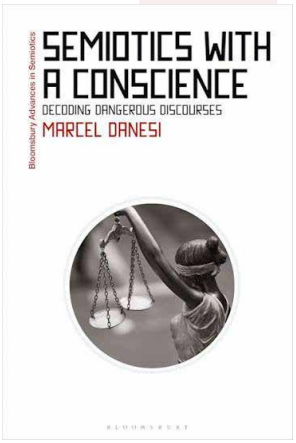
Dark Semiotics

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BY: **Keith M. Murphy**



Marcel Danesi

Semiotics with a Conscience: Decoding Dangerous Discourses

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, 192 pp. $ 39.95 (pbk, ISBN 9781350362123), $ 135 (hbk, ISBN 9781350362086).

The book *Semiotics with a Conscience: Decoding Dangerous Discourses* by Marcel Danesi is vexing. In terms of its topic, it's very timely, and delineates a real and pressing problem. In terms of its execution, however, it consistently misses the mark. There are some redeeming qualities to the book that might make it a worthwhile read for completists seeking to cite everything in the realm of semiotics and misinformation (given the author's status and the book's appearance in a well-known series, it's destined to be one of that realm's central texts). But anyone in need of useful methodologies, innovative theory, or a good resource for teaching semiotics would be better served somewhere else.

The premise of the book is more or less presaged in its title. The world is awash in what Danesi calls 'dangerous discourses' – misinformation, conspiracy theories, Big Lies, and visual symbols of hate, for example – and one way to analyze these discourses, and to combat them, is through the careful deployment of semiotics. The preface and first chapter lay the groundwork for approaching semiotics as explicitly ethical (which, the author acknowledges, has not historically been a common way to describe the field) and establishing the analytic vocabulary relied on in the rest of the book. The second chapter does some work to illuminate both overlaps

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and distinctions between different semiotic forms used in dangerous discourses, like text, abstract symbols, and visual imagery. The following three chapters purport to focus on distinct types of dangerous discourses: denials, big lies, and false narratives. Finally, the book's last chapter tries to offer a positive vision for what a future 'semiotics with a conscience' approach might be.

On the surface, this all seems agreeable enough. Dangerous discourses are a big problem; semiotics *can* help us better understand them; and we likely *should* make stronger arguments that showcase semiotics in an ethical light. That said, beyond simply forwarding the case that all of this is so, *Semiotics with a Conscience* doesn't do much else to lead us in new directions – or, really, anyplace at all. There are two main reasons for this, as I see it. First, the book suffers from a collection of small issues that together weigh it down inexorably; second, a single larger problem sits at its center, essentially functioning as the book's fatal flaw.

The small issues are, in themselves, irritating but not ruinous. For example, the text can be distractingly repetitive. Sometimes this manifests explicitly at the paragraph level. In Chapter 4, for instance, Danesi ends one sentence with the phrase 'disastrous for Sicily' and then follows it directly with a quote ending with 'a disastrous one for Sicily.' Two pages later he uses the phrase 'infested by vermin and rats' and then 'filthy and infested by vermin' in the very next line. In Chapter 5, Danesi quotes from Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, then four pages later uses the same quote – modified and not cited – as if it hadn't appeared just a few pages earlier. Compositional quirks like these can be chalked up to lax editing, of course, but the repetition continues at other levels. The book is riddled with anaphoric signposts like 'as mentioned' and 'as discussed,' subtly marking how often ideas and examples are recycled. But perhaps the most noticeable repetition is the persistent reliance on three specific authors – Hitler, Machiavelli, and Orwell – who are credulously called upon as either expert practitioners of dark semiotics (Hitler and Machiavelli) or virtuoso analysts of the form (Machiavelli and Orwell). There is, of course, nothing wrong with substantially relying on a small group of writers or texts to build one's argument. However, a problem emerges here when those writers are invoked not because they offer any semiotic insight, but because they supply a glut of discourses whose dangerousness need not be explained.

