SEMIOTICS AND POPULAR CULTURE

Media Literacy and Semiotics

ELLIOT GAINES

Media Literacy and Semiotics

Semiotics and Popular Culture

Series Editor: Marcel Danesi

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Marcel Danesi is Professor of Semiotics and Anthropology at the University of Toronto. Among his major publications are *X-Rated!*; *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things; Vico, Metaphor, and The Origins of Language*; *Cool: The Signs and Meanings of Adolescence*; *The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life*; and *Brands*. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Semiotica*, the leading journal in semiotics.

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Media Literacy and Semiotics

Elliot Gaines

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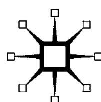

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For my sisters, in fond memory of our parents
who so loved the negotiation of meaning.

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Series Preface

Popular forms of entertainment have always existed. As he traveled the world, the ancient Greek historian Herodotus wrote about earthy, amusing performances and songs that seemed odd to him, but which were certainly very popular with common folk. He saw these, however, as the exception to the rule of true culture. One wonders what Herodotus would think in today's media culture, where his "exception" has become the rule. Why is popular culture so "popular"? What is psychologically behind it? What is it? Why do we hate to love it and love to hate it? What has happened to so-called high culture? What are the "meanings" and "social functions" of current pop culture forms such as sitcoms, reality TV programs, YouTube sites, and the like?

These are the kinds of questions that this series of books, written by experts and researchers in both popular culture studies and semiotics, will broach and discuss critically. Overall, they will attempt to decode the meanings inherent in spectacles, popular songs, coffee, video games, cars, fads, and other "objects" of contemporary pop culture. They will also take comprehensive glances at the relationship between culture and the human condition. Although written by scholars and intellectuals, each book will look beyond the many abstruse theories that have been put forward to explain popular culture, so as to penetrate its origins, evolution, and overall *raison d'être* human

life, exploring the psychic structures that it expresses and which make it so profoundly appealing, even to those who claim to hate it. Pop culture has been the driving force in guiding, or at leashing shaping, social evolution since the Roaring Twenties, triggering a broad debate about art, sex, and "true culture" that is still ongoing. This debate is a crucial one in today's global village where traditional canons of art and aesthetics are being challenged as never before in human history.

The books are written in clear language and style so that readers of all backgrounds can understand what is going in pop culture theory and semiotics, and, thus reflect upon current cultural trends. They have the dual function of introducing various disciplinary attitudes and research findings in a user-friendly fashion so that they can be used as texts in colleges and universities, while still appeal to the interested general reader. Ultimately, the goal of each book is to provide a part of a generic semiotic framework for understanding the world we live in and probably will live in for the foreseeable future.

Marcel Danesi
University of Toronto

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I want to thank everyone involved with the Semiotic Society of America. Over the course of many years now, SSA introduced me to a great assembly of pioneering scholars and provided a venue that supported the development of many of the ideas represented in this book. I wish to acknowledge Terry Prewitt, the director of the Semiotic Society, with my sincere thanks. With apologies for not mentioning each of the amazing scholars in the Society by name, I encourage the reader to look for the innovative research and publications available from them.

To my colleague and friend, T. Ford-Ahmed, many thanks for your support, encouragement, intelligent commentary, and tolerance for my idiosyncratic ways of expressing my enthusiasm for semiotics. I want to acknowledge Jenny Nelson, who introduced me to semiotics and the Semiotic Society and inspired my interest in media criticism and the craft of writing research.

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Many of the ideas and materials in this book were previously published in the *Proceedings of the Semiotic Society of America*. In addition, some chapters were adapted from published versions and reprinted with permission from the following journals and books. Chapters one and six were published in earlier forms in *Semiotica: The Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies* as "Media Literacy and Semiotics: Toward a Future Taxonomy of Meaning" and "The Narrative Semiotics of *The Daily Show*," and they are reprinted with permission from Mouton de Gruyter. A version of chapter two, "The Necessary Ambiguity of Communication," appeared in *MICA Communications Review* published by Mudra Institute of Communications, Ahmedabad, India. Parts of chapter four, "Audiences and the Semiotics of Space," are reproduced with permission from Sage Publications, India Pvt., from an earlier version titled "Communication and the Semiotics of Space," which appeared in the *Journal of Creative Communications*. Chapter seven, "News Stories as Culture, Information, and Entertainment," is reprinted with the permission of Hampton Press, Inc. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in *Building Diverse Communities: Applications of Communication Research*, edited by Mark Orbie, Trevy McDonald, and T. Ford-Ahmed. Thanks to all of the publishers for their editorial work with Palgrave Macmillan. Finally, thanks to you for recognizing the importance of media literacy and semiotics.

INTRODUCTION

Media Literacy and Semiotics

The Pervasiveness of Media

The fact that media are pervasive in contemporary life is not news, but questions about the effects of media are always debatable. Any topic can be addressed in the media; for example, the 1990s television situation comedy *Seinfeld* was promoted as a show about nothing. But rather than being about nothing, *Seinfeld* was a series of stories featuring a cast of comic characters that illustrated a particular contemporary set of values, beliefs, lifestyles, and practices. And while most entertainment is taken for granted as simple amusement, the topics, events, and issues that motivate stories affect social discourse about aspects of everyday life. Perhaps even more significant is that the same can be said about nonfiction media.

Since the earliest days of mass communication, media have influenced social discourse about the issues of the day. When print was the dominant medium, whoever owned a printing press had a great deal of power to influence the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of those who were able to receive what was being circulated. As new media develop, audiences adapt. While individuals have always been occupied with their own affairs, society forces collective issues into our everyday lives. As technological

innovations develop, new forms of media expand our capacities for communication and change the ways people live and interact.

The original colonies in the New World populated coastal regions where commerce depended on oceangoing vessels. The shipping news printed the arrival and departure schedules of ships necessary to everyone sending and receiving goods and supplies from far away places. But along with information about the timetables, readers could choose from a variety of points of view expressed by various writers who used those publications to voice opinions about events and issues that affected what people thought and did in their everyday lives. The media and technological innovations since that time have made an extensive impact which could not have been anticipated. Yet all technological innovations that extend our capacities for communication also reproduce fundamental characteristics of human interaction.

Most people manage to be aware of news and events that happen outside their immediate sphere of experiences, even while they are focused on more personal day-to-day activities in their own lives. Sometimes we learn about things from other people, but more often than not, we find out about events and ideas from media. We make many assumptions about sources of information and necessarily maintain a healthy skepticism if there are reasons to doubt the reliability of a particular personal source or media institution.

The sheer volume of information transmitted by the media can be overwhelming. The need to develop media literacy is fundamental to an informed society capable of thinking critically about the issues and ideas affecting democratic decision making. "Our culture is saturated with information," considering that, in the United States alone, about "175,000 book titles" will be published this year and that "radio stations send out 65.5 million hours of original programming," and television distributes "48 million hours" of programming worldwide.[1] Of the

diverse media and communication technologies that are available, there seems to be something for everyone among magazines, newspapers, radio and TV, film, digital audio and video, electronic gaming, mobile phones that integrate other innovations, convergent media, and services incorporating a range of new technologies, the Internet, and satellite communications.

With all that goes into keeping up with information and technologies in contemporary life, one might wonder why we pay attention to seemingly trivial things in the news, such as the lives of celebrities who get into trouble. Whether you follow the lives of the rich and famous, the events and standings of sports, the stock reports, regional political issues, or war in foreign lands, mass media circulate information that permeates society. Information and ideas are so infused into culture that people may not be conscious of what they know, or how they know it. Still, as ideas and questions about society circulate, everybody seems to have opinions, and people tend to believe that what they think is correct. However, most discussions do not systematically consider the effects of media and technologies on beliefs, opinions, habits, and cultural assumptions.

The nature of social discourse is a competition between ideas about how to address social issues. As a *hegemonic process*, social discourse is propelled by a desire to influence cultural values and beliefs. Ideas do not just come out of thin air, but they may appear to when someone somewhere sets out to express ideas of significance through some form of media. The pervasive presence of mass media has made it appear to be a natural part of our environment that is taken for granted until something appears to be wrong. While most people understand the potential to create illusions for effects in action or horror movies, media producers employ more subtle and effective methods to persuade and convince audiences in other ways.

Writers and programmers have the power to prepare information and entertainment knowing they will affect audiences, and they are careful to code their ideas using strategies and

technologies designed to deliver an intended message. Based on their perceptions of the authority of a given media source, audiences decide what to accept as valid. But media producers are masters of constructing messages using communication technologies. In order to think critically about communication and media, the logical nature of communication processes must be understood. Not only is it essential to be able to recognize and distinguish speculations, opinions, and beliefs from facts, but one must also know the differences between nature and socially constructed beliefs about the world. In so doing, audience members must accept some limits to what can be learned from a given media source.

About This Book and Processes of Media Communication

With a focus on mass media, the purposes of this project are to demonstrate how communication processes work in our everyday lives and how understanding media and communication can help ensure greater accuracy and effective interpretation. Considering the pervasiveness of media in contemporary society, critical thinking and media literacy are essential to the education of an informed public in a democratic society. Understanding the processes and effects of media are necessary for critical analysis.

Throughout this project, stories and examples taken from the media are used to illustrate the practical importance of identifying the structures of representation and communication strategies that motivate interpretation of everyday experiences. At the same time, the impact of media technologies must be addressed, because they add powerful dimensions to communication processes and raise many questions. The media analyzed in this book are examples that demonstrate many applied semiotic concepts. Words that appear in italics are generally defined within the text, but also appear in the glossary at the end of the book.

Italics are also used for titles of books and media programs, and occasionally for emphasis. The concepts defined for analyses are intended to help the reader develop a general sense of how semiotic methods can be applied to other examples of media and communication. Teachers, critics, and students of media are encouraged to think creatively about media literacy and to adapt these ideas, methods, and semiotic thinking to their own questions about media.

