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*Bynall, Social Semiotics*

## Introduction

*Susanne  
Pain* *Banhus*

Every day we encounter and make use of a huge variety of media. Some of them fall into the category habitually referred to as 'the media', like newspapers, magazines, television, cinema or radio. All of these are obviously communications media, which make available a wide range of messages and meanings. But the term 'media' refers more widely to all those things which are channels for communicating something. If we widen the term 'media' to include anything which is used as a channel for communicating meanings, a large part of our experience of the world involves interactions with media. Walking down the street, all kinds of messages are being generated for us by, for instance, shop signs, posters, and traffic lights. Even the people passing by are generating meanings by virtue of the kind of clothes they are wearing, or their hairstyles. Meanings are being made everywhere, through a huge variety of different channels of communication, a huge variety of media. Since media in this broad sense are so important to the experience of living in society, it is clearly both useful and interesting to find a way of understanding how these media are meaningful to us.

In recent times, one of the most powerful and influential ways of thinking about media has been the approach known as semiotics (or semiology). The names semiotics and semiology derive from the ancient Greek word *semeion*, which means 'sign'. Semiotics or semiology is a way of analysing meanings by looking at the signs (like words, for instance, but also pictures, symbols etc.) which communicate meanings. Because society is so pervaded by media messages, semiotics can contribute to far more than our understanding of 'the media' in the narrow sense of mass-media texts like those discussed in the following pages. The power of the semiotic approach lies partly in its applicability to the much wider field of meaning-making which includes, for instance, fashion, theatre, computer games, literature and architecture. But this book has been written primarily for students of the media, or for use as part of courses in Media Studies, Cultural Studies, or

Communications Studies for instance. Therefore this book deals with the semiotic approach partly by conducting critical analyses of recent material in 'the media' of advertising, magazines, newspapers, television and cinema. The analyses of these different kinds of written and audiovisual materials are used to introduce, discuss and evaluate semiotic methods, and to show how this method can be extended or challenged by other approaches.

My primary focus is on how semiotics can be used in the study of the media, because of the assumption that meanings in the media are communicated by signs, and because the question of how signs work is what semiotics is concerned with. Semiotics was first developed as a way of understanding how language works, and language is the medium which we use most often. We use language to communicate by speaking and by writing, and much of 'the media' uses language either as their primary medium of communication, or to support other media of communication like pictures, for instance. Semiotic analysis has been extended to the analysis of other non-linguistic media of communication, but chapter one takes up the initial linguistic focus of semiotics by explaining its approach to language and then to visual signs. The chapters which follow build on these foundations and explore how semiotics can be used in the study of advertising, magazines, newspapers, television, and cinema. Like every analytical method, semiotics makes use of some technical language, has drawn on insights which come from other related disciplines, and has evolved and changed over time. In this book, some of the terminology of semiotics is explained, some ideas which it has borrowed from other disciplines are discussed, and some developments of semiotics in response to new challenges and difficulties are assessed.

This book assumes no prior knowledge about semiotics. It does assume a basic familiarity with the kinds of media found in British and American culture. It will be enough to have noticed some advertisements, to have read some newspapers, read some magazines, watched some television, and been to the cinema. As I have already hinted, this book is not just an introduction to media semiotics, it is a critical introduction. Key ideas from semiotic approaches to the media are discussed in the chapters which follow, but these ideas are also tested out, modified, and their lim-

itations explored. There is no perfect analytical method for studying the media since different theoretical approaches deline their tasks, the objects they study, or the questions they ask in different ways. For instance, at one extreme it could be argued that meanings in the media can be understood by doing a very detailed analysis of media texts (like newspapers or television programmes). At the other extreme, it could be argued that meanings in the media can be understood by asking individuals how they interact with media in localised and specific ways. These two positions are oversimplified caricatures of, respectively, a very rigid kind of semiotic analysis known as structuralism, and a recently fashionable kind of research known as ethnography. Clearly, each of them takes a quite different approach to what appears to be the same issue.

This book takes a position somewhere between those two extremes. These are the five basic assumptions which underlie my approach to meanings in the media. The patterns and structures of signs in media texts condition the meanings which can be communicated and read. The signs in media texts are read in relation to other signs and other texts in a social and cultural context. Each medium has features specific to it and features which are shared with other media. Texts and media position their audiences in particular ways. Audiences understand and enjoy the media in different and diverse ways. The negotiation of meanings between media and audiences are important in establishing terms through which we understand ourselves and our culture. These assumptions form the basis of the issues which are explored and discussed in the chapters which follow, though the weight given to each of them varies. This often reflects the different emphases of academic approaches to the different media because the study of the media is not a homogeneous subject, though there are overlaps between currents of critical thinking as well as relatively discrete areas. In writing this book, I have aimed to maintain a consistent focus on semiotic analysis, while at the same time acknowledging other ways of studying the media to some extent. Some of these different academic approaches (like psychoanalytic criticism) add weight to semiotics, while others (like ethnographic research) are virtually opposed to it.

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There are alternative ways in which this book could have been organised, around theoretical issues for instance, or by following the history of developments in a particular field of study. I have chosen the present structure because it seems the clearest for a teaching and learning context. The order and emphases of each chapter should enable the reader to gain an understanding of critical discourses developed in semiotics for each medium and to pick up the common conceptual strands which link the study of these media together. In a similar way, challenges to semiotics are gradually posed as the book proceeds, and exemplified in relation to particular examples and cases in the various media which my chapters discuss. Each chapter has a section at the end called *Sources and further reading*, which notes important and accessible works for the reader who wishes to follow up both semiotic studies of the relevant medium and also cites some works which are critical of semiotics. For greater clarity and ease of use, I have collected the majority of references together in these sections, rather than citing a mass of books in the text itself. A section called *Suggestions for further work* also appears at the end of each chapter, with seven tasks and questions which encourage readers actively to make use of semiotics and other approaches to the media which are relevant to the issues raised in the chapter.