Besides the book's repetitiveness, a second small issue is that it's written too solidly in (and for) a specific historical moment. Most of its contemporary examples are drawn from the Donald Trump and MAGA (Make America Great Again) era, including socially chaotic phenomena like QAnon, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the Covid-19 pandemic (the January 6 attack on the US Capitol gets passing mention, but is incorrectly dated to 2022 instead of 2021). These are, thematically, good examples. However, I worry that they "work" for today's audience because many of us

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remember them quite clearly, not because they are especially well-contextualized in the book. Danesi does an admirable job exploring some of the more esoteric details of specific dangerous discourses, like the QAnon conspiracy theory. But because he seems to assume that readers are familiar with the social and historical contexts in which such discourses circulated, his introductory descriptions can be quite thin. As a result, I suspect that were I to assign this book tomorrow to first-year undergraduates – who were alive when QAnon was ascendant but in elementary school – they would find themselves thoroughly perplexed. To be fair, Danesi is decidedly not alone in this style of presentation. But since semiotic analysis is an overly scrupulous game of small features, it's incumbent upon us as analysts to ensure that the features that matter most are as properly arranged in our analyses as can be, and I don't think Danesi always gets there.

A third issue is that Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are each devoted to a different type of dangerous discourse – denials, big lies, and false narratives, respectively – presented as more or less distinct types of discourse. But this is an illusion, since denials often involve lies, lies can be narratively structured, and so on. Why is Holocaust denialism not also a big lie? I get that dividing the general object of inquiry this way is a useful way to structure the book, and Danesi doesn't overstate differences or draw thick boundaries between types. But organizing the book like this risks misleading readers into seeing these discourses as real kinds, rather than as writerly heuristics.

There are other small issues like these, but I'll leave it there because the book's bigger issue, its fatal flaw, is more urgently existential. It has two aspects. First, *Semiotics with a Conscience* is not really a book about semiotics; second, it doesn't say much about the danger in dangerous discourses.

Perhaps that first claim is an overstatement, and I should rephrase. The book *concerns* semiotics. But it does not really show us how exactly to work with semiotics, nor does it offer an especially compelling model for why semiotic analysis is better-suited than other methods for understanding dangerous discourses. Danesi states in the preface that he's written the book for the general public and as such he shies away from overly technical exposition. This is commendable, and, overall, the prose is quite readable for an erudite public (or advanced undergraduate student). But if readers want to learn how to apply a technical semiotic analysis – even a rudimentary one – to, say, a piece of fake news they've encountered on social media, then there's very little here for them to absorb.

This isn't to say that there's nothing useful in this regard. The book contains insightful discussions of thinkers like Saussure, and especially Barthes (for some reason Peirce receives surprisingly low billing), along with many others. There are lots of cases and examples (both historical and contemporary) whose "dangerous" stakes Danesi communicates well. In Chapter 1 there is even a version of a usable analytical

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framework presented. But here's where the big issue begins: that framework is not very good. It's overly simplistic and never applied in any rigorous or coherent way. It may not even be a framework at all. I'm only calling it a framework because there is a diagram – badly labeled and under-explained – that gives graphic form to a basic idea: we interpret discourses through codes, and codes are arranged as a network of nodes that are either rhetoric (including metaphors), symbols, images, or texts (especially narratives). Sometimes "code" is used neutrally, sometimes it's more like a "secret code," but otherwise this is as complex as it gets.

As a 'theoretical tool,' which is how the preface describes semiotics, this framework is lacking. Terms like image, symbol, text, and metaphor have technical (semiotic) senses, but they're also used colloquially. When the technical sense is not carefully explained (even if 'reaching a general public' is a good reason not to), then readers who are not otherwise initiated into semiotic thinking are likely to interpret them colloquially – which undermines the very purpose of the tool. The kinds of non-nuanced examples that Danesi relies on throughout the book contribute to this: an image is a thing like a photograph, a symbol is a thing like a swastika, a text is a thing like *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. That rhetoric can be textual and imagistic, that images can depict narratives, that symbols invoke metaphors – none of this really matters here. Instead, the main procedure is to present, say, a conspiracy theory, to label certain features as 'I-nodes' (images) and others as 'S-nodes' (symbols) and so on, and to describe the whole assemblage as a semiotic network, even though doing so adds nothing; it's all just an exercise in giving new names to familiar things.

This is all not very satisfying. If *Semiotics with a Conscience* is offering readers a theoretical tool, then those readers should finish the book with more than the ordinary interpretive instruments they started it with. (I'll note that Danesi does draw on the concept of *apophenia*, the tendency to find meaningful connections between unrelated things, though it's not a uniquely semiotic idea). However, because the approach promised in the book's title ultimately amounts to an intuitive truism – that dangerous discourses are built from metaphors, symbols, images, and texts – I don't think this tool can be properly described as semiotic, or maybe even as a tool at all.

