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# MEDIA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

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ARTHUR ASA BERGER



# **Media Analysis Techniques**

**Sixth Edition**

*For Marcia Gilbert and all her wonderful colleagues at Casa Grande University in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Their hospitality made my visit there honoring the translation into Spanish of my books Media Analysis Techniques and Media Research Techniques so pleasant.*

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**Sixth Edition**

Arthur Asa Berger  
*San Francisco State University*



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne



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# PREFACE

When I was in high school I didn't know what kind of work I wanted to do and what I should major in when I got to college. I liked to write and I liked to draw. So I took some "preference tests" and they all suggested I should go into advertising. I didn't go into advertising but I've spent almost fifty years writing about it and consumer culture, often in a critical way. I ended up majoring in English and minoring in philosophy.

I eventually became a professor and a writer. I published my first book, my dissertation on the comic strip *Li'l Abner*, in 1970 and have been writing articles and books since then. One thing about writing that I discovered is that after you publish a book, it disappears into a void. Generally speaking, you don't know where it goes and who—if anyone—is reading it. You get royalty statements every year telling how many copies have been sold but you don't know who your readers are and where they are located. Every once in a while I get a message from a student who has been assigned the book asking me about something in the book, but that's very rare. I often joke that nobody ever reads one of my books unless they are assigned it by a "malicious and demented" professor.

So you can imagine how surprised I was four or five years ago when I got a letter from someone named Marcia Gilbert, who said she was at Casa Grande University, a small university in Ecuador, asking for permission to translate my books *Media Analysis Techniques* and a companion volume *Media Research Technique* into Spanish. I assumed that she was a professor in the communication department but was to learn that she is the chancellor of the school, which she founded. She said she would be trying to find some funds to pay for a visit I might make to the university, but was unable to do so. My wife and I decided to visit Ecuador at our expense and at the end of November 2016, we flew to Ecuador. I spent 6 days in Guayaquil, talking about teaching with members of the school's administration and faculty, giving a lecture, and playing learning games. My wife and I spent a lot of time with Marcia Gilbert and had many delightful lunches, with her colleagues, at her lovely home.

The university had a reception in my honor in which Marcia and two other people who had been involved with the book spoke about it (in Spanish). Then I gave a short talk about how I came to write the book and answered questions

from students and others in the audience. After our stay in Guayaquil, we visited other cities in Ecuador, most notably Cuenca. Marcia contacted a former colleague, Steve Wille, who lived in Cuenca and he made sure we had a good time there.

I know that *Media Analysis Techniques* has been translated into Chinese and Italian and Spanish and I believe it has been translated into Farsi in Iran and Turkish. But I cannot know who else might have translated it or where people read it. I recently found out, thanks to Facebook, that a professor in Turkey has assigned it for many years to her students. One of the things you learn, when you are a writer, is that you never know who is reading your books and can only guess about what impact they may be having.

The first edition of *Media Analysis Techniques* was published in 1982, long before many of the readers of this book were born. So it has been around, in various rebirths, reincarnations and new editions, for more than thirty years. I learned over the course of my career as a writer that a book is never finished. There are always new things I find to write about, new enhancements of discussions to make, and new topics to explore, so I've spent 35 years updating and revising this book.

There is a reason the book has lasted so long, for what it does is teach you, my readers, different techniques of analysis so you can make your own analyses of pop culture, media, and almost anything else that interests you. Once you learn the methodologies I discuss in the first five chapters of the book, and see how I've applied them in the second section of the book, you'll be able to use these methodologies to analyze and interpret any films, television programs, print advertisements, videos, television commercials, or any other aspect of the media and culture that strikes your attention. In academic jargon, we call specific films, television shows, commercials, and so on, "texts."

Let me also say something about why I wrote this book. In 1976, a young student wrote a letter to me, after having read my book *Pop Culture*. Let me quote part of her letter:

While wandering through the stacks of Central Library, looking for a book for my freshman composition class, my eyes fell upon your book, "Pop Culture." I took it out and read it the same night...Popular culture inundates us; it is us. What have we to strive for except numerous credit cards, a two-car garage, and white teeth...You brought out many things which are always on my mind, always disturbing me...However hard I try to remain aware of popular culture, and criticize it continuously, I am

nevertheless sucked in. There is no way not to be drawn into the flow of it. Please write back your ideas on how to study this society in terms of popular culture.

Six years later, in 1982, my answer to this young student's request appeared in the form of a book. I called it *Media Analysis Techniques*.

## A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON MEDIA ANALYSIS

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I wrote this book to help change the way professors teach courses on popular culture and media criticism and the way students learn to analyze texts and other aspects of mass mediated culture. I wanted to empower students to make their own critiques of our mass mediated culture rather than learning what professors, critics, philosophers and other writers had written about media and the texts carried by the media.

We must make a distinction between media and the texts they carry. For example, when we say, "I think I'll watch some television," we really mean that we will watch some particular program. At times, some television viewers who are extremely active with their remote controls actually watch a *mélange* of bits and pieces of various shows—in a sense, they might be said to be watching television rather than particular programs. But this is not the way most people watch television, and the fad of skimming television has died out in recent years.

Teaching methods of media analysis has another virtue. Because new kinds of programs and other forms of popular culture are constantly being invented, students who learn the different methods of analysis taught in the book can use the concepts they learn to deal with these new programs and entertainments as they appear. And so, in the first part of the book, on techniques of interpretation, I offer chapters that introduce readers to basic concepts in semiotic theory, psychoanalytic theory, Marxist theory, sociological theory, and discourse analysis. In the second part of the book, I show students how to apply the theories they learned in the theory section to various texts.

In order to help my readers learn how to apply the methodologies I discuss, I've developed a number of learning exercises and games that are found at the end of the book. It's one thing to learn a methodology; it's another thing to learn how to apply the methodology and its concepts to texts and other aspects of mass mediated culture. I have also written a glossary in which I offer definitions of the most important concepts used in the book.

## A MESSAGE TO STUDENTS READING THIS BOOK

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Media criticism and analysis, you must realize, is not based on your personal opinions about some film, television show, video game, or whatever. You are entitled to your taste, but if you wish to convince others that your opinions are worth considering, you have to have something to support them. This book helps you do that; it provides you with what I consider to be the five most important methods of analyzing and interpreting our mass mediated culture. The more you know, the more you see, and after reading this book, you'll have learned a number of concepts that will help you interpret the texts you see and better understand the impact of media on our lives and our society.

Students sometimes ask me why they should learn about media analysis when they could be taking “practical” studio or production courses. I explain to them that criticism and creativity are two side of the same coin. Creative people (directors, artists, musicians, writers, performers, and so on) must be analytic about what they do; they need to understand why their work succeeds when it does, and how to avoid repeating their mistakes.

If you are a creative artist and you don't know what you're doing, everything you do is, in effect, an accident. That's why artists study art history and film students study film history and film theory. It's the theory that drives the practice—in the arts and in industry as well. A number of my former students have told me that when they got a job, to their surprise they discovered that the most useful courses they took were media criticism, media aesthetics, and media and communication research methods. Anyone can be taught how to operate a camera (or any other device involved in production). It's what you do with that camera that counts.

In *Media Analysis Techniques, Sixth Edition*, I discuss a variety of interesting and provocative texts such as the cult classic *The Prisoner* (1967–1968) that many of you have probably never heard of. I chose certain episodes from this series because they offer good examples to analyze. If you've never seen the series, you can see many important episodes of *The Prisoner* on YouTube. The series is also available on DVDs. A newer version of *The Prisoner* was broadcast in 2009 but was not successful. When I taught media criticism, I would teach my students a methodology, such as semiotics, and then show them an episode of *The Prisoner*. Then I would ask them to write a semiotic analysis of the episode they had just seen. I chose a different episode of *The Prisoner* for each of the four methodologies in the book, but other films, television shows, or other kinds of texts could be used as well.

Television shows and other popular culture texts come and go rather quickly, so if, for example, I picked a television show popular in 2014, it might not be around in 2017. The fact that media texts are born and die so quickly affected my choice of topics to discuss in the applications section of the book. I chose topics that would be around for a long time, such as the classic film *Murder on the Orient Express*. You can read Agatha Christie's mystery novel, compare it with the film, and now compare the film and the book with a PBS Masterpiece Theater television production of the story that takes considerable liberties with the novel. I also have chapters on all-news shows, football, magazine advertisements, video games, and social media, which are an important part of our media diet.