## Signs and myths

### The semiotic point of view

Semiotics originates mainly in the work of two men, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Charles Peirce. Their ideas are quite closely related, but exhibit some differences, so I am going to explain some of their major insights separately in this chapter, and then indicate the kind of synthesis between them which is referred to as simply 'semiotics' in this book. Saussure was an academic who taught linguistics at the University of Geneva in the early years of this century. His *Course in General Linguistics* (1974) was published in French in 1915, three years after his death. Saussure's book is a reconstruction of a series of lectures that he gave on language, assembled from the notes taken by his students and jottings discovered by his colleagues. The book explains his ground-breaking view of language, and was a major contribution to the discipline of linguistics. But Saussure viewed linguistics as only one part (though a privileged part) of a much broader science which he predicted would one day exist, a science which he called semiology. Saussure believed that language is made up of signs (like words) which communicate meanings, and that all kinds of other things which communicate meanings could potentially be studied in the same way as linguistic signs.

Semiotics or semiology, then, is the study of signs in society, and while the study of linguistic signs is one branch of it, it encompasses every use of a system where something (the sign) carries a meaning for someone. Much of this book is concerned with the semiotic analysis of language, but much of it is also concerned with non-linguistic things (like photographs, for instance) which carry meanings for someone. The same semiotic approach

can be used to discuss language-based media and image-based media, because in either case we find signs which carry meaning. Since language is the most fundamental and pervasive medium for human communication, semiotics takes the way that language works as the model for all other media of communication, all other sign systems. That is the way in which this book proceeds; explaining some of semiotics's insights into how language works, and expanding this semiotic method to other media in society.

It is usual to assume that words and other kinds of sign are secondary to our perception and understanding of reality. It seems that reality is out there all around us, and language fully names real things and the relationships between them. By contrast, Saussure proposed that our perception and understanding of reality is constructed by the words and other signs which we use in a social context. This is a very surprising and revolutionary argument, because it implies that signs shape our perceptions, rather than reflecting a reality which was already out there. From this point of view, words are not labels which are attached to things that already exist in a pre-given 'natural' state. Nor are they labels attached to ideas which already existed in the human mind before language came along. Instead, Saussure showed that language and the other communication systems which we collectively use, provide the conceptual framework in and through which reality is available to us. This reverses the common-sense view that reality exists before language gives words to it. Instead, the language system we use creates our concepts of reality. We cannot think or speak about something for which there are no words in our language.

At the same time as language and sign systems shape our reality, they also provide the means for communicating about this reality. A system of signs which works in this way has to be thought of as a medium in a more extended sense than the way that a medium is conventionally thought of. A medium is conventionally something which acts as a channel, passing something from one place to another. But if language and other sign systems are not simply channels, if they give form and meaning to thought or experience instead of just naming what was already there, then there is nothing which exists before signs and

media communicate thought and experience. Rather than thinking of signs and media as channels which translate pre-existing thought and reality into communicable form, signs and media are the only means of access to thought or reality which we have.

This is one reason why Saussure's work is so important. Although Saussure never made this leap, his semiotic method, showing how we are surrounded by and shaped by sign systems, leads to the realisation that consciousness and experience are built out of language and the other sign systems circulating in society that have existed before we take them up and use them. Language was already there before we were born, and all of our lives are lived through the signs which language gives us to think, speak and write with. All of our thought and experience, our very sense of our own identity, depends on the systems of signs already existing in society which give form and meaning to consciousness and reality. We tend to think of ourselves as individuals, whole beings who are not divided, and who are the unique subjects of our own life experience. But semiotics shows that this impression is created by the language which gives us the word 'I' to refer uniquely to ourselves, and gives us the words which divide up our reality in particular ways.

We shall be returning to these complex ideas about the self and reality later in this book, and testing them out in relation to some concrete examples. But perhaps it is already evident at this stage that thinking about signs, media and meaning in semiotic terms will have large implications for the ways in which the self, identity, reality and society are understood. Before getting too carried away by the general thrust of these ideas, we need to be specific about how Saussure's view of language works. In doing this, some of the recurring semiotic terminology used later in this book can be explained, and we can also move from thinking mainly about language to considering visual signs with the help of some ideas developed by the American philosopher, Charles Peirce.

### Sign systems

Saussure's first move was to set limits to the variety of tasks

which his study of language might involve. Instead of considering language from a psychological, sociological, or physiological point of view, he decided to focus on a clearly defined object of study: the linguistic sign. He showed that the linguistic sign is arbitrary. The linguistic sign 'cat' is arbitrary in that it has no connection either in its sound, or its visual shape, with what cats are really like. In another language, the sign for cat will be different from the linguistic sign in English (e.g. French uses *chat*). Clearly, there must be a kind of agreement among the users of our language that the sign 'cat' shall refer to a particular group of furry four-legged animals. But this agreement about signs is not consciously entered into, since we learn how to use language so early in our lives that there can be no deliberate choice available to us. Language has always been there before we arrived on the scene. Even if I perversely decided to adopt another sign for what we call a cat, like 'yorup' for instance, this sign would be entirely useless since no-one else would understand me. The capacity of linguistic signs to be meaningful depends on their existence in a social context, and on their conventionally accepted use in that social context.

Each linguistic sign has a place in the whole system of language (in Saussure's original French, *langue*), and any example of actual speech or writing (in French, *parole*) uses some particular elements from the system. This distinction is the same as that between, for instance, the system of rules and conventions called chess, and the particular moves made in an actual game of chess. Each individual move in chess is selected from the whole system of possible chess moves. So we could call the system of possible chess moves the *langue* of chess. Any individual move in a game of chess would be *parole*, the selection of a move from the whole set of possible moves allowed in the *langue* of chess.

The same distinction can be made about language. In English, (or writer) can make. In order for an utterance to be meaningful, it has to conform to the system of rules in the English language. The whole system of rules governing which utterances are possible is the *langue* of English, and any utterance that is actually made is an example of *parole*. *Langue* is the structure of rules which can be partially glimpsed in any concrete example of

*parole*. The linguistic signs of *parole* are only meaningful if they are used in accordance with the rules of *langue*. The first two important ideas from Saussure then are that first, linguistic signs are arbitrary and agreed by convention, and second that language is a system governed by rules, where each instance of speech or writing involves selecting signs and using them according to these rules.