Communication is persistent and pervasive. Every waking moment of contemporary life seems to be impacted by experiences that require the interpretation of signs taken to be messages from the environment, other people, or media. And while we are busy interpreting necessary information, the processes of communication and the media are in the background. Those processes have significant effects on the interpretation of meanings and the messages they convey, even when people pay no attention to them. This book is designed to reveal the nature of communicative processes, especially those embedded in the media, and to provide an understanding of the subtleties that affect human perception and interpretation.

This project is grounded on a few basic premises: (1) communication is a representational process that is mostly taken for granted; (2) media communication is an important driving force in society; and (3) critical thinking and media literacy are necessary to an informed democratic society. Thus, the purposes of developing media criticism and applied semiotic methods of analysis include

- empowering media users to make informed decisions;
- educating producers so they can make ethical decisions about creating media;
- understanding the role of media in people's everyday lives and its effects on politics, lifestyles, and economics;
- identifying how knowledge is claimed, and the limits of what can be verified.

Media Extend Capacities to Communicate

As if everyday face-to-face communication were not already complicated enough, mass media add even more complexities and additional levels of separation between messages and the world they are intended to represent. Because of the ways that audiences consume media, people have a sense of familiarity with their personally selected sources and take much for granted about the validity of message content.

The availability of technologies and information make it possible to send messages to and from most places where people live, work, and interact. Computers, television, radio, mobile phones, and text messaging, for example, have all become as normal as face-to-face communication. While we are busy taking care of the necessities of our lives, we are immersed in a mediated world. Social discourse and significant events are selected, produced, and circulated until they are so ubiquitous that we may not even notice how we know what is going on around us. People may deny that they use media, but then acknowledge uses that are so habitual that they are not noticed.

Immersed in our cultural environment, we absorb communication just as we breathe the air around us. Like the air we breathe, we tend to take for granted the information, ideas, and beliefs that motivate everyday decisions and practices. People continuously make assumptions about the validity of what they hear and see, just as they must continuously evaluate the authenticity of a speaker. Yet the media are so much a part of our environment that the vast number of familiar and anonymous speakers circulating ideas and information become as normal as the air we breathe. Like pollution in the air, we may not notice subtle changes that can have profound long-term effects.

Communication theorists like McLuhan established the concept that media extend human capacities and affect the nature of messages.[2] Just as the wheel functions as an extension of the

human foot which facilitates mobility, and the telescope and microscope extend the abilities of the eye to see, media generally extend our capacities to speak and write language that communicates messages and ideas through time and space. The needs of our everyday lives are met by a selective awareness of available information as we discover what works and what does not. But meanings are communicated everywhere and we are constantly engaged in selecting from a barrage of sensory data. The mediated world requires awareness and an ability to read and interpret signs that help us understand its meanings.

How Meanings Are Expressed and Interpreted

It is natural for all living things to have specific capacities for sense perception that enable them to perceive and interpret signs necessary for their survival. Just as we are necessarily detectives seeking answers to questions by observing the conditions of the world around us, we all depend on signs as part of our everyday practice of communicating and interpreting meanings. *Semiotics* is the study of signs that represent and convey the significance of things. The concept of a *sign* indicates something such as a word, sound, or image that stands for or represents some meaning. Understanding semiotics clarifies the processes that express the meanings of the world around us by which we assess the conditions of our lives. The study of semiotics encourages a systematic awareness of how meanings are expressed and interpreted from the vast amount of available data to which we are regularly exposed.

While there are many approaches to media literacy, semiotics provides a clear foundation for the analysis of mass communication and the production of meaning. More than understanding the intended meanings available to the intelligent interpreter, semiotics provides a systematic method for understanding how signs work to produce meanings.

Organization of This Book: Toward a Semiotics of Media Literacy

The chapters of this book provide a collection of analytical methods that aim to systematically demonstrate and develop tools for critical thinking and to help establish media literacy as a necessary and achievable goal for our times.

Chapter 1 provides an essential foundation for the whole project and for the methods presented in subsequent chapters. The general characteristics of media criticism and applied semiotic methods are summarized. Since media literacy requires clear parameters for identifying communicative processes, a set of categories describing the ways that people attempt to settle differences of opinion are explained. Finally, a description is provided for a generic application of semiotic methods to the analysis of the media.

Chapter 2 addresses the necessary ambiguity of communication that results from the various perspectives that affect communication and interpretation. Media representations are experienced as immediate, but the events and objects that are represented through media are actually remote from direct experience. A set of semiotic concepts is introduced and applied to the analysis of a variety of examples.

Chapter 3 explores how opinion leaders and media storytellers communicate values and beliefs. Media mythologize and valorize specialized identity groups, such as doctors, lawyers, sports teams and individual athletes, warriors, and criminals, and create celebrities in general who act as proxies for audiences that identify with and derive satisfaction from the actions and accomplishments of others.

Chapter 4 addresses the topics of audiences, identity, and space. One of the defining qualities of media is that they alter the contexts of stories and messages in time and space. In spite of producers' intentions to program media to inform, entertain, or persuade, the contexts of representations in time and space are affected as individuals are situated to understand meanings from their own diverse points of view.

In chapter 5, a basic semiotic method is applied to the analysis of an episode of *The Simpsons* in order to examine entertainment as an expression of culture, ideology, and myth. Entertainment media are generally understood as various forms of amusement, but the pleasures of entertainment media do not conceal their impact on society. Media products and innovations take many forms and provoke perpetual debates about their effects. Chapter 5 includes figure 5.1 that illustrates several key semiotic relationships. In addition, the chapter ends with table 5.1 that illustrates the scene-by-scene analysis of the episode of *The Simpsons*.

Chapter 6 explores how continuity is essential to logic and the processes of social discourse. The chapter specifically focuses on the application of logic and continuity as part of a communication strategy used by writers for *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* on the Comedy Central television network.

Chapter 7 looks at news stories as culture, information, and entertainment. The purpose is to explicate the everyday communication practices of TV news associated with the cultural processes of storytelling that help negotiate the meanings of events. At the same time, a basic semiotic method is used to demonstrate how an applied structural analysis of a simple 90-second news story can reveal how cultural assumptions, values, and beliefs are negotiated within stories about real events. This chapter includes table 7.1 that illustrates the scene-by-scene content for the analysis of the news story.

Media Alter Contexts of Communication

Everything that is understood to have meaning must take some form that can be perceived to act as a sign that stands for its meaning. But a representation is not what it stands for. Thus communication is a continuous process of representation, perception, and interpretation. Media are forms of communication that extend our capacities to express ourselves beyond an individual's solitary experiences of the world. Individuals interact

and form societies built upon cultures that are developed into elaborate systems for sharing thoughts and understandings from one mind to the minds of others. Communication systems have grown from the unique human capacities to utter sounds and create coded systematic patterns of speech, and to adapt those codes to produce language as visual symbols to represent messages, ideas, and information that can be preserved over time and transported through space.

No matter how much media change and develop, humans still need to be able to reason and to understand what they find in media that represents the world around them. Individuals experience media directly, but the words, sounds, and images they receive only refer to what others experience or know, directly or indirectly. The various contexts of media messages effectively alter the interpretation of meanings. So, media have great potential to add complexities to signs that are organized, manipulated, and constructed intentionally to communicate meanings from any given perspective to others in another time and space. Critical thinking and media literacy are necessary for audiences to understand the effects and influences of media.

The way we live in and understand the world is affected by what we know from a constant cultural exchange circulated in the media. The people who shape the media are highly skilled image makers and storytellers. Considering the powerful influence of the media, developing tools and methods that enable critical analysis of all communication processes is essential. The advantages and hazards of media in an age of information suggest the importance of media literacy and critical thinking. The following chapters are intended to explain a systematic point of view—a way of understanding how we communicate and interpret meanings.

CHAPTER 1

Media Literacy and Semiotics

Media have an enormous influence on what we know and believe in contemporary Western cultures and, increasingly, around the world. Media production and distribution are expensive, and media messages are constructed by individuals and teams of people with the intention of sending messages that influence public opinions and individual actions. It is therefore necessary for every individual and social group to be able to critically analyze and understand media.

This chapter explores the conditions of media saturation and the perspectives that distinguish the intentions of media producers from the interpretations of people in the audience. The evolving processes and technologies used to communicate extraordinary levels of information, beliefs, and ideas suggest a need for systematic critique. Finally, a description is provided for a generic application of semiotic methods to analysis of the media.

Symbols and the Intimate Immediacy of Mass Media

Hearing the crash of a cymbal, one experiences the sound as a sensation that has no meaning in and of itself. Perhaps it can be recognized as a sound produced by striking a metal object.

But in the context of a particular piece of music, the crash of a cymbal can resemble the sound of thunder or an explosion or symbolically stand for an emotional exclamation among other sounds. In a similar way, the media of mass communication provide contexts combining signs and sign systems that represent a general meaning expressed through the nature of the media and an exclusive meaning negotiated between the framing of representations and the perceptions of a given text.

As a general rule, media themselves are only messengers; the media provide a context for systematic delivery that is secondary to the messages that appear to make sense on their own. The nature of the media affects the message because each medium embodies a distinct symbolic system of expression. A *symbol* is a type of sign that must be learned from others, the meaning of which can be shared within cultural groups. Thus, media always function at a minimum of two levels—the meaning of the message itself and the symbolic way the media represent it. "In semiotic terms, we are confronted with a sign process in which a symbol is used as a symbol."[1] Like when we hear the sound of a cymbal in a symphony, our attention is drawn to the meanings of symbols rather than the processes that produce them.

Without the technology of electronic media, speech, written language, and visual images still function as symbols assembled to convey messages and tell stories about objects, events, and ideas. By virtue of the media of mass communication, symbols are embedded in cultural codes. A meaning is often dependent on a *code* that provides rules for systematic relationships between signs that express meanings within a given context, such as the rules of a game, the way words are organized into sentences, or clues that let audiences know that a particular program contains important information, rather than entertainment. Reassembled, media are received with a potential sense of immediacy by individual members of mass audiences.

