

1

Semiotic Analysis



I face this assignment—explaining semiotics 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.

So my mission, if not impossible, is quite challenging: Not only am I to explain the fundamental notions or elements of semiotics, 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, John Locke, and others have shown

4 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

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

Table 1.1 Three Aspects of Signs

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

From these two points of departure a movement 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, 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.

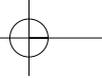
Peirce argued that interpreters have to supply part of the meanings of signs. He wrote that a sign "is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (quoted in Zeman, 1977, p. 24). This is different from Saussure's ideas about how signs function. Peirce considered semiotics important because, as he put it, "this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs." Whatever we do can be seen as a message or, as Peirce would put it, a sign. If everything in the universe is a sign, semiotics becomes extremely important, if not all-important (a view that 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 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

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



6 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

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.

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, Ferdinand de Saussure (1915/1966):

Language is a system of signs that express 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 semeion "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, 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.” “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 below, with the topics addressed appearing in all capital letters:

<i>DENIM</i>		<i>FANCY CLOTHES</i>	
Cheap	COST	Expensive	
Rough	TEXTURE	Smooth	
Mass-produced	FABRICATION	Hand-made	
Department stores	PLACE BOUGHT	Boutiques	

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 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?

8 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

❖ 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 interesting and 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)

We can now start looking at texts differently and can start thinking about how it is that signifiers generate meaning. 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

Figure 1.1 Saussure's Diagram of a Sign

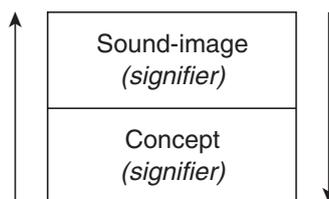
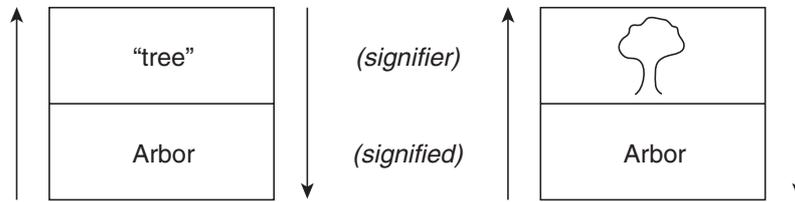


Figure 1.2 Saussure's Diagram of a Sign and Symbol "Tree"

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.

Figure 1.3 Sign: A Combination of Signifier and Signified

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

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):

<i>Signifiers</i>	<i>Signifieds</i>
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.
Dust on hat is brown house dust	Man seldom goes out.
Wax stains from candles on hat	No gas in house.

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 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 and/or numbers—help give people a sense of what the corporation is like.

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

12 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

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 clothing and the 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.

Activities and Performances

Thanks to the work of semioticians and psychologists, we now pay a great deal 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) displayed by their opponents 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. One problem with signs is that if they can be used to tell the truth, they can also be used to lie.

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.

❖ SIGNS AND TRUTH

Umberto Eco (1976), a distinguished Italian semiotician, has suggested that (as noted above) 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 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 some ways in which we can (and do) lie—or, to be kinder, mislead others—with signs:

<i>Area</i>	<i>Misleading Signs</i>
Wigs	Bald persons or persons with different hair color
Elevator shoes	Short persons 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	Persons pretend to have feelings, beliefs, and the like
Food	Imitation crab, shrimp, lobster, and so on
Words	White lies told so as not to hurt people

14 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

We live in a world full of signs that 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 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.

❖ 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. As Peter Brooker writes in *Cultural Theory: A Glossary* (1999):

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.

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!

❖ LANGUAGE AND SPEAKING

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 applied by the creator of a program 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.

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* (1972), 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. He 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 1.2 presents a comparison of connotation and denotation.

Table 1.2 Comparison of Connotation and Denotation

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

18 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

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.

❖ 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 another.