## WHAT'S NEW IN THIS EDITION?

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I have updated statistics on media and related matters and I have enhanced my discussions of numerous topics throughout the book. And I've added new discussions by thinkers such as the following:

- Daniel Chandler on semiotic codes
- Michel Foucault on change in cultures
- Mark Gottdiener on sign vehicles in semiotic theory
- Guy Debord on the *Society of the Spectacle*
- Mark Thompson et al. on Marx's neglect of egalitarian political culture
- Marcel Danesi on myth and popular culture
- Ernest Kris on the Oedipus complex
- Sigmund Freud on the purposes of jokes
- Clotaire Rapaille on the new "global code"
- Teun van Dyk on discourse analysis and ideology
- Wolfgang Iser on reception theory

I've enhanced my discussion of many topics and added some new topics, not mentioned previously, as well.

I've also added new drawings and new images to enhance the visual attractiveness of this book and updated the references sections. I hope you will find this new edition interesting, entertaining, and useful and that it will help you become a more discriminating user and critic of media. It also will help you better understand the role the media play in your life and in the society in which you live.

**CODA**

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I used to tell my students at the beginning of my courses in media criticism, “You’ll find that this course will change your lives.” The students invariably laughed. But quite a few of my students told me, when I happened to bump into them after they had finished the course, that the methodologies they learned from *Media Analysis Techniques* had affected the way they looked at media and numerous other aspects of their everyday lives. Methods are like viruses. Once they get into your head, it’s hard to get rid of them. Let me offer an example.

A few years ago I was doing some shopping in a supermarket when a woman of about 40 approached me, smiling. “Dr. Berger,” she said. “Don’t you remember me? I took your seminar in semiotics 20 years ago.” When I got a chance to look at her I recalled having had her as a student. Then she said something very interesting: “That semiotics you taught us...*it’s still with me.*” That’s an important point. Once you learn these methodologies, it is likely that they will stay with you and will have an impact not only on the way you think about media and popular culture but also on the way you live.

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# PART I

## TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION



*S. Rousseau*



C.S. Peirce

*Semiology* is the term used for the science of signs explicated by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. A different science of signs, semiotics, was first elaborated by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. *Semiotics* is the term now generally used to refer to both systems. Both are concerned with how meaning is generated in "texts" (films, television programs, and other works of art). In this chapter, after a discussion of the most essential semiotic concepts and some related concerns, semiotic concepts are applied to an episode of a television program. Codes, formulas, and the "language" of television are then addressed.

# CHAPTER 1

## SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

I face this assignment—explaining semiotics, the science of signs (also known as semiology) and showing how it can be applied to television and popular culture to those who know little or nothing about the subject—with a certain amount of apprehension. I'm not sure whether semiotics is a subject, a movement, a philosophy, or a cultlike religion. I do know that there is a large and rapidly expanding literature on the subject and that many of the writings of semioticians are difficult to understand and highly technical. You might be interested to know that as of December 21, 2016, there are more than 12,000 books on semiotics, 8,187 books on semiology listed on Amazon.com books, and on Google, 4,487,000 websites on semiotics and 543,000 on semiology. We find, then, that there is a great deal of interest in this subject.

So my mission, if not impossible, is quite challenging: Not only am I to explain the fundamental notions or elements of semiotics, but I am also to apply them to television and television productions as well as to popular culture in general. It is a large undertaking, but I think it can be done. The price I must pay involves a certain amount of simplification and narrowness of focus. I am going to explain the basic principles of semiotics and discuss some sample applications. I hope that after reading this chapter and the annotated bibliography provided, those interested in semiotics will probe more deeply into it at their own convenience.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SUBJECT

---

Although interest in signs and the way they communicate has a long history (medieval philosophers, including John Locke and others, have shown interest), modern semiotic analysis can be said to have begun with two men: Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). (Peirce called his system *semiotics*, and that has become the dominant term used for the science of signs. Saussure's *semiology* differs from Peirce's semiotics in some respects, but as both are concerned with signs, I will treat the two as more or less the same in this chapter.)

Saussure's book *A Course in General Linguistics*, first published posthumously in 1915, suggests the possibility of semiotic analysis. It deals with many of the concepts that can be applied to signs and that are explicated in this chapter. Saussure (1915/1966) wrote, "The linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image . . . I call the combination of a concept and a sound-image a *sign*, but in current usage the term generally designates only a sound-image" (pp. 66–67). Saussure's division of the sign into two components, the signifier (or "sound-image") and the signified (or "concept"), and his suggestion that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, were of crucial importance for development of semiotics.

Peirce, on the other hand, focused on three aspects of signs: their iconic, indexical, and symbolic dimensions (see Table 1.1).

From these two points of departure a discipline or science was born, and semiotic analysis spread all over the globe. Important work was done in Prague and Russia early in the 20th century, and semiotics is now well established in France and Italy (where Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and many others have done important theoretical as well as applied work). There are also outposts of progress in England, the United States, and many other countries.

Semiotics has been applied, with interesting results, to film, theater, medicine, architecture, zoology, material culture, and a host of other areas that involve or are concerned with communication and the transfer of information. In fact, some semioticians, perhaps carried away, suggest that *everything* can be analyzed semiotically; they see semiotics as the queen of the interpretive sciences, the key that unlocks the meanings of all things great and small.

Peirce argued that interpreters have to supply part of the meanings of signs. He wrote that a sign "is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (qtd. in Zeman, 1977, p. 24). This is different from Saussure's ideas about how signs function. Peirce considered semiotics important because, as he put it, "this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not

**Table 1.1** Three Aspects of Signs

	Icon	Index	Symbol
Signify by	Resemblance	Causal connection	Convention
Examples	Pictures, statues	Fire/smoke	Flags
Process	Can see	Can figure out	Must learn

composed exclusively of signs” (qtd. in Sebeok, 177, p. v). For Peirce, whatever we do can be seen as involving a message or, more technically speaking, a sign. If everything in the universe is a sign, semiotics becomes extremely important, if not all-important (a view that many semioticians support wholeheartedly).

Whether this is the case is questionable, but without doubt, all kinds of people have used semiotics in interesting ways. Semiotics has only recently (in the last fifty years) been taken seriously in the United States, however, and it is still not widely used or taught here. There are several reasons for this. First, Americans tend to be pragmatic and down-to-earth; we do not generally find abstruse, theoretical, and formalistic methodologies congenial. Also, a kind of international cultural lag exists; it takes a while for movements that are important in the European intellectual scene to become accepted, let alone popular, in the United States. It was the French who “discovered” Faulkner and film (as a significant art form), and, although Peirce did important work on semiotics in the United States, Americans had to wait for semiotic analysis to evolve and mature in Europe before it caught our attention.

## THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

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In what follows, you are going to be learning a new language in the form of a number of concepts that will enable you to look at films, television programs, fashion, foods—almost anything—in ways somewhat different from the manner in which you may be used to looking at these things. The basic concern of this discussion is *how meaning is generated and conveyed*, with particular reference to the television programs (referred to here as *texts*) that we will be examining.

But how is meaning generated? The essential breakthrough of semiotics is that it takes linguistics as a model and applies linguistic concepts to other phenomena—texts—and not just to language itself. In fact, semioticians treat texts as being like languages, in that relationships (rather than things per se) are all-important. To quote Jonathan Culler (1976),

The notion that linguistics might be useful in studying other cultural phenomena is based on two fundamental insights: first, that social and cultural phenomena are not simply material objects or events but objects or events with meaning, and hence signs; and second, that they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations. (p. 4)

Signs and relations—these are two of the key notions of semiotic analysis. A text such as *Star Trek* can be thought of as a system of signs, and the

meaning in the program stems from the signs and from the system that ties the signs together. This system is generally not obvious and must be elicited from the text.

## **SOCIAL ASPECTS OF SEMIOTICS: THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY**

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There is a question that semiotics can help us answer: what is the relation between individuals and society? Some people believe that only individuals exist and that society is an abstraction. In his book *Ferdinand de Saussure: Revised Edition*, Jonathan Culler quotes the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who wrote, "Society is a fictitious body, the sum of the several members who compose it" (p. 85). Culler (1986) made an important point about the social dimensions of semiotics. He writes:

The assumption that society is the result of individuals, each acting in accordance with self-interest, is the very basis of utilitarianism. . . . Saussure, Durkheim, and Freud seem to have recognized that this view gets things the wrong way around. For human beings, society is a primary reality, not just the sum of individual activities . . . and if one wishes to study human behavior, one must grant that there is a social reality. . . . In short, linguistics and psychoanalytic psychology are possible only when one takes the meanings which are attached to and differentiate objects and actions in society as a primary reality. (p. 87)

Because meanings are socially produced, we must have society to teach individuals what signs mean. Ironically, the idea that there are only individuals and that society is an abstraction is something that people learn as a result of growing up in some society. Saussure, Freud, and Durkheim argue that "behavior is made possible by collective social systems individuals have assimilated, consciously or unconsciously" (Culler, 1986, p. 87). We are unaware of the extent to which culture shapes our feelings, actions, and even our identities. Meaning, then, is always social.

