight these two paths and reflect the latest trends in current semiotic inquiry, we have launched the book series “Select Works of Eminent Contemporary Semioticians,” published by the Nanjing Normal University Press. The first five English monographs included in this book series afford not only revelations in the ways of knowing and the dimensions of thought, but also new perspectives for interpreting contemporary sociocultural phenomena and their developments.

We would first like to introduce *Basics of semiotics* (eighth expanded edition), written by the late American master philosopher and semiotician John Deely. Since its first edition, this book has been a well-known classic in semiotics, and various editions have been published in different languages. However, the last edition in English was the fifth, which is no longer available, as it sold out in 2015. This up-to-date eighth edition, in English, is long overdue. The book highlights two overarching issues concerning the entire enterprise of modern semiotics. One is the differences between semiology and semiotics; the other is the scope of semiotic inquiry. Deely points out that semiology, to wit the “minor tradition” traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure, confines sign studies to the limited fields of human cultures centering on language, whereas semiotics, namely the “major tradition” following Charles Sanders Peirce and upheld by Charles William Morris and Thomas Albert Sebeok among others, has enlarged the scope of semiotic inquiry to include not only linguistic signs, but also the biology of semiosis. Stressing the differences between the two traditions, Deely is manifestly against equating semiotics with semiology. Moreover, in this most up-to-date edition of *Basics of semiotics*, Deely grasps theoretically the full extent of the action of signs. Inheriting Peirce’s formulation of semiosis that the essence of signs involves a triadic relation between representamen, object, and interpretant, none of which needs physical existence in the semiotic process, Deely further argues that physiosemiosis is an action of signs that precedes and stays free from life. The action of signs features its involvement with nonbeing. In Deely’s own words, the sign “must exist in order to convey an object signified to or for some third (be it a person or not). But what is conveyed may not exist, and similarly the ‘third’ to which it is conveyed may not yet exist” (Deely 2018, Author’s Letter to the 8th Edition Readership: 3). In addition to the above two issues, Deely also distinguishes between source date and access date by means of what he calls “historical layering,” for which the *raison d’être* is “No one writes after they die” (Deely 2018: 1). According to Deely, the source date must and can only be a date from

within the lifetime of the author of the given text, whereas the access date is the date of the translation, or edition, used to access the source.

In both the scope and the quality of research, *Basics of semiotics* has made considerable progress, which is why in 1990 the late American Paterfamilias Semioticorum, Thomas Sebeok, praised the first edition of the work as “the only successful modern English introduction to semiotics... a clear, creative, and provocative synthesis of major trends, past and present.” Although entitled “Basics of semiotics,” the book is different from other general introductions to semiotics in that it not only introduces to its readers crucial masterpieces of semiotics and master semioticians, covering significant topics ranging from the historical development of semiotic thought to current institutionalization, subject matters and prospects of semiotics, but also showcases Deely’s own theorizing and academic viewpoints.

By comparison, *Signs in society and culture*, written by the renowned American media critic and theorist Arthur Asa Berger, has something significant in common with Deely’s *Basics of semiotics* (eighth expanded edition): It adds epistemological breadth and depth to semiotics. However, in terms of their writing styles, *Signs in society and culture* is somewhat different from *Basics*, in that the former highlights the connections between semiotics and modern ordinary life, whereas the latter focuses more on theoretical interpretations. In vivid and humorous language, Berger manages to apply semiotic concepts to the analytical and meaningful interpretations of sociocultural phenomena and emphasizes theory–practice integration that is grounded in current social media and folk arts. The book can stimulate its readers to think deeply about sociocultural phenomena and emphatically embodies the social value and effects of semiotics as a methodology. Perhaps this will be a cross-disciplinary tour de force that brings a novel reading experience to its readers. One of the main reasons that this book is included in the series is that we want to make it clear that semiotics, as a methodology of research, is not merely something exclusive to metaphysics. It can also be a potent way to understand and interpret daily life situations, appreciate folk arts, and shed light on communication media, etc.

Apparently, it is from the perspective of semiotics that both Deely and Berger set out on their quests for new approaches to the world, each with their own new mythologies, new interpretations, and new routes, in theory (*Basics of semiotics*) and in practice (*Signs in society and culture*).