Table 1.3 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

utilize 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 will explain the ideas these two theorists developed in the sections that follow.

Table 1.3 Comparison of Synchronic Analysis and Diachronic Analysis

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

❖ 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 will 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” (see pp. 21–23):

20 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

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

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.

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 below, 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: β .)
 1. *The person absenting himself can be a member of the older generation (β_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 absentation: going to work, to the forest, to trade, to war, "on business."*
 2. *An intensified form of absentation is represented by the death of parents (β_2).*
 3. *Sometimes members of the younger generation absent themselves (β_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 1.4 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.

Table 1.4 Propp's Functions

α	<i>Initial situation</i>	Members of family or hero introduced.
β	<i>Absentation</i>	One of the members of the family absents himself from home.
γ	<i>Interdiction</i>	An interdiction is addressed to the hero.
δ	<i>Violation</i>	An interdiction is violated.
ϵ	<i>Reconnaissance</i>	The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance.
η	<i>Delivery</i>	The villain receives information about his victim.
ζ	<i>Trickery</i>	The villain attempts to deceive his victim.
θ	<i>Complicity</i>	The victim submits to deception, 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, hero is dispatched.
C	<i>Counteraction</i>	Seekers agree to decide on counteraction.
\uparrow	<i>Departure</i>	The hero leaves home.
D	<i>1st function of donor</i>	Hero is tested, receives magical agent or helper.
E	<i>Hero's reaction</i>	Hero reacts to actions of the future donor.

(Continued)

Table 1.4 (Continued)

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.
↓	<i>Return</i>	The hero returns.
Pr	<i>Pursuit</i>	A chase: The hero is pursued.
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>	Sought-for person.
	<i>Her father</i>	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.

I will 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 a number of years ago and today 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.

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; 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.

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 1.5 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.

Table 1.5 Proppian Functions in "Arrival" Episode of *The Prisoner*

<i>Propp's Function</i>	<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Event</i>
Initial situation	a	Hero shown resigning
Interdiction violated	δ	(implicit) Spies can't resign
Villain causes injury	A	Hero abducted to the Village
Receipt of a magical agent	F	Woman gives Six watch with device
False hero exposed	Ex	Friend shown with Two

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 our perception of what anything "means." That, in fact, is the purpose served by editing.¹

❖ PARADIGMATIC ANALYSIS

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 writes in his introduction to Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928/1968), 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 the establishment of 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 an example above, 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 1.6, which shows the ideational structure upon which the narrative is hung.

Table 1.6 Polar Oppositions in "Arrival"

<i>Freedom</i>	<i>Control</i>
Number Six	Number Two
The individual	The organization
Willpower	Force
Escape	Entrapment
Trust	Deception

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*.

Lévi-Strauss is interested in the ways narratives are organized or structured and in how their organization generates meaning. He has

26 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

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.²

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 1.5 and 1.6) 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 unconsciously) of material from other, previously created

texts. Parody, or the humorous imitation of a text, is a good example of the conscious reuse of material from a text. In order for parody to be effective, audience members must be familiar with the original text, so that they can appreciate the ways in which it is being ridiculed. There are also parodies of *style* (e.g., contests are held in which entrants compete to produce the most ridiculous imitation of Hemingway's writing style) and parodies of *genre*, which play upon the basic plot structures of formulaic kinds of texts, such as soap operas and westerns.

Another kind of conscious intertextuality takes place when screenwriters or film directors create scenes that are recognizable as "quotations" from other films. Avant-garde filmmakers and other artists often consciously "quote" from the works of other artists—they patch together bits and pieces from well-known (or not so well-known) works and create new works. Thus, as Marcel Danesi points out in *Understanding Media Semiotics* (2002), the film *Blade Runner* contains many allusions to biblical themes, such as the search for a Creator. Another example of intertextuality is the Leonard Bernstein/Stephen Sondheim musical *West Side Story*, which is based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Some television critics have suggested that the short-lived 2003 television show *Skin* was yet another modernized version of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Unconscious intertextuality involves textual materials of many kinds (plots, themes, kinds of characters, and so on) that become common currency, pervading cultures and finding their way into new texts without the creators' being aware of it. Some literary theorists argue, in fact, that all creative work is, ultimately, intertextual. That is, all texts are related to other texts, to varying degrees.

