

Analysing Media Texts

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1 Introduction: the railway model of communication

This chapter aims to explain the important theory of communication called semiotics. Along the way it introduces key concepts that you will encounter when using semiotic theory, and shows how these can be applied in the analysis of a wide variety of media texts, from single words to television news reports and films. Semiotics, as we shall see, is an important topic in its own right, but it is also extremely helpful to know about because it underpins other approaches to textual analysis, including the ones discussed in later chapters in this book.

Most people who have gone through elementary school will be familiar with the simple, basic model of communication: SENDER – MESSAGE – RECEIVER. ‘Communication’ is what goes on when a ‘sender’ sends a ‘message’ to a ‘receiver’. This *linear model* contains the three most important elements in all forms of communication. It also indicates the *direction* of the process. It is logically valid, but it is very simple. One could call it the railway model of communication. The railway is, as we all know, also a way of communicating.

When a place is said to have ‘good communications’ it does not necessarily mean that people there discuss things in an agreeable or meaningful way; it means that the place is well connected to other places by way of roads, railways, flights or ferries. This simple, linear model of communication actually compares the communication of writing, sound and pictures to the transportation of a parcel by rail. The parcel that someone wraps and posts will usually arrive safely and unchanged to the addressee, who will know exactly what to do with the contents.

However, this is not necessarily the case when the media do the transporting and when the parcels are various types of texts. In fact most of the time the media do not communicate simple, unambiguous ‘information’ such as ‘the time is now 6.30 p.m.’ Such messages can easily be transformed into ‘yes’ or ‘no’ types of questions: they are either true or false. But what is the meaning of the little video vignette that opens the main newscast every evening? When Tony Blair or George W. Bush appear on the television screen, do their pictures mean the same to all viewers? What about the direct, interpersonal communication between people in everyday life? Even the most common of sentences, such as ‘the weather is pretty good today’ or ‘I love you when you are like this’ can be more or less enigmatic depending on how they are expressed.

Both interpersonal and media communication are therefore a lot more complicated than the transport of parcels by railway. As a consequence, we need a more complex understanding of what goes on. Of course, in everyday life we do feel we understand most of what is said both in the

media and among people we meet. The present chapter addresses this paradox. It shows how both the complexity and the apparent obviousness of communication can be at least partially explained by a *theory of signs*, or *semiotics* (from the Greek *semeion*, sign).

We begin, in Section 2, by examining the way in which signs circulate in everyday life. Through immersion in culture, humans have come to have a sophisticated understanding of signs, whether in language, music or visual images. This cultural knowledge takes the form of sets of codes (or rules) according to which particular signifiers (for example, the word 'dog') are associated with particular signifieds (in this example, the concept of dog). In Section 3 we focus on language, which is what semiotics was first developed to explain. We see how Saussure treated language as a sign system and argued that, in language, words gain their meaning from their relationship to and difference from each other rather than by any intrinsic relationship to the thing for which they are a sign. So, in language, as in other sign systems, meaning is constituted by difference.

So, for example, the word 'dog' means dog because of its unique arrangement of sounds. If we make a small difference, and substitute a 'b' sound for the 'd' sound, then the meaning changes completely: 'dog' becomes 'bog' and a whole new meaning is created. Section 4, then, further examines the way in which difference within sign systems is organised – namely along two dimensions, the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic. Again, language is the model here, and yet again the same basic principles can be applied to other kinds of sign such as visual images.

In Section 5 we switch to a slightly different approach, the semiotics of C.S. Peirce. Peirce distinguishes between three types of sign and we examine each of these, taking photography as a case study. The apparent immediacy of a photograph (at first sight it seems to carry its message to us just like a train) actually raises important questions about how signs work, and how far they can be said to represent reality. These issues are followed up in Section 6 in which we examine how different semiotic systems work together. In newspapers, for example, captions next to photographs 'anchor' the photographs, cueing us to a specific meaning, which might not have been apparent in the case of the image on its own (see also **Bonner 2005**, especially Figure 2.1). Finally, in Section 7, we look at the way in which semiotics can open up questions of interpretation, how it is that different people can interpret signs differently and how ambiguity is virtually 'built into' media texts of all kinds.

A last word before the chapter gets under way: semiotics can seem quite difficult if you haven't come across the subject before. But the key point to remember is that, although it involves quite a radical way of

thinking about texts and meaning, it is not complicated. You just have to keep your mind open to some new concepts, and put to one side (for the time being) certain common-sense notions of how meaning is made.

2 The cultural competence of everyday life: signs and codes

Activity 1.1

Imagine turning on the television and the first thing you see are the opening credits of a news bulletin. What makes you think this is the news? ■ ■ ■

Most readers will spend about one second deciding it is a news programme. In the case of the *BBC Ten O'Clock News* (see Figure 1.1), the animated graphic shows a view of the world surrounded by swirling rings of red and thin, white circles. This could, perhaps, be the opening sequence in a science film, or a programme about world travel. But the image is strangely abstract, which does not fit with either of these. What immediately cues us to the fact that we are watching the news is not a visual factor, but the soundtrack. Its most prominent aspects are a regular ringing tone, related to the chimes of a clock, and a drum tattoo of a rather military character. This is a kind of music we have learned to associate with matters of importance, and in particular that type of



Figure 1.1 The opening credits of the *BBC Ten O'Clock News* use signs that, without any further explanation, tell us a great deal about what to expect from the programme
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programme called the news, which is presented promptly on the hour or fraction of the hour. Hearing the music, then, points us strongly in the direction of interpreting what is on the screen: not science fiction, not travel – but the *news*.

In just a second or two, then, reasonably competent film and television viewers will have ‘read’ what sort of programme this is from the picture and the sound. It is worth mentioning that the word for ‘read’ in German, *lesen*, and in French, *lire*, both are etymologically (‘etymology’ – the history of words) derived from the Latin *legere*, meaning the putting together of diverse elements to form a new whole. This is basically what we do when we read – we put together letters to form words, and words to form more or less meaningful sentences. But as we have just seen, a similar process takes place with pictures and sounds. We see a graphic representation of the world and abstract shapes around it. We link this to a notion of ‘important world affairs’. We hear a soundtrack with a clock-like chime and a ‘military’ drum pattern. We link this to the idea of urgency and timeliness. Of course, these elements can mean different things on their own, but brought together they represent (because we have learned this over time) a factual genre, called the news.

Study note You will find a video clip that shows the opening credits of BBC Ten O’Clock News in the Viewing Room on the DVD-ROM, Analysing Media Texts. You can go to the Viewing Room at any time you wish to view this and other clips discussed throughout the book.

Each of these visual and sound elements can thus be said to function as ‘signs’. According to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), who coined the term ‘semiology’, a sign consists of a *material signifier* and an *immaterial signified*. (It is worth noting that the term ‘semiotics’ is now used more frequently than ‘semiology’ – see Section 5.) The signifier can thus be dots, lines, shapes, sound waves or another physical, concrete entity, which we link to or associate with some idea or notion. This idea is the signified. It is notable that we hardly ever stop to think about such associative connections, since they are established in accordance with a ‘code’ or rule that we learned long ago. These rules are not in any book of law. They are *conventions*, that is to say ‘agreements’ established by way of habit in a community of users of the same language, the same sorts of pictures, music, and so on. *A code is a convention that associates a signifier with a certain signified or meaning.*

2.1 The relations between signifiers and signifieds: arbitrariness and motivation

As a consequence of being a linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure was primarily interested in speech and writing; that is, in verbal language rather than visual signs. One of the things that characterises verbal

language in comparison to pictures is that the relation between signifiers and signifieds is accidental or *arbitrary*. There is nothing about actual dogs that determines that the sound 'dog' is used to refer to them. This is why the animal in question can be called *Hund* in German and *chien* in French: same animal, different words. Some small children may, at pre-school age, wonder why 'hill' is not called 'butter' and why the plants we climb are called 'trees' and not 'ball'. The simple answer, of course, is that this is just the way it is. It is something speakers of English somehow agreed upon (established a convention on) a very, very long time ago. There is in principle nothing to prevent us from shifting to call cats 'dogs' and dogs 'cats' as of tomorrow. ('But wouldn't it confuse the animals?', the hero of David Lodge's novel *Small World* (Lodge, 1985) asked when he heard the previous sentence concluding a brief introduction to semiological thinking.)