Now for the second point. What makes the dangerous discourses identified in the subtitle *dangerous*? Or, really, what shifts a piece of discourse from a presumably neutral position to something that's more or less (for lack of a better term) *bad*? A reasonable presumption going into this book is that the badness (the "danger" in dangerous discourses) can be found in signs themselves, or at least very nearby. Yet the book's semiotic framework, such as it is, is agnostic as to its ethical valence (despite repeated entreaties to ethics). Readers who know nothing about semiotics might assume that everything Danesi describes is somehow uniquely applicable to *dangerous* discourses. Danesi never makes that claim, but he also doesn't adequately distinguish between

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generic semiotic analysis and a semiotic analysis applied to dangerous discourses. Maybe that's fine. Maybe the point is simply that semiotics can help us understand any kind of discourse, and dangerous discourses just happen to be the focus of this book. The question remains, though: *what makes a discourse dangerous*? It's never really answered. But there are clues.

At the end of the book (p. 151), Danesi declares that 'semiotics has obvious ethical implications, since it can expose the illegitimate use of signs in a concrete way.' The claim is notable in part because of its boldness, and in part because it raises a real question: what does 'the illegitimate use of signs' mean? Is this what makes a discourse dangerous, a use of signs that deviates from a 'legitimate use' into an 'illegitimate use'? And what about those of us who interpret the illegitimate use? Are we just semiotic dupes misrecognizing something bad as if it's legitimate? It's an odd framing, because however "legitimacy" is defined, it's usually thought of as culturally shaped, historically contingent, and unevenly distributed, always something applied to the things of the world by real social actors. Critically, it's not something that can necessarily be determined *within* a semiotic framework, and certainly not within the simplified version used in the book. If dangerous discourses are indeed about illegitimate sign-use, it seems like we'd need to look somewhere other than signs to understand them.

Danesi certainly understands this, which is perhaps why throughout the book he presents plenty of real social actors who put signs to "illegitimate" use. But those real social actors are disproportionately weighted toward world-historical bad guys like Hitler, Machiavelli, and Vladimir Putin, puppet-master types, 'master liars,' as Danesi describes them. Because there's not much said about the ordering of badness within a semiotic framework, this is where the *danger* question starts to feel tautological: dangerous discourses are dangerous because dangerous men promote them. It's almost as if the difficulty of answering a question like 'what makes a discourse dangerous *from a semiotic point of view*' has been bypassed, replaced by the repeated invocation of obvious bad actors responsible for their propagation. And on the interpretation side of things, it's similarly blunt. Why people 'fall for' these ruses can almost always be explained, according to Danesi, by neuroscience – that is, by a shared neural infrastructure that, through flukes of evolution, has left humans vulnerable to the hand of a manipulative malefactor.

Despite the book's pushing a semiotic network perspective, Danesi's core argument is essentially a *linear* one: individuals interpret dangerous discourses in certain ways because their brains are hardwired to do so, using the multiple resources that have been assembled for that purpose by some lone or institutional master liar. To understand how it all works, one must recognize that dangerous discourses have 'authors' on one end, and 'readers' on the other, with a 'text' that subsists between

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them. Analysis requires describing some of the discourse's details; identifying and labeling within those descriptions any symbols as S-nodes, images as I-nodes, and metaphors as R-nodes; and then looking somewhere else to determine whether the whole assembly is dangerous or not.

This kind of approach is simply ill-suited to the semiotic reality of most contemporary dangerous discourses – even those with identifiable figureheads like Putin or Trump. It cannot tell us how dangerous discourses are collectively constructed (Bielo 2019), how they grow and spread in social space, how they thrive in particular political environments and fizzle out in others. Almost every contemporary example Danesi provides in the book doesn't really conform well to the linear model. Similar to memes (Wiggins 2019), these dangerous discourses are massively complex, emergent, medium-dependent (Gershon 2023), fueled by on-the-ground participation, enmeshed in many other 'non-dangerous' semiotic regimes (e.g., law, religion, science, nationalism), and so on. How and why any dangerous discourse is semiotically encoded (Murphy 2023), who benefits from doing so, how meaning-making processes have changed and adapted – none of this is given much attention, at least when it comes to recent examples (his discussion of the Dreyfus Affair is likely the closest we get in the book). To the degree that real social conditions matter to Danesi's approach, they don't count as a part of the machinery of dangerous discourses – only the chassis that contains them. Everything important is treated as part of a static code that can be easily decoded if one simply has the right tools to do it.