❖ DIALOGICAL THEORY

The Russian semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin has suggested that language is "dialogic," by which he means that when we speak, what we say is tied both to things that have been said before and to utterances that we expect to be made in the future. As he explains in his book *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981):

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself on the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time

28 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue. (p. 280)

If we take this notion and move it from speech utterances to texts, we can gain some insight into intertextuality. Bakhtin discusses the relationships that exist among texts, including what he calls the matter of “quotation” (which we now call intertextuality) in the Middle Ages:

The role of the other’s word was enormous at that time; there were quotations that were openly and reverently emphasized as such, or that were half-hidden, completely hidden, half-conscious, unconscious, correct, intentionally distorted, deliberately reinterpreted and so forth. The boundary lines between someone else’s speech and one’s own speech were flexible, ambiguous, often deliberately distorted and confused. Certain types of texts were constructed like mosaics out of the texts of others. . . . One of the best authorities on medieval parody . . . states outright that the history of medieval literature and its Latin literature in particular “is the history of appropriation, re-working and imitation of someone else’s property”—or as we would say, of another’s language, another’s style, another’s word. (p. 69)

The “appropriation” of the work of others that took place in the Middle Ages is similar to what happens today. This is because, in part, many inhabitants of the Western world share a common cultural heritage that informs the work of artists and is reflected in texts even when there is no conscious decision made to “quote” from other texts or sources.

❖ METAPHOR AND METONYMY

Metaphor and metonymy are two important ways of transmitting meaning. In metaphor, a relationship between two things is suggested through the use of *analogy*. Thus we might say, “My love is a red rose.” One of the most common metaphoric forms is the simile, in which *like* or *as* is used and a comparison is suggested. For example, “He’s as sharp as a razor” or “She’s as good as an angel.”

Sometimes we incorporate metaphors and similes into the verbs we use. Consider the following examples:

The ship *cut* through the waves. (The ship is like a knife.)

The ship *danced* through the waves. (The ship is like a dancer.)

The ship *raced* through the waves. (The ship is like a race car.)

The ship *pranced* through the waves. (The ship is like a horse.)

The ship *plowed* through the waves. (The ship is like a plow.)

In these examples, the ship takes on different identities. These verbs convey information that is different from that in the statement “The ship sailed through the waves.”

In metonymy, a relationship is suggested that is based on *association*, which implies the existence of codes in people’s minds that enable them to make the proper connections. As James Monaco (1977) has noted:

A metonymy is a figure of speech in which an associated detail or notion is used to invoke an idea or represent an object. Etymologically, the word means “substitute naming” (from the Greek *meta*, involving transfer, and *onoma*, name). Thus in literature we can speak of the king (and the idea of kingship) as “the crown.” (p. 135)

A common form of metonymy is a synecdoche, in which a part stands for the whole or vice versa.

A good example of metaphor in film is the famous scene in Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush* in which he cooks his boots and eats the shoelaces as if they were spaghetti. A good example of metonymy is found in *The Prisoner* in the form of the monstrous balloon Rover, which symbolizes the oppressive regime that runs the Village. Table 1.7 compares and contrasts metaphor and metonymy.

Generally speaking, metaphor and metonymy are often mixed together, and sometimes a given object might have both metaphoric and metonymic significance. The distinction is important, because it enables us to see more clearly how objects and images (as well as language) generate meaning. And, in the case of metonymy, it becomes obvious that people carry *codes* around in their heads—highly complex patterns of associations that enable them to interpret metonymic communication correctly. Just as you can’t tell the players without a program, you can’t understand the meaning of most things without knowing the codes.