Every sign in *langue* acquires its value by virtue of its difference from all the other signs in *langue*, the language system. We recognise the sign 'cat' by its difference from 'bat' or 'cot' or 'top'. Saussure described language as a system which has no positive terms, and by this he meant that signs have no special right to mean something in particular and not something else. Instead, signs acquire their potential meaningfulness by contrasting themselves with what they are not. 'Cat' is not 'bat' or 'cot'. So language is a system of differences between one sign and all others, where the difference between one sign and the others allows distinctions of meaning to be made. At any point in time it is the difference of one sign from all other existing signs which allows that sign to work. So no sign can have meaning except inasmuch as it is differentiated from the other signs in *langue*. 'Cat' works as a sign by being different from 'bat', rather than by any internal property of the sign 'cat' itself.

Written or spoken languages are only one example of what Saussure believed to be the feature which characterises the human animal: that we make use of structures of signs which communicate meanings for us. Just as language can be investigated to discover how *langue* is structured as a system, allowing us to communicate with linguistic signs, the same kind of investigation can be carried out on any medium in which meanings are generated by a system of signs. Linguistics shows the way in which semiotics will operate, seeking to understand the system of *langue* which underlies all the particular instances of *parole* in which this signifying system is used. Semioticians search for the systems which underlie the ability of signs like words, images, items of clothing, foods, cars, or whatever to carry certain meanings in society.

The systems in which signs are organised into groups are called codes. This is a familiar term, for instance in the phrase

'dress codes'. In our society, the dress code which governs what men should wear when going to a formal wedding includes items which can be selected from the almost infinite *langue* of male clothing, from the code of male formal dress, and they communicate a coded message of 'formality'. By contrast, a man might select jogging shorts, training shoes and a baseball cap to go to the local gym. These clothing signs belong to a different dress code, and communicate a message of 'informality'. In the case of dress codes, it is possible to select the clothing signs which we use in order to communicate particular messages about ourselves. Even when clothes perform practical functions (like the loose and light clothes worn to play sports) codes still give social meanings to our choices, like codes of fashionableness and codes governing what men may wear versus what women may wear. In the same way, there are linguistic codes within the whole system of *langue*, which divide language up just as clothes are divided up into coded sets of signs. There are linguistic codes appropriate for talking to babies, talking to royalty, writing job applications, or writing love poems.

The message conveyed by linguistic signs often has much to do with how they can be used as part of coded ways of speaking or writing. Similarly, a television sequence of a newsreader behind a desk is a message which gains its authority by drawing on recognisable codes, while different codes constrain the way we might interpret a sequence showing cowboys shooting at each other on the main street of a western town. As we begin to address different kinds of sign in different media, the concept of a code becomes very useful in dividing signs into groups, and working out how the meaning of signs depends on their membership of codes. Individual linguistic signs become meaningful because of their difference from all other linguistic signs. But the significance of individual signs often depends on which code groupings they belong to: our understanding of a sign often depends on recognising that it belongs to a code which has particular meaning for us.

### Components of the sign

Saussure drew a distinction between the evolution of linguistic signs through time, called 'diachronic' linguistics, and the study of signs existing at a given point in time, called 'synchronic' linguistics. From a diachronic point of view, we might investigate the way that a particular sign like 'thou' used to be used in ordinary language but is now used only in religious contexts. But from a synchronic point of view, it is the place of 'thou' in our own historical moment that is of interest, not how it has gained its current role in our language. The linguists who preceded Saussure had concentrated on diachrony, the development of language over time, and Saussure argued that this approach was useless for giving us an understanding of how language works for the people who actually use it. For a community of language users, it is the system and structure of the current language, *langue*, which makes articulation meaningful, and not the history of how signs have come to take the form they have now. His emphasis on synchrony enabled him to show how signs work as part of a structure that is in place at a given point in time. The same emphasis on synchronic analysis works for any other communication method where signs contrast one with another. For instance, denim jeans used to be work-clothes, and were clothing signs in a code of clothes for manual labour. Today, jeans are a sign whose meaning is 'casual style' or 'youthfulness', signs belonging to a style code of everyday dress in contrast to suit trousers, which signify 'formality' and belong to a different dress code. The coded meaning of jeans depends much more on their relationship with, and difference from, other coded signs in the clothing system today, rather than their meaning depending on the history of jeans. Synchronic analysis reveals more about the contemporary meaning of jeans than diachronic analysis.

In his analysis of linguistic signs, Saussure showed that there are two components to every sign. One is the vehicle which expresses the sign, like a pattern of sound which makes up a word, or the marks on paper which we read as words, or the pattern of shapes and colours which photographs use to represent an object or person. This vehicle which exists in the material world is called the 'signifier'. The other part of the sign is called

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the 'signified'. The signified is the concept which the signifier calls forth when we perceive it. So when you perceive the signifier 'cat' written on this page, you perceive a group of marks, the letters 'c', 'a', and 't', which are the signifier. This signifier is the vehicle which immediately calls up the signified or concept of cat in your mind. The sign is the inseparable unity of concept of cat with the signified, since in fact we never have one without the other.

This stage of the explanation of the sign says nothing about any real cat out there in reality: the sign 'cat' is made up of two entities, signifier and signified, which are joined together in the minds of language users. The sign 'cat' does not refer to any particular cat, but to a mental concept. It is perfectly possible to use a sign, like 'God' which does not relate to any observable thing out there in the real world. Many linguistic signs, like nouns, clearly relate to actual things, like cats, which could be observed in reality. The actual things which signs refer to are called 'referents', so the referent of the sign 'cat' which I speak when talking to my own cat has my particular cat as its referent. If I write a note to my neighbours when I leave for a holiday, saying 'please feed cat', it is clear from the context that my cat is the referent of the sign, but the sign 'cat' could refer to any cat. And just as the English language arbitrarily connects the signifier 'c', 'a', 't' with the signified 'cat' in our minds, so too the language arbitrarily connects the whole sign 'cat' with a particular sort of living creature, the real cats which can be referents of this sign.

