**Semiotics and Television |**  by Ellen Seiter
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**Semiotics:** The study of signs and how meaning is created.
**Sign:** Something that represents something else. Everything is a sign.
**Image:** A collection of signs (example, a person—stand up)
Here is how some famous people have looked at signs:

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| **SEMIOTICS REVIEW** |
| **1) Ferdinand de Saussure:  Semiology** Saw the sign as consisting of two parts (signifier and signified) | **Signifier**(the material/stimulus/referent)Palm Tree on Deserted Island | **Signified** |

- said words are arbitrary & conventional; we assign meaning that has to be learned.
”Rain” = watery drops from sky

- Words become defined through their differences with other words (other signs in a system). Example, rain is not sleet or snow or hail, etc.

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| **2) Charles S. Pierce:  Semiotics** | RepresentamentPalm Tree on Deserted Island | Object  | **Interpretant**What we use to describe the sign, which then becomes another sign |

Believed nothing takes place outside of a sign system—i.e., everything is a sign.

Pierce believed there were 3 kinds of signs:

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| **Pierce: 3 Kinds of Signs** |
| **Symbolic**(conventional/arbitrary)on a larger scale, everything must be learned, even what my hand is, culturally speaking | **Iconic**(resembles what it represents—but does it really? Still involves convention) Seiter’s example: cat photo? Anatomical drawing? Child’s drawing? **Betty Crocker** | **Index**Existential link (physical clues) between signifier and signified and so rely less on learned/symbolism but still there. **Logical connections**: smoke means fire, paw prints mean animal, but fire trucks and hunting/tracking are cultural aspects attached. Most photographed content: house means people; spider web, barn=animals  |

**Mention shortcomings of Semiotics: Not considering viewer, etc.

Index Cont. (my idea)**

Umberto Eco said all signs are learned to some degrees and their meanings rely on cultural context. People say the “camera never lies. We can say “the camera always lies”. We always make deductions about what we see:

1) showing imagery/sound whose meanings are defined through our belief systems, experience, culture, history rather than “nature”, and

2) giving us the *illusion* that it is purely factual information.

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| **3) Roland Barthes**Denotation/connotation(p. 29 bottom) | SignifierPalm Tree on Deserted Island  | Denotation  |  |
| Barthes argued that connotation is the primary way mass media convey meaning. So, what we see has to fit into slots of what we already know. No time for the details: |  **New Signifier Connotation/ Myth/Ideological  Meaning** Relaxation, Luxury, Wealth |

What if I’ve never seen the tropics? One criticism of semiotics is that it doesn’t consider the viewer as enough of the equation.

**Deduction:**
**Beliefs are as “real” as facts because on some levels the two cannot be separated—even “scientific facts”.**

**Examples:**

- Alzheimers disease: In 1986 on the radio, we heard that scientists discovered that senility was a disease rather than a natural condition in the elderly. We said, “Are you kidding?? That’s just a natural part of growing old!” Commedians even joked about it on TV.

- In 1950’s, 50% of all medical students surveyed at Johns Hopkins believed that masturbation cause blindness, even though there was no medical evidence of this.

- Ulcers: In recent years we thought ulcers were caused by the food people ate; now we know they are caused by bacteria. Etc.

- Obesity—2% cure

**Example:** Michael Foucault, The Order of Things (bizarre classifications)

**Connotation obscuring denotation**
Barthes further believed that connotation actually obscures denotation. So, the ideological meaning attached to something actually overrides the denotative meaning of the thing itself.

**Example:**The cross: How does an instrument of murder and torture become worshipped and represent salvation? The ideology overrides the denotative meaning.

**How does connotation come to override denotation?**Barthes said connotation “freezes” the meaning with a single ideology attached to it, and that we get stuck in that ideology, forgetting all about discussion of denotative meaning.

**Example:** War mythology of honor, etc.

Barthes says connotation “is the primary way that the mass media communicate ideological meanings.”

**Example:** Diamond engagement rings. Anyone know the origins of this tradition?
De Beers Diamonds advertising campaign, 1938. But that campaign created a mythology about diamonds that people bought into.

