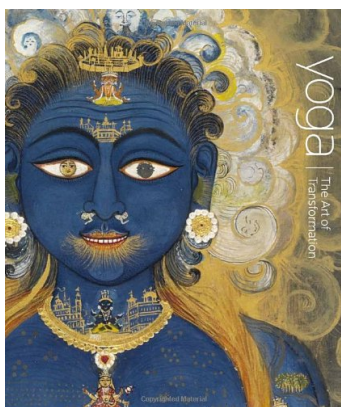


Semiotics, yoga and art



This review of Debra Diamond (ed.) *Yoga – The Art of Transformation* defines some notions of semiotics and then takes a quick semiotic look at the book. I investigate some of the methodological limitations of the book and what semiotics could bring to the analysis of yoga illustrations. Methodology is important – it defines what we see, the way we see it and finally what we can't see. The review concludes that it in many ways is *Yoga The Art of Transformation* symptomatic for the academic yoga discourse.

Semiotics nailed down with a few words

Semiotics is about what things *mean* to us. It is a method to (1) reveal the messages embedded in things and (2) to substantiate how the process of meaning generation takes place.

A fundamental thing about human beings is that no matter what we encounter we will immediately imbue this phenomenon with meaning. This is a default program running in us and we cannot get away from it. This default program is our culture. No matter what we – or the mind - get in contact with the default program starts to give values, associations, attach feelings, understanding, meaning. So there is a mental aspect to our encounter with the world. This 'mental aspect' is the "signified" and is central to semiotics. The 'whatever we get in contact with' mentioned above – it can be a stone, an event, a text, human behaviour, a sound, an illustration, a feeling – is the 'signifier'. So because of our human nature – our inherent default program – all signifiers are automatically being "signified". Studying the signified we are looking into how our mind and culture is working.

Initially the notions of semiotics (like signifier and signified) can seem cumbersome and opaque but as soon as one starts to use them a whole new world of insights and possibilities is opening up in my experience. Before reviewing *Yoga The Art of Transformation* let me briefly further introduce some crucial semiotics distinctions by discussing our relationship with dogs.

A dog is not just a physical dog. It has a mental aspect to us. So in semiotics the dog is both (a) *something* – a signifier – which is radiating (b) *messages* – the signified – to us. The *meaning* – this "signified" – is totally dependent on context (think of a dog in various contexts like a hunter, a drug pusher, an old lady, a blind person). Thus in semiotics a dog can both be called "a signifier" (the physical aspect) and "the signified" (the mental aspect, what the dog means to us). But here comes a twist.

Sometimes a dog is also in semiotics defined as a "referent". So we now have three notions related to a dog: signifier, signified and referent. Take the English word DOG (a *physical* sound) and a 'photo of a dog' (a *physical* illustration): in semiotics they are two *signifiers* both referring to the *same physical object* in reality. So here the 'DOG word/ sound' and the 'dog photo' become "signifiers" (they refer to something outside themselves) and the actual *physical dog* they are referring to becomes "the referent". Hence sometimes a physical dog is a *referent* sometimes a *signifier*. It becomes as *signifier* as soon as we humans imbue it with meaning (the signified). This 'signified' is what culture is about: the process of giving meaning, a meaning which is often un-reflected and taken for granted.

What is the purpose of these semiotic distinctions? Semiotics make us conscious aware of the message *processing* originating from signifiers/ everything. The main interest of semiotics is usually *not* the referent to which the signifiers can be pointing. It is rather the silent assumptions – the cognitive and perceptual filters – which are informing us but which we are not conscious aware of. Semiotics further warns us that we often tend to believe that the signifier – say a photo – is depicting *reality* (the referent). But we are often wrong in assuming that. Instead we are seeing something we have *projected* upon this referent – we see (read) our "mental imagination",

not the “real thing”. Thus it is crucial to semiotic analysis to make us aware that “the mental aspect” has taken over and what really is dominating our perception and reverberating through our mind is the signified – not the referent.

During the 20th Century semiotics became a codified discourse for how we can better talk about and become aware of the meaning processes (resulting in something signified) tricked by signifiers. Today semiotics is embedded in our dealing with and analysis of politics, art, media, psychology, history, advertising, public relation and so on. Modern advertising and public relation would hardly exist without semiotics.