Once Saussure had divided the sign into signifier and signified, it became possible to describe how language divides up the world of thought, creating the concepts which shape our actual experience. This can be illustrated by a simple comparison between signs in different languages. In English, the signifier 'sheep' is joined to a particular signified, the concept of a certain type of animal, and the signifier 'mutton' is joined to the signified of the meat of this animal. In French, the signifier *mouton* draws no distinction between the signified animal and its meat. So the meaning of 'mutton' in English is sustained only by its difference from 'sheep'. Meaning is only generated by the difference from signifiers, and the signified is shaped by the relationships between other way around). The signifieds or concepts in our minds are

All these referents for the images I am trying to document.

shaped by the signifiers that our language provides for us to think and talk with. In English we have only one signifier for the signified colour white, so the signified concept of whiteness is indivisible, one single thing. But we can conceive of a language where there are several words subdividing whiteness into several distinct colours. For speakers of such a language our signified white would not be one colour but several different and separate colours, just as for us, redness is divided into the distinctly different colours scarlet, crimson, vermilion, etc. The systems which structure our language also shape our experience of reality, as indicated at the beginning of this chapter. This surprising reversal of common-sense comes logically from Saussure's thinking about the components of the linguistic sign.

### Sequences of linguistic signs

One of the distinctions between linguistic signs and other kinds of sign is that language is always dependent on time. In a written or spoken articulation, one sign must come before the next, and the articulation is spread out over time. In photographs, paintings, or an outfit of clothes, each sign is present at the same time as the others: the signs are distributed across space rather than time. In film or television for example, both space and time are involved, since the shapes on the screen are next to other shapes in the same space, while the image changes over time as the film progresses.

When signs are spread out in a sequence over time, or have an order in their spatial arrangement, their order is obviously important. In a sentence like 'The dog bites the man', meaning unfolds from left to right along the line of the sentence, as we read the words in sequence one after another. This horizontal movement is called the 'syntagmatic' aspect of the sentence. If we reverse the order into 'The man bites the dog', the meaning is obviously different. Each linguistic sign in the syntagm could also be replaced by another sign which is related to it, having perhaps the same grammatical function, a similar sound, or relating to a similar signified. These sets of related signs are called 'paradigms'. We could replace 'dog' with 'cat' or 'beast', and replace 'bites' with 'fights' or 'kicks' or 'chews'. Each different

selection from these paradigms would alter the meaning of the syntagm.

So an important aspect of how language makes meaning must be that each linguistic sign is surrounded by paradigms of associated signs that are not present. Explaining the meaning of an instance of *parole* must involve noting the way that the syntagmatic ordering of signs affects meaning, and the way that the signs not selected from a particular paradigm shape the meaning of the sign that has been selected. As a general principle, every sign that is present must be considered in relation to other signs present in the structure of the articulation, and every sign present has meaning by virtue of the other signs which have been excluded and are not present in the text.

### Visual signs

Most of the account of linguistic signs above comes directly from Saussure, but some of the principles and terms which we shall need in the chapters that follow derive from the semiotic work of the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1958). In particular, the semiotic analysis of images and other non-verbal signs is made much more effective by some of Peirce's distinctions. Although language is the most striking form of human sign production, the whole of our social world is pervaded by messages which contain visual as well as linguistic signs, or which are exclusively visual. Gestures, dress codes, traffic signs, advertising images, newspapers, television programmes and so on are all kinds of media which use visual signs. The same principles underlie the semiotic study of visual signs and linguistic signs. In each case, there is a material signifier, which expresses the sign, and a mental concept, a signified, which immediately accompanies it. Visual signs also belong to codes, are arranged in syntagms, and selected from paradigms. In the last few pages, I have used some examples of visual signs along with linguistic ones, to suggest that they can be approached in similar ways.

We have already seen how linguistic signs are arbitrary, since there is no necessary connection between the signifier 'cat' on this page and the signified concept of cat in our minds, and nor is there any connection except a conventional one for English

a signifier is a linguistic sign  
of a cat  
of a signifier is a linguistic sign

### Signs and myths

speakers between the whole sign 'cat' and its referent, the kind of furry four-legged animal which is sitting next to my desk. The relationship of signifier to signified, and of sign to referent, is entirely a matter of the conventions established by *langue* in general, and in this case by the English language in particular. This type of sign, characterised by arbitrariness, Peirce calls the 'symbolic' sign.

But a photograph of a cat looks recognisably like a specific cat. The arrangement of shape and colour in the photograph, the signifier which expresses the signified 'cat', has a close resemblance to its referent, the real cat which the photograph represents. In a photograph, the signifier is the colour and shape on the flat surface of the picture. The signified is the concept of a cat which this signifier immediately calls up. The referent is the cat which was photographed. Just as my cat is white with some black and orange patches, so a photograph of my cat will faithfully record these different shapes and colours. This kind of sign, where the signifier resembles the referent, Peirce calls an 'iconic' sign. We shall encounter iconic signs in our exploration of the semiotics of various visual media. Unlike the case of linguistic signs, iconic signs have the property of merging the signifier, signified and referent together. It is much more difficult to realise that the two components of the photographic sign plus their referent are three different things. It is for this reason that photographic media seem to be more realistic than linguistic media, and we shall be exploring this issue in greater depth later.

When a cat is hungry and miaows to gain our attention, the sound it makes is a way of pointing out its presence, asking us to notice it, and Peirce called this kind of sign 'indexical'. Indexical signs have a concrete and often causal relationship to their signified. The shadow cast on a sundial tells us the time, it is an indexical sign which is directly caused by the position of the sun, and similarly smoke is an index of fire, a sign caused by the thing which it signifies. Certain signs have mixed symbolic, indexical and iconic features. For instance, a traffic light showing red has both indexical and symbolic components. It is an indexical sign pointing to a traffic situation (that cars here must wait), and using an arbitrary symbolic system to do this (red arbitrarily signifies danger and prohibition in this context).