The nature of narrative is symbolic in that stories are represented by systems of signs understood by members of a group

who share knowledge of the codes that structure meanings. A newspaper article about the speech of a politician like the president of the United States assumes the readers' knowledge of the language, context, and continuity of the political discourse. The same is true when video of the identical speech appears on TV or the Internet with the additional impact and emotion expressed by the sound, appearance, and verisimilitude of the immediate presence of the speaker. The technologies of the media make it possible to resignify symbolic systems, while overcoming the natural restrictions of time and space and making communication appear immediate and intimate when received.

Two other related concepts must be considered as categories of representation, along with the symbol. While the symbol must be learned in order for someone to know its meaning, an *icon* is a sign that expresses a meaning because it resembles what it stands for. An icon is a general category of expression and can be very effective because of the assumptions that are associated with resemblances. A drawing may look like something with only a few recognizable general characteristics. Many plants and animals attract their prey by mimicking characteristics of other plants or animals, thus demonstrating that resemblances are persuasive. But icons are not necessarily reliable signs. They work well, however, to create universally recognizable signs, as in a cartoon series such as *The Simpsons*, in which simple drawings represent the general characteristics of humans.

A third category of signs is the *index*, which is defined by its capacity to stand for something that actually exists. An *index* is a sign that has a physical or material connection to its referent. The power of an indexical sign is that it points to something specific, like an index finger that points to an object. Smoke can be understood as an index to fire just as a beeping sound might be an index to an oncoming car. A fingerprint or footprint, or other physical clues in a detective story, are other examples of indices. In many situations, such as considering an image that looks like someone or something particular, the distinction between an

icon and an index can be critical to identifying a forgery or an impersonator.

The semiotic concepts of the icon, index, and symbol must be carefully considered when analyzing the media. An image of a recognizable person in the media gives a sense that the person is present, even though a media representation necessarily originates far from the receiver and generally at a different time. Immediacy has a powerful and persuasive effect on individuals who receive communication in personal spaces. Thus, the power of mass media is not just in their capacities to deliver ideas and information, but also in their ability to exploit the verisimilitude of representations that are received with a sense of intimacy and immediacy.

The third-person effect hypothesis suggests that most people generally believe that media affect other people, while they themselves are immune to being manipulated or persuaded unknowingly.[2] Audiences need to recognize that media affect every user because attention is drawn to illusions of actuality and inferences of consequences.

As new media develop, they are adopted and incorporated into everyday practices until a generation of users become dependent on them and can no longer remember, or even imagine, life without them. Underlying all of these media are the cultural constructs of speech and language, shared values, concepts, beliefs, and practices. Established *codes* of behavior guide the design and use of interior spaces, protocols for general manners for various interpersonal interactions (including rules for interpersonal proximity), appropriate clothing for particular occasions, ethics for specific situations, and more.

So much of what people know about the world around them is learned from media sources and interpreted in the context of an individual's life, experience, and circumstances. Media are ubiquitous and enter personal space with a sense of immediacy that gives contemporary mass communications and opinion leaders great power and access to people. Without critical thinking, it

is easy to assume a great deal about the media and the world of objects, ideas, and situations they represent.

Media Literacy as a Community of Inquiry

Clearly, as people adjust to routines that allow them to process vast amounts of information, media have an enormous influence. All media producers assume they will attract an audience and deliver their messages. But people use media for their own purposes and generally do not think critically about the persuasive nature of repetitive images and ideas that become normal because they are familiar. The goal of media is to attract attention in order to successfully profit and sustain themselves. By delivering information and entertainment the media make people familiar with certain lifestyles, products, and social norms that influence the everyday values of individuals who, collectively, impact the ethos of society. Especially because people use media out of habit and respond automatically to ideas, information, and entertainment, a method for revealing the assumptions that sustain certain beliefs and practices can help to promote the well-reasoned open discussions that are essential to a democratic society.

What all media have in common is the semiotic nature of communication; meanings emerge from communicative processes initiated through the perception of signs. Those signs express references to objects, events, or ideas that originate somewhere other than where and when the media are received by audience members. Semiotic theory is based on an assumption that all living things have a capacity to perceive, interpret, and interact with the world in order to survive. It is our nature to perceive the world through our senses and to interpret meanings that inform the ways in which we act. Beyond the most basic instincts for survival, we live in a complex world of signs that stand for objects, events, and ideas that influence lifestyles, attitudes, and political decisions.

The representational qualities of media phenomena are reasonable because they are logically developed from older, familiar portrayals that are consistent with established ideas. Media project a tacit authority to provide knowledge and expertise, but the media draw credibility from their repetitive and persistent presence, which simulates the continuity of signs necessary to logical reasoning. However, this is an illusion of veracity generated by the media that cannot substitute for verification.

Part of the illusion is self-referential; media referring to, or indexing, other media products or spokespersons demonstrates social discourse, but does not provide evidence of actuality. In order to understand authentic verification, it is necessary to look at the methods of proposing opinions about the meanings of things.

Settling Opinion

Pierce described five general ways of "settling opinion" in order to achieve consensus about the truth: the methods of tenacity, authority, popular opinion, a priori, and the method of inquiry.[3] Each of these methods is represented in the media, but only an "ongoing process of inquiry" can provide verification and consensus in the long term because "the possibility of truth rests on an appeal to the real, understood as something that cannot be changed by human convention."[4] The nature of actual existent phenomena is unaffected by opinions and interpretations drawn from various cultural perspectives. Scientific communities systematically test and peer-review the results of studies to verify the accuracy and validity of research methods and findings. General audiences lack the specialized knowledge of scientists and other expert communities that are necessary for understanding the details of rigorous science, scholarly research, and discipline-specific discourse of diverse specialties. Thus, media often provide lay descriptions of complex issues that enter into public debates.

Conventional fiction and nonfiction media representations employ all of the various methods of "settling opinions" and influence social discourse about facts, events, and speculations and their effects on beliefs and public policy.[5] While all such methods fail to deliver absolute truth, their persuasive application in media suggests that critical explication is necessary to understand the methods of tenacity, authority, popular opinion, a priori, and the method of inquiry as imbricating communication strategies.

The method of "tenacity" is an insistence that a belief is valid without considering evidence to the contrary.[6] An argument based on tenacity will only prevail in isolation or if one has absolute power to influence. Media circulate ideas and information widely, so tenacity should fail when contradictory opinions challenge unsubstantiated claims. Still, media audiences are so large that sheer tenacity persuades a great number of people who are inclined to accept a particular point of view regardless of opposing evidence.

A Fox News Channel political commentator like Bill O'Reilly can insist on his own point of view and literally tell someone on his TV show who disagrees with him to shut up. Any commentator or journalist can be mistaken about the facts or possible inferences of news events or political outcomes. But beyond a lack of simple courtesy in public discourse, O'Reilly uses tenacity as a communication strategy to dramatically demonstrate that he has the authority to silence anyone on his show who has an opposing opinion.

One imposes beliefs on others using the method of "authority" because one has the brute power to do so.[7] Generally used in order to sustain the control of those in power, the method of imposing opinions on others generally works until evidence to the contrary is persuasive enough, and the oppressive power of authority can be resisted or overthrown. For example, consider the historical case of Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis, a Hungarian obstetrician who lived from 1818 to 1865 and introduced

antiseptic prophylaxis into medicine.[8] Working in a maternity ward in Vienna, he observed that patients became ill and died after being examined by student physicians who had come directly from working in the morgue. Semmelweis experimented with antiseptic practices by simply insisting that students wash their hands before touching patients. His experiments resulted in reducing the death rate by 11 percent in two years, according to the Centers for Disease Control.[9] Still, physicians and hospital officials were insulted by his suggestion that they should wash their hands. Arguing that their methods were well established and correct, they ultimately had the authority to terminate Semmelweis and force him to leave Austria in 1850.[10]

It took many years, but the method of inquiry eventually overcame the authority of established medical practitioners of the time. Eventually, the principles of antiseptic prophylaxis were accepted as true. Even though the general population may not understand the scientific reasons why these practices prevent the spread of disease, the media helped to generate a popular opinion that embraced basic hygienic behaviors like washing hands before engaging in medical procedures, eating, or handling food.

In contrast to a notion of authority based on brute force, the authority of the media is derived from its pervasiveness and capacity to promote complicity through identification with the dominant ideologies generally portrayed through the media. Exploiting the universal appeal of wealth and material comfort, media representations suggest that the general audience accept the values and beliefs of those with power. Audiences adopt values that are attractive and familiar, and eventually these values can be developed to a level of acceptance that becomes popular opinion. However, popular opinions are still derived without verification. For example, opinions about the guilt or innocence of someone accused of a crime do not affect the truth, but can possibly influence the outcome of judicial decisions through the power of media.

While the media may not be unified in a conscious conspiracy to manufacture consent, cultural *hegemony* sustains the

dominance of certain belief systems. Following the ideas of Walter Lippmann, who served on President Woodrow Wilson's Committee on Public Information, media propaganda has intentionally been employed to influence public opinion.[11] Recognizing the advantages of gaining complicity rather than using coercion, powerful interests exploit the media in order to gain consensus for policies. Promoting themselves as messengers, the media attract attention to celebrity personalities, spokespersons, and opinion leaders, who become familiar and attractive to the more diverse populations in the audience. To a great extent media spokespersons are assumed *a priori* to be knowledgeable and to speak the truth in the public interest, simply because they have a presence in the media and subsequent access to audiences. Again, media personalities become familiar and self-referential, creating an illusion of reason based on an internal logic of ideas that were not necessarily verified. Opinions based on fear and hatred affect emotions and rhetorically include some people in the audience while isolating others.