*Logic as a liberal art*, another Deely book in the series, and *The way of logic*, written by Canadian philosopher Christopher S. Morrissey, a managing editor of *The American Journal of Semiotics*, mainly use theoretical and logical reasoning to examine and interpret the mystery of the universe and the complexity of

human societies. In view of our incapacity to exhaust the subjects of this vast universe and our capricious human societies, logic often seems to be the ideal route to take to theoretically construct and interpret them.

A major contribution of Deely's *Logic as a liberal art* is that it lays the theoretical foundations for logical analyses in contemporary semiotic research and thus restates the fundamental value of logic in liberal education. Using the theoretical framework constructed in his *Basics of semiotics*, Deely manages to reinterpret the philosophical root of logic in the entire field of semiotics and provides the foundation for the logical reasoning of semiotics. His theoretical treatment of the subjective world is quite unique, and affords a contemporary interpretation of classical ontology and epistemology. Deely proposes that the mission of logic is to use clear and workable rules to turn invalid arguments into valid arguments, so as to interpret the world from the viewpoint of semiotics. The logic Deely has built is extraordinarily constructive, and it is a new development of term logic and propositional logic. Moreover, Deely also associates logical analysis with liberal education, arguing that the purpose of a liberal education is to enable the freedom and liberation of thought, in which process logic plays a critical role. Deely had encountered this in the Greek and Latin philosophical traditions, which he strongly advocates reviving. Therefore, whether we consult it to know the world from the perspective of philosophy and logic or whether it is used to improve liberal education, this book comes as a great source of revelation to its readers. It is doubtlessly a cross-disciplinary classic.

Morrissey's *The way of logic* starts with the problem of existential import, a fundamental philosophical topic in philosophy, to strive for an ideal path of logical analysis within the frameworks of philosophy and semiotics, and to provide an effective "way of logic" for human understanding. The author proposes adopting *term functor logic*, which he developed from Aristotelian term logic. He also points out that mainstream first-order logic, namely predicate logic, is limited by the existential condition imported and encoded in the syntax and therefore unable to show traditional logic in its entirety. While following the classical logic system, the author introduces two basic functors, + and -, and the only rule of calculation, DON. On the one hand, this has returned logic to pure propositional reasoning; on the other hand, it gives logical reasoning more concise mathematical forms. This book provides an in-depth analysis of the problem of existential import and proposes a third solution between term logic and first-order logic. It is a classic that integrates tradition and innovation.

It can be said that Deely's *Logic as a liberal art* paves the way for logical research in contemporary semiotics, whereas Morrissey's *The way of logic*

affords an effective research method for concrete logical analysis. The common feature between the two books is the present-day adaptation of ancient knowledge, coalescing Hellenic and Latin heritages with contemporary semiotics and opening another window on today's world.

Among the five academic monographs in the series, *Marshall McLuhan: The unwitting semiotician*, written by another North American master semiotician Marcel Danesi, seems to feature little theorizing concerning semiotics per se. Nor does it use many daunting or abstruse terms. Indeed, this book is intended mainly to be a pertinent and semiotically based close reading of the author's former teacher, Marshall McLuhan, an internationally famous scholar who was not a declared specialist in semiotics but actually an "unwitting" semiotician, as is claimed in the book title. However, unlike many other books on semiotics, despite its seemingly unacademic interpretation, Danesi's portrait of McLuhan the semiotician is profoundly significant: Semiotics exists in everyday, real-life situations as a way to perceive and understand everyday life. The term "semiotician" can even extend to the ordinary people living around us. With his usual liveliness and wit, Danesi narrates the dynamic ideas of a visionary theorist, in a way akin to a tireless spinning of a soothing yarn. This quasi-orality writing style can bring the readers a unique experience of reading, lighthearted yet of depth and insight. In fact, *Marshall McLuhan: The unwitting semiotician* is not only an excellent case study concerning semiotic interpretation, but also a wonderful source book for many areas, including communication, media studies, cultural semiotics, and so on. To the readers who take a particular interest in the evolution of human communication, this book will prove an especially great revelation.

