

BOOK REVIEWS

The Edusemiotics of Images: Essays on the Art-Science of Tarot

By Inna Semetsky

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Reviewed by Elizabeth Scheer, University of Wisconsin

In *The Edusemiotics of Images: Essays on the Art-Science of Tarot*, Inna Semetsky argues for a critical method of education grounded in tarot reading. Stating that tarot “can be a profound motivational force” in shaping how we grow and act (3), the author mobilizes discourses in deconstruction and pragmatism to argue that we can approach tarot as a form of semiotics and, in turn, as a method of moral instruction, as the meaning of each card marshals the reader towards a deeper and more ethical engagement with the world. The book is a series of thought experiments, each chapter taking on some aspect of tarot and arguing for its pedagogical use. Chapter One, for example, uses the archetype of The Fool (the first card in the Tarot deck) to explore themes of initiation and rites of passage, asking what it means to be at the beginning of one’s education. Chapter Four problematizes the “dualism between magic and science,” arguing that the semiology of The Magician card marshals us towards inner wellsprings of creativity and poetic thought. Later chapters, like “The Paradox of Inquiry” and “Ghosts in the Machine?” step back from particular cards and process the educative properties of tarot as a whole.

All of Semetsky’s chapters are united in a philosophical framework that champions process, multiplicity, and becoming over linear models, and the claim that images cue us to hidden emotional truths that language alone cannot supply. From an ethical and emotional vantage point, *The Edusemiotics of Images* supplies little with which to quibble; its thesis—that tarot offers a pedagogy that promotes feeling and process over rationality and rigid determinism—is both straight-forward and feel-good. The book’s “reboot” of Deweyan

progressivism will be of particular interest, perhaps, to millennial scholars of education whose generation has often been characterized by a somewhat faddish preoccupation with tarot and the zodiac. Indeed, the deduction of a pattern hidden within apparent chaos appeals to a generation that bore the brunt of two major economic recessions, and has been forced to embrace non-linear chronologies of self-actualization that Semetsky calls “the informal school of life” (10).

As a millennial scholar (Aries sun, Aquarius moon!) and a heavy dabbler in the domain of tarot, I found myself both intrigued by and somewhat suspicious of *The Edusemiotics of Images*, which promised to reveal, much like a shaman peering over her medicine wheel, an underlying logic connecting two belief systems to which I have, myself, subscribed: post-structuralism and the New Age. The author is not wrong in the connections that she draws between Deleuze and tarot, and it was exciting to see these topics drawn together in an argument that will intuitively make sense to a student of any and all of these ideas.

The problem is that the book, itself, is not particularly clear. It suffers, I think, from being both too complicated and too simple, as its diffuse conceptual framework obfuscates a relatively straight-forward argument while also skimming the surface of critical conversations that need to be laid out in full. Put another way, Semetsky relies on cursory engagement with too many critics. The casualty of this kind of scholarly name-dropping is that the work displays breadth but not depth, a deficit which produces some important inconsistencies in Semetsky’s critical framework. For example, what I enjoyed about the work was the fact that Semetsky’s argument is quite simple. But its simplicity arises from the fact that its argument is, at its root, structuralist, not post-structuralist, reliant upon binaries of “not this but that” even as it aligns itself with “Thirdness...a category of synthesis, mediation and learning!” (24). Perhaps in an effort to underline the legitimacy of her work’s claims, the author has culled quotes and sources to create an account of tarot that enlists a wide range of scholars, from Julia Kristeva, to Marshall McLuhan, to John Dewey, to Saussure. This critical arsenal is too vast, however, and ultimately poses problems for the book’s argument as a whole, since some of the lines of critical thought do not ultimately work well together. In saying that tarot is a closed sign system that is activated in and through experience, Semetsky wants to have her cake and eat it too, marking tarot as both a structuralist and post-structuralist pedagogical mode. That’s all well and good, but these distinctions between Barthes, Saussure, Deleuze and Foucault need to be clearly outlined in the introduction, followed by a comprehensive explanation of this work’s intervention in that conversation. Otherwise, one has the sense that *The Edusemiotics of Tarot* uses theory like a tarot deck, pulling cards— “Jung;” “Piaget;” “Peirce;” “Zizek;” “Bubet”—without telling the reader a credible story about how those cards fit together. Were I to workshop this manuscript with its author, I might invoke the formulation that often begins a tarot reading: “Tell me what I need to know about [my finances, my love life, my health].” Here, the reader has asked the critic what they need to know about edusemiotics, and it is the role of the author to create a sense of directionality within this unknown: that is, a clear sense of how the signs connect.

This analogy between the author and the tarot reader is significant in another way, because there's the sense that Semetsky is observing a closed system from an omniscient remove without probing the relationship between the tarot reader and the individual whose tarot is being read (unless one is reading one's own tarot). This relationship between "reader" and "read" strikes me as akin to that of teacher and student, or at least teacher and student-teacher. I would be curious to hear how Semetsky reads the role of intimacy in this encounter, as one's tarot reading is deepened and enhanced by the reader's own reading of her "pupil." A relevant anecdote comes to mind: I have a vivid memory of attending a tarot workshop where a woman, new to the course, asked the facilitator whether she should leave her partner. The facilitator contemplated her spread before proclaiming: "the cards say: stay!" The look of horror on the woman's face led the reader to retract his divination: "the cards say: go!" The point being, here, that tarot is a dyadic experience that involves reading body language and backstory, not just the cards.

I also would have loved to have had Semetsky say a bit more about the element of chance involved in the pulling of a spread. She does take up the projections involved in the "hermeneutic process" in Chapter 10, but even more might be said to directly address tarot's tendency to invite what can only be described as magical thinking. In tarot as in life, we are largely at the mercy of dumb luck. We do, however, get to control the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves: our fortunes, our failures, and our vulnerabilities. The magic of tarot, it seems to me, is its capacity to let us spin ad hoc determinism from indeterminacy by showing us what we already know to be true: that we harbor the strength to deal with whatever fate casts our way. My father—who is not Deleuze but a veteran public-school teacher—has always said that a good teacher helps her students fall in love with themselves learning the material. I think this is the conceit at the center of Semetsky's book, and it is why, despite my objections to her critical methodology, I applaud her project's aims.

Reviewer Details

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