Forests that think

Description

The â??science of signs,â?• semiotics, provides valuable insights into the relationship between the highly artificial world of networked computers and the world of nature.

First, we have to abandon the idea that at the core of artificial, animal and plant communication systems we have *data*. According to a common computational typology thereâ??s *data* (just 1s and 0s, or perhaps unstructured facts), from which we might infer *information* when put into a meaningful context. Further up the scale thereâ??s *knowledge*. Some even add *wisdom* above that. Search online for â??DIKW model.â?•

Included in its many shortcomings, the DIKW model drives life out of nature. It also means that contrary to expectations computer systems that attempt artificial life (AL) and intelligent robots, are maddeningly un-alive. Think instead of ***signs*** as the unit of communication, with *data* as a derived and manageable unit of calculation suitable for computer processing.

Iâ??m extrapolating from the writing of various theorists of semiotics, with a particular focus at the moment on the book *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* by Eduardo Kohn. (Many thanks to Patricia Gibbons for referring me to it.)

Kohn doesnâ??t write about data, but itâ??s clear that the concept of the *sign* delivers something that data cannot, leading him to assert that â??life is inherently semioticâ?• (74), and â??the logic of evolutionary adaptation is a semiotic oneâ?• (74). Drawing on C.S. Peirce, careful observations of life in the forests of Ecuador, and evolutionary theory, he develops the prospect that thereâ??s a unity amongst living things that otherwise eludes definition, that affirms the capacity of thought beyond the human (albeit on different time scales), and restores some of the enchantment of nature.

> â??If thoughts are alive and if that which lives thinks, then perhaps the living world is enchanted. What I mean is that the world beyond the human is not a meaningless one made meaningful by humans. Rather, mean-ingsâ??means-ends relations, strivings, purposes, telos, intentions, functions and significanceâ??emerge in a world of living thoughts beyond the human in ways that are not fully exhausted by our all-too-human attempts to define and control these. More precisely, the forests around *vila* are animate. That is, these forests house other emergent loci of mean-ings, ones that do not necessarily revolve around, or originate from, humans. This is what Iâ??m getting at when I say that forests think. It is to an examination of such thoughts that this anthropology beyond the human now turnsâ?• (72)

This is one of several books that I feel bound to savour, and donâ??t intend to rush, as the implications of such radical propositions sink in. What becomes of thought when we think of it as something that forests do?

Reference

- Kohn, Eduardo. 2013. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, p.72

Notes

- That forests might think, speak, whisper and have agency survives in remnant form through many narratives, not least *Babes in the Wood*, and Tolkienâ??s forest of Fangorn.
- The photograph of leaves was taken in the Edinburgh Botanical Gardens last weekend.

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. data
2. nature
3. Peirce
4. trees

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