Visual signs are different. If on the television screen we see some shape that looks like a dog, we might say that what we see is a signifier that refers to the signified 'dog'. This visual sign has a very specific meaning, that of the particular dog we see. In contrast, the signifier 'dog' in the sentence 'the dog came running across the lawn' at least initially has no meaning other than a general 'dogness' attached to it: no particular breed and certainly no name. So, in language the meaning is general, while the visual dog sign on the screen is far more specific. Certainly that is the case as long as we are talking about a photographic sign or a 'realistic' drawing; a dog here will always be a collie (Lassie, perhaps?) or a German shepherd (could it be Rin-Tin-Tin?) or some other breed. Now, although this might at first suggest that photographs and realistic drawings are uncoded, that they are simply copies of things, certain media theorists would argue that they are indeed coded signs. Photographs and realistic drawings are also shaped, the argument goes, in accordance with the conventions that we follow; that is, in accordance with certain rules for the interpretation of visual or other sensory impressions that we routinely use in everyday life, and that may not be shared by all cultures. For example, a photograph of a dog might not be known in cultures where the 'dog' phenomenon is unknown – wherever that may be. As soon as one leaves photography and the most 'realistic' of drawings and paintings, it becomes even clearer that visual signs are based on codes, just as much as language is.

Consider, for example, a circle with scattered lines stretching outwards around it. This is a conventional representation or sign for the sun. We accept that the figure means 'sun' in children's drawings, for instance, even if the sun does not actually look like that when one looks at it in the sky. The same applies to all simple drawings and other stylised, more or less abstract visual forms, such as road signs and the signs on the doors of public toilets that are to inform us whether

they are intended for men or women. The latter do not resemble real men and women very much, but we recognise them precisely as conventional signs for the sexes that are also sort of human-like shapes and thus partly motivated. By 'motivated' we mean simply that there is some aspect or aspects of the signifier which correspond to the signified (see Figure 1.2).

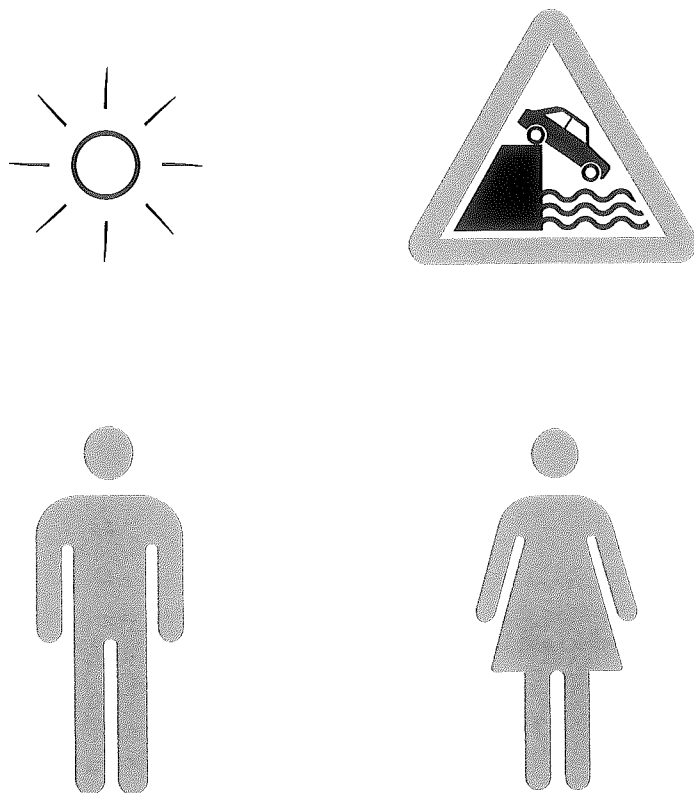


Figure 1.2 Schematic drawings of the sun, a road sign, and symbols for men and women as used on public toilets. Although it is possible to see these signifiers as conventional (the shape of the man and woman is not totally realistic), there is also a motivational aspect to them (they are more or less the shape of men and women)

The relations between signifier and signifieds in signs can, in other words, be *more or less conventional*, *more or less motivated* – from the totally arbitrary and consequently conventional in verbal language to the minimally arbitrary or clearly motivated in straightforward photography. We will return to this in a slightly different context below.

Study note To help your understanding of the arbitrary–motivated distinction, work through the first of the Semiotics Activities in the Chapter Activities area of the DVD-ROM, Analysing Media Texts, which focuses on this issue.

2.2 The two steps of signification: denotation and connotation

You may have noticed that, in our description of the video still from the opening credits of the *BBC News At Ten O'Clock* above, we tried to signal how an audience in effect perceives what the screen shows – the signifiers – in two steps. We first identify the world, and we then link or associate this phenomenon with important events: global significance or the like. We first see that the world is a graphic image, and then we link or associate this with the news. Such a sequence is, however, not really noticeable in real life. It is primarily an *analytical, logical or theoretical distinction* between two sorts of signification; in reality we perceive both meanings more or less simultaneously. The first of the two meanings, the immediate and direct one, is in the semiological theoretical tradition based on Saussure's work, called *denotation*; the second, 'indirect' meaning is called *connotation*. Con-notation (cf. *chili con carne* – literally, chili *with* meat) is a 'with-meaning', an additional meaning that is clinging to the first.

The scholar who developed these concepts was the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965) who, between the First and Second World Wars, further developed the 'structural linguistics' that Saussure was trying to establish as a foundation for a more general semiology. This general semiology would study 'the life of signs within society', as Saussure once put it (Saussure, 1974, p.16). The French literary scholar and cultural critic Roland Barthes (1915–1980) was then important in showing how the distinction between denotation and connotation was central in all kinds of media texts, from films to newspaper advertisements. Crucially, it was Barthes who began to apply the semiological approach to the analysis of visual images.

An important part of the reason why the distinction between denotation and connotation has been developed, is the fact that the meanings or signifieds of signs tend to change with time and place. They are not absolutely and finally fixed in their meaning once and for all. The same signifier can mean different things for different people at different times in different locations. Signs that once had positive connotations, for example, can at a later time have negative connotations. Certain symbols related to the Vikings were, for instance, commonly regarded as having positive meanings 'attached' to them in the Scandinavian countries in the 1920s. However, since Nazi organisations used them before and during the Second World War, it is now impossible to see them without having the connotation 'Nazi' present at the same time (see Figure 1.3). From a totally different area, one could think of how the 'glamrock' star Gary Glitter stood (in his platform heels, see Figure 1.4 a) for a sort of 1970s innocence – until he was convicted of downloading child pornography (see Figure 1.4b). Or one could consider how the traditional imagery of trade union solidarity (muscular men and heavy industry) may

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Figure 1
Source:

appear in a less positive light after the impact of feminism, Thatcherism and the so-called new economy. In fashion, one can very easily notice such changes in connotations over time. Clothes, shoes and haircuts that once connoted an attractive lifestyle now signify something backwards, 'hick' or stupid. Platform shoes were the thing to wear in the 1970s, looked incredibly naff for almost 20 years and then returned in the late 1990s as the preferred footwear for millions of young women.