Introducing the book under review

Let me now turn to the subject of this article *Yoga - The Art of Transformation*. A new beautiful book, full of illustration related to yoga edited by Debra Diamond. It contains an impressive range of marvellous illustrations which must have been a major effort to collect. The pictures are well grouped under interesting headings and I can just assure that the book is stunning and a delight to study.

In this review however I want to highlight some methodological aspects of the book which not so easily catches the eye and which I found was lacking in the analyses of the illustrations. Now and then our embedded research methodology should be carefully scrutinised and re-evaluated because, as mentioned earlier, methodology is important – it defines what we see, the way we see it and finally what we can't see. I would like to use this review as an opportunity to do such a re-valuation through using *Yoga The Art of Transformation* as an example.

The signifying process embedded in the book

Now I have introduced semiotics I suggest we take a quick semiotic look at the book so we can get an initial impression of what this methodology can bring to the table. Thus as a warm up exercise in semiotics lets have a look at the book as a *signifier*.

Let us see what is actually going on as we pick up the huge book and starts to browse through it for the first time. The catalogue with its numerous articles describing the numerous illustrations opens with a general introduction to yoga. This introduction contains six articles written by the worlds top leading yoga scholars. We also see that prestigious sponsors have supported the book. All this immediately makes us implicit aware of the artistic and academic aspirations of the book.

But what is happening here in semiotic terms? What is unfolding is a strategy which is core to semiotics. It is an act well known by and crucial to all advertising and PR: by *associating* the catalogue with prestigious yoga experts and sponsors the catalogue itself become enmeshed in and signified with their prestige and knowledge/proficiency. There is nothing wrong with this – it is just an example of a basic semiotic strategy/process.

So already as the readers open the book and flicker through it we are holding a *signifier* in our hand signifying high status, profound knowledge, refined art. All the marks of high culture. Thus we receive unconscious signals and messages before we have really started to read properly: “this is not just another coffee table illustration book for light entertainment. No this yoga book – this signifier - is an expression of high culture – a cultural symbol supported by the gate keepers of elite culture.” This strategy or process of associations is named “*connotations*” in semiotics.

The book (the signifier) is in our mind not only being associated – linked – to high ranking cultural signifiers (scholars, sponsors). This elite/ high culture association is also being transferred to the *content* of the book – the yoga sign. Thus there is an even more subtle implicit message coded into this book: *yoga as such* becomes associated with the ranks of high cultural icons of world culture. How does the book in its implicit ways achieve this? In other words: what are the embedded semiotic processes/ strategies?

One of them is to discuss yoga in positive terms – uttermost respectful and almost reverential (no parody allowed) - and to avoid negative or critical remarks about the subject matter. In this way is the reader by default let to associate similar appreciating values to the yoga sign.

An example of this process: we all know the world of difference it makes if we call a ‘man with a bomb’ a “terrorist” or a “freedom fighter”. One of the expressions is certainly imbuing the bomber with prestige and admiration, the other not. The connotation shapes our valuation of ‘the man with the bomb’. Thus *Yoga The Art of Transformation* is in line with this creating

connotations by for instance linking powerful signs to yogis by naming them: *great sages, masters of meditation, perfected sage and enlightened beings*.

Within cultural sociology one would say that the signifier (the book, the illustrations) and its referent (yoga) through connotations has been charged with *symbolic and cultural capital* through implicit social psychological strategies ("*transference*").

The above introductory analysis does not try to say some thing deep and important about the book. It is just a little example of what semiotics can bring to the table by just looking at the book as a signifier. I have NOT discussed if the book reveals something about the objects in reality it claims it is dealing with (the referent). I have instead investigated how the book affect our understanding of itself (the signified).

In fact semiotics – focusing on the signified of the signifier - is a strong tool for analysing *images* as it is the nature of images to talk to us through symbols. However to my surprise there was little – if any - semiotics or cultural sociology to be found in this book.

Chasing the elusive referent versus a semiotic approach

The absence of the methods of semiotics could raise the suspicion that the book is blind to the symbolic messages encoded into the illustrations – the signifiers. But the situation is not that critical. Many of the articles guide us neatly through what *different elements of a picture is representing* (the so called "key signifiers"): for instance the snake/ bird/ hand gesture in an illustration is representing this; the band/hairstyle/building is representing that; this clay figure/ symbol/ stereotype is representing that god; etc. Further we are also well guided about the meta-data of the illustrations (year of origin, region, commissioner, artist, who and what is portrayed, the historical background).