Table 1.7 Metaphor and Metonymy Contrasted

<i>Metaphor</i>	<i>Metonymy</i>
<i>Meta</i> (transfer, beyond)– <i>phor</i> (to bear) Chaplin eats shoelaces like spaghetti.	<i>Meta</i> (transfer)– <i>onoma</i> (name) Rover kills one of the villagers on command of Number Two.
<i>Simile</i> : important subcategory in which comparison is made using <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> . “No man is an island” Costume of Spider-Man.	<i>Synecdoche</i> : important subcategory in which part stands for the whole or whole for a part. Red suggests passion. Uncle Sam “stands for” United States.
Long, thin objects can be seen as penises.	Bowler hat implies Englishman; cowboy hat implies the American West.

❖ CODES

Codes are highly complex patterns of associations that all members of a given society and culture learn. These codes, or “secret structures” in people’s minds, affect the ways that individuals interpret the signs and symbols they find in the media and the ways they live. From this perspective, cultures are codification systems that play an important (although often unperceived) role in people’s lives. To be socialized and to be a member of a culture means, in essence, to be taught a number of codes, most of which are quite specific to a person’s social class, geographic location, ethnic group, and so on, although these sub-codings may exist within a more general code—“American character,” for example.

We all recognize that in order for people to be able to drive safely on the highways, a code is needed. This code is a collection of rules that tells drivers what they should and should not do in all conceivable situations. In like manner, we are all taught (often informally) other codes that tell us what to do in various situations and what certain things “mean.” Obviously, we carry these rules and understandings about life over to our exposure to media productions, or to *mass-mediated culture*.

It is quite possible, then, for misunderstandings to arise between those who create television programs and those who view them. Umberto Eco (1972) has even suggested that “aberrant decoding . . . is the rule in the mass media” (p. 106). This is because different people

bring different codes to given messages and thus interpret the messages in different ways. As Eco puts it:

Codes and subcodes are applied to the message [read “text”] in the light of a general framework of cultural references, which constitutes the receiver’s patrimony of knowledge: his ideological, ethical, religious standpoints, his psychological attitudes, his tastes, his value systems, etc. (p. 115)

Eco offers some examples that suggest how such aberrant decodings might have taken place in the past: foreigners in strange cultures who do not know the codes, or people who interpret messages in terms of their own codes rather than the codes in which the messages were originally cast. This was, Eco notes, before the development of mass media, when aberrant decodings were the exception, not the rule. With the development of mass media, however, the situation changed radically, and aberrant decoding became the norm. According to Eco, this is because of the wide gap that exists between those who create and generate the material carried by the media and those who receive this material.

The transmitters of messages, because of their social class, educational level, political ideologies, worldviews, ethos, and so on, do not share the same codes as their audiences, who differ from the message transmitters in some or even most of the above respects and who interpret the messages they receive from their own perspectives. The work of British sociolinguist Basil Bernstein (1977) illustrates how this might be possible. His research led him to conclude that in Britain, children learn either of two linguistic codes, the “elaborated” code or the “restrictive” code, and that the code a child learns plays a major role in his or her future development and adult life. The following lists show the differences between these two codes:

<i>Elaborated Code</i>	<i>Restricted Code</i>
Middle classes	Working classes
Grammatically complex	Grammatically simple
Varied vocabulary	Uniform vocabulary
Complex sentence structure	Short, repetitious sentence structure
Careful use of adjectives and adverbs	Little use of adjectives and adverbs
High-level conceptualization	Low-level conceptualization
Logical	Emotional
Use of qualifications	Little use of qualifications
Users aware of code	Users unaware of code

32 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

The code a child learns becomes the matrix through which his or her thought is filtered; thus the two codes lead to very different value systems, belief systems, attitudes about the world, and so on. Bernstein's work enables us to see how language shapes us and demonstrates the enormous problems we face in trying to resocialize the hard-core poor and other disadvantaged persons in society.