We can also illustrate the significance of the distinction between denotation and connotation by looking at the visual signs that represent (signify) certain nation states. Take the 'American Eagle' (see Figure 1.5). One might wonder why the land of the prairie and the Wild West would not instead choose a cow or a horse as its animal. Eagles are not commonly seen where most Americans now live, while dogs and cats are ubiquitous. The choice of the eagle was, of course, made for certain historical reasons, similar to those that also made an eagle a visual symbol of Germany: the eagle is a bird that connotes pride, power – and a willingness to use violence if necessary in order to defend and feed itself. It is a predator. A cow is not. At a first semiotic level the figure of the eagle is a *motivated*, visual sign for a particular kind of bird – it *denotes* the kind of

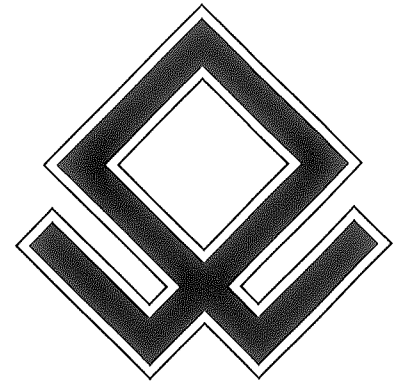
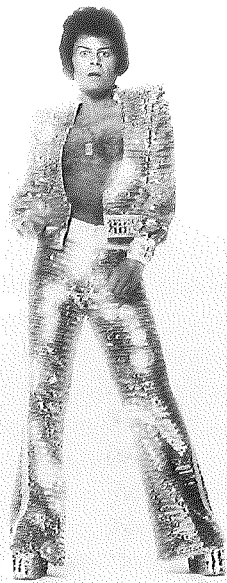


Figure 1.3 This rune is an ancient Viking symbol that has, in more recent years, been appropriated by the Nazis. The overriding connotation of this image now is of fascism, rather than the original Viking associations with the god Odin



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Figure 1.4 Gary Glitter (a) in his heyday and (b) after his arrest for possession of child pornography

Source: (a) Redferns and International Photos (b) Associated Press



Figure 1.5 The 'American Eagle' connotes pride, power and the propensity to use violence to defend and feed itself

Source: Corbis

bird we know as an eagle. At a second semiotic level the figure of the eagle *connotes* pride and power (and, to some, violence). In this way it can be used as an *arbitrary* or conventional symbol for the USA.

2.3 Varieties of meaning: connotational codes and cultural differences

The notion of connotative meanings demonstrates how the semiology developed by Saussure, Hjelmslev and others has been able to deal with the fact that the meanings of signs can vary according to the contexts in which they appear. That is to say, meanings are determined by the place, time and purpose of communication, and by the specificity of both senders and receivers – who it is that is sending and receiving. Signs of all sorts are always used and perceived in concrete historical, social and cultural situations and, even if most denotative meanings are more or less constant, the variation of connotative meanings is of great importance to all sorts of communication. Connotative meanings are, just as the denotative meanings, regulated by codes; in other words, the conventions that link signifiers to signifieds. However, in the case of connotation, codes are likely to be more fluid, more rapidly changing. The notion of

'code' is therefore crucial to semiology, since it is tied to certain cultural communities that share the conventions in question. *Culture* can, at least in this context, simply be defined as a *community of codes*. If one moves to a new country, it will take quite a while to get to know all the local codes, even if one may claim to 'understand the language'. Certain words, expressions, images and objects have a significance of which newcomers will be unaware. Even if one has moved to a culturally closely related country – say, from England to the USA or Canada, or from one Scandinavian country to another – one will soon notice that there are songs, names, stories and places one's new friends and neighbours know well that one has never heard of. Words one thought were quite innocent actually may cause embarrassment, perhaps because they somehow have acquired politically incorrect meanings. Thus, late-night conversations in bars or at parties may be problematic or even tiresome to follow.

Codes, and the related concept of culture, thus have important consequences not least for all sorts of international communication, both interpersonal and through mass media. Connotative codes that are peculiar to one culture can, for instance, make it hard to understand what goes on in an imported television serial. In the 1980s the Danish researcher Kim Schröder (1988) interviewed groups of US and Danish viewers about the prime time soap opera *Dynasty* after screening a particular episode for them. He asked his interviewees to recount, among other things, the events of that episode, in which the show's 'bitch', Alexis (played by Joan Collins), who spoke with a British accent, was threatened with the line '*remember the Boston Tea Party!*' A middle-aged Danish couple remembered that there was talk about some tea party in the episode, but could not really recall that there had been any tea parties in either this episode or any other episode they had seen. So they just supposed that such an event had taken place, possibly in an episode they had missed. In other words, they lost a point that was certainly picked up by all US viewers and probably by most British as well. The Boston Tea Party was, of course, the beginning of the American War of Independence and consisted of Americans dumping a shipload of British tea into the Boston harbour. In order to understand that the line was a threat, without resorting to the tone of voice or facial expressions, one would have to know this historical reference and thus know that it connotes war against the British. One would also have to perceive that Alexis spoke with a British accent (of a sort that connotes arrogant upper classes). The Danish couple could not make these connections, and neither could most of *Dynasty's* audiences in over 90 countries.

Knowledge of codes is often, as in this example, directly tied to factual knowledge. But it is also a vaguer sort of knowledge of conventional meanings in a certain culture. Such a knowledge depends on *familiarity* that is established through living within the culture. In

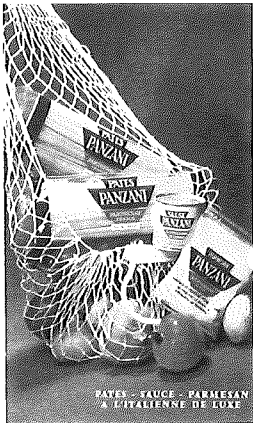


Figure 1.6 Roland Barthes demonstrated that non-Italians have knowledge of a different set of codes for pasta products from those with which Italians themselves are familiar

Source: Barthes, 1977/1964, plate VXII

a now classic analysis of a magazine advertisement for pasta products, Roland Barthes demonstrated how different elements in the advertisement had 'Italianness' as a shared connotation (see Figure 1.6). Barthes also pointed out how an apprehension of these signs for 'Italianness' would be dependent upon a previously established knowledge of, or familiarity with, certain tourist clichés that Italians (or Chinese, or Senegalese) do not necessarily have themselves (Barthes 1977/1964).

3 How signs gain their meaning: language as a system of differences

We can see the connections between semiology's understanding of the sign on the one hand, and notions of culture and cultural differences on the other, if we have a closer look at Saussure's theory of how signs in language actually acquire their meaning. Saussure argued that there is an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified of a sign, as evidenced in the fact that different languages have very different words for the same phenomenon.

The *signifieds* divide the world into categories of 'content'. These categories, or ideas of how the world is ordered, are not always dictated by the physical realities themselves; they are often culturally specific. For instance, the colour category 'brown' does not exist in certain cultures, and the colour that we now call 'orange' did not exist a few hundred years ago. Firstly, we had the fruit 'orange', and then a couple of centuries ago its name began to be applied to a particular part of the colour spectrum, somewhere between 'yellow' and 'red'. Of course, that part of the spectrum had always existed. What changed was the fact that people began to name it and, in doing so, started to recognise it as a colour in its own right.

Along similar lines we can note that the English language has fewer words for 'snow' than the language of Inuit ('Eskimos'), while Arabic may have a particularly well-developed set of terms for camels. These are all examples of how the signifieds are to some extent culturally determined, and relatively 'arbitrarily' organised. Anthropologists are very familiar with such differences, which may even be so many and fundamental that different languages imply significantly different perceptions of the world and our existence in it.

In the 1950s the anthropologist Whorf, in co-operation with his mentor Edward Sapir, developed what is known as the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* or *Whorf's hypothesis of linguistic relativity* (Whorf, 1956). This hypothesis is precisely about the close connections between the way in which a language is organised and how the users of this language perceive or experience the world. The empirical basis for the hypothesis was primarily in Whorf's studies of the language of the Native American tribe

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the *Hopi*. This language is grammatically extremely different from European languages. It has almost no nouns, and verbs are inflected in very different ways. Such radical differences obviously make it difficult to translate from one culture to another.