Symbolic  
Sign

iconic  
Sign

indexical  
Signs

### Connotation and myth

The rest of this chapter deals with semiotic ideas which are found in the work of the French critic Roland Barthes. His ideas build on the foundations outlined so far, and take us closer to the semiotic analysis of contemporary media. Because we use signs to describe and interpret the world, it often seems that their function is simply to 'denote' something, to label it. The linguistic sign 'Rolls-Royce' denotes a particular make of car, or a photographic sign showing Buckingham Palace denotes a building in London. But along with the denotative, or labelling function of these signs to communicate a fact, come some extra associations which are called 'connotations'. Because Rolls-Royce cars are expensive and luxurious, they can be used to connote notions of wealth and luxury. The linguistic sign 'Rolls-Royce' is no longer simply denoting a particular type of car, but generating a whole set of connotations which come from our social experience. The photograph of Buckingham Palace not only denotes a particular building, but also connotes notions of royalty, tradition, wealth and power. When we consider advertising, news, and TV or film texts, it will become clear that linguistic, visual, and other kinds of sign are used not simply to denote something, but also to trigger a range of connotations attached to the sign. Barthes calls this social phenomenon, the bringing together of signs and their connotations to shape a particular message, the making of 'myth'. Myth here does not refer to mythology in the usual sense of traditional stories, but to ways of thinking about people, products, places, or ideas which are structured to send particular messages to the reader or viewer of the text. So an advertisement for shoes which contains a photograph of someone stepping out of a Rolls-Royce is not only denoting the shoes and a car, but attaching the connotations of luxury which are available through the sign 'Rolls-Royce' to the shoes, suggesting a mythic meaning in which the shoes are part of a privileged way of life.

Myth takes hold of an existing sign, and makes it function as a signifier on another level. The sign 'Rolls-Royce' becomes the special form of language, the signified 'luxury'. It is as if myth were a gloss and makes a new sign system out of it. As we shall see, myth is

an innocent language, but one that picks up existing signs and their connotations, and orders them purposefully to play a particular social role.

### Wrestling and Julius Caesar

In 1957 the French lecturer and critic Roland Barthes published a book called *Mythologies* (1973). It consisted of short essays, previously published in French magazines, which dealt with a wide variety of cultural phenomena, from wrestling matches to Greta Garbo, from Citroën's latest car to steak and chips. These essays on aspects of contemporary French culture sought to look beyond the surface appearance of the object or practice which they discussed, and to decode its real significance as the bearer of particular meanings. What Barthes did was to read social life, with the same close attention and critical force that had previously been evident only in the study of 'high art', like literature, painting or classical music. *Mythologies* uses semiotics as the predominant means of analysing aspects of everyday culture.

The book concluded with an essay called 'Myth Today', which drew together the implications of the semiotic method Barthes was using in his short essays, and showed why his reading of social life was significant. *Mythologies* had a huge impact in France, and later in the English-speaking world, and opened up everyday popular culture to serious study. This section is devoted to the discussion of two of the short essays in *Mythologies*, and more fully discusses the essay 'Myth Today' which provides a general framework for the study of popular culture. Many of the analytical methods and critical concepts in 'Myth Today' recur in later chapters of this book.

The first essay in *Mythologies* is 'The World of Wrestling'. Barthes discusses the meaning of the rather seedy wrestling matches which at that time took place in small auditoria around Paris. Something fairly similar can be seen today in the televised WWF wrestling from the United States, where exotically-named and colourfully-clad wrestlers perform very theatrically. The modern television form of this type of wrestling is much more glossy and widely marketed than the backstreet entertainment Barthes discusses, however. Who wins and who loses in these

wrestling contests is insignificant compared to the excessive posturing and the dramatic incidents which are displayed in the bouts and in the stadium by the wrestlers. This form of wrestling is not only popular enough to be televised recently, but has also given rise to spin-off products: a TV cartoon featuring star wrestlers, toy action figures, T-shirts and other clothing, and computer games. Clearly, something about this theatrical wrestling spectacle has been significant and popular, in 1950s Paris and in Britain, and in the United States today.

Barthes describes wrestling as a theatrical spectacle rather than a sport. The spectators, he finds, are interested primarily in the powerful emotions which the wrestlers simulate. These can be clearly read in their gesture, expression and movement, which are so many coded signs signifying inner passions. Wrestling becomes a kind of melodrama, a drama using exaggerated physical signs, and is characterised by an emphasis on emotion and questions of morality. Here Barthes describes some of the physical signs made by the wrestlers, and it is easy to read their connotations, since they belong to a very clear code:

Sometimes the wrestler triumphs with a repulsive sneer while kneeling on the good sportsman; sometimes he gives the crowd a conceited smile which forebodes an early revenge; sometimes, pinned to the ground, he hits the floor ostentatiously to make evident to all the intolerable nature of his situation. (1973: 18)

For Barthes, wrestling is like ritual, pantomime, or Greek tragedy, where what is important is to see some struggle being played out by actors who do not represent realistic individual characters, but ideas or moral positions. The 'bad-guy' wrestler, the 'bastard' as Barthes calls him (1973: 17), appears to fight cruelly and unfairly, but is pursued by his opponent despite the bastard's attempt to hide behind the ropes of the wrestling ring, and is deservedly punished. The spectators enjoy both the outrageous cheating and cruelty of the bastard, and also the eventual punishment of the bastard by the good-guy wrestler. All of this drama is communicated by the physical signs made by the wrestlers, and these signs belong to a code which is familiar to the audience. The audience's pleasure comes from reading and enjoying the wrestlers' coded signs.