It has been said that the United States and Great Britain are two nations separated by a common language. In the same manner, the different classes in Britain, with their different codes, seem to be separated. When we move from language to the mass media, where in addition there are aesthetic codes, iconic codes, and more separating audience members, we can see that it is quite remarkable that the media can communicate with any degree of effectiveness.

Although I cannot address them in any detail here, several further aspects of codes and questions related to them merit brief mention; readers who are interested in investigating the subject of codes would do well to consider the following list:

- *Characteristics of codes*: coherence, covertness, clarity, concreteness, continuity, comprehensiveness, and so on
- *Manifestations of codes*: personality (in psychology), social roles (in social psychology), institutions (in sociology), ideologies (in political science), rituals (in anthropology)
- *Problems*: creation of codes, modification of codes, conflicts among codes, countercodes, codes and rules
- *Codes in popular culture*: formulas in spy stories, detective stories, westerns, science fiction adventures, pop music, fanzines, girlie fiction, horror stories, gothic novels, advertisements, sitcoms, and so on.
- *Ritual*: mealtimes, drinking in bars, gift giving, dating, television watching, supermarket shopping, behavior in elevators, sports contests, lovemaking, dressing, and so on.³

Codes are difficult to see because of their characteristics—they are all-pervasive, specific, and clear-cut, which makes them almost invisible. They inform almost every aspect of our existence (I've listed some of their manifestations) and provide a useful concept for the analyst of the popular arts and media; for not only do genres such as the western and the sitcom follow codes (commonly known as formulas), so do the media in general. It is to this subject I turn now, specifically, with a discussion of codes in television.

❖ SEMIOTICS OF THE TELEVISION MEDIUM

I have, to this point, been concerned with the ways semiotic analysis can be used to explicate programs carried on television, with a specific focus on the television narrative. Various forms of media carry various genres of the popular arts, as the following lists demonstrate:

<i>Media</i>	<i>Popular Art Forms</i>
Radio	Soap operas
Television	Advertisements/commercials
Films	Westerns
Comics	Police dramas
CDs	Variety shows
Posters	Musicals
Newspapers	Talk shows
Magazines	News
Telephone	Spy stories
Books	Documentaries
Billboards	Love stories

Each medium, because of its nature, imposes certain limitations on whatever popular art forms or genres it carries. Because of the small screen and the nature of the television image, for instance, television is not the ideal medium for presenting huge battle scenes. Television is a “close-up” medium, better suited to revealing character than to capturing action.

In applying semiotics to television, then, it makes sense for us to concern ourselves with aspects of the medium that *function as signs*, as distinguished from *carrying signs*. What is interesting about television, from this point of view, are the kinds of camera shots employed in the medium. Here is a list of some of the most important kinds of shots, which function as signifiers, and what is usually signified by each shot.

<i>Signifier (shot)</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Signified (meaning)</i>
Close-up	Face only	Intimacy
Medium shot	Most of body	Personal relationship
Long shot	Setting and characters	Context, scope, public distance
Full shot	Full body of person	Social relationship

34 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

Camera work and editing techniques can be examined in the same way:

<i>Signifier</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Signified</i>
Pan down	Camera looks down	Power, authority
Pan up	Camera looks up	Smallness, weakness
Dolly in	Camera moves in	Observation, focus
Fade in	Image appears on blank screen	Beginning
Fade out	Image screen goes blank	Ending
Cut	Switch from one image to another	Simultaneity, excitement
Wipe	Image wiped off screen	Imposed conclusion

The above material represents a kind of grammar of television as far as shots, camera work, and editing techniques are concerned. We all learn the meanings of these phenomena as we watch television, and they help us to understand what is going on in particular programs.

There are other matters that might be considered here also, such as lighting techniques, the use of color, sound effects, and music. All of these are signifiers that help us to interpret what we see (and also what we hear) on television. Television is a highly complex medium that uses verbal language, visual images, and sound to generate impressions and ideas in people. It is the task of the television semiotician to determine, first, how this is possible and, second, how this is accomplished.

