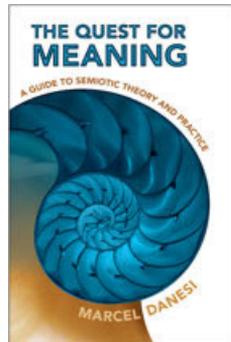


# ○ REVIEW OF MARCEL DANESI, *THE QUEST FOR MEANING: A GUIDE TO SEMIOTIC THEORY AND PRACTICE*

(TORONTO: UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS, 2007)

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Marcel Danesi is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto. He has published extensively on semiotics. His book is a much needed introduction to the field. Danesi uses non-technical language and carefully explains main themes and concepts of the discipline. He often gives a concrete example of theory he has just explained. There are numerous illustrations throughout the book and a glossary of main terms at the end. At the end of each chapter, there is a suggested bibliography and internet resources. Each chapter opens with an epigraph that captures the spirit of the chapter.

The cover of the book has a picture of a nautilus-like shell that has been sawed in two, revealing an intricate and beautiful pattern. This connects with the semiotic notion that humans use signs and language to structure and order their lives. The book also serves as an apology for the field due to its lack of mainstream acceptance, especially in view of the criticism leveled by post-structuralism.

Danesi defines the discipline as the science of produced meaning. This includes ‘the meanings that are built into all kinds of human products, from words, symbols, narratives, symphonies, paintings, and comic books to scientific theories and mathematical theorems’ (3). However, semiotics limits itself to ‘the use, structure, and function of signs (symbols, words, images, figures, etc.)’ (3–4). Semioticians study the ‘*what, how, and why* of signs’ (5). Semiotics has been applied to ‘the study of body language, art forms, discourses of all kinds, visual communication, media, advertising, narratives, language, objects, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, clothing, space, cuisine, rituals...’ (5).

Danesi gives a brief but helpful historical sketch of semiotic theory. Originally, semiotics was a medical term coined by Hippocrates (*sêmeiotikos* ‘observant of signs’) to denote the connection between medical symptoms or signs and the ill. Religion and philosophy figure heavily in its beginnings. Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine were all interested in semiotic concerns. Later, Medieval

theologians debated semiotic issues (St Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham). Then the scientific revolution emerged and the modern discipline of semiotics was created. The two fathers of semiotics are Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce. After these two giants, other contributors to semiotics include Ludwig Wittgenstein, Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, and Michel Foucault. Currently, semiotics is a secular science and interdisciplinary, using concepts and results from linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and anthropology. Conversely, these fields have utilised semiotics in their own research. Semiotics is also related to the popular field of cultural studies.

Given the religious and biblical origins of semiotics, it is somewhat of a disappointment that the relation between semiotics and biblical studies is never broached in the book. This is ironic because in the preface, Danesi mentions two movies that concern the Bible and semiotics: *The Name of the Rose* and *The Da Vinci Code*. In both of these, there is a semiotic sleuth who interprets signs to solve a mystery. Since the 1960s, structuralism and its close sister semiotics have enjoyed an esteemed place among biblical scholars as a type of criticism applied to biblical texts. One thinks of Daniel Patte and the Vanderbilt school, George Aichele, David Jobling, and Stephen Moore, to name a few. Currently, one of the sections at the national SBL conference is labeled 'Semiotics and Exegesis'. And let's not forget the now defunct journal *Semeia*, whose very name indicates its structuralistic/semiotic beginnings. In fact, volume 81 is devoted to semiotics and biblical studies (1998) and volume 54 to poststructuralism as exegesis (1992). Another defect of the book is that Danesi never discusses the relationship between structuralism and semiotics.

One of the few biblical references in the book is an allusion to Samson. In a chapter on representation, Danesi cites the cutting of Samson's hair as fitting the 'sign role' of a superhero. Here Samson plays the role of a hero who has a flaw (easily seduced). Just as kryptonite made Superman weak, so the cutting of Samson's hair by Delilah constitutes his Achilles heel, so to speak. Danesi points out that the modern superhero is an example of how mythology still dominates our thinking, though we might deny it. A superhero is a sign that helps us subconsciously 'make things right' in the world, at least in imagination. In the same way, I would suggest that the story of Samson helped the Israelites deal with their continued position as occupied and subjugated by the Philistines and the other powers of the Ancient Near East.

The modern superhero also represents justice, truth, and goodness. Among recent literary critics, Samson's status as a hero has been questioned, and it has been suggested that he is more an antihero than true hero, and he represents Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh. I would argue that if the story of Samson is an example of ancient superhero mythology, then focusing on his flaws is not the issue. He outwits and defeats Israel's arch-enemy! His peccadilloes only serve to move the plot of the story.

In his last chapter, Danesi provides a very interesting semiotic interpretation of clothing and food. For clothing, Danesi asks the pertinent question, 'What do clothes mean?' Danesi gives several examples of how clothing functions as a sign in society. A biblical scholar who has done work on this topic is Heather A. McKay (1999). Also, *Semeia* 86 (1999) has a section on the social significance of food.

To recap, Danesi's book is a great introduction to the field of semiotics for undergraduate or graduate Bible or religion majors (or interested biblical scholars), but will need supplementation

with examples of biblical scholars who use semiotics in interpreting biblical texts. It is very accessible and will keep the students interested.

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## REFERENCES

McKay, Heather A. 1999. 'Gendering the Body: Clothes Maketh the [Wo]man'. In *Theology and the Body; Gender, Text and Ideology*, edited by Robert Hannaford and J'annine Jobling. Exeter: Gracewing. 84-87.