3.1 How meaning is constituted through difference

Saussure argued that, since the meaning (or the signified) of a verbal sign (such as the colour 'orange') does not spring from the 'thing' (the orange colour) itself, it has to be explained as resulting from the principle that *the sign acquires its meaning through its relations to other signs* (Saussure, 1974, pp.114–20). The meaning of the verbal sign 'orange' is determined by its relations to 'red', 'yellow', 'brown', etc. The signified of a verbal sign is, in other words, determined by the opposition of its signifier to or difference from other verbal signifiers. *Language is a system of differences*. What is 'light' is determined by what is 'dark', what is 'hot' by what is 'cold'. This could be formulated as the principle that *meaning is constituted by difference*. At the level of the signifier in verbal language one can think of the way in which every word is composed of sounds that differentiate meanings, so-called phonemes. A person who lisps is fully understandable in English, but there may well be languages where a lisping 's' and a straight 's' may give otherwise similar words different meanings. To find out whether two sounds are phonemes, linguists will use a so-called permutation test. The sounds signified by 'b' and 'p' are closely related, but the difference between them is crucially important in English. One can demonstrate that by replacing the 'b' in *bass* with a 'p'. 'Pass' means something other than 'bass' and hence 'b' and 'p' are meaning-differentiating phonemes, or basic sound units, in English.

In more philosophical terms, *the role of difference in our way of thinking* has attracted a lot of attention, particularly within media and cultural studies, in the last couple of decades. Here the notion of *difference* has been central to discussions of identity (see Woodward, 1997). Since we tend to think in terms of differences, understood as *oppositions*, we also immediately think in categories. These categories tend to render quite difficult the imagining of gradual transitions, in-between things or states and any interconnections between the two poles of an opposition. The fundamental example is the opposition between male and female, which, through enormous networks of connotations, is used to define anything from sexual preferences to clothes, cars, behaviour and ways of thinking. Another example could be the racial opposition between 'black' and 'white'. 'Black' here tends to cover everything that is not absolutely 'white', thus radically polarising and simplifying an enormous variety of skin colours and other so-called 'racial' attributes (see Bennett, 2005, Section 5).

Reading 1.1 Activity

Signification through difference can also work in a more subtle way. For an example of semiotic interpretation that shows this read the following extract from Roland Barthes, 'The face of Garbo'. In it Barthes discusses the face of the Swedish actress and Hollywood star, Greta Garbo. Figure 1.7 is a still photograph from her film, *Queen Christina* (USA, dir. Mamoulian, 1933), which Barthes discusses.

Bearing in mind the discussion above of denotation, connotation and signification as a system of difference, consider the following questions and make notes as you do so:

- What, according to Barthes, does the whiteness of Garbo's face signify?
- Can you identify any binary oppositions to which Barthes might be pointing?

Reading 1.1

Roland Barthes, 'The face of Garbo'

Garbo still belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost oneself in a human image as one would in a philtre, when the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh, which could be neither reached nor renounced. A few years earlier the face of Valentino was causing suicides; that of Garbo still partakes of the same rule of Courtly Love, where the flesh gives rise to mystical feelings of perdition.

It is indeed an admirable face-object. In *Queen Christina*, a film which has again been shown in Paris in the last few years, the make-up has the snowy thickness of a mask: it is not a painted face, but one set in plaster, protected by the surface of the colour, not by its lineaments. Amid all this snow at once fragile and compact, the eyes alone, black like strange soft flesh, but not in the least expressive, are two faintly tremulous wounds. In spite of its extreme beauty, this face, not drawn but sculpted in something smooth and friable, that is, at once perfect and ephemeral, comes to resemble the flour-white complexion of Charlie Chaplin, the dark vegetation of his eyes, his totem-like countenance.

Now the temptation of the absolute mask (the mask of antiquity, for instance) perhaps implies less the theme of the secret (as is the case with Italian half mask) than that of an archetype of the human face. Garbo offered to one's gaze a sort of Platonic Idea of the human creature, which explains why her face is almost sexually

undefined, without however leaving one in doubt. It is true that this film (in which Queen Christina is by turns a woman and a young cavalier) lends itself to this lack of differentiation; but Garbo does not perform in it any feat of transvestism; she is always herself, and carries without pretence, under her crown or her wide-brimmed hats, the same snowy solitary face. The name given to her, *the Divine*, probably aimed to convey less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person, descended from a heaven where all things are formed and perfected in the clearest light. She herself knew this: how many actresses have consented to let the crowd see the ominous maturing of their beauty. Not she, however; the essence was not to be degraded, her face was not to have any reality except that of its perfection, which was intellectual even more than formal. The Essence became gradually obscured, progressively veiled with dark glasses, broad hats and exiles: but it never deteriorated.



Figure 1.7 Greta Garbo in Queen Christina (USA, 1933)

Source: Kobal

Reading source

Source: Barthes, 1973, pp.62–3 ■ ■ ■

The piece was first published as one of a series of newspaper articles in the 1950s. These inaugurated a new kind of criticism of popular culture. Here, for example, by approaching the face of Garbo as a semiotic structure, Barthes was able to show the complexity and richness of Hollywood cinema, a phenomenon that most intellectuals at the time considered to be worthless mass culture. His ‘cool’, analytical approach pays close attention to the text, yet at the same time is strangely distant. There is no question of trying to understand the characters Garbo plays, or even empathising with a notionally real Garbo. Instead her cinematic image is read as a system of difference, one that yields a mythical, almost religious meaning of ‘human perfection’. No doubt you will have identified aspects of the system: white versus black, male versus female (this difference, Barthes suggests, is actually suppressed in Garbo), and perfection versus degradation.

4 Syntagms and paradigms

Clearly, then, difference is critical for semiology. Its impact as an organising principle in social life extends all the way from letter and word up to the level of large-scale texts, and indeed questions of cultural and political difference. However, the theory of semiology does not only treat

difference in terms of the kinds of binary oppositions we have been looking at – important as these are. It further proposes that difference is organised along two dimensions, those of the syntagm and the paradigm.

A syntagm is normally the same as a sentence, but one may also think of it as something more extended, as referring to the *linear dimension of a text*, its ‘sequenciality’. Grammar lessons at school might have taught you that different languages have different patterns in which correct sentences are made. For example, in the place reserved for the subject of the sentence, one must place nouns, not verbs. (So, in English, we say ‘the cat sat on the mat’, or we could say ‘the man sat on the mat’ but we would never say ‘ran sat on the mat’.) This gives us wide, but not unlimited, sets of possibilities when constructing sentences. The categories from which we make choices when filling the designated places in the sentence pattern, can then be called *paradigms*. There are verb paradigms, adverb paradigms, and so on, that consist of all verbs, all adverbs, and so on, respectively. Paradigms may be thought of as ‘storage shelves’ where one finds and takes out the words one needs to fill certain places in the syntagms.

An example of the relationship between syntagms and paradigms is shown in Figure 1.8. In this figure, syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions correspond, respectively, to ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ axes.

In Figure 1.8 the last noun of the sentence (its object – ‘mat’) has been used as the position at which other possible paradigms might be slotted in. But we could equally well have substituted other verbs for ‘sat’, other prepositions for ‘on’, and other nouns for ‘cat’. In other words, at every link in the chain of this syntagm (as in all syntagms), paradigmatic selection is being carried out.