❖ SOME CRITICISMS OF SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

You will notice that I have said very little up to this point about aesthetic judgments. This leads us to one of the major criticisms of semiotic analysis, namely, that in its concern for the relationship of elements and production of meaning in a text, it ignores the quality of the work itself. That is, semiotics is not really concerned with art, but rather with meaning and modes of cognition (the codes that we need to understand a text). It may be compared to judging a meal by the quality of the ingredients, without any concern for how the food was cooked or what it tasted like.

In certain cases, the text is subjugated by the critic. It exists as nothing but (or perhaps little more than) an excuse for a virtuoso performance by the semiotician, who grabs the spotlight away from the

work itself. But this is a problem of all forms of interpretation. Most works of art exist now at the top of a huge mountain of criticism that analyzes and explicates them, sometimes at greater length than the original works themselves.

Another problem with semiotic analysis, especially of television and televised texts, is that a strong theoretical foundation is lacking that would facilitate work in this area. Most of the work done in semiotics in recent years has been concerned with film, not television. Without a strong and well-articulated body of theoretical criticism, work in the applied semiotic analysis of television texts must remain tentative.

Nevertheless, a great deal is possible, and if you can avoid extremism in your analyses of signifying systems in texts, you can produce critical readings of considerable value and utility. You have enough theory to get started, and applied semiotic analyses are likely to lead to advanced in critical theory.

❖ A CHECKLIST FOR SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF TELEVISION

I suggest below some of the questions you should address in undertaking a semiotic analysis of a television program. I have concentrated on narratives in this chapter, but much of what I have discussed is applicable to all kinds of programs.

- Isolate and analyze the important signs in your text.
 - What are the important signifiers and what do they signify?
 - What is the system that gives these signs meaning?
 - What codes can be found?
 - What ideological and sociological matters are involved?
- What is the paradigmatic structure of the text?
 - What is the central opposition in the text?
 - What paired opposites fit under the various categories?
 - Do these oppositions have any psychological or social import?
- What is the syntagmatic structure of the text?
 - Which of Propp's functions can be applied to the text?
 - How does the sequential arrangement of elements affect meaning?
 - Are there formulaic aspects that have shaped the text?



36 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

- How does the medium of television affect the text?
 - What kinds of shots, camera angles, and editing techniques are used?
 - How are lighting, color, music, and sound used to give meaning to signs?
- What contributions have theorists made that can be applied?
 - What have theorists in semiotics written that can be adapted to your analysis of television?
 - What have media theorists written that can be applied to semiotic analysis?

I hope that the contents of this chapter have given you a sense of the semiotic approach and will enable you to apply this fascinating—and powerful—analytic tool. You can apply semiotics to television, film, the comics, advertisements, architecture, medical diseases, artifacts, objects, formulas, conventions, organizations, friends, enemies, and just about anything else in which communication is important—and in which there is signification.

❖ STUDY QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Contrast the work of Peirce and Saussure on the nature of signs.
2. Discuss the following concepts: synchronic/diachronic, syntagmatic/paradigmatic, language/speaking, metaphor/metonymy, elaborated/restricted codes.
3. Explain, in detail, Propp's theory. Discuss his ideas about "functions" in narrative texts.
4. What significance does binary opposition have? What does it mean to say that concepts are "purely differential"?
5. What are codes? Why are they important?
6. Discuss the assertions in this chapter concerning how camera shots in television and film function as signs.
7. What are the differences between elaborated and restricted codes?
8. What criticisms can be made of semiotic analysis?