Commercial media promote lifestyles, consumerism, and ideologies that appeal to the reasoning of the audience a priori, and maintain the values of existing power structures at the same time. The a priori method is comfortable because it seems reasonable, but it is also accepted without the rigor of testing its validity. According to Peirce,

> The most perfect example of it is to be found in the history of metaphysical philosophy. Systems of this sort have not usually rested upon any observed facts, at least not in any great degree. They have been chiefly adopted because their fundamental propositions seemed "agreeable to reason."[12]

Considering that news events happen at remote locations, audiences can either accept or reject the reliability of journalists or opinion leaders based on assumptions a priori. The a priori method appeals to what people already know or believe

to be true and, according to Peirce, is very similar to the method of authority. "The very essence of it is to think as one is inclined to think. All metaphysicians will be sure to do that, however they may be inclined to judge each other to be perversely wrong."[13]

While commentators argue polemics and speculate on the inferences of policies and events, the news items and stories circulating among nonfiction media are remarkably consistent. Related topics with cultural significance appear in newspapers and magazines and on radio, TV, and the Internet, creating cycles initiated by an event like the Olympics, a medical breakthrough, a government initiative, a high-profile crime, a scandal, or a legal case. At some level beyond verification, all news stories appeal to a priori assumptions that sustain what a particular demographic audience is inclined to think about the inferences of events conveyed by the media.

The a priori method appeals to a universal sense of reason that is comfortable to an individual or group that does not necessarily accept the authority or popular opinions of others.[14] An example of the a priori method is a continuing debate that challenges the validity of science and scientific methods.

Advancing familiar ideas and habits of reasoning, opinion leaders use the media to argue that scientists do not all agree or that scientific opinions change and are therefore unreliable. Determined to maintain the dominance of a political ideology, religion, or economic model, the a priori method fails to prepare opinion leaders to recognize scientific inquiry as a perpetual search for evidence of facts that need further verification in specifically situated contexts. Thus, a community of scientists recognizes its own fallibility as an asset.

With an understanding that the method of inquiry is a continuing process of observing, openly questioning, and testing validity, scientists do not assume they are correct a priori; they reject beliefs based on tenacity, resist control by authority, and are not influenced by popular opinion.[15]

In contrast to science, fiction media use artistic representations that resemble what is real and creatively describe the qualities of actual experiences. Within stories about characters and events,writers always re-present ideas derived from experience and observation. Fiction writers specialize in crafting descriptions simulating reality that amplify aspects of experience without a direct attempt to be accurate about actual events. Still, the emotional and poetic qualities of fiction narrative evoke empathetic feelings through identification with the realistic qualities of the events and experiences of the characters in a story. In this way, fiction relies on the methods of a priori and popular opinion to sustain belief in the affective realism of a fiction narrative.

Similarly, in the guise of serving the public interest, nonfiction media persistently engage in political discussions that are staged to appear to be representative of the general population involved in democratic social discourse. Spokespersons seem to have authority because they have the power of the media to amplify their opinions, and they can appear to speak for others in the general population. Opinion leaders who insist with tenacity that their ideas and solutions are correct, even if they have no evidence and there are signs to the contrary, appeal to popular opinion as if consensus was evidence. Such political discussions suggest that the actual conditions of the world can be negotiated and that popular opinion can somehow resolve conflicts about the nature of the truth and the material nature of the universe.

News media have traditionally regarded objectivity as the notion that reporters can describe real events without speculation or opinions. The ideal of journalism is based on observation and the principles of inquiry, but the authority of any given media artifact is negotiated by people in the audience through popular opinion. While the ideals of objective journalism have been effectively debunked, traditional journalists maintain an ethos of accountability and independence while maintaining a clear distinction between verifiable facts and opinions that are based

on speculations. People who own and control the media have the power to assert the method of authority and to readily exploit the potential of propaganda to maintain particular beliefs and promote specific ideas. Fox News, for example, targets members of a particular demographic audience who want their popular opinions validated by the authority of the network.

Speaking of the appeal of authority, Peirce stated, "For the mass of mankind, then, there is perhaps no better method than this. If it is their highest impulse to be intellectual slaves, then slaves they ought to remain."[16] While similar to Lippman's elite determination to control public opinion, from his nineteenth-century perspective Peirce could not have anticipated the powerful influence and extensive reach of twentieth-century media technologies. Still, authentic verification depends on observation and a community of inquiry that necessarily are "subject to investigation, since they are fallible and subject to genuine doubt."[17]

Media and technologies empower writers and producers to selectively focus attention on objects and ideas and to distribute them without the natural constraints of space and time. Media consumers need a logical method in order to engage in affectively understanding media. That method must specifically address the conditions of media production (such as quotas and deadlines) and the motivations of producers (such as profits or ideological agendas), and consider the contexts and identities that affect individual reception and interpretation. Recalling the classical ideas of rhetoric and representation, as well as McLuhan's global village and his observations about technologies extending human capacities,[18] semiotics provides the descriptive tools necessary to understand the processes that distinguish media communications.

The Role of Semiotics

The role of semiotics is to study the relationships between signs and the objects, ideas, events, and meanings that they stand for,

and also to understand how signs produce other signs that determine meanings that translate into the actions of interpreters. *Semiotics* is descriptive, but it does not resolve the issues communicated by the subject of its observations. Rather, semiotics can illuminate the processes that communicate and produce meanings, describe the limits of knowledge expressed through certain processes, and facilitate critical discourse about the certainty of what can be known.

Great debates among semiotic scholars raise questions and explore important issues that are beyond the understanding of those without training and extensive experience with such concerns, and perhaps, are not very useful for promoting media literacy. Media literacy calls for a common sense approach to understanding how to discuss communication, the processes that engender meanings, and the nature of media. Still, the method of analysis must be based on systematic inquiry that aims for consensus about observable data.

Critical Thinking and an Analytical Semiotic Method

In spite of how well they can imitate reality, the conditions of media communication leave audiences alienated from direct experience in nature. Critical thinking must be applied to breaking the habit of accepting media representation as reality. As Peirce stated, "The action of thought is excited by the irritation of doubt, and ceases when belief is attained; so the production of belief is the sole function of thought."[19] Without sacrificing the pleasures and informed purposes of using media, critical thinking and media literacy incorporate awareness of the processes that produce message content and a realistic sense of immediacy.

Media provide symbols such as words and images that stand for ideas and objects, constructing layers of communication. The essences of messages are represented within codes that

construct the shared understandings of cultural systems. In other words, media only appear to represent reality by effectively using technologies to encrypt additional layers upon established representational systems that are based on elaborate, shared sets of assumptions. Those assumptions replace the "irritation of doubt" because habits "establish in our nature a rule of action" that maintains certain beliefs and sustains a certain social order.[20] While social order is necessary to civil societies, in order to resist subordination and domination sustained through the subtleties of media representations, media literate people need to understand the explicit meanings of assumptions that conceal ideologies. A logical method is necessary.

The method begins with the recognition of signs that raise questions. When the irritation of doubt occurs, a sign appears in the mind of a media interpreter that conflicts with that person's experience or sense of identity and that acts as a thought stopper. An "Aha! reaction" is "a sudden critical reaction" that can be an intuitive response that initiates reflective considerations about some aspect of media.[21] As a way to begin to think critically about the media, an aha reaction prompts an observer to look for signs and sign relations representing objects or ideas that may carry more meaning than is expressly intended in the content of a message system. Effective reflection and analysis require breaking the habit of simply accepting the intended messages and exploring assumptions concealed within the nature and processes of communication.

Thought stoppers are only the beginning. When encountering something new or previously unknown, the mind seeks frames and categories of known objects, ideas, or events to try to understand new phenomena. This is a creative mental process called abduction, which activates a back and forth negotiation that seeks to recognize shared qualities suggesting an association between a familiar sign and something new. This process helps comprehension, but diminishes the potency of a specific concept by generalizing its distinctive qualities.

What is observable, known, or assumed in a given sign system? How do signs represent meanings? Asking and answering such questions generally does not just happen. Media literacy and critical thinking require skills, awareness, and motivation to break the everyday habits of understanding and and change behaviors that are learned as strategies to cope with a perpetual stream of situations and information. Because each individual negotiates and constructs a personal identity built upon shared characteristics, affinities, and differences from others, certain kinds of representations imbedded in media suggest assumptions, or ideological silences, expressing structures of power maintained by writers, politicians, and media producers. The media are useful, and their general appeal acts in defiance of the effort necessary for the development of media literacy.

The repetitive nature of media messages renders ideological assumptions normal because they are so familiar. Recognition of the significance of ideologies is initially subtle and can be easily dismissed. Typically, representations of race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other culturally exclusive perspectives suggest issues of power relations within social contexts.

Many examples of subtle *ideological silences* are explored in the chapters that follow. For example, a Budweiser commercial is generally expected to sell beer. But commercials often seek to entertain a particular demographic population; in the case of Budweiser, an advertisement was designed to appeal to workers who would rather be drinking beer than working. Using the facade of a scientific laboratory in a comic commercial, Budweiser scientists are portrayed as working to improve the quality of people's lives. They invent a fake coffee cup that simulates steam so that an office worker can appear to be present and working while he is actually out drinking beer. Because a steaming cup of coffee is on his desk, the boss and coworkers take the steam as an indexical sign indicating that the person is at work on the premises. Joking about the idea of tricking an

employer, this scenario promotes dishonesty and expresses an ideological silence without confronting the alienation associated with working conditions. The audience that finds this appealing and entertaining might consider questions of values and ethics between employers and employees.

Using similar associative logic, video games advocate violence, cars are marketed for their sex appeal, and cooking and cleaning products are promoted directly to women as a means of maintaining their identities as domestic workers. While these examples may seem apparent, innumerable products are promoted every day that conceal ideologies, even as they exploit them, in order to appeal to the normal social values of prospective consumers. There may be nothing objectionable about the values imbedded in product promotions, but media literacy suggests the importance of being aware of latent assumptions in order to make intelligent choices based on valid criteria.

There is no single way to promote media literacy or to analyze media, but semiotic logic offers a pragmatic perspective that has powerful potential for universal application to all issues related to communication. When we understand that all meanings are negotiated through a process that is initiated by the perception of signs and that reason is *semiosis*, the process of signs referring to other signs, we can begin to share a consistent method of understanding the structures of rational thought.

We know a sign first by its qualities, one of which is to have a perceptible presence. If we have not noticed a sign, it cannot refer to anything or be associated with a meaning. What qualities distinguish any given sign from something else? One must inquire into the form of representations and look for qualities that express the meaning of a sign or raise questions about how it is to be interpreted.