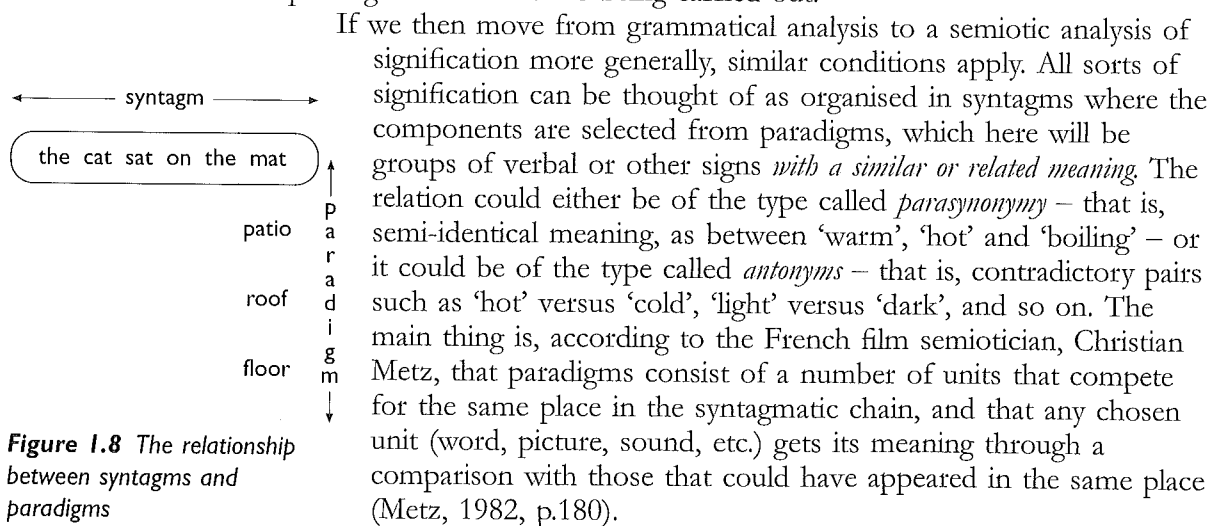


Figure 1.8 The relationship between syntagms and paradigms

If we then move from grammatical analysis to a semiotic analysis of signification more generally, similar conditions apply. All sorts of signification can be thought of as organised in syntagms where the components are selected from paradigms, which here will be groups of verbal or other signs *with a similar or related meaning*. The relation could either be of the type called *paronymy* – that is, semi-identical meaning, as between ‘warm’, ‘hot’ and ‘boiling’ – or it could be of the type called *antonyms* – that is, contradictory pairs such as ‘hot’ versus ‘cold’, ‘light’ versus ‘dark’, and so on. The main thing is, according to the French film semiotician, Christian Metz, that paradigms consist of a number of units that compete for the same place in the syntagmatic chain, and that any chosen unit (word, picture, sound, etc.) gets its meaning through a comparison with those that could have appeared in the same place (Metz, 1982, p.180).

4.1 Some examples of paradigmatic–syntagmatic relationships

The principle of syntagmatic–paradigmatic relations was central to Saussure's idea of language as a system of differences (actually Saussure used the term 'association' rather than paradigm). What is important in media and cultural studies, then, is the extension of this principle to cover *all media and forms of communication* by way of analogy. A stereotypically French example of a syntagm could be the menu at a restaurant. It is ordered in accordance with a culturally specific sequence of various types of dishes that make up a decent meal: starters, main courses, cheeses and desserts. This sequence can be regarded as a culturally specific *syntagmatic code*. If someone orders the courses served in the reverse order, this will be met with raised eyebrows at least. (In the UK, however, the cheese very often comes after the dessert in the menu order in many restaurants and in the specific ritual of port and stilton (cheese) beloved of Oxbridge colleges.) For each element in the syntagmatic chain, each course, there are paradigms from which one makes selections. Not just anything will fit as a starter, and what fits as a starter will not be found in the paradigm of desserts.

Another example could be clothing. There are paradigms for headwear, upper- and lower-body garments, socks and shoes. Wearing knickers as a hat will be a breach of a paradigmatic code – and also of a syntagmatic one. For there are syntagmatic codes for combinations: a tuxedo jacket does not fit with jogging trousers. It is a breach of the code, as is slalom boots worn with a ballroom dress. Such breaches of codes can of course be done, not least in order to draw attention. They may therefore also successfully be used in humour or advertising.

In film and television we might therefore imagine lighting, camera angles, and so on, as selected from 'storage shelves' or paradigms full of more and less adequate alternatives, and every selection will contribute to a meaning which would be changed if other selections were made. So, the idea of paradigms and syntagms can be successfully transferred from language to more visual and conceptual arenas. However, there are problems with this transfer. One problem is that words are *discrete* – that is, clearly separated entities – while selections of filmic elements such as lighting and camera angles will most often be made from continuous scales where the differences will be gradual. Still, the idea that those who make a film or any other text continuously make choices among alternatives that have consequences for the meaning of the final 'syntagm' or product is clearly both sustainable and important.

The paradigmatic dimension of texts is, then, the selection of elements for the places in the syntagmatic chain, and the relations between the selected elements and the alternatives. This is a key to the

theme of a text; that is, what it can be said to be about at a deeper level, and how it treats its subject(s). One can, for example, think of the choice of characters for a fictional story in a particular medium. From the paradigm 'women' one can choose from a variety of possibilities, and the same is of course the case for the paradigms 'men', 'human relations', 'settings', 'conflicts', and so on. The prime-time soap *Dynasty* (which I keep referring to since I wrote a book about it – Gripsrud, 1995) had a couple of female lead characters who were clearly older than probably all other leading ladies in US prime-time television fiction – characters who were around their forties. The show therefore came to thematise women's ageing and the question of what this process is supposed to mean. When action movies have female heroes instead of the usual muscular men, they thematise the notions of femininity in our culture. In both of these examples we are talking about conscious paradigmatic choices made by the producers. The *unconscious choices* may be even more interesting, those that have been done 'automatically', since they will be related to – be indexical signs or symptoms of – norms and understandings that are so ingrained that one does not stop to think about them.

The 'character paradigm' of US soap operas was once described like this by a US critic (see Figure 1.9):

Soap opera people belong for the most part to the socially and professionally successful. They are well-groomed and cleanly limbed. They live in homes with no visible mops or spray cans that yet wait shining and ready for any unexpected caller. At the same time, almost all of soap opera's characters are drawn from the age group that spans the late teens into middle-age. They constitute what might be called the legitimately sexually active portion of the population. And the great majority come from the generation that reaches from the mid-twenties into the mid-forties. That is to say, they suggest a sexuality that has transcended the groping awkwardness of adolescence but that never goes beyond a commerce of bodies which are personable and smooth – even the older men are clean older men.

Porter, 1982, p.126

This description of the code that guides the selection of characters by the writers of US soaps obviously says something about dominant US culture. The UK code tends to provide a paradigm of characters that is

Figure 1.9 (facing page) The differences between US and UK soap opera character paradigms are quite apparent when comparing US and UK soap operas. UK soap operas reveal a code that allows for a wide variety of types of character (a) Nick Cotton from *EastEnders* and (b) Vera Duckworth from *Coronation Street*. US soap operas, however, operate with a code that constrains their choice of characters to 'clean-cut' men and women (c) Bobby Ewing and Jenna Wade from *Dallas* and (d) Brenda Walsh, Kelly Taylor and Donna Martin from *Beverly Hills 90210*. Source: (a) BBC (Nick), (b) Granada (Vera), (c) and (d) Kopal (both)

radically more inclusive in terms of looks, ages and degrees of success in life (see Figure 1.9). Paradigms such as these, and the selections made from within them, can thus often tell us something about underlying, not necessarily acknowledged, features of a society and a culture, or a way of thinking. They become *symptoms*, and a clever textual analyst may be able to formulate a diagnosis. Such analyses are therefore sometimes called *symptomatic readings*. These diagnose not so much the psyche of the individuals who created the text, as the society, culture or milieu of which they are parts and with which they share values and ideas. This issue, of perceiving shared values via textual analysis, is explored further over the course of the next four chapters.

5 The sign according to C.S. Peirce

So far in this chapter we have largely kept to the Saussurian tradition in the theory of signs; that is, semiology. The most frequently used term for the theory of signs these days, however, is *semiotics* (hence the use of this term also in this chapter's title). This term was coined by the American philosopher, physicist and mathematician Charles Saunders Peirce (1839–1914) who, independently of Saussure, had a series of related ideas. His definition of a 'sign' is different from Saussure's and he has other ideas as to the components of the sign. According to Peirce, anything that in some way or other stands for something else in some respect or capacity is a sign. It is thus already at the outset clear that Peirce (unlike Saussure) does not take verbal language as his point of departure. For Peirce, signs are something much more extensive – in fact, *everything is signs*, to the extent that everything means something to us.