An American sociosemiotician, Mark Gottdiener, offers another way of looking at the basic concepts in semiotics. In his book *The Theming of America: Dreams, Visions, and Commercial Spaces* Gottdiener (1997) writes:

The basic unit of semiotics is the *sign* defined conceptually as something that stands for something else, and, more technically, as a spoken or

written word, a drawn figure, or a material object unified in the mind with a particular cultural concept. The sign is this unity of word-object, known as a *signifier* with a corresponding, culturally prescribed content or meaning, known as a *signified*. Thus our minds attach the word “dog,” or the drawn figure of a “dog,” as a signifier to the idea of a “dog,” that is, a domesticated canine species possessing certain behavioral characteristics. If we came from a culture that did not possess dogs in daily life, however unlikely, we would not know what the signifier “dog” means. . . . When dealing with objects that are signifiers of certain concepts, cultural meanings, or ideologies of belief, we can consider them not only as “signs,” but *sign vehicles*. (pp. 8, 9)

We learn from him that some objects carry beliefs and meanings with them and it is the task of the semiotician to discuss these meanings, which may not be evident to people, and show how they are communicated.

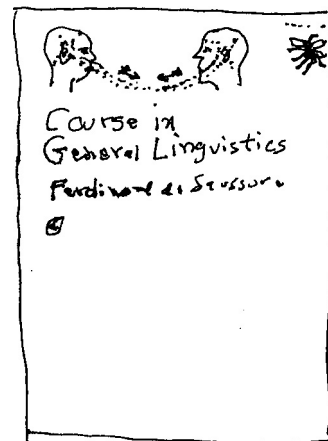
## SAUSSURE ON THE SCIENCE OF SEMIOLOGY

In semiotic analysis, an arbitrary and temporary separation is made between content and form, and attention is focused on the system of signs that makes up a text. Thus a meal, to stray from television for a moment, is not seen as steak, salad, baked potato, and apple pie, but rather as a sign system conveying meanings related to matters such as status, taste, sophistication, and nationality.

Perhaps it would be useful to quote one of the founding fathers of semiotics, in this case Ferdinand de Saussure (1915/1966):

Language is a system of signs that expresses ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of all these systems.

*A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology* (from Greek *sēmeîon* “sign”). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. (p. 16)*



This is the charter statement of semiotics, a statement that opens the study of media to us, for not only can we study symbolic rites and military signals, but we can also study commercials, soap operas, situation comedies, and almost anything else as “sign systems.”

Saussure offered another crucial insight that is relevant here: that concepts have meaning because of relations, and the basic relationship is oppositional. “In language there are only differences,” according to Saussure (1915/1966, p. 120). Thus, “rich” doesn’t mean anything unless there is “poor,” or “happy” unless there is “sad.” Further, “Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system” (p. 117). It is not “content” that determines meaning, but “relations” in some kind of a system. The “most precise characteristic” of these concepts “is in being what the others are not” (p. 117). Saussure adds, “Signs function, then, not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position” (p. 118). We can see this readily enough in language, but it also holds for texts. Nothing has meaning in itself!

One thing we must remember when thinking about oppositions is that the opposing concepts must be related in some way. There is always some topic (not always mentioned) that connects them. For example, rich/WEALTH/poor or happy/MENTAL STATE/sad. I wrote an article a number of years ago in which I discussed blue jeans and what I called the “denimization” phenomenon and contrasted it with the wearing of fancy clothes. Some of the differences are listed in Table 1.2, with the topics addressed appearing in all capital letters:

If you think of a pair of terms you believe are oppositional but can find no subject to which both of the terms relate, there is probably something wrong with the pairing of those terms. So where are we now? I have suggested that

**Table 1.2** Topics and Oppositions of Denim

Denim	Relationship	Fancy Clothes
Cheap	COST	Expensive
Rough	TEXTURE	Smooth
Mass-produced	FABRICATION	Hand-made
Department stores	PLACE BOUGHT	Boutiques

semiotic analysis is concerned with meaning in texts and that meaning stems from relationships—in particular, the relationship among signs. But what, exactly, is a sign?

## SIGNS

A sign, according to Saussure (1915/1966), is a combination of a concept and a sound-image, a combination that cannot be separated. But because Saussure does not find these terms quite satisfactory, he modifies them slightly:

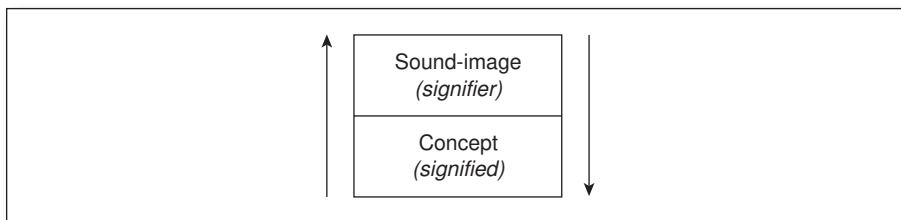
I propose to retain the word sign [*signe*] to designate the whole and to replace concept and sound-image respectively by *signified* [*signifié*] and *signifier* [*signifiant*]; the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts. (p. 67)

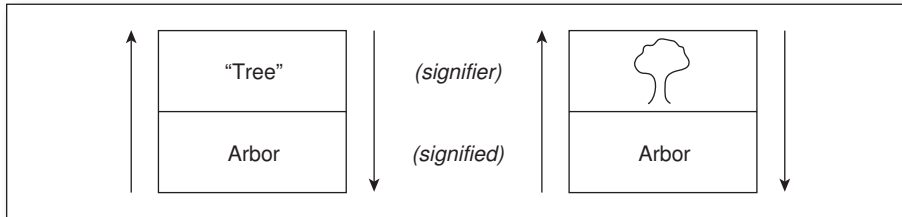
The relationship between the signifier and signified—and this is crucial—is *arbitrary*, unmotivated, unnatural. There is no logical connection between a word and a concept or a signifier and signified, a point that makes finding meaning in texts problematic.

Saussure uses trees as an example. He offers a diagram of the sign in general (see Figure 1.1) and then of the *sign* tree (Figure 1.2). The difference between a sign and a symbol, Saussure suggests, is that a symbol has a signifier that is never wholly arbitrary:

One characteristic of the symbol is that it is never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for there is a rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and signified. The symbol of justice, a pair of scales, could not be replaced by just another symbol, such as a chariot. (p. 68)

**Figure 1.1** Saussure's Diagram of a Sign



**Figure 1.2** Saussure's Diagram of a Sign and Symbol for *Tree*

We can now start looking at texts differently and can start thinking about signifiers. How do signifiers generate meaning? And how is it that we know these meanings? If the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, the meanings that signifiers hold must be learned somehow, which implies that there are certain structured associations, or *codes*, that we pick up that help us interpret signs. (I will deal with this subject in more detail shortly.)

Let's look at the television program *Star Trek* in terms of its signifiers and what is signified. Anyone who has seen the program knows that it is a space adventure/science fiction series. We know this because we are told so at the beginning of each episode, when the captain's voice-over describes the mission of the starship *Enterprise*—to explore new worlds and seek out new civilizations, "to boldly go where no man has gone before." We can say that science fiction adventure is the general "signified" and that a number of "signifiers" show this, including spaceships, futuristic uniforms, ray guns, advanced computer technology, extraterrestrials with strange powers (such as Mr. Spock, whose pointy ears signify that he is only partly human), and magic/science.

It is precisely because the program is so rich in signifiers that legions of "Trekkers" are able to hold conventions, wear costumes, sell "phasers," and so on. When you have appropriated the signifiers, you have captured, so to speak, the signified. This, I might point out, is how many commercials work. People purchase the "right" products and assume (or hope) that these products will signify a certain social class, status, lifestyle, or what you will.

All of this is based on associations we learn and then carry around with us. Anyone who communicates uses associations between signifiers and signifieds all the time. Because in real life the relationships are arbitrary and change rapidly, one must be on one's toes all the time. Signifiers can become dated and change

their significance all too quickly. In a sense, then, we are all practicing semioticians who pay a great deal of attention to signs—signifiers and signifieds—even though we may never have heard these terms before.