Media representations are generally not one dimensional and can express a general meaning while also suggesting multiple secondary characteristics and specific applications. Different media are sometimes classified into categories: *genres* that are

established according to general characteristics such as fiction and nonfiction, news and commentary, comedy, drama, or mystery. Genre names set up certain expectations about the style and characteristics of stories and meanings, even though any specific example may exhibit distinguishing variations.

> Any number of qualities or ideas may merge (generalize), but when they do so they lose their individual identities and become part of the new *quale*-consciousness or idea. But like qualities, of which in essence they are generalizations, ideas do not lose their character of being what they are in themselves.[22]

We look for continuity in experience in order to fit what is new or spontaneous into familiar categories of ideas that are already established and accepted as reasonable.

Ideas appear reasonable because they are consistent in some way with older habits of understanding. After the disastrous events that occurred in New York on the morning of September 11, 2001, broadcasters showed the same images over and over again. At the same time, reporters explained the events by relating them to other events, such as the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Assuming the attackers had been foreign invaders, and not a domestic terrorist like the Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh, reporters associated the events with the initiation of a global war before any facts had been verified. This, again, is the active process known as *semiosis*, the cognitive initiative of ideas referring to other ideas and thus building new understandings so they are continuous with the past. While it is the nature of signs to develop, it is also a potential limitation to understanding, because random events occur that may require creative interpretations to accommodate new contexts of experience.

The tendency to generalize the meanings of representations by assuming they are what they appear to resemble suggests the

power that media producers can use to exploit communication technologies that have the capacity to create realistic illusions representing reality. The acquired skill of recognizing thought stoppers and "aha reactions" enables an observer to use that ability to isolate a sign that contradicts the intentions of a message sender or a problematic relationship between a sign and its object.

With the infinite possibilities of media to consider, one must, at first, explore semiotic methods at a very basic level. The purposes of media literacy should not be forgotten in the process of analysis. What is important is an understanding of the logic of arguments, persuasion, and socially constructed values, beliefs, and practices, apart from information, ideas, and the actual nature of the object of analysis. Ideas, beliefs, and cultural values must be distinguished from things in nature that are not affected by human values and beliefs. This is applicable to entertainment as well as information and nonfiction media.

Semiotic theory was derived from observations of the natural capacities of living things to perceive the world around them and interpret those things that are necessary to survival. Media have replaced direct experiences in many situations that affect contemporary life. Cultural institutions and practices conceal myths behind the comfortable familiarity and assumptions about beliefs and practices that are considered normal simply because they appear to be the way things have been done in the past. Assumptions about the merits of any culturally constructed system must not be taken for granted. By discovering the assumptions in media representations, the literate observer can enjoy the pleasures of the media and be capable of negotiating independent understandings, while still being aware of attempts to persuade or manipulate the audience. As with traditional literacy, the exploration of moral and aesthetic codes requires another level of analysis in order to distinguish past practice from the potential for new understandings.

How to Analyze Media

Methods of analysis depend on the specific nature of the media artifact under consideration and the kinds of questions asked. Criteria for the selection of media samples worthy of analysis are based on observations that evoke questions about communication, power, social norms, conventions, stereotypes, or categories of identity, such as race, class, age, or gender. When a media artifact raises questions, isolate problematic issues as much as possible.

- Separate distinctive elements of a sign system such as sound, images, text, and specific aspects of context.
- Identify cultural codes that organize sign systems into meaning-making patterns of communication.
- Identify the media genre and the categorical expectations that are implied. Is it a nonfiction representation, or a fiction form intended to be entertainment?

Identify how communication takes place. That is, what signs are perceived as significant: words, sounds, images, objects, a mental image, an idea or concept, a sense, intuition, or feeling? Is meaning communicated as an existent connection to real events or objects in the world (index), a resemblance to actual objects or events (icon), or a cultural convention (symbol)? Consider the power and resonance of these categories and the significance of how they describe the relationship between a sign and its referent, meaning, or object.

Distinguish between *denotation* (the literal meanings) and *connotation* (the implied meanings), considering the context of the signs in relation to social conventions, values, and beliefs. For example, a car is literally (denotation) a means of transportation, but a Lexus (or other pricey late model) is a car that also implies (connotation) that the person using the car is wealthy and has high social status.

The first reaction to signs is usually the connotation, while the literal, or denotative, meaning is assumed. But those assumptions may say more about the interpreter than the object. The relationship between the sign and its object determines the *interpretant*; new meanings potentially emerge from how each different interpreter perceives the object as having some consequence or significance. True or not in any other context, interpreters are determined, even if only for the moment, by their own responses to signs.

The media analyst must understand the distinctions between discourse within the media phenomenon (story world) and the circulation of meaning in the audience. Characters and events that happen within the play of the media are fixed texts, so signs and sign relations are observable to the analyst. Writers determine the characters and events in a fiction narrative, but audiences are made up of diverse individuals that dynamically negotiate meanings from a variety of potential perspectives circulating among the members of the audience.

Ask the following questions about the media being analyzed:

- Who is the source of information?
- What is the intended meaning?
- Why is this communication phenomenon available (to entertain, inform, persuade, etc.)?
- Does the encoded (intended) message conceal assumptions (or ideological silence), cultural myths, intertextual references, values, or beliefs that are not explicitly expressed?
- How can the potential for different meanings be interpreted? That is, what are the possible alternative interpretations of the intended meaning and why would different people interpret the same phenomena differently? For example, a representation might appeal to men and offend women at the same time.

Media analysis generally requires accurate qualitative descriptions. To write or present an analysis, introduce the problematic nature of the text and briefly describe the narrative denotatively.

Interpret the connotative meanings, recognizing evidence of assumptions and the practical consequence of signs and sign systems that convey the problematic aspects of the text. Assumptions would include the codes that reproduce values and beliefs of any cultural institution or stereotypical expectations about class, gender, age, ethnicity, and so forth. Conclude with an interpretation of the evidence and possible consequences of this understanding.

Explore significant meanings that were not necessarily intended by the writers or media producers. One of the purposes of the analysis is to discuss the assumptions the writers make about the meaning they intend the audience to read. In other words, the job of the media analyst is to explain why a particular media artifact is important for people to discuss.

An "aha" moment is the first insight into the problematic nature of a particular media sample. If there is conflict about something within the topic, explore the assumptions made by everyone concerned and decide what is important about the disagreement.

In an episode of *Seinfeld* concerned with the practices and social conventions of "dating," the meaning of dating is questioned.[23] Discussed in greater detail in chapter 2, entertainment programs such as *Seinfeld* use comic situations to discuss social conventions and the meanings of real life situations in indirect ways. When exploring ideological issues about people and society, it is important to understand the difference between nature's and society's rules. Nature deals with the physical properties of life, whereas society invents rules for living with other people.

Certain skills or abilities are prerequisite to successful media analysis:

- *Reflectivity* refers to the ability to see yourself, know how you feel or think about categories of life situations, and understand your own "worldview" (or paradigm) as distinct from how others may view the world, a set of circumstances, or a particular event. *Others* may be

identified by various distinctions, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, or a particular historical context. *Reflectivity* also refers to the ability to recognize the values or beliefs that support a particular interpretation of events or circumstances.

- The media analyst must be able to recognize assumptions and *ideological silences* that support certain values and beliefs, so that they can be examined beyond their silent and a priori quality.
- Media literacy requires an ability to recognize differences between specific information communicated, knowledge embodied by an interpreter, and value added through representation of communication phenomena.
- The media analyst must understand the distinctions between discourse within the media phenomenon, or story world, and the circulation of meaning in the audience. The story world of the narrative has already been constructed from a particular point of view, but the audience negotiates meanings from multiple perspectives.
- The media analyst asks questions such as who is encoding the message and why; what is the context and history behind a narrative; what assumptions are embedded in the messages; and how does the medium itself influence the nature of communication?
- The purpose of media analysis is not necessarily a matter of judgment or morality, right or wrong, but may simply be an attempt to understand the nature of communication and media.
- Theoretical perspectives are not laws or even rules; they offer guidelines to help understand the process of media analysis.

In the final analysis, an interpretation may include value judgments or may provide insight into a writer's process. No matter what specific questions motivate media analysis, understanding improves social discourse and the possibilities for positive change.

Media Literacy and Semiotics for the Future

The purpose of this chapter is to provide ways to analyze, define, and categorize media in order to better understand and make the best use of its content. Rather than to condone or condemn, the purpose of media literacy and semiotic analysis is to recognize the nature of media and the significance of its effects.

Clearly, the power and the potential to manipulate the beliefs and practices of mass audiences have been exploited and abused in the interests of ideologies, politics, and profits. Audiences, as individuals and as groups, appear to have little collective authority to change the powerful institutions that control the media. Understood from a pragmatic perspective, education is subversive because independent, critical thinking tends to promote social discourse that challenges conventional thinking and existing power structures.[24] Critical thinking and media literacy will most likely empower individuals, rather than governments and institutions that are determined to maintain their own power. Job training and a degree of conformity are necessary for maintaining a labor pool capable of sustaining existing commercial interests and power structures. Enigmatically, educating a generation of media consumers to think critically and analyze media will help to promote change and a more egalitarian culture.

Semiotics is an empirically objective tool that can describe, define, and categorize the communicative processes that produce meanings. The study of semiotics builds knowledge of logic. Recognizing communication processes and strategies prepares people to understand media, make better use of its strengths, and cope with its effects and influence. Semiotic analysis and media literacy prepare the way for improved understanding and social discourse.

Media attract attention and deliver messages in a process that sustains the economic, political, and cultural influences of the dominant ideology of those who control it. Commercially viable media require expensive equipment and resources that engage

many people in planning, production, distribution, and reception, all of which link multiple cultures and extensions of society. At all levels, cultures reproduce themselves, and media have their own unique collection of cultural environments. Media institutions maintain a multiplicity of dominant ideologies as new products and services develop, and new voices emerge from the top-down and bottom-up, representing every possible voice in society. Each has a worldview to share, and all aspire to propagate their perspectives, seeking the kind of hegemony achieved by Hollywood, Madison Avenue, Wall Street, and Washington, each with its own brand of meaning.