But Danesi himself doesn't always have those tools. Take, for example, his brief discussion of the "OK" hand gesture, which he describes like this (p. 46):

> Even a simple hand gesture can accrue coded meanings within the semiotic network that defines a group. For example, the 'OK' hand gesture, which appears innocent, is used by white supremacist groups as an iconic symbol, with the looped and extended fingers made to resemble the letters W and P, standing for "white power."

This is, at best, a significant misreading of the semiotics of the situation (not to mention its history). The "white power/OK" hand gesture was not a creation of any white power organization, nor was it ever used by avowed racists until long after its spread. The origins of the idea that the gesture is racist trace back to the mid-2010s. But the claim was supercharged by a post on the platform 4Chan in 2017. An anonymous user (all users on the platform are anonymous by design) posted the following, with the title "Introducing: Operation O-KKK:" [1]

[1] Archived here, visit at your own risk: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/114482325/

> We must flood twitter and other social media websites with spam, claiming that the OK hand sign is a symbol of white supremacy. Make fake accounts with basic white girl names and type shit like: OMG that's so truuuuu
>
> Use as many emojis as you please. It would also be good for us to associate the OK sign being a symbol of white supremacy because Mel Gibson used it.
>
> Use the hashtag "#PowerHandPrivilege" in all of your tweets and whatnot related to this.
>
> Bonus points if your profile pic is something related to supporting feminism.
>
> Leftists have dug so deep down into their lunacy. We must force to dig more, until the rest of society aint going anywhere near that shit

In other words, the whole thing began as an intentional trolling campaign to persuade ordinary people like Danesi to believe that the OK gesture is racist. Expanding on the original poster's call to action, users began digging up old photos of rightwing politicians and celebrities performing the gesture, which they'd re-circulate on social media along with the claim that their subjects were secretly signaling white power allegiance. Soon enough, rightwing groups like the Proud Boys and even young staffers in Trump's White House were photographed using the OK gesture (though technically, linking OK to Trump had started a few years before). This helped flood social media with both the gesture and the claim, while also allowing new participants to acknowledge winkingly that they, too, were playing the trolling game. Traditional media outlets began reporting on accusations that White House interns were using racist gestures, which rapidly propelled an obscure internet "joke" into mainstream awareness. As liberals and Democrats began repeating the claim that the gesture is racist, Trump supporters would prominently display it at Trump rallies. Eventually, several political watchdog groups labeled the gesture a hate symbol. Only then did members of actual racist organizations start using it – not because the fingers look like a (partially upside-down!) abbreviation for white power (note that this makes little sense), but because a small group of internet trolls engaged in coordinated semiotic warfare trying to change a common hand gesture's meaning. And, in large part, it worked.

This isn't really the space for detailing a more technical analysis of this example, but I think it's clear that Danesi's reading of the racist OK gesture is far less complex and far less interesting – and ultimately wrong in its upshot – than what actually happened in the real world. It's not a story of "codes" and "images" and the

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passive accrual of meaning within a single social group. It's a story of real humans actively operationalizing a folk theory of semiotics and taking advantage of the affordances of social media to forcibly re-engineer how a very normal and innocuous sign is interpreted (cf. Wąsik 2025). Not all dangerous discourses follow this pattern, of course, and my point is not to assume that they do. But I do think this example illustrates how examining dangerous discourses primarily as *social projects* rather than simply as multimodal texts can provide a much richer and more explanatory semiotic analysis.

To be clear, every major contemporary example of a dangerous discourse used in *Semiotics with a Conscience* (not just the OK gesture) can be looked at in this way, by starting not with the dangerous discourse itself, but with a question: *why does this particular discourse exist right now and in this form*? All these examples involve some kind of intentional manipulation, distortion, or obfuscation. All of them center on a disruption of existing or alternative significations between signs, referents, and the world for some sort of malign purposes. How that manipulation practically unfolds, who goes about doing it, who is it aimed at, what counts as "malign" in a given situation – answers to these and many other questions could push a 'semiotics with a conscience' much further and produce far more consequential results than the simplistic 'decoding' approach advanced by Danesi.

In the end, while I think *Semiotics with a Conscience* would have been a more successful book had it taken the kind of dynamic approach I've noted here, that's ultimately just a difference of scholarly opinion. The bigger problem, as I see it, is that I'm not even sure the book succeeds on its own terms. Had there been fewer examples but with better context and more careful, even didactic analysis for each of them, then maybe it would feel more usable, more indispensable. As it stands, however, the combination of several small issues haunting the text throughout and a couple more substantial issues sitting at its base makes recommending this book very difficult.

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