Book Review of Tony Jappy's Introduction to Peircean visual Semiotics.pdf

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Our lives are visually rich with legal meaning. We see objects, representations, and symbols of law all around us. The act of seeing inevitably leads to the interpretation of that which is seen. Visually, we are stimulated; our reactions to everyday signs and symbols construct meaning about our lives. Many times, we simply respond to visual stimuli in ways that are underexplored, such as stopping at the stop sign while driving. Through this example, we can contemplate the semiotic process generated by the red octangular road sign while driving.

Because it is red with a reflective coating for nighttime illumination, we interpret the object through its color as well as its shape. We associate the color red with other traffic signs that indicate ‘halt’, such as the red traffic light, the flashing red lights from emergency vehicles (pull over and stop to let speeding vehicles pass), or red hazard lights on stopped vehicles that alert oncoming traffic to a stopped presence on the road. In addition to color, we recognize the shape of the octagon as unique to a stop sign, as it the predominant traffic sign that is circular in nature; through its roundness, we engage with the sign’s meaning. Through either our knowledge of the stop sign from traffic school or more likely, through the ubiquitous confrontation with this sign in everyday driving contexts, we comply with its directive and interrupt our acceleration. As experienced drivers, we see this object and internalize its meaning by slowing to a stop.

The law gives us a framework for understanding and implementing its meaning. Interestingly, many of us probably do not come to a complete stop (as directed in official driving manuals), but instead come to a rolling stop that is informed by our own individual judgment of oncoming traffic, crossing pedestrians, the presence of
law enforcement, or any other potential reason mandating a full stop. Our engagement with the stop sign is dynamically informed by the stop sign as an object, the stop sign as signifying ‘stopping’ according to vehicular law and roadway habit, yet dynamically interpreted (sometimes) by the individual, dynamically informed challenge to its meaning (to stop completely). Through the example of the rolling stop, we engage with and interpret the stop sign on many levels.

Charles Sanders Peirce, American semiotician, gives us a framework for the digestion and absorption of truly seeing what we see based upon his logic for interpretation. And, Professor Tony Jappy, in Introduction to Peircean Visual Semiotics, gives us a way to grasp Peirce and comprehend Peircean semiosis. Jappy’s presentation of Peirce in conjunction with visual aspects of everyday culture is easily accessible and indeed a pleasure to read. Through Jappy’s writing, the reader becomes intimately connected with both the theory and the theorist. Using bibliographical insight in conjunction with theoretical explanation, Peirce, as well as his work, are enlivened through Jappy’s writing. Peircean semiotics gives us a way to see law and interpret what we see.

In order to contextualize Peirce and his writings generally within philosophy, and more specifically within idealism, realism, and empiricism, Jappy devotes a chapter to the bibliographical foundations of Peirce’s work. Jappy’s presentation of Peirce introduces the reader not only to Peirce, but to the epistemological foundations for thinking about signs, symbols, and images. The concrete images that Jappy draws upon to explain Peirce are tangible facets of daily living. This focus on the quotidian is testament to Jappy’s keen ability to contextualize and explain Peirce in the otherwise mundane and seemingly external relationship to intellectual life. For it is through everyday phenomena that ideas and theories come to life. Similarly, it is through everyday occurrences that we understand what law is and how it happens.

Jappy presents visual aspects of American culture as tools for analysis in explaining Peircean logic. Familiarity with such everyday images generates these objects as dynamic elements in the production of meaning. The types of images used in the book are extensive and include advertisements, cartoons, charts, photographs, paintings, street signs, woodcuts, hieroglyphics, emoticons, diagrams, posters, caricatures, maps, sketches. Within these images, a variety of objects and signs give further depth to Jappy’s explanation of Peircean semiosis: architecture, facial expressions, nudes, young men in a bar, birds in flight, engine, prison cells, a rooster, Mickey Mouse, Ronald McDonald, Che Guevara, and other such world leaders as George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin, even a shapeless blob. The variety of these objects illuminates the wide array of semiotic contexts existing in daily life.

Jappy presents visual culture as the communicative value of pictorial elements in Peirce’s overarching framework of the icon-index-symbol trichotomy. In his richly illustrated and articulate book, Jappy examines the image as a form of “pictorial data” in which meaning from signs can be interpreted and understood according to Peircean trichotomies, for as Peirce noted, the sign can be thought of according to the “dynamic object, the sign, and the dynamic interpretant” (71). Jappy’s writing about Peirce is straightforward and lucid for readers who are unfamiliar with Peirce.
and/or semiotics more generally, or simply need refreshing in Peircean logic. Peirce’s typology for the classification of signs contributes to the order of representation: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. The latter of these provides particular insight into how law is perceived in a semiotic manner.

Legal semiotics often draws upon Peircean semiosis for theoretical support and clarification as much of law happens in common places. Through Thirdness, we can perceive law in myriad ways, as legal iconography is a source of communication for governance, order, and control. Jappy’s use of street signs (75, 88) provides an example of an image commonly used by law, imagined and tested to perpetuate its desire through image and representation. Set within the medium of everyday situations, these signs become objects for interpretation within dynamic contexts. The audience for law’s communication is the onlooker, as the person who passes by, looks at the sign, and understands its message. The interpretation of the sign is contextually reflective of previous knowledge regarding law (in terms of experienced traffic behavior and legally acceptable frameworks and responses). Therefore, the rhetoric of the street sign conveys a commonly understood language in which law is depicted, received, and acted upon through visual meaning.

Seeing law is to comprehend its logic. The logic of law is premised upon its receipt and reception, albeit such acknowledgment is not necessarily compliance. Even through resistance, law nonetheless maintains its presence and legitimacy as a source of governance. Cars that roll to a stop and proceed through the intersection acknowledge the stop sign insofar as the purpose may be less to formally stop, and more informally, to pay attention with a suggestion to stop. Importantly, the image of a law enforcement officer at said intersection would be yet another type of visual cue that law is watching. Therefore, Peirce’s logic of the visual through the related actions of seeing, interpreting, and contextualizing meaning, provide insight into how law is visually constructed with sight in mind and engaged with by a seeing public.