Many of us have followed the adventures of a detective who is (like all classic detectives) a first-class semiotician—although we were unaware of this because we didn't know about the existence of semiotics. I am talking about Sherlock Holmes. Inevitably, in a Sherlock Holmes mystery story, some situation arises that puzzles everyone, which Holmes then “solves.” He does this by reading signs that others have ignored or have believed to be trivial or inconsequential. In one story, “The Blue Carbuncle,” Watson finds Holmes examining a hat that had been brought to him by a policeman. Watson describes the hat: It is old, its lining is discolored, and it is cracked, very dusty, and spotted in places. Holmes asks Watson what he can deduce from the hat about its wearer. Watson examines the hat and says that he can deduce nothing. Holmes then proceeds to describe, in remarkable detail, what the man who owns the hat is like: He is highly intellectual, has had a decline in fortune, his wife no longer loves him, he is sedentary, and he probably doesn't have gas in his house. Watson exclaims, “You are certainly joking, Holmes.” Holmes then shows Watson how he reached his conclusions. He examined the hat, noticed certain things about it (signifiers), and proceeded from there (described the implied signifieds). Figure 1.3 shows that signs are made of signifiers and signifieds, and Table 1.3 shows these signifiers and signifieds.

Holmes explains Watson's mistake: “You fail . . . to reason from what you see. You are too timid in drawing your inferences.” Watson had said that he saw nothing in the hat. What he did was fail to recognize the signifiers he found for what they were. Such failure is common in readers of detective novels, who pass over vital information and don't recognize it for



**Figure 1.3** Sign: A Combination of Signifier and Signified

SIGN	
<i>signifier</i> Sound-image	<i>signified</i> Concept

**Table 1.3** Sherlock Holmes's Examination of Signifiers

Signifiers	Signifieds
Cubic capacity of hat (large brain)	Man is intellectual.
Good-quality hat, but 3 years old	Man hasn't a new hat, suggesting decline in fortune.
Hat not brushed in weeks	Man's wife no longer loves him.
Brown house dust on hat	Man seldom goes out.
Wax stains from candles on hat	No gas in house.

what it is. Some semioticians, on the other hand, are not timid enough in drawing their inferences, but that is another matter. The meanings in signs, and in texts (which can be viewed as collections of signs), are not always (or even often) evident; they have to be elicited. And too many people are like Watson, I would suggest—not bold enough in drawing inferences.

## FORMS OF SIGNS

Signs, we must recognize, take a number of different forms. Words, of course, are their most familiar form—they stand for things, ideas, concepts, and so on. But signs have a number of other forms that we might consider.

### ***Signs and Advertising***

We think of signs, most commonly, as connected with advertising—as some kinds of displays, perhaps with words and images, announcing where businesses are located and the nature of the businesses. All kinds of media are used in the creation of advertising signs: carved wood, neon and other lighting, molded plastic, paint, and other materials form words and images. We see advertising signs in the windows of supermarkets, announcing “specials.” We see signs on restaurants, on stores—wherever there is some kind of commercial activity going on. The nature of such signs—their designs and the materials they are made of—generally indicates whether the establishments on which they appear are upscale or down-market.

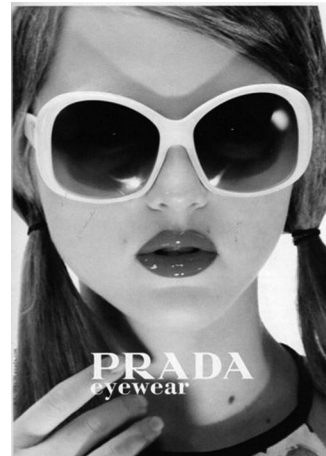
Many corporations use symbols and icons as a means of establishing some kind of “corporate identity,” because it is easy to remember a symbol or icon.

The design of a firm's symbols and icons—through the use of color and form, and often the appearance of specific words or numbers—helps give people a sense of what the corporation is like.

Semiotics is of great interest to marketers, who use it in an effort to understand the way consumers think and what goes on in their minds when they contemplate purchasing a product or service. Branding has now become a major way in which companies get people to purchase their products. Rob Walker (2008) deals with the role of brands in his book *Buying In: What We Buy and Who We Are*. He attacks the notion that the new generations somehow “see through” advertising and are immune to it. He writes:

*Everybody* sees right through traditional advertising. You'd have to be an idiot not to recognize that you're being pitched to when watching a thirty-second commercial. (p. 110)

But recognition is not the same thing as immunity. And what's striking about contemporary youth is not that they are somehow brand proof, but that they take for granted the idea that a brand is as good a piece of raw identity material as anything else. These are consumers, in fact, who are most amenable to using brands to fashion meaning for themselves—to define themselves, to announce who they are and what they stand for. What this argues, in effect, is that it is the semiotic significance of brands that is important for young people, and others, who purchase these products—it is their sign value, as revealed by logos in many cases that is crucial.



## Brands

Brands of objects play an important role in the way people fashion their identities. The advertisement for Prada shown here has a model wearing enormous dark sunglasses that give her a mysterious quality. We also see her brilliant red lips that attract our attention and provide the product with a kind of sexual allure. People use sunglasses like the Prada glasses not only to protect themselves from the glare of the sun but also to project a certain kind image of themselves.

In his book, *Understanding Media Semiotics*, Marcel Danesi (2002) discusses branding in some detail. He writes:

Brand names, clearly, do much more than just identify a product. . . . They are constructed to create connotative signification systems for the product.

At a practical informational level, naming a product has, of course, a denotative function; i.e. it allows consumers to identify what product they desire to purchase (or not). But at a connotative level, the product's name generates images that go well beyond this simple identifier function. Consider Armani shoes as a specific case-in-point. Denotatively, the name allows us to identify the shoes. . . . However, this is not all it does. The use of the manufacturer's name, rather than some invented name or expression, assigns an aura of craftsmanship and superior quality to the product. The shoes are perceived to be the "work" of an artist (the manufacturer). They constitute, in effect, a "work of shoe art," so to speak, not just an assembly line product for everyone to wear. (pp. 185–186)

I would suggest that many people use brands to create and consolidate their identities and give them a sense of security about their status. Brands are all about differentiation: from other brands and from people who wear other brands or no-name generic products. In an essay I wrote, "The Branded Self," I suggest that, to a certain extent, we are our brands. I write:

From a semiotic perspective, brands are signifiers that we use to help define ourselves to others and, to a certain degree, without being too reductionistic, we can say that we *are* the brands we assemble to forge a public identity . . . Brands, from a Peircean perspective, are icons that function as status symbols, among other things. (2011a, pp. 232–237)

The fact that our valuations of brands change and our sense of style is open to fashion currents suggest that identities based on brands are open to constant revision and change, which brings the question of postmodernism into the discussion.

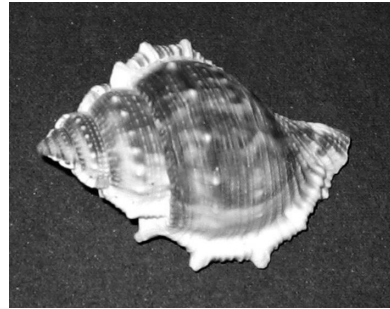
The notion that our identities or selves are, in some way, temporary constructions, is a central notion in postmodern theory. I will discuss postmodernism later in the book.

## **Material Culture**

Objects and artifacts—the things that make up what is known as *material culture*—also serve as signs and can convey a great deal of information. When we "read" people, either in real life or in mass-mediated texts such as advertisements, commercials, and films, we pay a great deal of attention to things like their hairstyles, the brands of sunglasses, clothing, accessories and shoes they wear, and their body ornaments. All of these objects are signs meant to convey certain notions about what these people are like. In addition, where people are

located tells us a great deal about them. If they are in a room, we scrutinize the furniture and other objects in the room, the color of the walls, and any paintings or drawings on the walls.

Some anthropologists study people's garbage to gain information about their lifestyles. Frequently what these garbologists find in people's garbage contradicts statements the people themselves have made to these researchers about their tastes and lifestyles.



## ***Objects and Identity***

I once conducted an exercise in a semiotics seminar I was teaching that yielded fascinating results. I asked students to go home and find a simple object that they believed reflected their character and personality. They were to put that object in an unmarked brown paper bag, write a note about what the object reflected about themselves, and put the note in the bag as well. The first object I pulled out of a brown bag was a large seashell. I asked my students to tell me what they believed the object signified. They said things like “sterility,” “death,” and “emptiness.” Then I took out the slip of paper that the student submitted and read what she thought it signified: “beautiful,” “simple,” “elegant,” and “natural.” The moral: People don't always correctly interpret the messages you send to them, or, to make the point stronger, people seldom interpret the messages you send to them (by your facial expression, body language, clothes, hairstyle, and whatever) correctly.