The value of this series extends beyond semiotics itself in that it also provides methodological guidance for studies in the fields of the humanities and social sciences, opening a semiotic window on the world, in other words, using semiotic approaches in our attempts to explore and know the world. As we recall, Kalevi Kull emphasized at the 33rd Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America in 2008 that we study semiotics to make the world pluralistic. It is for the same purpose that we publish this book series, using an intrinsically pluralistic method of academic inquiry to understand our pluralistic world. In fact, natural sciences aim chiefly to search for regularity in the bewildering complexity of the world, that is, to simplify what is complex, whereas the humanities and social sciences, in addition to their own necessary search for regularity, can "complicate" what seems simple. It is in the latter that the genuine significance of semiotic inquiry as a methodology lies.

Since late 2015 when it was first prepared, the final publication of this book series has taken more than two years. In this process, many have offered their

kindhearted help. Besides the authors of the books in the series, the book editors, and the authors of Chinese guides to reading for the five books, we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the president of IASS-AIS, Professor Paul Cobley, for his professional suggestions and constant support, and to the director at Nanjing Normal University Press, Ms. Chun Zhang, for her devotion to the series. Very special thanks go to our dear old friend John Deely, who spared no effort to support Chinese semiotics in the international arena since we made our first acquaintance. Alas, John passed away on January 7th 2017. To this international master semiotician, we dedicate his two posthumous swansongs *Basics of semiotics* (eighth expanded edition) and *Logic as a liberal art*.

Each book in the series is complemented by a Chinese guide to reading. The authors of the guides are prime scholars in the semiotics team at the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures of Nanjing Normal University. They have thorough training in semiotics and relevant fields and long-term involvement in research. Their efforts will better prepare the series for Chinese readers, paving the way for a more comprehensive engagement with the content. Their devotion to the project has made the series more reader-friendly.

Society, nature and the universe are vast and boundless, in that society is temporally inexhaustible while nature and the universe are spatially bottomless, so to speak. Human intellectual inquiry is similar to a small boat sailing on the sea, and semiotics is merely another window opened on this boat.

**Acknowledgements:** The writing of this article was supported by the Jiangsu Social Science Youth Fund (15TQC004), the Significant Chinese National Social Science Fund (15ZDB092), and the Second Phase of the Project Funded by the Priority Academic Program Development of Jiangsu Higher Education Institutions (PAPD: Phase II) (20140901).

## References

The article discusses the following publications in the series “Select Works of Eminent Contemporary Semioticians”:

Berger, Arthur Asa. 2018. *Signs in society and culture*. Nanjing: Nanjing Normal University Press.

Danesi, Marcel. 2018. *Marshall McLuhan: The unwitting semiotician*. Nanjing: Nanjing Normal University Press.

Deely, John. 2018. *Basics of semiotics*. 8th, expanded edn. Nanjing: Nanjing Normal University Press.

Deely, John. 2018. *Logic as a liberal art*. Nanjing: Nanjing Normal University Press.

Morrissey, Christopher S. 2018. *The way of logic*. Nanjing: Nanjing Normal University Press.

## Bionotes

### Jie Zhang

Jie Zhang (b. 1956), PhD, is Professor of Semiotics and Literary Theory at the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures at Nanjing Normal University. His main research interests include semiotics, literary theory, and Russian literature. His publications include “A semiotic analysis of anti-identity construction in fictional narratives from the viewpoint of modeling systems theory” (2016, with Hongbing Yu); “The intelligent mechanism of the text: Boundaries, dialogue and space-time” (2014); and “An analysis of the regeneration mechanism of the textual meaning in *A hero of our time*” (2014).

### Hongbing Yu

Hongbing Yu (b. 1984), PhD, is Associate Professor of Language, Communication and Semiotics at the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures at Nanjing Normal University. His current research interests include semiotics, language and cognition, communication, and Chinese languages and cultures. His publications include “Semiotic modeling and education” (2017); “A semiotic analysis of anti-identity construction in fictional narratives from the viewpoint of modeling systems theory” (2016, with Jie Zhang); and “Human brains function culturally: Semiosis under the culture-driven view” (2013).