**Destablizing a sign**
When the ideologies attached to a prominent sign DO change, then the sign becomes “destabilized”. Example: Space Shuttle Challenger

**Space Shuttle**Old Connotation: power, innovation, frontiers
Challenger Explodes
We Deconstruct: What’s it made of? Who makes decisions about it? Etc.
New Connotation: Fallibility, government waste, bureaucratic incompetence

**Iconographic**: possessing qualities of an icon

**Iconography:** Van Eyck 1434 (we don’t understand the symbolism today) **Iconoclast:** Destroyer of symbols—S’nead O’Connor and the Pope photo;
the bra burner

**Codes:** Collections of rules we learn—systems of signs.
Example: The codes of marriage—a project I’m working on is taking apart those codes to show denotation: [www.julietdavis.com/studio/altar-ations](http://www.julietdavis.com/studio/altar-ations)

**Decode:** To interpret signs

**More Kinds of Signs:**

**Metaphor:** One thing IS Another: I thought I was dreaming: Carment Electra was hitting on me, and she had the body of my old gym teacher. Yeah, you were dreaming, but the good news is you get 500 channels with DSL—and that’s real.

**Metonymy:** Loose associations (e.g., mansion=wealth)

**Synecdoche:** part represents the whole, whole represents the part
Example: pentagon represents the whole government. The world represents Internet connection

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**EXERCISE FOR REVIEW**
Identify ways in which the cross is:
a sign
symbol

index

metonymy
synecdoche
icon

metaphor (cross to bear)
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SOME UNIQUE CONSIDERATIONS OF TV AND FILM SEMIOTICS

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| **Christian Metz’s Semiotic Concepts in Film (applied to TV)** |
| **Paradigmatic signifiers** | Set of signs that are similar and may be substituted for one another based on a set of rules or criteria.(e.g., all Bill Cosby shots; all close-ups; all commercials; all game show hosts)All food commercials; all game showsPart of how meaning is understood is through differences—e.g., this game show assistant is different from or similar to Vana White in what way? Comparisons are key to meaning.synchronic (no temporal order)  |
| **Syntagmatic signifiers**  | Signs in a particular combination or sequence governed by a set of rules or criteria. (e.g., Bill Cosby’s face, then his wife’s face; a particular order of commercials; programming lineup, etc.)diachronic - temporal |

**Can you think of some video techniques that have become conventional symbols?**Example: Soft focus = romantic
pink is for girls
glasses for smart people

**Concerns: Can signs be used in negative ways on television?**- Stereotyping what a “family” or individual “should” be
- Teaching codes of behavior – smart kids act like this; pretty girls look like this;
 good mothers do this; good dads own this
- Instilling desire / creating need
- Presenting ideals; selling the dream (e.g., hot tub commercial)
- These cultural norms become “naturalized”—it’s “natural” for women to do this

**Keep in Mind:**1) Meaning must be conveyed rapidly in TV (read p. 3), so connotation is key.

2) TV uses simultaneous signifiers (redundancy: Laugh track, music, silly stunt; not in movies) and (read p. 4) is therefore not considered a high aesthetic standard, not “artistic”, which means thought-provoking, etc.- Signs can be used to lie and to create propaganda, etc. (p.2)

**What is the purpose of television?**
To provide viewing audiences for commercials.
(Ex. “Soap Operas”)

**The commercial power structure behind it,**creating need, developing margins of difference (toilet paper, Rolaids, American idea that we can spend money to lower risk—wealthy people can buy their ways out of risk: buy health insurance, buy the right foods, the right medicines, etc.)

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**EXAMPLE: BAKED BEANS COMMERCIAL**
1) Describe the narrator.
Denotation: Guy who is balding, glasses, pudgy, shirt, country setting, accent
Connotation: Midwesterner, honest, hard-working, wholesome

2) Describe the farm.
Denotation: Red barn, white house.
Connotation: Wholesome (white) house, red (rich/beans) barn

3) Denotation: Secret Recipe: no one has the recipe
Connotation: Value based on scarcity

4) Describe the dog.
Denotation: Dog, Golden Retriever
Connotation: Man’s best friend, loyal

5) Denotation: Talking Dog?!!!!
Connotation: Magical--the mere knowledge of the secret recipe is so magical it can make a dog talk, and so valuable it can make the dog break its loyalty.

6) Identify an indexical sign in this ad. Refresh: What is an indexical sign?

7) Identify a metonymy in this ad. What is a metonymy?