❖ ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

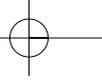
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (Michael Holquist, Ed.; Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press. This volume consists of four essays on literary theory, with a focus on the novel. After years of obscurity, Bakhtin has been "discovered," and his ideas have become extremely influential, especially his notions of "dialogism," discussed in this chapter, and of "carnival," discussed in his book on Rabelais.
- Barthes, Roland. (1970). *Writing degree zero and elements of semiology* (A. Lavers & C. Smith, Trans.). Boston: Beacon. Barthes addresses the basic concepts used in semiotic analysis and makes reference to some of the work he has done on food, fashion, furniture, and automobiles.
- Barthes, Roland. (1972). *Mythologies*. New York: Hill & Wang. This volume is a collection of short essays on everyday-life topics, such as wrestling, soap powders, margarine, and steak and chips, and a long essay on semiotic aspects of myth. This is a fascinating book and one of the most interesting examples of applied semiotic analysis available.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. (1997). *Bloom's morning: Coffee, comforters, and the hidden meaning of everyday life*. Boulder, CO: Westview. This book takes an everyman named Bloom (after the hero of Joyce's *Ulysses*) and analyzes the semiotic significance of every object he uses and everything he does from the moment he is awakened by his radio alarm clock to the time he has breakfast. The 35 short essays on Bloom's morning are preceded by a discussion of everyday life, and the book ends with a chapter titled "Myth, Culture, and Everyday Life." The book is illustrated with more than 35 drawings by the author.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. (1997). *Seeing is believing: An introduction to visual communication* (2nd ed.). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield. This book functions as a primer to help readers become visually literate. Subjects covered include basic elements of visual communication; photography, film, television, comics, and cartoons; typography; and new technologies related to visual communication.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. (1998). *Signs in contemporary culture: An introduction to semiotics* (2nd ed.). Salem, WI: Sheffield. This book is intended for people who have no familiarity with semiotic thought. It offers an exploration of the basic concepts of semiotic theory, along with applications of these concepts to various aspects of contemporary society. Each chapter contains both discussion and application of a semiotic concept.
- Coward, Rosalind, & Ellis, John. (1977). *Language and materialism: Developments in semiology and the theory of the subject*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. This is an important theoretical work that deals with semiotics and its relation to Marxism, the work of French post-Freudian Lacan, and other topics.



38 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

- Culler, Jonathan. (1976). *Structuralist poetics: Structuralism, linguistics and the study of literature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Culler provides an excellent discussion of the basic principles of semiotic analysis and application to literature. Another book by Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure* (in the Penguin Modern Masters series), is also highly recommended.
- Danesi, Marcel. (2002). *Understanding media semiotics*. London: Arnold. Danesi, who is the director of the Program on Semiotics and Communication Theory at the University of Toronto, uses insights from semiotic theory to deal with topics such as print and audio media, film, television, the computer, the Internet, and advertising.
- Eco, Umberto. (1976). *A theory of semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. This book contains an important theoretical analysis of semiotics that deals with its range of applications; it is an advanced text for readers with a good background in the subject. See also Eco's *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Indiana University Press, 1979).
- Fiske, John, & Hartley, John. (1978). *Reading television*. London: Methuen. This is one of the most useful applications of semiotic theory to television to be found. The authors devote a good deal of attention to codes and to specific texts.
- Goldman, Robert, & Papson, Stephen. (1996). *Sign wars: The cluttered landscapes of advertising*. New York: Guilford. Using semiotics and other methods of cultural criticism, the authors "decode" advertising in general and various commercials and ad campaigns in particular. They also discuss, from a critical perspective, advertising's role in U.S. culture and society.
- Gottdiener, Mark. (1995). *Postmodern semiotics: Material culture and the forms of postmodern life*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. Gottdiener is a sociologist who uses semiotic analysis (among other things) to analyze shopping malls, Disneyland, and postmodern architecture. The first part of the book is devoted to theoretical concerns (and is complicated and very sophisticated); the second part addresses cultural studies and sociosemiotics.
- Guiraud, Pierre. (1975). *Semiology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. This is a very brief but interesting explication of semiotic principles, originally published in the French "Que sais-je?" series. It focuses on the functions of media, signification, and codes.
- Hall, Stuart. (Ed.). (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage. This book, edited by Stuart Hall, contains his two long essays "The Work of Representation" and "The Spectacle of the 'Other'" as well as essays by other authors, including Sean Nixon's "Exhibiting Masculinity" and Christine Gledhill's "Genre to Gender: The Case of Soap Opera."
- Leach, Edmund. (1970). *Claude Lévi-Strauss*. New York: Viking. This book represents one of the more successful attempts to make Lévi-Strauss's work