Whether the good wrestler wins or not, the bout will have made Good and Evil easily readable through the medium of the coded signs the wrestlers use to communicate their roles and their emotions to the crowd. Grins, sneers, gestures and ways of moving, etc. are all indexical signs which connote triumph, revenge, innocence, viciousness or some other meaning. A grin would be an index of triumph, hitting the floor an index of submission in defeat, for instance. The wrestlers combine these signs together in syntagms and exaggerate them, so that there can be no doubt about how to read their connotations. The wrestling bout is much more like a pantomime than a fight, because highly coded signs are being presented for the enjoyment of the audience. Barthes's conclusion is that wrestling makes our confusing and ambiguous world intelligible, giving clearly readable meanings to the struggle between moral positions represented by the wrestlers. Wrestling for Barthes is a system of coded signs, a visual spectacle in which a highly theatrical and controlled version of reality is presented to us without ambiguity. Once we look beyond the surface of wrestling, where it can appear to be a rather silly and pointless spectacle, we find that wrestling is a way of communicating about morality and justice, transgression and punishment, through signs which belong to a code. Wrestling is a medium which speaks about our culture in a highly codified (and entertaining) form.

The second example of Barthes's project in *Mythologies* brings his work closer to the focus of this book: signs in the mass media. The second short essay in the volume is 'Romans in Films', and refers to the 1952 film *Julius Caesar*, based on Shakespeare's play and starring Marlon Brando. Once again Barthes produces a surprisingly analytical discussion of something apparently undeserving of serious study. The essay is not only about a Hollywood film (rather than an 'art' film, for instance), but it also focuses on only two details of the film: the haircuts of the actors, and the fact that almost everyone sweats in the film. Barthes considers these two details as symptoms of how the film adopts coded signs whose connotations communicate the film's underlying themes. The images of people on the screen are iconic signs, resembling the actors. The images of the film belong to a syntagm, the film narrative which unfolds through time from the beginning to the end.

jfk Robinson

In *Julius Caesar*, Barthes notes, 'all the characters are wearing fringes', and none of them are bald (1973: 26). This particular hairstyle works as a sign, whose connotation is 'Roman-ness'. Despite the American accents of the actors, and the fact that the film is based on a play written in the Renaissance, this hair sign enables the actors to persuade us of the consistency and believability of the classical setting. 'Romans are Romans thanks to the most legible of signs: hair on the forehead' (1973: 26). The film's impression of authenticity is conveyed in part, Barthes suggests, by this coded way of representing Roman-ness, so that the sign appears natural and intelligible, perhaps not even noticeable. The point is not whether Romans really had fringes or not. Rather, the hairstyle is a conventional sign belonging to a code of Roman-ness which the film uses, and which is both recognisable and consistent.

The soldiers, the labourers and the conspirators against Caesar all sweat in the film. Barthes argues that this is also a sign. 'Everyone is sweating because everyone is debating something within himself' (1973: 27). The sweat is therefore an indexical sign of moral feeling, the struggle in the minds of the characters about what they should do. This internal struggle apparently makes the characters sweat, and we read the sweat as an indexical sign of moral struggle. The only man who does not sweat is Julius Caesar himself, and Barthes argues that this is because he is the object of the conspiracy. Caesar does not have a moral dilemma in the same way as Brutus and the others who are plotting to kill Caesar. Sweating, like hairstyle, appears to be 'natural' in the film, perhaps scarcely noticeable, but it is a sign used in a meaningful way to signify that the film narrative is presenting a tragic psychological drama. Like hairstyle, this use of sweat as a sign depends on its belonging to a code recognised in our culture. Sweating and having fringes are coded signs whose connotations enable us to read the meaning of the film.

As a general conclusion at the end of 'The Romans in Films', Barthes criticises this kind of use of signs. Hairstyle and sweating are not foregrounded, made clear to the viewer as being coded signs (unlike the self-conscious display by the wrestlers). Barthes shows that these signs can be seen as a coherent and meaningful system once they are closely investigated, but a straightforward

viewing of the film would be unlikely to pick them out. Watching wrestling is pleasurable largely because of the audience's knowledge of the codes which are being used, and the way that the wrestlers exaggerate their signifying actions, making the codes they use evident. The coded signs in *Julius Caesar* are not made evident in this way. In the film, the sign 'remains on the surface, yet does not for all that give up the attempt to pass itself off as depth. It aims at making people understand (which is laudable) but at the same time suggests that it is spontaneous (which is cheating)' (1973: 28). These signs conceal the fact that they are part of a conventional code for representing Roman-ness, even though they are a crucial part of the film's meaningfulness.

### Myth and social meanings

Having looked briefly at two of Barthes's short essays in *Mythologies*, the rest of this section explains and discusses the longer essay which concludes the volume, 'Myth Today'. In it, Barthes draws together some of the more general critical points which his analyses of cultural products have led him to, and explains a coherent method for going on to study more aspects of social life. Many of the methods used, and issues addressed, in 'Myth Today' will appear in the following chapters of this book, though they will often require some development or criticism when they are applied to the different media covered there.

At the beginning of 'Myth Today', Barthes declares that 'myth is a type of speech' (1973: 109). We saw above that wrestling can be regarded as a medium in which messages about morality and behaviour are communicated through a theatrical type of entertainment. The moves, gestures and expressions in wrestling are a form of coded communication through signs, used self-consciously by the wrestlers. Wrestling, as it were, speaks to us about our reality. On one level, the wrestlers' gestures signify 'defeat' or 'helplessness'. They are signs for emotional or moral attitudes. But on another level, more abstractly, the whole wrestling match is itself a sign. It represents a moral terrain in which there is a crude and 'natural' form of justice. The 'bastard' is made to pay for his cheating and cruelty, and the match shows the spectators an exciting yet ordered world, compensating for

the ordinariness and disorder of reality. The wrestling match makes this 'natural' world intelligible by putting it on stage in the artificial form of the match itself.

But is this moral world natural, common-sense, unchangeable? It is not, Barthes argues, and instead the wrestling-match with its moral structures and positions represented by the wrestlers, merely makes it seem as if it were natural. Wrestling, and morality, are both products of a specific culture (west European pseudo-Christian culture). They are both tied to a certain historical period, and to a particular way of organising society in a particular place. The meanings of wrestling are not natural but cultural, not given but produced, not discovered but worked for, not real but mythical. In the same way, the Romans in *Julius Caesar* are made intelligible to the audience by a set of conventional signs, whose aim is to produce a myth of Roman-ness, a historical and psychological realism based not on reality but on convention. Myth, as Barthes uses the term, means things used as signs to communicate a social and political message about the world. The message always involves the distortion or forgetting of alternative messages, so that myth appears to be exclusively true, rather than one of a number of different possible messages.