(**REWIND VIDEO TAPE**)

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# Metaphor Ad Review(OPTIONAL)

**EXAMPLE OF INDEX: CAR ACCIDENT REPORT (read)**
Of all the car accidents and infants in accidents, this one is chosen for national news—why? These are heavily charged signs:

1)Pregnant mom police officer: “pregnant women/mothers have special instincts”
2)Toys: Indexical of a child; ironic connotation of play emphasizes grimness of scene
3) Footprints: Indexical of child (Hansel & Grettle), but come afterward.
4) Little girl: Lucky to be saved; more delicate than little boy; etc.
5) Being saved: Being lucky, being untouched, a “miracle”, watched by “angels”

Much easier than an ethnic angle with a culture we don’t understand well, for example.

**COMMON MYTHS/IDOLOGIES utilized in ads. Can you think of any?** Brainstorm. This is what you will be writing about in your first paper.
 **Scientifically Engineered Food
POPCORN COMMERCIAL**Better than nature
 **The Cowboy Myth/ Frontier Mythology
ROUNDUP COMMERCIAL**Denotations: Describe
Connotations:
The cowboy was truly “free”The cowboywas a “real man”
The cowboyovercame challenges of nature
Selling trucks, motorcycles, etc. Trucks at rodeo, w/ lasso in back. **Myths of Technology as a frontier**If we see it, it’s already done.
Anything we can do, we should do.
Our biology is something to be conquered (fertility, etc.).
Anything that we don’t know about needs to be conquered.
Etc.

**The Myth of “Nature” and Freedom
RV COMMERCIAL**That there is such a thing as untouched nature
that we can experience blissfully in an RV—with all the amenities of home.
(In actuality, nature is either treacherous or it is touched/tainted.)
Myth that nature is “better” than urban environments
Nature means freedom.

**More Myths of Freedom
LIBRARY COMMERCIAL/FREEDOM SHOP COMMERCIAL**
If we don’t fight terrorists, they will take over our country and take away our books.
WORD PLAY: Freedom=Choice (associated with shopping?)=Opportunity (associated with being a good consumer and seller).
Shopping is patriotic and represents a protest against censorship (freedom=choice)

**Myth of Domestic Bliss**Cleaning products
fizz away the dirt
Things “sparkle” (magic)
Bubbles are clean and fun (“Scrubbing Bubbles” cartoon)
Mop system: woman in biz suit, in Bauhaus/deco penthouse w/ hip broom closet

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**Critical Theory**
Theory that provides critical frameworks for interpreting texts.
If CONTEXT is part of how meaning is generated (e.g., intertexuality, cultural relativity, history, myth, legend), then we need to look at some of the texts, histories and ideologies that heavily influence our perceptions:

**Freud: Psycholanalysis Examples**id, ego, super ego (ad)—animal instinct/higher moral sense/mediator of the two
sublimation (ad) – directing sexual tension to other tasks (e.g., sports)

Condensation: dream imagery coming together in unusual ways

 (a hen in your living room representing your mother coming to visit)
fear of castration (images)
Oedipus Complex (Angel Heart, Memento, Identity, etc.)

**C.G. Jung:** Collective Unconscious, Archetypes: Hero, Anima/Animus, feminine side, masculine side, dark side

**Feminist Criticism and Gender Studies:** Roles women play in films, etc., the idea that gender is constructed (in contrast to sex, which is biological), but even the body is culturally constructed **(e.g., breasts, foot binding)**

**Ethnic Criticism:** Ethnic roles

**Marxist Criticism:** Considers budgets, etc., and how funding affects what gets produced

**SUMMARY:**
Semiotics is often listed with modes of criticism such as feminist, psychoanalytic, etc., but it’s really a tool for all (read pp. 38-39).

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**INTRODUCE MYTHOLOGIES READINGS and the story of Barthes’ writings each day in 1950’s France.**

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**Marshall McLuhan** (1911-1980, Canadian Communications Theorist)

”The Medium is the Message”
The underlying notion is that the message is greatly impacted by the delivery system. Some would understand this position to be the ultimate in media determinism. If the content is obliterated by the channel, "what" we say is of little importance-only "how" we chose to deliver it. McLuhan's belief in technological determinism is obvious by his phrase, "we shape our tools and they in turn shape us" (quoted in Griffin, 1991, p. 294).

McLuhan's philosophy that the medium is the message "was influenced by the work of the Catholic philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who believed that the use of electricity extends the central nervous system" (Wolf, 1996, p. 125).

**Controversial Theory (example):**Hot media, high definition (stills), requires low participation
 – film, photography, print, lecture, book
Cool Media, low definition (dots), requires high participation to fill in the gaps
--TV, telephone, dialogue