- understandable to the general reader. It includes some biographical material as well as chapters on myth, kinship, and symbolism.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. (1967). *Structural anthropology*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday. This volume is a collection of essays on language, kinship, social organization, magic, religion, and art by the distinguished French anthropologist, an original mind and a great literary stylist.
- Lotman, Jurij (Yuri) M. (1976). *Semiotics of cinema* (Mark E. Suino, Trans.). Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Contributions. This book is an application of semiotics to cinema that deals with narration, montage, plot, acting, and other related topics. Lotman is identified with the Tartu school of Russian semiotics and applies its principles to art and culture. Another of Lotman's books, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, has also been published by Michigan Slavic Contributions (located at the University of Michigan).
- Propp, Vladimir. (1968). *Morphology of the folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press. This classic "formalist" analysis of fairy tales, originally published in 1928, has implications for the analysis of all kinds of other mass-mediated culture.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. (1966). *A course in general linguistics* (W. Baskin, Trans.). New York: McGraw-Hill. This book, originally published in 1915, is one of the central documents in semiotic analysis and the source of many of the concepts used in the field.
- Scholes, Robert. (1974). *Structuralism in literature*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. This book provides an introduction to structuralism, with a focus on the analysis of literary texts but with obvious implications for other kinds of texts. The ideas of such thinkers as Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, Jolles, Souriau, Propp, and Barthes are presented.
- Sebeok, Thomas A. (Ed.). (1977). *A perfusion of signs*. (1978). *Sight, sound and sense*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. These two volumes edited by Sebeok are important collections of applied semiotic theory. The topics addressed include clowns, medicine, faces, religion, nonsense, architecture, music, and culture.
- Solomon, Jack. (1988). *The signs of our times: The secret meanings of everyday life*. New York: Harper & Row. This book presents a fascinating and perceptive application of semiotic analysis to everything from advertising, toys, and architecture to television, food, and fashion. It has an excellent concluding chapter on postmodernist art forms such as MTV and postmodernist works such as the film *Koyaanisqatsi*.
- Wright, Will. (1975). *Sixguns and society: A structural study of the western*. Berkeley: University of California Press. This is an ingenious application of the ideas of Lévi-Strauss, Propp, and others to the western.



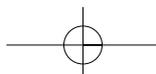
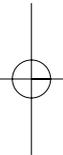
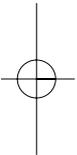
40 TECHNIQUES OF INTERPRETATION

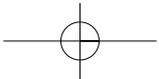
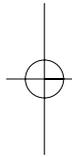
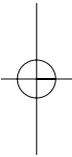
❖ NOTES

1. For example, consider the difference order makes in the following two phrases, both of which contain the same words: "My husband was late . . ." and "My late husband was . . ."

2. Space constraints do not permit me to dwell any longer on Lévi-Strauss. Readers interested in pursuing this subject are referred to the annotated bibliography that accompanies this chapter for works by and about this author.

3. For an explication of these matters, see Berger (1976a).







Marxist thought is one of the most powerful and suggestive ways available to the media analyst for analyzing society and its institutions. This chapter deals with such fundamental principles of Marxist analysis as alienation, materialism, false consciousness, class conflict, and hegemony—concepts that can be applied to media and can help us understand the ways media function. Particular attention is paid to the role of advertising in creating consumer lust, and some cautions are offered about the danger of being doctrinaire.