Because everything is signs, a semiotics in Peirce's sense will have it that, when we see a horse at a distance of three feet, it is a horse-sign we see. We see forms and colours and may hear sounds and recognise smells that we associate with the meaning 'horse'. If we go over and touch the horse, we will perceive more signs of the same, such as soft hairs over strong muscles, a mane, and so on. If we are still in doubt, we may get some final sign-evidence when the horse kicks our behind. Peirce's semiotics is, in other words, a theory of perception and a theory of knowledge (epistemology) at least as much as it is a theory of communication. It is, moreover, radically pragmatic or context-based, in that it makes the meaning of a sign dependent both on the particular person who encounters it and the situation in which it is encountered: what is a sign for me need not be a sign for you. Thus the distinction between denotation and connotation disappears (see Section 2.2). In Peirce's view *all* signification depends on situation, including what we have been calling denotation – the apparently 'fixed' meaning of a given

sign. This can also be seen if we take a look at a graphic representation of Peirce's model of the components of the sign (see Figure 1.10).

The 'sign' is that which stands for something else, and the 'object' is that for which the sign stands. The interpretant is the signification or meaning that the sign has for someone. A simple, stylised drawing of the sun may be the sign. The object is then the sun we (sometimes) see in the sky. And our thought '[this is] the sun' is the interpretant. ('Interpretant' is derived from the word interpretation, and it does not refer to the interpreter but the interpretation.) An important point here is that the object is not the thing itself, not 'the actual sun'. In line with the example of the horse above, the object is also a sign; that is, certain phenomena (light in the sky, heat) that we interpret as signs of 'the sun'. And not only is the object a sign in its own right, the same goes for the interpretant – the word or term 'sun' in this example. The interpretant may itself result in a new interpretant in a new triangular sign. The sign 'sun' may, for instance, be interpreted, associated with or perceived as 'star', a radically more distant and possibly extinguished sun. The new object will then be 'a star (in the sky)'. The term 'star', the new interpretant, may then by some be taken to mean 'movie star' – and a series of new interpretants is then made possible. Such processes of ever new interpretations or signs are called *unlimited semiosis*. They may be reminiscent of how conversations might develop at more or less festive occasions where various associations made by participants can lead far away from the subject that first was discussed. In media studies it may be easier to think of how literary texts or films are interpreted again and again, including reinterpretations of previous interpretations. In the field of political communication one might think of how terms such as 'environmental' or 'environment friendly' have gone through similar chains of interpretants and signs, *mediated by or produced by the media*.

Peirce's model of the sign, and the idea of 'unlimited semiosis', imply that it is impossible to determine the final and absolute meaning of signs. This way of thinking is highly dynamic; that is, orientated towards the shifts in meanings according to specific situations and a high degree of flexibility in the sign systems that cultures consist in – and that the media produce and mediate. (For a critical perspective on 'unlimited semiosis', see Chapter 5).

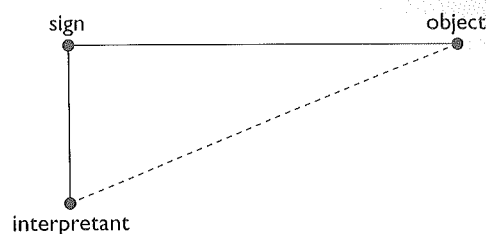


Figure 1.10 Peirce's model of the sign

5.1 Peirce's three kinds of sign – and a discussion of photography's relation to reality

Peirce distinguished between three types of sign (symbol, icon and index). Whether a sign is a symbol, an icon or an index depends upon the logical relation between the sign and that for which it stands. Signs where the relation is *arbitrary* and totally *conventional* (see Section 2.1) are called *symbols*. Verbal language belongs in this category, as do the colours of traffic lights, certain logos and other phenomena for which we must learn a certain code in order to grasp the meaning. The second type of sign is called an *icon* or an iconic sign. These are signs that resemble what they stand for. They are simply pictures, or sculptures; that is, two- or three-dimensional representations of a more or less photographic or 'realistic' type (a photograph of the US President is an iconic sign for the US President). The third and last type of sign is called an *index* or indexical sign. 'Index' is the Latin and English word for the first finger, which is frequently used to point at things, and an indexical sign points at that for which it stands. It does so in the sense that there is a *causal* relation between the sign and that for which it stands. Smoke is an indexical sign that something is burning and snot indicates (is an indexical sign for) a bad cold. The symptoms doctors look for when they are to come up with a diagnosis are indexes of diseases or injuries. The clues, leads or traces that detectives look for are indexical signs for the murderous activities that they are investigating.

These categories can actually become key terms in important theoretical debates with practical consequences. Photographs, for instance, are clearly iconic signs, but whether they are also indexical has been disputed. The dispute concerns photography's status as a medium for objective documentation, a technology that delivers indisputable facts. Photography can be said to be indexical because in a sense it is a pure 'effect' of the light reflected by the object(s) in front of the camera when the picture was taken. Photography is accordingly a purely physical-chemical cause and effect system, untouched by human hands, and consequently an 'objective' representation of whatever was in front of the camera. The argument against this is that the photographer has to make a number of choices, of framing, point of view, lenses, lighting, film speed, etc. – plus all the choices in the darkroom. Put together, all of these choices provide the photographer with so much space for her or his subjectivity that photography is no more indexical than is any drawing.

This sort of scepticism about the objectivity of photography can lead to a quite provocative conclusion when the issue is whether computer-manipulated photographs in the media should be explicitly marked as

such (for example, 'This photograph has been digitally manipulated'). The Danish philosopher and media scholar Sören Kjörup (1993) has, for instance, argued against such a procedure, since it would imply that the public is encouraged to regard analogue (non-digital) photographs as *not* 'manipulated', and therefore as pure and objective documentation. For Kjörup any such implication is misleading. Opponents of this position, however, make the point that in the case of analogue photography it *is* a direct physical-chemical reaction that imprints an image on the light-sensitive film. And they propose that, even if the analogue photographer has manipulative possibilities too, the physical-chemical process involved here means that photography has a documentary potential of a totally different kind than that at stake in digital photography.

The defence of the indexical character of photography is also a defence for prevailing notions of *truth* – the idea that there are certain facts, especially concerning physical reality, that are objective; that is, indisputably correct information about an objective reality that exists independently of those who study it and their approaches to it. According to this view, to present computer-manipulated pictures where the alterations done are not detectable as though they were ordinary photographs, is to tamper with notions of truth that are fundamental to modern science, politics, law and a number of other social and interpersonal domains (for more on debates over the notion of truth see Chapter 5).

This question of whether computer-manipulated photographs should be marked as such in the (journalistic) media is, then, just a small part of a larger discussion on the status of photography and photographic media in general as providers of objective representations of reality. This is obviously of central importance to the question of how we are to regard the footage and still photography that are so integral to television news, current affairs and other documentary programmes. I would for my part suggest that, even if we maintain that photographic representations are indexical signs, this does not have to mean that we believe they deliver totally objective, indisputable renditions of what went on or goes on in front of the camera. There are good reasons to sympathise with those who warn against an unproblematic faith in photography.

These issues concerning the semiotic character of texts and the relationship of texts to the real world are central in many media contexts. They also point to the importance of understanding semiotics in light of and in combination with the other perspectives on media texts that we deal with in the following chapters. It therefore seems sensible to focus on the question of photography and truth in the next two sections of this chapter.