However in semiotics we are not so much interested in what a signifier is referring to ("this gesture symbolises Vishnu", "this Mantra symbolises the universe as energy"). It is of course good to know that a figure in the illustration is a *representation* (an icon, a symbol of) of say Vishnu, but for semiotics it is more important to investigate what kind of mental processing is being activated in the recipient by this visual representation. Semiotics is more interested in what cultural and social psychological impact does the signifier have *on the recipient* (what emotions, fantasies, conclusions, projections, and behaviour is generated by the signifier (the Vishnu picture, the Mantra illustration) and what semiotic strategies does the signifier employ. How do people read and react to the signifier, how (through what processes) does the signifier work on its "addresses"?

So semiotics proposes another way of approaching the illustrations: Why was the illustration created at all at exactly that point of time; what social groups were behind and financed it; what was their intentions; who did they want to "address" and who were the actual "receiver"; what are the implicit semiotic strategies ?

Crucial to semiotics is that the meaning (the signified) of the signifier (a text, a picture, a symbol) is *created by the setting*. Culture, conflicts and society. Context is the alpha and omega of semiotics! This is where cultural sociology enters the equation. Thus we will search the social, political and cultural context for clues because the recipients – the addressees and receivers - of the messages are a part of that setting. As the kind of signifiers we see in this book always are produced and financed by the rich and the powerful we have to investigate how and in what way the illustrations are confirming and arguing their point of view; creating their worldview, categories and myths; justifying their power and their repression. We will also analyse the various objects in the picture (the "*key signifiers*") and their configurations and connotations in relation to the setting. Here we will try to reveal some of the *semiotic strategies* (we could name them "psychological communication tricks" if you want) embedded in the signifier: why are rulers, gods and holy men often illustrated in identical *stereotype* fashions (called "*metonymy*" in semiotics); why are different social groups brought together in the same illustration (king talking to holy men) ("*anchorage*" in semiotics); is the illustration setting up "*metaphors*" instead of describing real events; why are certain groups NOT included; why is this a theme/subject of interest and why are others ignored?

Anyone used to modern political discourse know this approach: we are constantly scanning our context for clues and we are very aware of spin and PR when we are the addressees of political signifiers.

And I find this attitude and approach lacking from the analyses of the illustrations: the catalogue texts are in general failing to conduct such a critical semiotic and cultural analysis trying to reveal the *signified*. Instead are some of the texts trying to identify the *referent* or to give

us (endless) factual background information (meta data). They are assuming that some of the illustration – in the same way as a photography is supposed to do (but mostly doesn't do) – are revealing (referring to) a physical and social reality. Thus we see that many of the catalogue articles are trying to twist and squeeze the illustration in order to excavate the yoga referent.

Any historian trained in critical historical source analysis will know that those catalogue writers here are on thin ice. It is like a friend saying to you “look things are so and so because this is what they wrote in the papers”. We all know we have to be very cautious about the referent – what actual happened – when we deal with newspapers. The same apply of to all historical sources – including yoga illustrations. Let me give another example in order to nail that point down.

Imagine you were living in the province and found that you were at the bottom of the pecking order. It then occurs to you that you could dress like a rocker. So you find out how a rocker actually dresses up and buy the gear. From now on not a single person is saying a word if you – now representing a scary signifier (metonymy) - park your bike illegally or are jumping the queue at the supermarket. What happens next in our example is that a local journalist unseen takes a snapshot of you and the photo is published in the newspaper with the following text (anchoring): “Lawless Rocker gangs moving into our community. It is now time to back mayor Jones and his campaign for more police in the street.” The photo of you has become a metaphor of lawlessness and the image of you has become a metonymy – an idealised gangster. Now give our example some years and a historian is studying the photo and he draws up following conclusions: “based on the rocker's clothes and signs this looks like a new breed of rockers. Probably an outgrow of Banditos and Hell Angels. As these groups always are connected with drugs this indicates that already at this time the photo was taken a burgeoning drug market was on its way in this corner of the province.”

I think it should be clear now that we do not “see” photos – we “read” them (using various semiotic strategies) which have the implication that it is often doubtful to read illustrations as referring to historical realities.