## ***Activities and Performances***

Thanks to the work of semioticians and psychologists, we now pay a great deal of attention to body language, to gestures, to facial expressions, and to the ways people use their voices. These are all signs that we use to “read” people—that is, to attempt to gain some insights into their truthfulness, temperaments, personalities, and values.

Actors, we must remember, are people who pretend to have certain feelings and beliefs, which they “reveal” to audiences by the way they say things and also by their use of facial expression and body language, among other things. Poker players also are concerned with signs. They look for “tells” (body movements and facial expressions) their opponents display that

telegraph information about the strength of their hands or intentions to act. The problem poker players face is that sometimes their opponents bluff, or “lie” to them.

### ***Music and Sound Effects***

Music and sound effects are used to generate certain responses in audiences—based, in large part, on culturally acknowledged associations between given sounds and certain emotions. A musical phrase or a sound, we must remember, is a signifier, and the emotion it generates is the signified; as is true for all signs, the relation between the signifier and signified is arbitrary and based on convention. Music and sound effects play an important role in generating a sense of realism in films and television shows. The musical selections and sounds used function as cues that indicate to audiences what they should feel about what they are watching.

### ***Other Aspects of Signs***

There are other aspects of signs worth considering, listed and discussed briefly as follows:

#### **Signs within Signs: Signemes**

A glass of champagne will have a light yellow color and gas bubbles floating in the liquid. Sometimes, then, signs have smaller signs inside them. I would call these small microsigns, which don’t contain other signs within them, *signemes*.

#### **No Signs as Signs**

Because signs play such an important role in our lives, when we expect a response to a sign to be given and don’t get one, that too is a sign. Thus, in a famous Sherlock Holmes mystery, a dog didn’t bark at someone when a murder took place, which suggested to Holmes that the dog knew the murderer. When someone you know doesn’t respond to a greeting, that is an example of *no sign as a sign*.

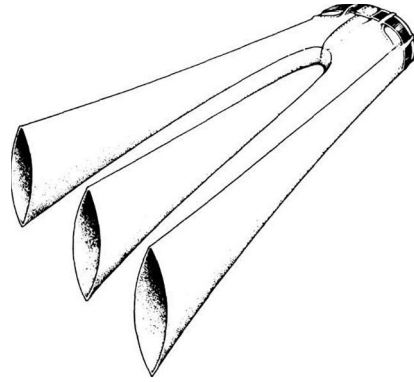
#### **Signs that Confound**

Optical illusions are visual signs that confuse us because our eyes are not able to process the information we are given in the image. Consider the Levi’s blue jeans advertisement shown here, which makes use of a well-known optical

illusion. Our eyes struggle to make sense of the image and cannot do so, creating a *sign that confounds*.

### Clutter and Signs

During a typical day, we are exposed to so many signs that there is the problem of clutter that often arises. Consider, for example, television commercials. If we watch 4 hours of television a night, commercials take up approximately 1 hour of our television watching. It is very hard for people to remember many details about the commercials they see because they see so many. When researchers ask viewers about certain commercials, some claim to have seen a television commercial that wasn't broadcast during the shows they were watching, exemplifying *clutter and signs*.



Detail From Levi's Advertisement

### Code Confusion and Signs

Often there is a difference between the aesthetic codes of creators of texts and of the consumers of those texts. Thus, in some cases, writers may use a term their reader doesn't know or may make allusions to things the reader knows nothing about, or when we visit countries where people do not speak English and their alphabet isn't the Roman one to which we are accustomed. In these countries, the signs over establishments are often unintelligible to people from the United States or Europe, creating *code confusion* (also known as culture shock).

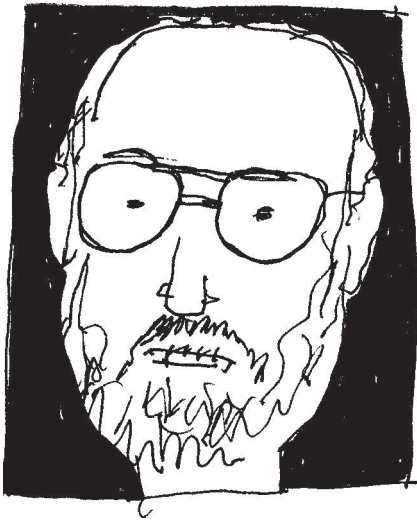
### Changes in the Meaning of Signs

Signs also can change their meanings over the years. In the fifties, when I was young, men with long hair were generally artists and musicians. Later, Hippies and members of the counter culture took up long hair. Now, long hair no longer signifies anything in particular about a person and thus occurs *change in the meaning of a sign*.

## SIGNS AND TRUTH

Umberto Eco (1976), a distinguished Italian semiotician, has suggested that (as noted earlier) if signs can be used to tell the truth, they can also be used to lie:

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for



UMBERTO ECO

something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands for it. Thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot be used “to tell” at all. I think that the definition of a “theory of the lie” should be taken as a pretty comprehensive program for a general semiotics. (p. 7)

Let us consider, as shown in Table 1.4, some ways in which we can (and do) lie—or, to be kinder, mislead others—with signs:

We live in a world full of signs that can be used to lie and mislead, and many of us spend a good deal of effort trying to determine whether or not we are being conned. Much of this lying with signs is relatively harmless (e.g., the blondes who are naturally brunettes), but in some cases (e.g., the truck

**Table 1.4** Semiotics as Everyday Signs of Lying

Topic	Misleading Signs
Wigs	Bald persons have hair or persons adopt different hair colors.
Elevator shoes	Short persons are made taller.
Dyed hair	Brunettes become blondes, blondes become redheads, and so on.
Falsies	Women with small breasts seem to have big ones.
Impostors	Persons pretend to be doctors, lawyers, or whatever.
Impersonation	Persons pretend to be someone else, steal “identity.”
Malingering	Persons pretend to be ill.
Theater	Actors and actresses pretend to have certain feelings, beliefs, and the like.
Food	Imitation crab, shrimp, lobster, and so on
Words	White lies told so as not to hurt people.

driver who pretends to be a doctor) it can be very dangerous. Eco's point is an important one: If signs can be used to communicate, they can be used to communicate lies.

## FACIAL EXPRESSIONS AS SIGNS

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Paul Ekman, a psychologist, has done important work on facial expressions. I first encountered his work at an international conference on semiotics. He argues that it is possible to discern when people are lying from examining their facial expressions and detecting extremely minute changes in the way certain facial muscles are activated or not activated. Ekman's research led him to conclude that there are eight facial expressions that are universal: anger, determination, disgust, fear, neutral, pouting, sadness, and surprise. In a summary of a report to the National Science Foundation, written with Terrence J. Sejnowski (Ekman & Sejnowski, 1992), we find the following:

Facial expressions provide information about affective state, including both emotions such as fear, anger, enjoyment, surprise, sadness, disgust, and more enduring moods such as euphoria, dysphoria, or irritableness; cognitive activity such as perplexity, concentration, or boredom;

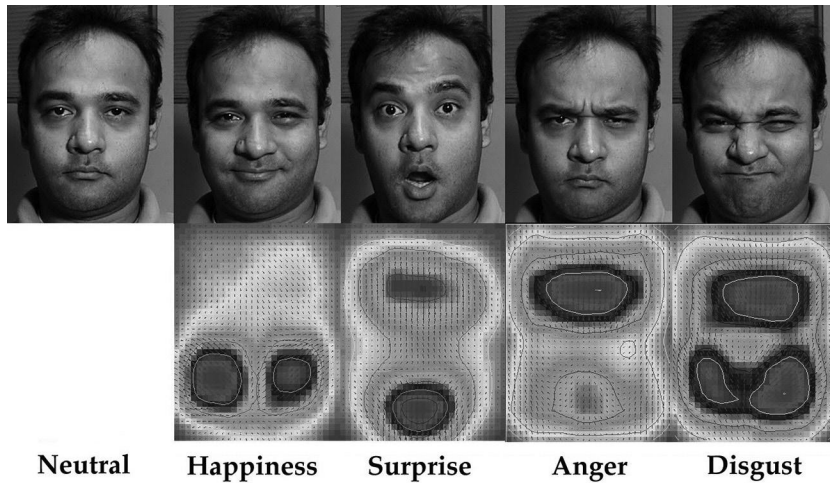
temperament and personality, including such traits as hostility, sociability, or shyness;

truthfulness, including the leakage of concealed emotions and clues as to when the information provided in words about plans or actions is false;

psychopathology, including not only diagnostic information relevant to depression, mania, schizophrenia, and other less severe disorders, but also information relevant to monitoring responses to treatment. (p. 4)

What is remarkable is that the authors suggest that it is possible to develop automated systems to monitor facial expressions, which could revolutionize fields such as law, communications, medicine, and education. Faces, they argue, are "windows" into our emotional states, which play an important part in our social lives. Take, for instance, the image showing five expressions and underneath them, the amount of energy needed to go from neutral to each of four of the universal facial expressions. Faces may be windows, but we often find it difficult to see through those windows and determine what a given facial representation actually means.