Ultimately, meaning is a call to action. If people respond to media without question, without systematic logic, they will be influenced to act according to the values and purposes of those who control the media. When media dominate a society, the most powerful effect is not necessarily controlling what audiences think, but restricting what they think about. If democracy is constrained by what media prescribe, creativity and independent thinking are curtailed, everyone is identified as consumers who relinquish their responsibilities to act as independent members of a democratic society, and freedom becomes limited to choosing what to buy.

Media users select what appeals to them without necessarily knowing why. Audiences relate to characters and situations that seem to reflect aspects of their own experiences and desires. But understanding the structures of communication provides insight into the importance of a well-developed foundation of logic and knowledge. Just as the foundation of a house must be solidly constructed beneath the usable living spaces, media literacy depends on a foundational understanding of the signs that construct the meanings circulating through the media.

There are endless varieties of structures of communication that produce meanings, and they all stand upon the basic foundations of semiotic theory. An important limitation of semiotics is that it is primarily descriptive and is not necessary for interpretation.

The processes that enable signs to represent objects, ideas, and meanings do not provide verification of truth or the reliability of information and ideas. Media generally represent persuasive propositions to willing audiences that, with knowledge and preparation, can independently inquire and determine the limits and potential of understanding. Applied semiotic methods provide a way to look at the world and systematically demonstrate the logic of how meanings are represented and reveal the limits of knowledgeable interpretation of the truth.

CHAPTER 2

The Necessary Ambiguity of Communication

One of Gary Larson's *The Far Side* cartoons is based on a classic American Western shoot-out in front of a saloon. With mountains in the distance, the townsfolk look on from the boardwalk in front of a saloon. In the foreground, a cowboy points a smoking gun, but a dish of something fluid, perhaps a cream pie, is splashing across his face. Just in front of the cowboy, a clown in a polka-dotted shirt with a ruffled collar lies sprawled on the ground, his tongue sticking out to the side of his mouth and eyes staring straight ahead to signify his death from a gunshot wound. The caption beneath the image tells the story: "It was over. But the way the townsfolk called it, neither man was a clear winner!"[1]

Larson's intended meaning is clear, even though the outcome of the competition is ambiguous. The humor of the cartoon is derived from the alternative ways to understand the narrative as Larson depicts it. Suspending disbelief about the iconic nature of the drawings and the absurdity of the event, we can consider only the characters and the story. First, the image presents a story of an event that took place in the recent past. The clown appears to be dead and was apparently shot by the cowboy. But

it also appears that the clown threw a pie and hit the cowboy in the face. Of course, the inequality of the weapons used by the two adversaries is the setup for the joke.

A shoot-out between a cowboy and a clown is, by its very description, a representation of exaggerated difference—the clown with his fluffy polka-dotted shirt, artificially big nose, and painted face against the serious, cowboy gunfighter. But Larson poses a metaphorical question about nature and culture when he jokes that there was "no clear winner." According to cultural understanding of the rules of the game, the one who draws and shoots first is the winner. The pie in the cowboy's face suggests that the clown may have thrown the pie before the cowboy shot him, and therefore the clown would be the winner of the competition. But even so, the nature of the clown's situation is that he is now dead. The story suggests that the power of nature prevails over culturally constructed rules. From within the culturally constructed context of the rules of the game, the townsfolk appear to be concerned about the outcome of the competition, regardless of the consequences to the clown. From the audience's point of view, the cartoon is funny because the meaning of the event remains ambiguous to the townsfolk, who are part of the story and still concerned with their own rules and values even though one of the participants is dead. As an example of print media intended as entertainment, Larson has illustrated a significant social debate about the effects of nature versus culture.

There are many aspects to even the simplest communication. This particular story uses words and images to construct a sequence of events that take place in a fictitious context even while making a clear reference to a historical time and place. Larson uses a narrative text to make an issue of the idea that meaning can be interpreted from differing points of view. Larson's story suggests a made-up world, in which the participants experience the event from their individual points of view, while the local spectators observing the shoot-out see it from

another. Of course, the audience's reading of the cartoon comprises yet another level of interpretation in response to Gary Larson's intended humor. And, there are people who simply will not get the joke.

Communication is necessarily ambiguous because there are many potential interpretations possible from a variety of perspectives. Through the representational processes of expressing and perceiving objects, events, or ideas, meaning is mediated in the minds of interpreters. Peirce states, "There is a triple connection of sign, thing signified, and cognition produced in the mind."[2] A *sign* stands for something, so at least three discreet elements coexist: the sign, its object or referent, and its meaning to an interpreter. An object, in and of itself, has no meaning unless the sign is being interpreted from a practical context in someone's mind. Meaning is not simple to communicate as a singular, precise idea from the context of its origination. Reception happens in a new context that can potentially alter interpretation of the intended meaning. Thus, communication is ambiguous because it can only represent a perceived "quality" of an immediate object.[3] A final interpretation must be negotiated at a more complicated level.

If communication is ambiguous and the meanings of things can be understood from multiple perspectives, how can correct understandings be verified? Peirce distinguishes that which is true from what he calls real, and he is careful to explain that something can be real and still not exist beyond thought.[4] A sign in the mind of an interpreter is real, but as we know from experience, sometimes we can be mistaken in our interpretation, and that notion may turn out not to be true. Peirce uses the term "Denotation" to express the "Object of a Sign" and, according to his Critical Logic, the object of a sign is true, regardless of what anyone or any group believes.[5] Denotation is a semantic determination, a one-to-one relationship established between the sign and its object, similar to a fundamental dictionary definition. For example, a tree is a woody perennial plant that typically has

a central stem with side branches. The object called a tree may be understood in other more nuanced ways, but on simple terms such a class of objects exists in nature. Accordingly, the truth is necessarily limited to the sign/object relationship.

As an exception, the meaning of a *symbol* is, by definition, predetermined to represent a meaning shared within a particular culture. If an image of a tree became an emblem for a group dedicated to some special beliefs and practices, the tree may represent something that only that group would recognize. For example, in the Basque region of Spain, an image of an oak tree recalls the historical community meetings held for generations before the Nazis bombed Guernica in northern Spain during World War II. When the oak tree that marked their traditional meeting place survived the attack, it became known as a symbol of the determination of the Basque people to survive in Spain. Although the meaning of a symbol may be real to those who understand it, it may not actually represent something that is true to others outside of a particular cultural group.

Recognizing what qualifies as evidence and verification of fact is necessary in order to understand the differences between nature and culture, and speculation and opinion. If a sign can be verified as referring to something that actually exists, it is defined in semiotics as an index. But a common strategy for justifying the power of one group over another is based on a dubious claim that dominant cultural beliefs and opinions are consistent with nature and actually exist. Used to justify public policy, war, and oppression, this is a rhetorical strategy used by dominant groups or individuals who claim to have authority and who assert their power over others. Stated most directly, beliefs and customs are habitual practices that cannot be universally determined as right or wrong. They cannot be verified scientifically with observable evidence in nature. But when faced with an authority figure who asserts that things have always been done a certain way, people tend to accept that past practices validate current beliefs

and customs as if they established some inflexible law related to what can be understood as the truth.

At its best, the idea of achieving truth in human communication is a negotiated attempt to overcome ambiguity, because interpretation of a given sign by a message receiver may only approximate the intent of a speaker. Objects and events in the natural world exist without intent to produce meanings. Some aspects of the physical world are observable and predictable, but the notion of truth about objects, events, and ideas that affect the lives of people will be determined within a particular context of interpretation.

Interpretant is a term used to express the potential for meaning to be produced by an interpreter. In the mind of the interpreter, a sign implies that objects and events will have consequences. Language moves experience to another level when a speaker uses symbols to represent meanings and assumes they are understood as intended. Among the many languages and cultures that exist, dictionaries are used to attempt to provide stable semantic relationships between words and meanings. And still, languages continuously change through perpetual use, modification, and adaptation to new contexts. Peirce describes this condition as "not sufficiently accurate for the purposes of exact logic," particularly regarding scientific inquiry.[6]

> The universe must be well known and mutually known to be known and agreed to exist, in some sense, between speaker and hearer, between the mind as appealing to its own further consideration and the mind as so appealed to, or there can be no communication, or "common ground" at all. The universe is, thus, not a mere concept, but is the most real of experiences. Hence, to put a concept into relation to it, and into the relation of describing it, is to use a most peculiar sort of sign or thought; for such a relation must . . . exist quite otherwise than a relation between mere concepts. . . . My universe is the momentary experience as a whole.[7]

Ambiguity is embodied in the nature of individuality, and shared understandings of linguistic codes are among the best tools available to humans for attempting to reach a common understanding. Meaning is not necessarily shared, but is developed through the semiotic relation between sign, object, and interpretant. As an individual perceives a sign, a relationship is understood to exist between the sign, its referent, and a potential effect on the interpreter. A message receiver may recognize other meanings or consequences that are not in the nature of an object or intended by a message sender.

As a sign expresses an object or meaning, the interpretant is a new sign in the mind of an interpreter. As one becomes conscious of signs, signs express meanings. The communicative act is the continuous cycle between expression, perception, and interpretation—the signifying capacity and the continuum between human consciousness and the world of intelligible things.

"On one side there's expression, on the other side is perception; then objects get perceived, signs get expressed. When expression and perception come together as an experience, that's the interpretant."[8] An interpretant is a context for a potential understanding of a sign and what it stands for or represents to an interpreter. "So communication in the end ... is simply the interpretant. Peirce took this very complex process and reduced it down to an idea, the interpretant; the mechanism that allows me to use and understand communication."[9] The interpretant is the potential or capacity to recognize meaningful distinctions and extend the resultant idea to generate a new sign. This communicative process constructs yet another sign, expressed, perceived, and interpreted through the perspectives of an individual or community.