So in summary semioticians would claim that the depiction of reality is in general not the reason why these illustrations – the signifiers - were made in the first place! Most often they were *not* made to describe the real world (the referent) – even if they sometimes pretend to do so. The yoga signifier - especially illustrations – in general are there to communicate symbolic messages and generate symbolic capital - according cultural studies. Thus what we spontaneously believe to be a photo of a ‘holy man’ could instead be a metonymy (stereotype) created to produce some connotations and anchorage.

All in all this left me wondering why are there no semiotic readings – basics to most contemporary studies of culture and communication - of the illustrations? Why are none of the readings digging into the ideology, politics and social difference radiating from the illustrations? I found that the catalogue often missed an evident opportunity here.

What is the referent of the book – an object or a sign?

Now let us finally discuss what is actually the subject of this book. Is it yoga seen through the lens of art? Does the illustration gives us new knowledge of the yoga referent? Let us once more return to the issue of the referent and the historical signifier. The first thing becoming clear is that if we exclude the photographs most of the illustration – 90 pct. or more? - actually are restricted to a period where India was under either (primarily) Muslim or British rule. So the first thing we realise is that the historical signifiers are actually very restricted in time. This is mainly about a very short span of time of yoga's long history and there is very little reflections on the implication of this limitations. Thus the book is mainly not about yoga illustrations throughout history but about yoga illustrations in a relatively narrow period compared to yoga's overall history. Nothing wrong about that – but the effects of the limitation in historical resources should have been contemplated further.

Leaving this aside I have a more serious concern or question: are the illustration actually showing us yoga and yogis – or are they showing something else? In other words what are the referents of the illustrations? Imagine that you the reader had got the task to illustrate ‘a bishop’ without using words. How would you do that? Most would probably find a photo of someone dressed like a bishop. The ‘dress signifier’ would in other words signify ‘bishop’. Or rather: it would only signify ‘bishop’ for a person who *already knew* what a bishop is and looks like. Imagine you now got the task of illustrating ‘a politician’ – even ‘a prime minister’. It now

becomes much more difficult because politicians do not dress different to say businessmen and bureaucrats. You might as a solution come up with a selection of photos of Obama, Cameron and Merkel. Yes, we today know they are politicians but give some centuries and this will be forgotten.

Here is the point. Perhaps in a far future historians will look at our selection of photos and say they represent typical examples of say "corporate managers". True enough – but this was not the reason why we today selected and grouped these photos as representing "politicians". Same photo – different cultural dependent readings of what the photos are referring to.

And this is exactly the problem for the catalogue. What we today read as 'yogis' is that what Mughal India read into the figures in the illustrations? How do one depict a yogi - at that time and to day and do we share the same representation? Are the pictures actually trying to illustrate a yogi or is just us who believe so based on some assumptions? So as a minimum we clearly need a precise definition of yoga and a yogi and what it all looks like – now as then.

Some of the contributors are sensing that there is a problem here and try to define their subject – the referent. They realise it is difficult to establish a definition of yoga and end up talking about yogis as "Hindu ascetics seeking omniscience through the cultivation of body and mind". This definition is so vague that almost everything becomes yoga and we will still wonder how to illustrate that? So we are left with following suggestion: "yogis are figures with long matted dreadlocks and ash covered bodies". Which definitely is a wrong definition of a yogi – this is how certain types of ascetics look like (in fact we do see many 'yogis' in the book represented not as ascetics but as upper caste identities). Other scholars in the book confess there is a problem. Hence they believe it is actually 'ascetics' and not 'yogis' represented in most of the pictures. Which is also dubious.

So how do we illustrate yoga and a yogi, how do we know how they would illustrate a yogi in pre-modern India and how do we illustrate the fact that yoga and yogis changed throughout history? Because someone for instance is pictured sitting in a certain (lotus) pose does not make him a yogi. And if some ascetics, elderly, mad man or tribe chief are performing gestures, rituals and vows like lifting their arms up in the air, does that make them *yogis*? Are meditating Buddhists yogis – and if they are, who are then *not* yogis of all the various identities involved in various religious rituals and transformational practices? Is everybody meditating practicing yoga? Is a Tantric worshiper - who has never heard about yoga – sitting in lotus pose visualising a goddess a yogi? And if some prince "take the pose of a yogi" - i.e. is sitting in the lotus pose! – perhaps in order to be admired and *symbolic associated* with sages and holy men, does this publicity stunt turn him into a yogi? Finally, when millions of young male peasants in Mughal India – often representing social outcast and a growing rural surplus population - started (in order to find work) to roam the countryside dressed up according to their region's stereotype image of an ascetic itinerant holy man (and we can/should speculate about the reason for – i.e. the signification of – why they did that), should we then "read" these identities as 'yogis' (giving us insight into yoga) or read their image and identities as signs of economic repression, demographical pressure, social adaptation, and cultural conventions?