6 Images and verbal language – relay and anchorage

Until now we have mostly talked about verbal language and images separately from each other, as though each type of sign stands on its own. However, images are composed of elements that are not as clearly distinguished as the word-signs of verbal language. The meanings of images are therefore often unclear, fleeting or plural. This is one central reason why images tend to be combined in some way with verbal language. In film and television they are accompanied by dialogue, writing (graphic signs) and/or music. Press photos are accompanied by a caption and/or an article or story. Images in advertising are accompanied by a text, at the very least the logo of the company or a trade mark. Art pictures as a rule have a title, but at times artists may wish to say that spectators can interpret their piece as they like and thus the title is in effect 'No title'. In Roland Barthes' article, 'The rhetoric of the image' (1977/1964), he distinguished between two types of function that verbal language can have in relation to images: *anchorage* and *relay*. The term 'relay' (French: *relais*) originally refers to the change of horses at posting stations in the (very) old days, but here, accordingly, it means that the text adds something that is not actually present in the image; that is, it adds some new element of meaning to the whole. A fresh horse takes over. The captions in the dialogue bubbles of comics provide a much-used example of this. Anchorage is, however, perhaps the more fundamental function. Here verbal language is used to point out which of the many possible meanings of an image are the most important. This is in a sense also what the relay function does – it draws attention to certain possible interpretations and specifies them by way of additional information. But at the same time – and Barthes overlooked this in his analysis – the image can also anchor the verbal text, that is to say influence or shape it to some degree, in some way. We shall have a look at a particular example in Activity 1.2 below (this activity also illustrates syntagms and paradigms further).

First, however, a few words of preliminary explanation. Even though relatively simple still images do not have a clear sequence in the manner of a sentence, or a scene in a film, we can nevertheless consider them as syntagms. It is just that all the elements are presented and perceived simultaneously rather than being 'unrolled' sequentially as in language. The individual elements can be thought of as having been chosen from paradigms in such a way that they form a 'sentence', statement or utterance. So, for example, the photograph in Figure 1.11 from *The Sun* newspaper can be viewed as a meaningful syntagm, one composed of the following paradigmatic elements: boy, girl, outstretched arms, conkers, goggles. We should note that this simple breakdown is not exhaustive;

it would be possible to point to many more elements. However, this is Barthes' thrust: in identifying the elements, the caption or title can put us on the track of what is being 'said' by the image. In the case of film and television, things are rather different. Verbal text that makes up the title of the film or programme will often be presented to us before we get to see the images. The images may then help us understand what an often quite enigmatic or ambiguous title is supposed to mean.

Activity 1.2

Look at the photograph with captions in Figure 1.11. Start by identifying paradigmatic elements in the photograph. You can use the list provided in the previous paragraph, but feel free to add others that you think may be significant. Now look at the captions that surround the photograph on three sides.

- What impacts do these have on what is signified by the photograph itself?
- How, if at all, does the photograph affect the signification of the captions? ■ ■ ■

You may find that doing Activity 1.2 is surprisingly difficult. Partly this has to do with the fact the much of the meaning is connotational or relies upon knowledge of vernacular English. But another factor is that what appears to be a simple message is actually complex. This is a whole ensemble of signs, all of which interact to produce meaning. Certainly there is no right answer. But some of the things you notice might include:

- The caption in small print at the bottom anchors the paradigmatic elements in the photograph, especially the conkers and masks. The pun, 'the mind goggles', contributes to this as well. Incidentally, puns work in a paradigmatic way: here 'g' is substituted for 'b' to turn 'boggles' into 'goggles' (for those of you whose first language is not English 'the mind boggles' means 'one is incredulous').
- The captions at the top and side, by ironically using the language of a public health warning or instruction manual, work to show us that children wearing masks in the playground is absurd. This is a good example of relay. The use of this style of language, as opposed to, say, journalistic description, is also a paradigmatic selection.
- Just as the words inflect the meaning of the photograph, so too the photograph of 'innocent' children points up the fact that the top and side captions are indeed ironic.

Finally, you may have considered the layout and typography of 'SCHOOL HEALTH WARNING'. It is represented, iconically, as a warning sign of the sort placed near the entrance to a building site. The type of lettering used confirms (anchors) this interpretation. It reinforces the ironic effect of the caption at the side. And of course this style is a paradigmatic substitution for a more conventional headline typography.

7 Semiotics and interpretation

A 'culture', as we saw earlier, may be defined as a *community of codes* (Section 2.3); that is, as a set of ideas about what signs mean and how they may be put together that is shared by a large or a small group of people. 'Communication' is a Latin word that originally meant 'making (something) common (or shared)'. Communion, commune, communism, communitarianism – and, of course, common – all have the same root. The concepts 'code', 'culture' and 'communication' are thus closely related in many and complex ways. It should also be clear from the discussion in this chapter that a model of communication that likens the communication of meaning to the straightforward sending of a parcel by train (mentioned in the chapter Introduction) cannot be used as more than a minimal point of departure. Culture understood as a community of codes is both a *prerequisite* of communication – as a shared condition for the process – and a *complicating factor*. The model must be lowered into the cultural sea of codes, to put it poetically. In addition, this sea of codes is also surrounded by other social and material structures and processes – institutions, technologies, markets, social classes, gender relations, racial relations, and so on.

Semiotics – understood as a joint term for the traditions of both Saussure and Peirce – deals with dimensions of the process of communication that social scientific research in the field has traditionally overlooked. This is why the sociologist Stuart Hall, then at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, could create a sort of watershed in the history of media research simply by introducing the notions of signs and codes in a famous article on encoding and decoding (Hall, 1980, originally written in 1973). Semiotic theory is mainly developed with a view to the understanding and analysis of texts; that is, the entities that are 'transported' in a process of communication. But, as we have seen, semiotics is also a highly important aspect of a more general theory of culture. It therefore also provides a productive approach to what goes on when the media's texts are produced as well as when they are received, used and understood by audiences.

An important aspect of this is the way in which semiotic theory treats relations between reality outside of media texts and these texts' representations of that reality. We have already discussed how both Saussure's and Peirce's versions of semiotics render the relations between language and external reality (between signs and that to which they refer) problematic and variable. Even if photographic signs – photographs, film and video footage – can be awarded a special status as indexical signs in the sense of C.S. Peirce, semiotic theory still contributes to an understanding of the uncertainty that may well arise when one is to decide what such photographic signs actually *mean*. It is in particular the notions of 'connotation' and 'connotational codes' that can do this, since they refer to the variability of all meanings.

One example (which is of particular interest to me, as a Norwegian, but is still generally illustrating) can be taken from the soccer World Cup in France in 1998 (see Figure 1.12). In the final minutes of Norway's match against Brazil, the referee gave Norway a penalty. It was unclear to most people, both in the stadium and in front of millions of television screens, whether he had a good reason to do so, even to those of us



Figure 1.12 The Norwegian football team celebrate after winning a match against Brazil in the 1998 World Cup in France. The referee awarded Norway the penalty that won them the match after a tackle between two players that was initially considered to have been faked. Only video footage vindicated the referee in his decision

Source: Action Images

who had been glued to the screen when the Brazilian supposedly did something wrong. According to the English writer Julian Barnes, in *Time* magazine (Barnes, 1998), the global television audience agreed that the Norwegian player Tore André Flo just 'unexpectedly sat down', that he was just faking it when 'collapsing for no good reason'. All available footage from any camera angle and all studio experts seemed to agree that the referee was tricked and so the Norwegians were consequently 'lucky bastards' (Barnes) to win the match with the aid of the penalty, while Brazil was the victim of a fraud.

However, after 'everyone' had been talking about this for a couple of days, still according to Barnes, 'an obscure Swedish video clip' emerged that showed that Flo's shirt had actually been (illegitimately) pulled to the extent that he ended up on his behind. This saved the honour of Flo and the Norwegian team, while confidence in television's total overview and precise rendering of facts was a bit tarnished.

The interesting thing here is that the trust in television's coverage was weakened by a video clip – in which everyone, including Julian Barnes, chooses to have full confidence. And judging from this Swedish video clip, it does actually seem reasonable to argue that the penalty shot was justified. But if the Brazilians had hired a few top US lawyers, it might after a while have looked differently, at least to Brazilians and others with a reason to distrust the moral stature of Norwegian soccer players.