Communication is a continuous referential process that is completed only out of a necessity to act or agree upon a meaning. Peirce's semiotic theory provides for a process of unlimited action of signs, called *semiosis*, that may lead to a consensus

about an idea of truth within a given social context.[10] However, while expanding on Peirce's ideas, Nöth cautions that

> our image of the other is indeed a construction of our own self. The frame of reference of this construction is not the "real" other, a presumably existing reality which we only have to reveal, but the immense web of cultural intertextualities which comprises not only our discourse about the others, but also the others' discourse about their cultural self.[11]

Therefore, understanding is based upon a self-referential, socially negotiated process intended to overcome the necessary ambiguity of communication.

Peirce explains that the perception of an object is not yet a final interpretation of meaning.[12] Meaning is based upon an existing epistemological ground, the knowledge taken from a particular foundational way of validating experience that determines understanding and conduct. Understanding is prescribed within established patterns of interpretation, but knowledge is affected by assumptions substituting for information that may be missing from the context of interpretation.

> Nothing is more indispensable to a sound epistemology than a crystal-clear discrimination between the Object and the Interpretant of knowledge.... The Immediate Object of a Percept is excessively vague, yet natural thought makes up for that... Of course, I must be understood as talking not psychology, but the logic of mental operations. Subsequent Interpretants furnish new Semes of Universes resulting from various adjunctions to the Perceptual Universe. They are, however, all of them, Interpretants of Percepts.[13]

The mind fills in details lacking in the immediate object with signs already understood through experience or cultural habit. According to Peirce, this is "a Perceptual Universe that is represented in instinctive thought as determining the original

Immediate Object."[14] Pragmatic interpretations assume that connotations are useful or practical applications of an implied meaning of a sign. Peirce, using the term "Seme" to refer to the expression of the sign, concludes: "Finally, and in particular, we get a Seme of that highest of all Universes which is regarded as the Object of every true Proposition, and which, if we name it [at] all, we call by the somewhat misleading title of 'The Truth.' "[15] Still, this notion of the truth is grounded in an interpreter's presumed understanding of the potentially real consequences of a sign, from a particular point of view. A universal truth is more likely to be very general as opposed to the meaning of a specific object or event, which can be understood to have many potential consequences beyond its actual existence.

The intent to convey an accurate version of the truth through a clear, mutually understood expression, such as language, is complicated by the embodied nature of the communicative process. Communication is a process of sharing meanings that is dependent on a capacity to perceive and interpret signs. The idea of truth suggests a need to limit the process of semiosis, or signs producing other signs, when interpretation is concluded at a point that finally satisfies the needs of an interpreter to address certain consequences.

The practicalities of everyday life demand some determination of meaning even when words or other signs will change over time or in new circumstances. Consciousness and perception guide sign interpreters into cultural groups defined to some extent by the beliefs, habits, rituals, and processes that facilitate a means of communication. "Since signs enable us to transform objects and events into meanings,"[16] cultures assume a shared identity and an acquired habit of interpreting meanings from a similar, limited point of view. Cultures engender habits of interpretation assumed to be valid by groups that are sometimes defined by race, class, gender, age, nationality, ethnicity, or position in social institutions such as jobs and specialized occupations, religions, schools, and governments. In spite of these

generalized categories, the focus of this chapter is a universal communication problem: everyone has a unique individual perceptual context from which to view and understand the world.

Recognizing semiotics as a point of view rather than a specific method of inquiry,[17] the examples of analysis that are presented later in this chapter represent a thematic ground for the interpretation of media as a social form of communication. This approach is informed by semiotic phenomenology following Lanigan, who takes up the semiotic perspectives of Peirce and Saussure, and the phenomenology of Foucault and Merleau-Ponty.[18] Semiotic phenomenology, or "Communicology," recognizes the convergence of expression and perception of meaning with an interpreter's existential capacity to construct inference from signs.[19] Stories invite listeners to experience sequences of events symbolically and still draw inferential conclusions about the practical effects of things that happen to others. After introducing the theoretical grounding, the following sections apply semiotic methods of analysis and explore the necessary ambiguity of communication using various stories from different cultures as illustrations.

Narrative, Culture, and Three Divisions Of Semiotics

The most common way for humans to share knowledge and experience is through narrative. Storytelling seems so natural within everyday living that we take for granted the depth and richness of communication accomplished through narrative. According to James Carey, "communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed."[20] Communication is generally intended to overcome ambiguity, but stories are often left open to interpretation even while the storyteller maintains control of potential meanings by narrating from a particular point of view. Stories about others are easier to understand than the immediacy of our own experience because the consequences of events experienced by characters in a story are observable and prescribed by defined relationships.

Before looking at some story analyses, some theoretical perspectives should be explained. Peirce's three divisions of semiotic theory will be explained in greater detail below. For now, consider three characteristics of any perceptual experience. First, in order to produce meanings, all signs, including mental ideas, have qualities that can be apprehended through sense perception. Second, the qualities of any particular thing make it distinguishable in relation to other things that are different. And third, the distinguishing characteristics of any given sign will have the potential to generate meaning to one who recognizes potential consequences associated with its existence.

While all of these divisions may occur simultaneously, communication generates additional simultaneous levels of representation, making the process even more complicated. Stories build on rich backgrounds, identifying characters with distinctive qualities and relationships with others in a given context. Each element may have meanings for the characters in the story, and other meanings for those telling and receiving them.

Personal experiences limit perspectives because of the power and immediacy of their effects on an individual, but considering the experiences related through a story, one may have the sense that others can be understood objectively. In an argument, negotiations engage individual perspectives that are not interchangeable. We may believe our experiential point of view is clear and generally fail to recognize the potential for ambiguity because we are completely immersed in our cultural habits of how to understand things.

As Marshall McLuhan suggested, no one knows who discovered water, but you can bet it wasn't fish. Considering how immersed we are in our everyday lives, until a problem emerges, most aspects of the environment are ignored because other concerns affecting survival or quality of life demand attention. Collective perceptions about acceptable living conditions suggest that things are as they should be. Cultures are groups of people defined by shared values, beliefs, and practices that are

so ubiquitous that they are assumed to be normal and natural. Our immediate environment, including cultural and biological conditions, is generally invisible, while attention is focused on the practical meaning of what is considered the objective world by any individual or group. Depending on the degree of sensitivity and awareness, people are generally oblivious to most cultural assumptions and believe their own perspectives are absolutely valid and accurately reflect the true nature of the world. But we know what we know because it is familiar from past experience and is perhaps shared through cultural affiliations. Communication thus functions at different levels of logic and depends on specific natural, biological, and cultural conditions.[21]

Consciousness and perception occur in relation to practical consequences whether considering a sign in nature or in a cultural form, such as conversation, music, literature, television, or film. Language, for example, is a culturally specific form of communication based on shared meanings that can only be understood by those who recognize the linguistic codes used to represent ideas. Perception is also culturally specific; that is, a physician belongs to a culture that is trained to see and interpret signs at levels beyond the ordinary perception or understanding of others. The same can be asserted for musicians, teachers, and mothers, who have knowledge specific to their daily practices that may not be noticed or understood by others. Every conceivable category of identity such as occupation, religion, ethnicity, race, class, gender, and age, will potentially affect the way meanings and consequences are understood.

As Peirce stated, "The Immediate Object of all knowledge and all thought is, in the last analysis, the Percept. This doctrine in no wise conflicts with Pragmaticism, which holds that the Immediate Interpretant of all thought proper is Conduct."[22] What actually happens or exists will be interpreted as sigificant because the meanings are perceived to have real effects. Interpretation is based upon perception, experience, and knowledge of the practical meanings in particular contexts. The

conduct of individual interpreters is generally a better representation of how they understand a situation than is a spoken explanation. Analysis of communication that provides clarification of ambiguity requires recognition of the various qualities of representation that produce meanings and motivate conduct.

The processes that generate meanings can be clarified by describing certain characteristics of categories and levels of interpretation. Peirce articulated three divisions of semiotics, revealing different levels of meanings that will be applied to the analyses that follow. The three divisions are described as follows:

1. "Pure Grammar" refers to the formal conditions for a sign to exist as an expression of communication, to stand for or represent something.[23] Pure Grammar "has for its task to ascertain what must be true of the representamen used by every scientific intelligence in order that they may embody any meaning."[24] Our capacities to see, hear, smell, taste, feel, and generally sense the world around us provides recognition of the perceived qualities of things. Qualities are generally relative in regard to shape, size, hardness, temperature, color, smell, and so on, but any meaning can only exist in contrast to other things beyond the category of "pure grammar."[25]
2. "Critical Logic" refers to the necessary conditions for a sign, an expression of communication such as a word, sound, or image, to represent an object or idea.[26] "Critical Logic, is the theory of the general conditions of the reference of Symbols and other Signs to their professed Objects, that is, it is the theory of the conditions of truth."[27] *Semantics* is another name for the process of critical logic, as it works by defining the meaning associated with a particular representation. At this level, we know things for their own qualities, as they can be distinguished and understood in relation to other things.

3. "Speculative Rhetoric" refers to the formal conditions for one idea to generate another, and to convey meaning from one mind to another mind.[28] "Speculative Rhetoric is substantially what goes by the name of methodology.... It is the doctrine of the general conditions of the reference of Symbols and other Signs to the Interpretants which they aim to determine."[29] This is the third element of the simultaneous process of signs, objects, and potential meanings that can be represented. Speculative rhetoric raises ontological issues concerned with describing the conditions of individual sense perception and the process of ideas growing into other ideas. It says as much about the interpreter as it does about the interpretation. As representations are used to express meanings, they become new signs in the mind of an interpreter and therefore potentially generate new meanings. Ambiguity is born at this level of understanding since any sign representing an object or idea is interpreted within a new context that inevitably affects the potential for consequential meaning of the original sign.

