

WAGNER, ROY 2019. *The Logic of Invention*. Chicago: HAU Books. 135 pp. ISBN: 9780999157053 (paperback); ISBN: 9781912808526 (E-book).

Roy Wagner (1938–2018) was, along with Marilyn Strathern, one of the most prominent figures of the so-called New Melanesian Ethnography. *The Logic of Invention* is his last book, published posthumously and available as an open access download via HAU books. In addition to works based in ethnography, Wagner has been building a more universal theory of meaning throughout his career, and *The Logic of Invention* continues this trajectory. The book consists of a preface, four chapters, and an epilogue. Despite the many links between them, the chapters are fairly independent, rather different perspectives on certain aspects of the theoretical apparatus than a cumulative argument. As usual, the scope is far-reaching. Wagner's focus is on meaning, but the use of symbols is not treated as one more tool of the human condition among others. Rather, meaning is what creates our existence and its conditions on all levels. *The Logic of Invention* 'is about the many subvariants of the subject-object transformation' (xiii), the dialectic of perspectives necessary for human perception and understanding. I will pick out some examples to illustrate.

The chapters discuss principles already familiar from Wagner's previous work. Obviation, the way meaning unfolds in tropes such as myths or rituals, is one of the central points of Wagner's theory (Wagner 1981; 1986). An obviation diagram is a way of seeing both the linear order of the development of a metaphor, as well as the axes of interaction that are not

linear. In an obviation diagram, all connections between different points of a trope can be traced. It is 'metaphor spread out' (p. 60). The diagrams show how the conditions for the next step in a trope are set up, to be obviated, 'anticipated and disposed of', in sequence. There are several examples of two- and three dimensional obviation diagrams in the book, which add to the previous texts in picturing details and comparisons of specific examples.

Chapter 3, titled 'Nonlinear causality', critiques uncausality, the persistent tendency to seek out a single cause for natural and other phenomena. Wagner links this to 'the illusion of linear causality', the way phenomena are perceived as the result of chains of causality, despite the way 'determining influences converge, diverge, and intersect with one another at all angles' (p. 59). An obviation diagram is a way to find and picture some of these influences. Wagner also points out in several places that a joke reverses linear causation in that it first presents the effect, and the punchline presents a surprising cause. Although Wagner is not a humor theorist as such, as an anthropologist studying comedy I have found Wagner's theories singularly helpful in my project. Humor is notoriously difficult to analyse, and I suspect the emphasis on uncausality is partly to blame for theories that aim to reduce humor to a single effect. This leads to bracketing out some aspects of humor, which flattens the phenomenon and does not do justice to its multifacetedness. Wagner's ideas,

such as invention and convention, and figure-ground reversal, offer a way to attend to the ambiguity and shifting perspectives of humor while leaving the joke intact.

One of the chapters consists of commentary on Ludwig Wittgenstein's propositions. This is an interesting departure from the other chapters in that alternating texts by Wittgenstein with Wagner's commentary creates a sort of dialogue. A previous work, *Coyote Anthropology*, was written as a dialogue between Roy and Coyote (Wagner 2010). These different ways of organising text can be seen as another way to model the shifts in perspective. As in previous works, although many of the examples come from Wagner's own ethnography among the Daribi in Papua New Guinea and other anthropological and scholarly texts, he also uses a wide variety of examples from art, fiction, and in one instance, beekeeping. The fourth chapter, 'The ontology of representation', includes a compare and contrast of William Shakespeare's play Hamlet, featuring 'royal incest', to the swarming of actual bees to replace the queen through 'royal outcast'.

Wagner's texts are not known for being easy to understand. As the approach has been built

it has increased in complexity and idiosyncrasy. *The Logic of Invention* is, at times, convoluted in the way it works through repeating examples with only small variations. The style of writing alternates clear statements with playful reversals in a way that can be disconcerting. For a reader unacquainted with the writings of Roy Wagner, I would not recommend starting with this book. Rather, this work would be better to visit after reading the others, so as to appreciate the nuance it adds.

REFERENCES

Wagner, Roy 1981. *The Invention of Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wagner, Roy 1986. *Symbols that Stand for Themselves*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wagner, Roy 2010. *Coyote Anthropology*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

MARIANNA KEISALO
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
marianna.keisalo@helsinki.fi