

Biosemiotics Achievement Award for the Year 2019

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Abstract

Established at the annual meeting of the International Society for Biosemiotic Studies (ISBS) on July 3rd 2014, in conjunction with Springer Publishing, publishers of the Society's official journal, *Biosemiotics*, the Annual Biosemiotic Achievement Award seeks to recognize those papers published in the journal that present novel and potentially important contributions to the ongoing project of biosemiotic research, its scientific impact, and its future prospects. Here the winner of the Biosemiotics Achievement Award for 2019 is announced: the award goes to Y.H. Hendlin for the article 'I Am a Fake Loop: the Effects of Advertising-Based Artificial Selection'.

Keywords Biosemiotics achievement award · Deceptive mimicry · Strange loops · Advertising · *Umwelt*

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We are pleased to announce that the Annual Biosemiotic Achievement Award for 2019 goes to: Yogi Hale Hendlin for his article 'I Am a Fake Loop: the Effects of

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Advertising-Based Artificial Selection' (*Biosemiotics* 2019, Vol. 12, Issue 1, pages 131–156).

The paper examines the mechanisms and the semiotic tools that the advertising industry uses to create fake loops of mimicry. This strategy excites our instincts but, at the same time, affects our capacity to adapt to new circumstances negatively. In doing so the rich signscape of nature is destroyed and, with it, our capacity to deal with the affordances that allow us to act in the environment and be recognized as agents with a proper identity.

Premised on the idea that human social processes are continuous with those in nature, the author extends methodologies and concepts of biosemiotics and ethological research to an analysis and critique of contemporary social phenomena such as marketing, advertising, and consumerism which form a centrepiece in the human and social sciences where they are traditionally treated as 'cultural' rather than 'natural'. In this paper, they are seen as instances of changing patterns of sign relations exhibited by the human species engaging in biological mimicry and deception. This paper shows how seamlessly biosemiotics can combine with and enrich scholarship in other disciplines, including philosophy, social psychology, and sociology.

The author achieves this by way of re-contextualising these social issues within a framework of *Umweltian* and biosemiotic relations, showing how it is possible to identify an 'ethical aperture' (p.134) appropriate to the 'curating of one's own habitat' (p.151). This way of framing social issues opens up new ways of thinking about concepts like agency and responsibility.

Hofstadter's concept of strange loops (Hofstadter 2007) - the paradoxes of self-reference - is used as a device for elaborating a number of complexities relating to deception in mimicry and is skilfully deployed here for a number of novel purposes: it is used to problematize notions of the self (and associated assumptions about agency) as unitary, bounded, and a-temporal; it serves to expose the way in which biological mimicry in the case of the human species can generate "fake loops" where the deception of others can simultaneously involve a covert form of self-deception resulting in a perversion of the original sign relations; it is used to explain the role of Tinbergen's supernormal stimulus (Tinbergen 1951) in generating the double deception characteristic of consumerist human society. Strange loops are shown ambiguously to be a basis for the moral failing of *akrasia* or "weakness of the will", as well as its antidote in the form of reflective capacities through which moral agency might be developed.

This paper is likely to be a stimulus for research along a number of different pathways including biosemiotics in relation to the burgeoning field of imitation and mimicry studies as represented by contributors to this volume (see also Maran 2017), but also in a range of social and cultural studies (e.g., Parikka 2010), in philosophy and philosophical ethics, especially studies drawing on phenomenological and pragmatist traditions (e.g., Gallagher 2017), and in the various disciplines involving the "4EA" approach to cognition and to living things more generally (e.g., Thompson 2007).

Particularly relevant for biosemioticians should be the reflection that, as humans, we most frequently assume that we are rationally autonomous in our capacity to represent causes and intentions. We behave as if our acting outcomes could be predicted with a predefined probability. In this paper the author forces us to recognize that much of our

behavior is instead automatic and “put into motion by features of the environment outside of conscious awareness” (p.137). Ultimately this condition makes us accept as informative whatever comes through a preselected set of beliefs, thus hampering any real access to the semiotic openness of nature.

The Members of the 2019 Biosemiotic Achievement Award Selection Committee.

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