Many people find it difficult to distinguish one facial expression from another, as a matter of fact.



SOURCE: Courtesy of Irfan Essa.

## HYPERREALITY

Jean Baudrillard, a postmodernist social theorist (I'll have more to say about postmodernism later in the book), argues that reality has been replaced by what he calls *hyperreality*, which suggests that the sign is now more important than what it stands for. Peter Brooker (1999) has this to say in *Cultural Theory: A Glossary*:

**Hyperreality.** A term associated with the effects of MASS PRODUCTION and REPRODUCTION and suggesting that an object, event, experience so reproduced replaces or is preferred to its original: that the copy is "more real than real." In the writings of the French social philosopher and commentator on POSTMODERNISM, Jean Baudrillard (1929–) and Umberto Eco (1932–), hyperreality is associated especially with cultural tendencies and a prevailing sensibility in contemporary American society.



Jean Baudrillard

In Baudrillard's discussion, hyperreality is synonymous with the most developed form of SIMULATION: the autonomous simulacra which is free from all reference to the real. (pp. 121–122)

According to this theory, then, simulations (such as Disneyland) become, ultimately, more important and more real for people than the reality they were designed to imitate. Indeed, Baudrillard has even suggested that Disneyland is now the ultimate reality and the United States is an imitation of it! As he wrote in “The Precision of Simulacra” (in *Simulacra and Simulation*):

Everywhere in Disneyland the objective profile of America, down to the morphology of individuals and of the crowd is drawn. All its values are exalted by the miniature and the comic strip. . . . Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the “real” country, all of the “real” America that is Disneyland. . . . Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. (p. 12)

Baudrillard spells out how Disney’s iconic creations have shaped our consciousness and our perceptions of reality. And now, Disney owns Marvel Comics and the Star Wars film franchise.

## LANGUAGE AND SPEAKING

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Earlier, I suggested that texts (such as films, television programs, and commercials) are “like languages,” and that the rules of linguistics can be applied to them. What a language does is enable the communication of information, feelings, ideas, and the like by establishing systems and rules that people learn. And just as there is grammar for writing and speaking, there are grammars for various kinds of texts—and for different media.

Saussure makes a distinction that is useful here—between *language* and *speaking*. Language is a social institution, made up of rules and conventions that have been systematized, that enables us to speak (or, more broadly, to communicate). Each person “speaks” in his or her own manner, but this speaking is based on the language and rules that everyone learns. A television program such as *Star Trek*—and I must point out that most of what I’m discussing here involves narratives—can be viewed as speech that is intelligible to its audience because the audience knows the language. That is, we know the signs and what they signify; we know the conventions of the genre, or what is acceptable and unacceptable. We know the codes!

Sometimes there is confusion, and the code the creator of a program applied isn’t the code used by the members of the audience. In such cases there is bad

communication. What makes things complicated is the fact that, generally speaking, people are not consciously aware of the rules and codes and cannot articulate them, although they respond to them. An example of this kind of mix-up is a scene in a film or TV program that is meant to be sad but occasions laughter in audience members.

It is obvious, then, that people are “speaking” all the time, even when they aren’t saying anything verbally. Hairstyles, eyeglasses, clothes, facial expressions, posture, gestures, and many other things communicate or “speak” (that is, signify continually) to those who are sensitive to such things and who are mindful of signs and signifiers. Maya Pines (1982) has offered this explanation of semiotics:

Everything we do sends messages about us in a variety of codes, semiologists contend. We are also on the receiving end of innumerable messages encoded in music, gestures, foods, rituals, books, movies, or advertisements. Yet we seldom realize that we have received such messages, and would have trouble explaining the rules under which they operate. (p. G1)

What semiotics does, Pines adds, is teach us how to decipher these rules and “bring them to consciousness.” I have described the messages we give and receive as being similar to “speech.” Speech always implies, as Saussure (1915/1966) tells us, an established system, although this system is also evolving continually.

Let me offer a brief summary of what we have covered thus far concerning semiotics:

1. Semiotics is concerned with how *meaning* is created and conveyed in texts and, in particular, in narratives (or stories).
2. The focus of semiotics is the *signs* found in texts. Signs are understood to be combinations of *signifiers* and *signifieds*.
3. Because nothing has meaning in itself, the *relationships* that exist among signs are crucial. An analogy can be made with words and grammar: It is the ways in which words are combined that determine what they mean. *Language* is a social institution that tells how words are to be used; *speaking* is an individual act based on language.
4. *Texts* can be viewed as being similar to speech and as implying grammars or languages that make the texts meaningful. Codes and conventions make the signs in a narrative understandable and also shape the actions.

## CONNOTATION AND DENOTATION

The word *connotation* comes from the Latin *connotare*, “to mark along with,” and refers to the cultural meanings that become attached to words (and other forms of communication). A word’s connotations involve the symbolic, historic, and emotional matters connected to it. In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes, a distinguished French semiotician, addresses the cultural connotations of many aspects of French daily life, such as steak and *frites*, detergents, Citroen automobiles, and wrestling. In his preface to the 1972 edition he writes:

This book has a double theoretical framework: on the one hand an ideological critique bearing on the language of so-called mass culture; on the other, a first attempt to analyzing semiologically the mechanics of this language. I had just read Saussure and as a result acquired the conviction that by treating “collective representations” as sign-systems, one might hope to go further than the pious show of unmasking them and account *in detail* for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature. (p. 9)

The first chapter in the book deals with wrestling. Barthes explains that what interests him about wrestling is that it is a spectacle of excess in which “a light without shadow generates an emotion without reserve,” that is similar in nature of Greek drama and bullfights. Wrestling, he adds, is a spectacle, not a sport, and is an externalized image of torture.



Roland Barthes

Barthes offers, in his discussion of wrestling, a description of a French wrestler, Thauvin, whose body suggests many things to the French public:

Each sign in wrestling is therefore endowed with an absolute clarity, since one must always understand everything on the spot. As soon as the adversaries are in the ring, the public is overwhelmed with the obviousness of the roles. As in the theatre, each physical type expresses to excess the part which has been assigned to the contestant. Thauvin, a fifty-year-old with an obese and sagging body, whose type of asexual hideousness always inspires feminine nicknames, displays in his flesh the characters of baseness, for his part is to represent what, in the classical concept of the *salaud*, the “bastard” (the key-concept of any wrestling match), appears as organically repugnant. (pp. 16–17)

Barthes mentions that the French call Thauvin *la barbaque*, which means “stinking meat.” Thauvin’s very body, then, is a sign that generates any number of strong feelings on the part of French viewers of professional wrestling. We could say the same, as well, for the many villains and heroes in American professional wrestling. Barthes’s purpose, he says, is to take the world of “what-goes-without-saying” and show this world’s connotations and, by extension, its ideological foundations.

*Denotation*, on the other hand, refers to the literal or explicit meanings of words and other phenomena. For example, *Barbie Doll* denotes a toy doll, first marketed in 1959, that was originally 11.5 inches high, had measurements of 5.25 inches at the bust, 3.0 inches at the waist, and 4.25 inches at the hips. The connotations of *Barbie Doll*, in contrast, are the subject of some controversy. Some scholars have suggested that the arrival of the Barbie Doll signified the end of motherhood as a dominant role for women and the importance of consumer culture, because Barbie is a consumer who spends her time buying clothes and having relationships with Ken and other dolls. The Barbie Doll doesn’t prepare little girls for the traditional role of motherhood in the way other kinds of dolls do—allowing them to imitate their mothers in caring for their “children.” Table 1.5 presents a comparison of connotation and denotation.

A great deal of media analysis involves discovering the connotations of objects and symbolic phenomena and of the actions and dialogue of the characters in texts—that is, the meanings these may have for audiences—and tying these meanings to social, cultural, ideological, and other concerns.