So what and who is the referent then? How do we know that the signifier (the illustration) has the reference - which we by the way can't define – we believe it to be? Some few of the illustrations have fragments of text engraved, which of course help us. But not many will tell us this is a picture of a yogi practicing yoga. Other pictures show us people with markings, devices and clothes shared by some modern days yogis. But how do we know that these pre-modern identities called themselves yogis and practiced yoga at that time? Since then things might have changed many times. Even today after yoga has come back into fashion many Sadhus – looking like our present day stereotype yogi - have not got a clue about yoga – many are against it.

There are two many question marks . The signifier is struggling to establish a physical referent. In most cases we are presented with a conglomerate of social identities some of them physically looking a bit similar. Many of these are examples of the rich variety of India's pre-modern holy men *and social outcasts*. The fact is as that as you today cannot see the difference between a businessman and a politician similar problem applies to many of India's holy men and the itinerant rural surplus population at the period where most of the illustrations are from.

The signifier seen as empty and as a battlefield

However by employing semiotics there is perhaps another approach. According to semiotics many signifier do namely not have a physical referent. They are empty. Instead of referring to reality they are referring to *another symbol*. Signs pointing to other signs in an endless mirror

cabinet is no rarity within semiotics. The signifier could be what Baudrillard calls a *simulacrum*: a copy without a original.

So we could contemplate that the illustrations are representing *visualisations of signs and symbols*. Let me give an example.

We could exchange the idea that the illustrations are *descriptions* of holy men with the notion they are instead *stereotype images of holy men*. The image was maybe just a *convention, a metonymy or a metaphor* – “this is how we typically illustrate an average holy man”. Or the image was perhaps how powerful groups *wanted* holy men to look like. In this way some of the stereotypes could actually be *prescriptions* made for the purpose of including certain groups and *excluding other identities*. A reflection and signal of new religio-political alliances. Maybe the illustration signalled a de facto power shift. We know similar strategies from present days totalitarian countries where for instance suddenly certain person have disappeared from photographs.

So we should start to scrutinise the images of holy men for conflicts. These images of signs are most probably weaved into the conflicts and ideology of society. Hence the signs – and *not* the realities – appearing in the illustrations are probably often *contested* symbolic images. Holy men were crucial to the political order and hence were also often the target of challenge. Often they embodied cultural and religious repression and ideology. Without them the political power could easily loose its legitimacy and dwindle away. Often the holy man – like the bhakti yogi of the *Bhagavad Gita* – was a living symbol of the caste society. He was an image of repression. And then other stereotype images of other identities might be signs of protest against that very same caste society.

Thus these images – these signs – were often ideological battlefields and hence they must have been under perpetual change as the religio-political power constellation changed in society. The symbol would most probably – like the reports of today’s political committees – most often be a compilation of many conflicting versions. But to equate this symbolic image – most probably reflecting religio-cultural power struggles - with *real* yogis is misleading.

Academic yoga discourse and semiotics

The thoughts above are only suggestion of how we alternatively could approach the illustrations as signifiers referring to signs. To see the illustrations as carrier of symbolic messages. Thus from my point of view *Yoga The Art of Transformation* is not a book about yoga seen through the lens of art. The title is misleading. If anything it is probably about various religio-cultural symbols often finding representation in stereotype images (metonymy) of holy men and social outcasts – leaving aside the book’s chapters on modern yoga which is a total different story not discussed in this review.

However the book represent an important step in the direction of bringing visual signifiers into the academic yoga field. I suggest that the next thing we bring to the academic yoga field is semiotics and cultural sociology which will also transform how we understand and read *yoga-text* signifiers.

My point is that the same issues and problems discussed above of how to read an ‘illustration signifier’ does also apply to how to read a yoga ‘text signifier’. Most often the academic yoga discourse is trying to identify the yoga referent (the yoga out there in historical reality) through text signifiers. We have seen how this strategy is fragile and problematic. I believe the application of semiotics and cultural sociology when reading yoga text signifiers would dramatically change academic yoga discourse.