The study of these myths, mythology, is part of the 'vast science of signs' which Saussure predicted, and called 'semiology' (or semiotics) (Barthes 1973: 111). Reading the messages in myth involves identifying the signs which it uses, and showing how they are built by means of codes into a structure which communicates particular messages and not others. This can be explained by discussing the main example Barthes uses in 'Myth Today'. Barthes imagines himself at the barber's, looking at the cover of an edition of the French glossy magazine *Paris-Match*. On the cover is a photograph of a black soldier in uniform, who is saluting the French flag. The signifiers, the shapes and colours in the photograph, can be easily read as meaningful iconic signs, which communicate the message 'a black soldier is giving the French salute'. But the picture has a greater signification, which goes beyond what it denotes. The picture signifies that

France is a great empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is

no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. (Barthes 1973: 116)

A set of iconic signs which already possess a meaning ('a black soldier is giving the French salute') becomes the basis for the imposition of an important social message, that French imperial rule is fair and egalitarian. This social message is myth, and a controversial one when Barthes wrote the essay in the 1950s. France's empire was disintegrating, and there was brutal military conflict in France's North African colony of Algeria where Algerians fought and campaigned for independence. The crisis was the main political issue in France, and extensively debated in the media. The mythic signification of the picture on *Paris-Match*'s cover argues in favour of colonial control, without appearing to do so.

The myths which are generated in a culture will change over time, and can only acquire their force because they relate to a certain context. In myth, the context and history of the signs are narrowed down and contained so that only a few features of their context and history have a signifying function. Where the photograph was taken, the name and life experience of the soldier, who it was that took the photograph, are all historical and contextual issues which are irrelevant and neglected once the photographic sign is used as the signifier to promote the myth of French imperialism. Instead, the mythic signification invokes other concepts, like the history of France as a colonial power, the contemporary conflict over Algeria, and issues of racial discrimination. What myth does is to hollow out the signs it uses, leaving only part of their meaning, and to invest them with a new signification which directs us to read them in one way and no other. The photograph of the black soldier saluting makes the reader aware of the issue of French colonialism, and asks him or her to take it for granted that black soldiers should be loyal to the French flag, that colonial rule is perfectly reasonable.

This is not the only way to read the mythic image of the soldier, though it is the reading which appears most 'natural'. Barthes suggests three ways of reading the photograph. First, the photograph could be seen as one of a potentially infinite number

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of possible images which support the myth of French imperialism. The black soldier is just one example of French imperialism in this case. Thinking of the image in this way, Barthes suggests, is how a journalist would think of it. Seeking to present a certain mythic signification on the cover of the magazine, the journalist would look for a suitable photograph which gives a concrete form to this abstract concept, and creates the mythic signification.

Alternatively, a mythologist like Barthes himself, or someone using the semiotic methods discussed here, would 'see through' the myth. This critical reader would note the way that the black soldier has had his meaning emptied out of the photograph, except that he is an alibi, a justification, for the mythic signification. The rightness and naturalness of France's colonial power is the dominant signification of the photograph, but one which the semiotologist is able to explain and unmask. The myth of French imperialism has been imposed on the photograph, but the mythologist is able to separate the photograph from the myth, the sign from the signification, to undo the effect which the myth aims to produce. The mythologist 'deciphers the myth, he understands a distortion' (Barthes 1973: 128).

Thirdly, an uncritical reader noticing the cover of *Paris-Match* but not analysing it, would simply receive the mythic signification as an unremarkable and natural fact. The photographic sign would seem to just show France's imperialism (translated, confusingly, as 'imperiality') as a natural state of affairs, hardly worth commenting on. The black soldier saluting would seem to be 'the very presence of French imperialism' (Barthes 1973: 128). The photograph in this case is neither an example chosen to illustrate a point, nor a distortion trying to impose itself on us. Instead, 'everything happens as if the picture naturally conjured up the concept, as if the signifier gave a foundation to the signified: the myth exists from the precise moment when French imperialism achieves the natural state' (Barthes 1973: 129-130). For Barthes, the function of myth is to make particular ideas, like France's colonial rule of other countries, seem natural. If these ideas seem natural, they will not be resisted or fought against. Myth makes particular social meanings acceptable as the common-sense truth about the world. The function of the criti-

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cism and analysis of myth must then be to remove the impression of naturalness by showing how the myth is constructed, and showing that it promotes one way of thinking while seeking to eliminate all the alternative ways of thinking.

**Myth and ideology**

The analysis of myth to reveal its selectiveness and distortion is obviously political in the broadest sense. Every political view, even if it does not acknowledge the fact, is a representation of an existing state of affairs which implies that changes of a certain kind, with a certain purpose, should be made. In Barthes's work, and in the work of many semiotic critics, the analysis of culture and society is carried out from a left-wing perspective, and often closely tied to Marxist ideas. In 'Myth Today', the later sections of the essay take up the methods of semiotic analysis which have been discussed so far, and relate them to a general political analysis of society. The key concept in this analysis is 'ideology', which will be discussed further in subsequent chapters of this book as it relates to the study of the media. An ideology is a way of perceiving reality and society which assumes that some ideas are self-evidently true, while other ideas are self-evidently biased or untrue. Ideologies are always shared by the members of a group or groups in society, and one group's ideology will always conflict with another's. Some of the arguments about ideology which are advanced by Barthes and others will be subject to criticism later as we investigate their usefulness in relation to concrete examples of contemporary media texts. In particular, I shall argue that an ideology is not necessarily a false consciousness of reality. But first, it is important to see how Barthes's analysis of myth is connected to the concept of ideology.