It is indisputable that the Swedish video clip shows that Flo's shirt is pulled by a Brazilian player so that it stands out 'like a sail', as the Norwegian coach Egil Olsen put it at the time. This was the objective, indexical signified of the photographic sign. But it was hardly this alone that resulted in the penalty. Shirt-pulling is not allowed, but it has become so common that hardly any referee in an international match at this level would blow the whistle because of it, especially not within the penalty area. The reason for the penalty was that the judge, and later everyone else, assumed that it was the shirt-pulling that suddenly had Flo sitting on the ground. Our imagined US lawyers might have claimed that the experienced professional player with the English club Chelsea had simply chosen to *pretend* that he was pulled so hard that he fell, when he just felt his shirt pulled. It would be very hard to prove them wrong from the video images alone.

The persuasive power of the video clip depends on how one perceives Flo as a player and person. To Norwegians, he is simply a great guy from the tiny village of Stryn in the fjord country, and so he has a non-photographable moral disposition that makes calculated dirty tricks unthinkable. To people from other countries, such as the referee and Julian Barnes, it may be that ideas of Norway as a peripheral, well-ordered, quite innocent and in some ways slightly backwards country (lots of nature, only four and a half million inhabitants) would have a

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similar effect when assumptions were to be made about Flo's morality. Interviews, and so on, with him could also have supported the assumption that this sort of country boy would not be capable of dirty tricks. These, then, were the connotative codes at work when the video clip was seen as demonstrating beyond doubt that the penalty was correct. But, as our US lawyers might have suggested, Flo could instead be regarded as an experienced, enormously wealthy player in one of the toughest soccer leagues in the world, the English soccer league, a cynical sports circus. Then the indexical document might easily appear to be dubious evidence of the correctness of the penalty, at best.

Another, and more serious example – which is also much more well known – can be taken from Los Angeles in 1991. When the African-American Rodney King was arrested in March of that year, a man by the name of George Holliday was standing nearby with his video camera, taping what went on (see Figure 1.13). He sold the tape to a local television station for US\$500. This was the basis of something the US film scholar Michael Renov (1993, p.8) has put roughly like this: disagreement over the interpretation of a video tape resulted in a violent rebellion and damages estimated at about US\$700 million.

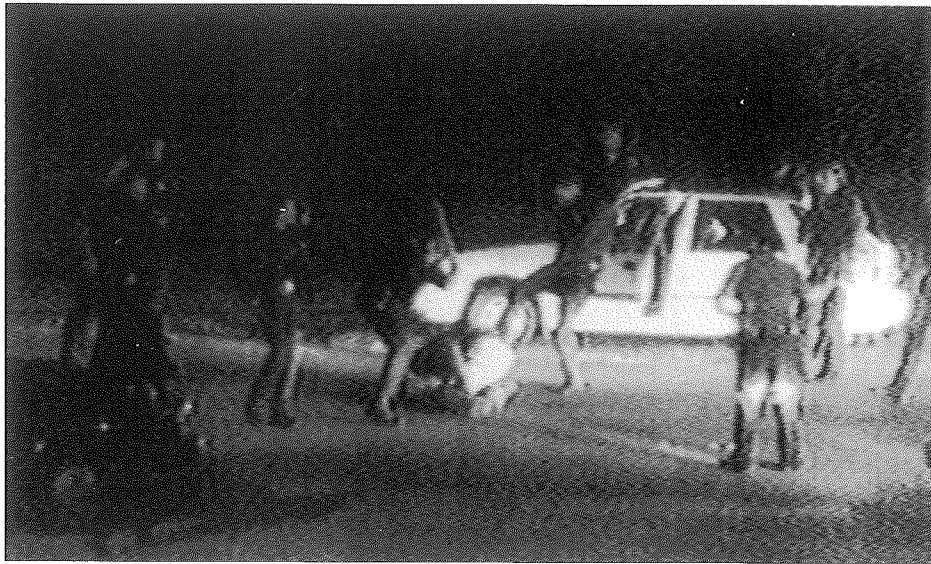


Figure 1.13 In 1991 Rodney King was arrested by US police. The video of his beating during the arrest was used during the subsequent court case against the police

Source: Empics

Holliday's 81-second take shows, in unclear, badly lit pictures, that a man lies on the ground while a group of police officers stands around and above him, hitting and kicking him. This is the indexical and iconic information the images provide. The disagreement that (somewhat surprisingly to most people) arose, concerned the question of what this

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scene actually *meant*. Most of the roughly one billion people around the globe who saw this piece of video thought they saw an example of brutal, in policing terms, and totally unnecessary violence. One might say the overwhelming majority of television viewers spontaneously applied a moral connotational code for the interpretation of fights that awards sympathy to the underdog, a person lying on the ground while attacked by several enemies – the guy who is alone against many. But the white jury from the white suburb in the ensuing trial did not apply such a code, not after the policemen's lawyers had completed their analysis of the footage in court. Through innumerable repetitions, uses of new framings, slow-motion, reversals and stills, the video sequence was in a sense emptied of the moral and emotional significance perceived by most television viewers. The spontaneous code was replaced with another, which (finally) became possible to use. A space was opened up for moral and emotional connotational codes that members of the jury and many in their social category have readily available: black Americans in confrontations with the police are connotationally interpreted as dangerous, violent, drug-intoxicated criminals. The police officers' claim that the abuse of King was necessary because he was aggressive became believable.

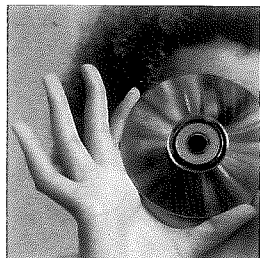
8 Conclusion

Both of these very different examples show how semiotics provide concepts and ideas that may seem very abstract and far removed from actual experience and current public issues, but which become highly useful and meaningful if applied within some larger context of interpretation. We have seen in this chapter how the various tools of semiotics can help us to understand how meaning works in texts in a wide variety of ways, no matter how banal. And we have seen how processes of signifying are closely tied up with questions of textual power; for example, the power of a newspaper to ridicule health and safety regulations, or the power of television to turn a savage beating by police into a necessary technique for the control of black criminals.

Semiotics has also been hugely important in making it apparent that our knowledge values and beliefs are social rather than individual in nature. We share codes and argue about the meaning of what we see on screen, hear on the radio or read in a newspaper. Semiotic analysis can, then, help to show the means by which such meaning is made, how it is a cultural process rather than simply being a matter of the way things are.

Another way of putting this is to say that semiotics invites us to examine texts not just for their obvious content, for *what* they have to say. It also gets us to think about representation; that is, about *how* texts

show us events, objects, people, ideas, emotions and everything else that can be signified. Indeed its whole emphasis is that the 'how' strongly influences the 'what'. We might therefore say that semiotic analysis is as much a frame of mind as it is a set of techniques. Crucially, it is a frame of mind which *all* the chapters in this book on textual analysis adopt to a greater or lesser extent.



DVD-ROM

Now that you have finished reading Chapter 1, work through the Semiotics activities in the Chapter Activities area of the *Analysing Media Texts* DVD-ROM. ■ ■ ■

Further reading

Bignell, J. (2002) *Media Semiotics*, Manchester, Manchester University Press. A very clear introductory text, *Media Semiotics* has a really useful focus on the media. It also has lots of illuminating worked examples.

Chandler, D. (2005) *Semiotics for Beginners*, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/semiotic.html>. This is a terrific website. Extremely well designed and written, it is far and away the best online guide to semiotics. The glossary of terms alone is a very useful resource.

Hawkes, T. (1977) *Structuralism and Semiotics*, London, Routledge. Hawkes's classic text is a little more advanced than the two above, but it is also very clearly written; especially useful for showing the history of the ideas associated with semiotics.

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Woodward, K. (ed.) (1997) *Identity and Difference*, London, Sage/The Open University.

Note

This chapter is a revised version of a chapter in Jostein Gripsrud (2002) *Understanding Media Cultures*, London, Hodder Arnold.