**Table 1.5** Comparison of Connotation and Denotation

Connotation	Denotation
Figurative	Literal
Signified(s)	Signifier(s)
Inferred	Obvious
Suggests meanings	Describes
Realm of myth	Realm of existence

## THE SYNCHRONIC AND THE DIACHRONIC

The distinction between the synchronic and the diachronic is yet another legacy from Saussure. As he uses the terms, *synchronic* means analytic and *diachronic* means historical, so a synchronic study of a text looks at the relationships that exist among its elements, and a diachronic study looks at the way the narrative evolves. Another way of putting this is that in conducting a synchronic analysis of a text, one looks for the pattern of paired oppositions buried in the text (the paradigmatic structure), whereas in doing diachronic analysis, one focuses on the chain of events (the syntagmatic structure) that forms the narrative.

Saussure (1915/1966) makes a distinction between static (synchronic) linguistics and evolutionary (diachronic) linguistics:

All sciences would profit by indicating more precisely the coordinates along which their subject matter is aligned. Everywhere distinctions should be made . . . between (1) *the axis of simultaneity* . . . which stands for the relations of coexisting things and from which the intervention of time is excluded; and (2) *the axis of successions* . . . , on which only one thing can be considered at a time but upon which are located all the things on the first axis together with their changes. (pp. 79–80)

To explain the differences between these two perspectives, Saussure suggests that the reader imagine a plant. If one makes a longitudinal cut in the stem of a plant, one sees the fibers that make up the plant, but if one makes a cross-sectional cut, one can see the plant's fibers in relationship to each other.

**Table 1.6** Comparison of Synchronic Analysis and Diachronic Analysis

Synchronic Analysis	Diachronic Analysis
Simultaneity	Succession
Static	Evolutionary
Instant in time	Historical perspective
Relations in a system	Relations in time
Focus on analysis	Focus on development
Paradigmatic	Syntagmatic
Claude Lévi-Strauss	Vladimir Propp

Table 1.6 contrasts synchronic analysis and diachronic analysis. For example, a researcher might focus on the way video games have evolved (thus using a diachronic perspective) or might compare the most important video games being played at a particular moment in time (thus using a synchronic perspective). Or the researcher could first use a diachronic perspective, to establish context, and then do a synchronic analysis, focusing on some important games. Claude Lévi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp are mentioned in this table as exemplars of these two styles of analysis. I explain the ideas these two theorists developed in the sections that follow.

## SYNTAGMATIC ANALYSIS

A *syntagm* is a chain, and in syntagmatic analysis, a text is examined as a sequence of events that forms some kind of narrative. In this section I discuss the ideas of Vladimir Propp, a Russian folklorist who wrote a pioneering book in 1928 titled *Morphology of the Folktale*. Morphology is the study of forms—that is, the component parts of something and their relationships to each other and to the whole.

Propp (1928/1968), whose work involved a group of fairy tales, has described his method as follows:

We are undertaking a comparison of the themes of these tales. For the sake of comparison we shall separate the component parts of fairy tales

by special methods; and then, we shall make a comparison of the tales according to their components. The result will be a morphology (i.e., a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole). (p. 19)

Propp refers to the essential or basic narrative unit in his study as a “function”:

Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action. (p. 21)



Propp's observations may be briefly formulated in the following manner:

1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.
2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.
3. The sequence of functions is always identical.
4. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure. (pp. 21–23)

Propp's work has great significance for this discussion, for we can adopt and adapt his ideas to films, television stories, comics, and all kinds of other narratives. Whether or not Propp was correct in all his assertions is not of great importance for our purposes. His concept of functions can be applied to all kinds of texts with interesting results.

For each of his functions, Propp gives a summary of its essence, an abbreviated definition, and a conventional sign or designation. Some of the functions are rather complicated and have numerous subcategories, all of which fulfill the same task. Propp's (1928/1968) description of his first function is quoted subsequently, so that you can see what a simple one is like and how he develops each (the numbers in parentheses refer to specific fairy tales that Propp studied):

- I. ONE OF THE MEMBERS OF A FAMILY ABSENTS HIMSELF FROM HOME. (Definition: *absentation*. Designation:  $\beta$ .)
  1. *The person absenting himself can be a member of the older generation* ( $\beta_1$ ). Parents leave for work (113). “The prince had to go on a distant

journey, leaving his wife to the care of strangers” (265). “Once, he (a merchant) went away to foreign lands” (17). Usual forms of absention: going to work, to the forest, to trade, to war, “on business.”

2. *An intensified form of absention is represented by the death of parents* ( $b_2$ ).
3. *Sometimes members of the younger generation absent themselves* ( $b_3$ ). They go visiting (101), fishing (108), for a walk (137), out to gather berries (244). (p. 26)

This is one of the briefer descriptions Propp provides for his functions; for instance, function 8 (about a villain doing harm or injury to a member of a family) has 19 subcategories.

Even though you do not know all the subcategories of each function, you can still use Propp’s 31 functions to conduct syntagmatic analyses of selected texts. (Table 1.7 displays a simplified and slightly modified list of these functions and gives a brief description of each.) What will become obvious to you as you use these functions is the extent to which a lot of contemporary stories contain many of Propp’s functions. His definition of the hero as “that character who either directly suffers from the action of the villain . . . or who agrees to liquidate the misfortune or lack of another person” is also worth considering (p. 50). Heroes also, Propp tells us, are supplied with magical agents or helpers that they make use of in difficult situations.

Let us now apply Propp’s functions to an episode of the television program *The Prisoner* to show how Propp’s work can be used to help uncover the morphology of a narrative text. *The Prisoner* is a remarkable “existential” television series first broadcast in the late sixties and regarded by many as a classic. It is about a man who, having resigned from some mysterious (apparently espionage) organization, has been abducted and is being held against his will in “the Village,” a strange resortlike place on an island, where everyone is called by a number rather than by name. The hero is locked into battles with various adversaries, each called “Number Two,” in the 17 episodes of the series. At the end of the series, the prisoner (Number Six) escapes from the Village, which he destroys, and returns to his apartment in London. Episodes of *The Prisoner* can be downloaded from the Internet at [www.amctv.com/originals/the-prisoner/](http://www.amctv.com/originals/the-prisoner/).

The first episode of *The Prisoner* is titled “Arrival.” It opens with a scene in which the hero, unnamed, is shown resigning. He is in an office with some officials; he pounds the table and leaves. He returns to his apartment and begins to pack, but as he does, he is gassed and passes out. He awakes in the Village, a totalitarian society where everyone has numbers instead of names;

**Table 1.7** Propp's Functions

$\alpha$	<i>Initial situation</i>	Members of family or hero are introduced.
$\beta$	<i>Absentation</i>	One of the members of the family absents himself from home.
Y	<i>Interdiction</i>	An interdiction is addressed to the hero.
$\delta$	<i>Violation</i>	An interdiction is violated.
$\epsilon$	<i>Reconnaissance</i>	The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance.
$\eta$	<i>Delivery</i>	The villain receives information about his victim.
$\zeta$	<i>Trickery</i>	The villain attempts to deceive his victim.
$\theta$	<i>Complicity</i>	The victim submits to deception, and unwittingly helps his enemy.
A	<i>Villainy</i>	The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family.
A	<i>Lack</i>	One member of a family lacks something or wants something.
B	<i>Mediation</i>	Misfortune is made known, and hero is dispatched.
C	<i>Counteraction</i>	Seekers agree to decide on counteraction.
$\uparrow$	<i>Departure</i>	The hero leaves home.
D	<i>First function of donor</i>	Hero is tested, and receives magical agent or helper.
E	<i>Hero's reaction</i>	Hero reacts to actions of the future donor.
F	<i>Receipt of magic agent</i>	Hero acquires the use of a magical agent.
G	<i>Spatial transference</i>	Hero is led to object of search.
H	<i>Struggle</i>	Hero and villain join in direct combat.
J	<i>Branding</i>	Hero is branded.
I	<i>Victory</i>	Villain is defeated.
K	<i>Liquidation</i>	Initial misfortune or lack is liquidated.
$\downarrow$	<i>Return</i>	The hero returns.
Pr	<i>Pursuit</i>	A chase: The hero is pursued.