Barthes proposes that myth serves the ideological interests of a particular group in society, which he terms 'the bourgeoisie' (1973: 137). This term refers to the class of people who own or control the industrial, commercial, and political institutions of the society. It is in the interests of this class to maintain the stability of society, in order that their ownership, power and control can remain unchanged and unchallenged. Therefore, the current ways of thinking about all kinds of questions and issues, which

allow the current state of economic and political affairs to continue unchallenged, need to be perpetuated. Although the existing state of society might sometimes be maintained by force, it is most effective and convenient to maintain it by eliminating oppositional and alternative ways of thinking. The way that this is done is by making the current system of beliefs about society, the 'dominant ideology', seem natural, common-sense and self-evident.

The dominant ideology of a society is subject to change as the economic and political balance of power changes. Ideology then, is a historically contingent thing. If we look back, say, two hundred years, some features of the dominant ideology have obviously changed. Two hundred years ago, it would have been 'self-evident' that black people were inferior to whites, that women were weaker than and inferior to men, that children could be employed to do manual labour. These ideas were made to seem natural, common-sense. Today, each of these ideological views has been displaced. The ideology of today is different, but not necessarily any less unjust. However, it would be difficult to perceive that current ideologies need to be changed, since the function of ideology is to make the existing system appear natural and acceptable to us all. Myth, for Barthes, is a type of speech about social realities which supports ideology by taking these realities outside of the arena of political debate.

In the case of the soldier-Negro, for example, what is got rid of is certainly not French imperialism (on the contrary, since what must be actualised is its presence); it is the contingent, historical, in one word: fabricated, quality of colonialism. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of explanation but that of a statement of fact. If I state the fact of French imperialism without explaining it, if I state near to finding that it is natural and goes without saying: I am reassured. (Barthes 1973: 143)

The function of the photograph of the black soldier saluting the flag is to make French imperialism ('imperialism' in the quotation) seem like a neutral fact. It discourages us from asking questions or raising objections to colonialism. It serves the interests of a

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dominant ideology. The way that it is able to do this is by functioning as myth, presenting a historically specific situation as a natural and unremarkable one. Today, nearly thirty years after Barthes published *Mythologies*, colonial rule is regarded by most people as an outdated and embarrassing episode in European history. It is much easier to see how myths like French imperialism are constructed once they become distanced from the prevailing ideology. When analysing contemporary examples of myth in the media, the task of the mythologist in analysing the semiotic construction of myth becomes more difficult, since the very naturalness and self-evident quality of myth's ideological messages have to be overcome.

Semiotic methods are not always used to analyse cultural meanings from a left-wing point of view. British Army officers in training at Sandhurst Military Academy are taught semiotics as part of a course on media coverage of wars. Understanding media semiotics is useful to them when they have to deal with media reporting of military conflicts they are involved in, so that mythic meanings appropriate to the British Army's ideological view of the situation can be more effectively presented and made to appear natural, common-sense. Advertising agencies in continental Europe (e.g. Italy) and a few in Britain use semiotics to design more effective advertisements. Just as Barthes argued that a photographer might look for an image which conveys the myth of French imperialism, advertising copywriters might look for linguistic and visual signs which support the mythic meanings of a product.

Both verbal and visual signs are used in ads to generate messages about products and their users, and semiotics can provide a framework for precise discussion of how these signs work. But it will also become clear that advertisements have a highly ideological role, since 'by nature' they are encouraging their readers to consume products, and consumption is one of the fundamental principles of contemporary culture, part of our dominant ideology. In advertisements, consumption is naturalised and 'goes without saying'. In order to accomplish this ideological effect, we will see that advertisements make use of myth, attempting to attach mythic significations to products by taking up already-meaningful signs in a similar way to the photograph on the

cover of *Paris-Match*. The investigation of advertisements will involve further discussion of myth and ideology, and introduce some of the problems with the concepts of myth and ideology which have not so far been addressed.

### Sources and further reading

The theories of the sign in Saussure (1974) and Peirce (1958) are considerably more complex than the outlines of them in this chapter. For other explanations and discussions of the sign, see Culler (1976), and from a linguistic and literary perspective Hawkes (1983) and Eagleton (1983), and from a media studies perspective Fiske (1982) and Braunton and Stafford (1996).

Barthes (1973) contains many entertaining short essays in addition to those discussed in this chapter and is not too difficult, although some of his references to French culture and theorists may be obscure to a present-day reader. Two books which analyse aspects of culture in a similar way are Blonsky (1985) and Hebdige (1988), and Masterman (1984) contains short essays discussing myth and social meaning with reference to television. Barthes's work is discussed by Culler (1983) and Lavers (1982).

### Suggestions for further work

- 1 Make a selection of road signs from the Highway Code or from observation of your local area. Which features of the signs are iconic, indexical or symbolic? (Some may be combinations of these). Why do you think these signs were selected?
- 2 Analyse the front and back covers of this book and two others you are using on your course, or two others you use in different contexts (like cookbooks or leisure reading). What is denoted and connoted by the signs you find, and why?
- 3 Note the clothing, hairstyles and other adornments of two people you encounter. What do these signs connote, and what knowledge of cultural codes do you need in order to read the connotations?
- 4 Barthes argues that 'Roman-ness' is signified by hair on the forehead in the film of *Julius Caesar*. What other conventionalised signs for historical and cultural identities have you encountered in the media? Do they encode mythic meanings about the culture?
- 5 There are cultural codes governing the 'natural' combinations of foods in each course in a meal (paradigmatic choices), or the order

of courses in a meal (syntagmatic choices). How do the cultural codes of foods and eating with which you are familiar differ from those of other cultures (for example, Indian, Chinese, French) whose foods you have sampled?

- 6 Analyse the layout, décor, music, staff uniforms, displays, etc. in your local supermarket. What do these signs connote about the social roles of the shopper, the staff and the shop?
- 7 Analyse the physical attributes, accessories and packaging of dolls and action figures like Cindy, Barbie, Action Man and G. I. Joe. In what ways do their connotations encode ideological assumptions about each gender?