

Review of: "Historical Semiotics"

Hongbing Yu¹

¹ Toronto Metropolitan University

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This piece is quite illuminating, despite some points that are intuitively “correct”, for instance, the largely essentialist use of the term “culture”, and some other points that are ambiguous, such as the equation between “semiotics” and “history education” in “As semiotics, history education” in the fourth paragraph. Counter-intuitive in a delightful way, the article reminds the broad fields, say, of general semiotics, that there are intellectual traditions of the inquiry of signs (e.g. Grau in the 18th century) in non-English worlds and these traditions must be reckoned with.

I give it three stars in this review because there are a few things that I believe should merit attention if the author wishes to make a stronger and more compelling case.

1, “historical semiotics”, as is treated here, should be properly understood as “semiotics of history”. To see how it is so, we just need to compare the wording with “historical linguistics” — When we speak of historical linguistics, it is still linguistics at issue, not “linguistics of history”.

2, The subject matter discussed here strongly reminds one of cultural memory, collective memory, and social memory, especially given that the author mentions “a living commemorative culture”. It would be a shame to miss out on influential works of, say, Jan Assmann, Maurice Halbwachs, Aby Warburg, and Yuri Lotman, among others. I see no reference to any of these highly relevant figures.

3, Refer to the pivotal concept of “semiosis” as formulated by Peirce. It is a more appropriate term than “semiotics” (as has been ambiguously used in the piece) in this context.

4, It is better to avoid essentialist usages of such terms as “culture”, that is, treating them as all-encompassing contextual factors. In short, beware of using these concepts uncritically.

All in all, this is a decent and promising piece of work. I look forward to reading a more carefully formulated, more nuanced, and more comprehensive updated version of it.