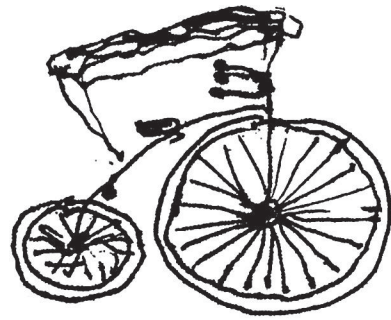
(Continued)

**Table 1.7** (Continued)

Rs	<i>Rescue</i>	Hero is rescued from pursuit.
O	<i>Unrecognized arrival</i>	The hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another country.
L	<i>Unfounded claims</i>	A false hero presents unfounded claims.
M	<i>Difficult task</i>	A difficult task is proposed to the hero.
N	<i>Solution</i>	The task is resolved.
Q	<i>Recognition</i>	The hero is recognized.
Ex	<i>Exposure</i>	The false hero or villain is exposed.
T	<i>Transfiguration</i>	The hero is given a new appearance.
U	<i>Punishment</i>	The villain is punished.
W	<i>Wedding</i>	The hero is married and ascends the throne.
There are seven dramatis personae in Propp's scheme:		
1	<i>Villain</i>	Fights with hero.
2	<i>Donor</i>	Provides hero with magical agent.
3	<i>Helper</i>	Aids hero in solving difficult tasks, etc.
4	<i>Princess</i> <i>Her father</i>	Sought-for person. Assigns difficult tasks.
5	<i>Dispatcher</i>	Sends hero on his mission.
6	<i>Hero</i>	Searches for something or fights with villain.
7	<i>False hero</i>	Claims to be hero but is unmasked.

he is told that he is Number Six. The prisoner is pitted against Number Two, who wishes to find out why Six resigned. Six tries to escape by running along the seashore but is “captured” by a huge and terrifying rubber sphere, Rover, that is kept beneath the sea and is controlled by Number Two. Six is sent to the Village hospital, where he finds himself sharing a room with an old friend, also a spy. While Six is being examined by a doctor, there is a commotion outside the exam room. Six rushes back to his room and is told that his friend has committed suicide. After Six is released from the hospital, he notices a woman

acting strangely at his friend's burial procession. Six talks with the woman, who tells him she was the friend's lover and that they were planning to escape from the island. She has a watch with a special device that will enable Six to evade Rover and steal a helicopter. Six takes the watch and "escapes" via the helicopter, but shortly after he has left the island he discovers the helicopter is rigged and controlled by Number Two. The episode ends with the helicopter returning to the Village and the spy friend, who had supposedly committed suicide, telling Number Two that Six is an unusual person who will need special treatment.



*The Prisoner*

Although *The Prisoner* is not a fairy tale per se, it contains many of the same elements as a fairy tale. Many contemporary narrative texts are, it can be argued, modified and updated fairy tales that, to a considerable degree, resemble the tales Propp has described. Table 1.8 lists a few of the Proppian functions that can be applied to events in "Arrival." This analysis could be extended and made more detailed through the use of some of Propp's subcategories, but I only want to suggest the possibilities of this kind of analysis here. Note: You can see "Arrival" and all the other episodes of *The Prisoner* on YouTube.

There are two important things to be learned from syntagmatic analysis. First, narratives, regardless of kind or genre, are composed of certain functions (or elements) that are essential for the creation of a story. Propp's work leads us, then, to an understanding of the nature of formulas. Second, the order in which events take place in a narrative is of great importance. There is a logic to narrative texts, and the arrangement of elements in a story can greatly affect

**Table 1.8** Proppian Functions in "Arrival" Episode of *The Prisoner*

Propp's Function	Symbol	Event
Initial situation	$\alpha$	Hero is shown resigning.
Interdiction violated	$\delta$	(implicit) Spies can't resign.
Villain causing injury	A	Hero is abducted to the Village.
Receipt of a magical agent	F	Woman gives Six watch with device.
False hero exposed	Ex	Friend is shown with Two.

our perception of what anything “means.” That, in fact, is the purpose editing serves.<sup>1</sup>

Let me offer a quotation that uses Proppian analysis to make a point about James Bond novels. In Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott’s (1987) *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* they write about Umberto Eco’s analysis of the Bond phenomenon:

Just as Vladimir Propp argued that “all fairytales are of one type in regard to their structure,” so Eco argues that, at the levels of plot, the Bond novels are structurally uniform. Indeed, he further contends that the “Bond formula” is merely a variant of the archetypal structure of the traditional fairy tale. According to Propp, the basic plot elements of the fairytale consists of functions performed by its central protagonists—the hero, the villain, the princess—in developing the course of action within the story. Likewise, Eco argues that the main characters of the Bond novels are motivated by the functions assigned to them, functions which he likens to a series of moves required by the rules of the game. (p. 70)

This would suggest that some of the appeal of the Bond novels and films is due to their being modernized and updated fairy tales and thus they play a role in our psyches similar to that of conventional fairy tales. I have more to say about James Bond in my chapter on psychoanalytic theory.

## PARADIGMATIC ANALYSIS

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The paradigmatic analysis of a text involves a search for a hidden pattern of oppositions that are buried in it and that generate meaning. As Alan Dundes (1928/1968) writes in his introduction to Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*, the paradigmatic form of structural analysis

seeks to describe the pattern (usually based upon an a priori binary principle of opposition) which allegedly underlies the folkloristic text. This pattern is not the same as the sequential structure at all. Rather, the elements are taken out of the “given” order and are regrouped in one or more analytic schema. (p. xi)

We search for binary or polar oppositions because meaning is based on establishing relationships, and the most important kind of relationship in the production of meaning in language is that of opposition.

We return here to Saussure's (1915/1966) notion that "in language there are only differences." Or, as Jonathan Culler (1976) has put it, "Structuralists have generally followed Jakobson and taken the binary opposition as a fundamental operation of the human mind basic to the production of meaning" (p. 15). Thus some kind of systematic and interrelated sets of oppositions can be elicited in all texts, whether they are narrative or not. Many people are not conscious of these oppositions—and sometimes they are only implied—but without differences, there is no meaning.

Some people argue that the oppositions and other structures that semioticians "elicit" from texts are not really there. These critics assert that semioticians do not *discover* systems of relationships but, instead, *invent* them. This controversy is sometimes known as the "hocus-pocus" versus the "God's truth" problem. I believe that the oppositions that semioticians find in texts are actually there; not only that, but they *have* to be there. Finding meaning without discerning polar oppositions is like listening to the sound of one hand clapping.

Given that I've used *The Prisoner* in a previous example, let me offer a paradigmatic analysis of "Arrival." The most important opposition found in this episode is between freedom and control, and I use these two concepts at the head of the list of oppositions displayed in Table 1.9, which shows the ideational structure upon which the narrative is hung.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, a distinguished French anthropologist, has suggested that a syntagmatic analysis of a text reveals the text's manifest meaning and that a paradigmatic analysis reveals the text's latent meaning. The manifest structure of a text consists of what happens in it, whereas the latent structure consists of what the text is about. Or, to put it another way, when we use a paradigmatic approach, we are not so much concerned with what characters *do* as with what they *mean*.

**Table 1.9** Polar Oppositions in "Arrival"

Freedom	Control
Number Six	Number Two
The individual	The organization
Willpower	Force
Escape	Entrapment
Trust	Deception



Lévi-Strauss is interested in the ways narratives are organized or structured and in how their organization generates meaning. He has done a great deal of work (much of it highly controversial) on myths, kinship systems, and related matters. According to Lévi-Strauss (1967), myths are composed of fundamental or minimal units, or “mythemes,” that combine in certain ways to give messages. Mythemes can be expressed in short sentences that describe important relationships. For example, in the case of the Oedipus myth, Lévi-Strauss offers mythemes such as “Oedipus kills his father, Laius,”

“Oedipus marries his mother,” and “Oedipus immolates the Sphinx.” These mythemes and their rules of combination (what Lévi-Strauss calls “bundles,” or relations) are the stuff of which myths are made. Myths are important not only because they function as charters for the groups that tell and believe them, but also because they are the keys to the ways in which the human mind works.

What is most significant about myths is the stories they tell, not their style. Thus the structured relationships among the characters and what these relationships ultimately mean should be the focus, not the way a story is told. Myths, Lévi-Strauss asserts, give coded messages from cultures to individuals, and the task of the analyst is to discover these masked or hidden messages by “cracking the code.” In the final analysis, this involves eliciting the paradigmatic structure of a text.<sup>2</sup>

In making a paradigmatic analysis of a text, an analyst should take care to avoid certain possible errors. First, the analyst must be sure to elicit true oppositions (as opposed to mere negations). For example, I would suggest that “poor” is the opposite of “rich” and should be used instead of something such as “unrich” or “nonrich.” Second, the analyst should be sure that the oppositions elicited are tied to characters and events in the text.

If I had offered a more detailed synopsis of “Arrival,” I would have been able to undertake more detailed syntagmatic and paradigmatic analyses of this story, and my lists of Proppian functions and polar oppositions (Tables 1.7 and 1.8) would have been longer. I might add that it is useful for the analyst to explicate the terms in his or her list of oppositions and to explain why each pair is included.

## INTERTEXTUALITY

*Intertextuality* is a term about which there is a good deal of controversy. For purposes of this discussion, it will refer to the use in texts (consciously or