Like many of Peirce's ideas, the names of each of these three divisions can get in the way of the simple logic of his thinking. Putting these ideas in simple terms can better capture the essence and practical application of these concepts. First, consider the independent qualities of a sign: Pure Grammar refers to the distinguishing characteristics that make a sign function as an expression of meaning. Second, observe how a sign relates to its essential meaning: Critical Logic, like semantics, reveals the relationship between an expression and the explicit object or established meaning it refers to. And third, recognize the significance of the context of interpretation: Speculative Rhetoric examines potential alternative interpretations reflecting different points of view. When analyzing any kind of significant phenomenon, one should consider (1) the representational qualities of the sign, (2) the relationship of the sign to its meaning, and

(3) the relevant context of a sign from the practical point of view of an interpreter. Collectively, these attributes describe the essential nature of a meaning-making process.

The significance of the three semiotic divisions is that together they represent the qualities of expressions and relationships necessary for shared understanding. Communication takes place without awareness of semiotics or the three divisions, but these conditions are necessary for sharing ideas and information and understanding them can help identify problematic aspects of the processes. Signs rarely occur in isolation, so sign relations must be considered within contexts that affect how they are interpreted.

Applied Analysis of Stories Demonstrating the Ambiguity of Communication

Narrative is a common context within which many signs may interact simultaneously, and much of what humans consider the truth is communicated through stories. According to Gerbner, "Stories socialize us into roles of gender, age, class, vocation and lifestyle, and offer modes of conformity or targets for rebellion."[30] Stories give context to events and human behaviors, and stories from cultures other than our own communicate alternative worldviews and illuminate differences. The first two examples are from a collection of Zen stories reputed to have their origins in India, China, and Japan between 500 BC and the year 1004 AD.[31]

> "The Moon Cannot Be Stolen"
>
> An old man lived very simply in a hut at the foot of a mountain. One night he arrived home to find an intruder. Since the would-be thief found nothing to steal, the man offered his clothes as a gift. The thief was surprised and sheepishly went away as the old man stood naked in the moonlight. The old man sat looking the moon, and he thought, "I wish I could give him this beautiful moon."[32]

The notion of ambiguity is illustrated in this story because the moon does not function as a sign of any significance to the thief. In terms of Pure Grammar, the thief would certainly be capable of perceiving the moon, but in the context of his perceptual experience, it is not significant to him. Finding "nothing to steal" expresses the absence of a sign in relation to the meaning of the behavior that identifies the thief. The old man's gesture of offering his clothes as a gift contradicts the expectations of a victim of a robbery, thus violating the sign/object relation of the thief's Critical Logic. Finally, the meaning of the "beautiful moon" demonstrates a failure (of Speculative Rhetoric) to communicate an idea from one mind to another. To the thief, the moon is not even a sign, whereas its aesthetic appeal is of great significance to the old man. Thus, the objects and setting of the story symbolically function to represent different points of view and meanings for the characters in the story.

"Muddy Road"

Two monks were traveling together down a muddy road. It was still raining when they came upon a lovely young woman in a silk kimono who was unable to cross an intersection because of the mud. The first monk offered her help and picked her up and carried her over the mud. The second monk didn't speak for several hours, but finally he could no longer restrain himself. He said, "We monks don't go near females, especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?" The first monk replied, "I left the girl there. Are you still carrying her?"[33]

The concluding question of this story demonstrates the essence of Critical Logic; the sign of the girl is ambiguous and is interpreted differently by the two characters. The first monk, observing the woman as a sign of a person in need, carried her over the mud as a service. To the second monk, she represents a violation of a cultural code of behavior that identifies the two as monks. A *code* is a systematic organization of signs whose

meanings are determined in part by their relationships to other signs within a given context. The monks are thus defined by a code of behavior. Applying Speculative Rhetoric, the first monk interprets the special context of his behavior and dismisses the code violation as a sign only in the mind of the second monk. In both stories, the ambiguity of communication is not located in the sign, nor the object, but in the interpretant.

The next example is taken from an American television situation comedy. While Gitlin observes that television scripts are written in simplistic language in order to "go down easier" and "make fewer demands,"[34] media narratives have the power to represent everyday meanings and practices and to negotiate understandings of appropriate situational behavior. As Gerbner suggests, media tend to replace traditional face-to-face communication with mass-produced programs that serve the traditional functions of stories and "weave the seamless web of the cultural environment that cultivates most of what we think, what we do, and how we conduct our affairs."[35] For example, consider one of the story lines from a *Seinfeld* episode from the seventh season titled "The Calzone."[36] This story addresses the ambiguity of a formal definition of dating.

The story begins with Elaine meeting Todd, a guy who bets her a dinner that Dustin Hoffman was in *Star Wars*. Since Hoffman did not appear in the film, Todd loses the bet and takes Elaine out to dinner. When she relates the incident to Jerry, he comments that Todd had found what he calls a dating "loophole" and managed to take her on a date without actually asking. Thus he avoids a possible rejection and any implied obligations and commitments normally associated with dating.

The emerging question is, what constitutes a "date"? At first Elaine maintains the idea that it was just a bet, but then Todd sets up several subsequent situations to arrange to go out with her without actually asking her out for a "date." Beyond the Pure Grammar of the word, the actual social rituals and practices associated with the notion of dating are being considered.

The word *date* that refers to a specific time or day becomes an ambiguous sign when applied to certain interpersonal social interactions. Complex social interactions expressed by linguistic symbols and other signs depend on their "professed Objects" to establish "conditions of truth."[37] The Critical Logic of the situation opens up the question of the relationship between the word and the actual meaning it represents in practice. The answer to that question lies in the ambiguity presented at the level of Speculative Rhetoric. Elaine and her friend define the term *to date* differently because of gender-related cultural perspectives, and therefore each expresses opposing attitudes, behaviors, and expectations about their relationship.

One Saturday night, Todd's parents show up to join him and Elaine for dinner. When she confronts him about the implications of "meeting the parents," he feigns that he just thought she would like to meet them, still denying the event was a "date." Rather than having a direct relationship with an object, the terms of dating tend to refer to social practices that happen and imply meanings at many levels. At this point, Todd claims they are just having a nice time together and asserts that this does not constitute a date. But meanings shift according to perspectives, contexts, and conditions relating to associated signs that affect potential interpretations.

Returning to her apartment after the couple's nondate dinner with the parents, Elaine asks, "Well if it's not a date then what is it?" Todd dismisses the idea that having dinner with his parents was a date, but then tries to kiss her goodnight at the door. Elaine rejects his advance, and her negative response implies that if their evening together was not a date, then a kiss is not appropriate. At this point, Elaine's rhetorical strategy establishes her power in the relationship to define what constitutes a date. Speculative rhetoric negotiates meaning through real situations with actual consequences.

Simultaneously in the episode, Jerry is dating a beautiful young woman. The story line surrounding her is based on the

idea that she is so pretty that a man cannot say no to her. Jerry recognizes this and uses her ability to accomplish things such as getting tickets to a sold-out film and talking a traffic cop out of giving him a speeding ticket after he is caught going over 90 miles per hour. Elaine's "date," Todd, had arranged to get Jerry a supply of hard-to-get premium Cuban cigars as one of his "nondates" with Elaine. They look like quality Cuban cigars, but turn out to actually be a poor-quality product from Peru. So Jerry decides to send his irresistible girlfriend to get his money back. Elaine spots the two of them together, and Jerry's girlfriend asks Elaine what the "M" in "Richard M. Nixon" represents. When Elaine says it stands for "Millhouse," we realize that her boyfriend has lost a bet for a "date" with Jerry's girlfriend/collection agent. In the end, Elaine and Jerry lose their respective boyfriend and girlfriend. Even in television entertainment, stories demonstrate the processes of negotiating the meanings of signs.

Seinfeld's observation regarding the dating "loophole" addresses the complex ambiguity of a common ritual practice. Based on Speculative Rhetoric, calling the situation "dating" implies certain meanings and responsibilities that are not universally shared in the narrative. The program depends on the ambiguity of cultural conventions and inconsistent Critical Logic as sources of humor.

Semiotic Truth Regardless of What You or I May Think

The study of the ambiguity of communication is based on the perpetual negotiation of representing meanings in changing contexts. Pure Grammar focuses only on the descriptive characteristics of expression and the qualities of a particular sign, but does not determine meanings. The meanings of words and other symbols are established in the social contexts of Critical Logic that look at the relationship of a sign as an expression of

its basic accepted meaning. However, the arbitrary interpretation of meanings happens in the dynamic contexts of applied understandings and practices that actualize the conditions of Speculative Rhetoric.

The story analyses were intended to serve as simple examples of ambiguity and to demonstrate an applied semiotic analysis. Considering Peirce's assertion that truth can only be located in the relationship between the sign and its object, communication can only describe "the quality of what we are immediately conscious of."[38] Real-time application of these semiotic principles enhances understandings of culture, communication, and political discourse, with a potential to recognize faulty reasoning and negotiate conflict resolution. The relationship between a sign and its object is quite easily distorted through advanced electronic media. The contribution of semiotics will be to minimize the effective misuse of this great power. The clear logic of a semiotic point of view is capable of locating the truth concealed beneath a veil of Speculative Rhetoric and revealing what is true "regardless of what you or I may think about it."[39]

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CHAPTER 3

Power and Proxy in Media Semiotics

Appearing on *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central to promote his new documentary film, Michael Moore mentioned he was bumped from his scheduled time on Larry King Live on CNN because King got Paris Hilton to appear after she was released from jail. Referring to Paris Hilton, Moore said, "She is our proxy." Jon Stewart laughed and responded, "She is the canary in the coal mine."[1] A canary was traditionally used in mines because it would suffocate from a lack of oxygen before humans would and thus act as a signal to warn coal miners of impending disaster. The reference to celebrity heiress Paris Hilton suggests that she appeals to audiences who love, disdain, or ridicule her as a sign that stands for the pleasures and problems inherent in a life of privilege and excess unavailable to most people.

A *proxy* is a person who substitutes for or acts on behalf of someone else. In relation to the media, a proxy is someone who can symbolically stand for or represent someone else. Beyond representations that would qualify for a conventional definition of a proxy, this term can be extended to include a broader category of signs that stand for a type of identification with people in the media. Mass media generate classes of signs, each

standing for certain qualities of identity that appeal to individuals in the audience. Narrative descriptions of events and actions transform the meanings of athletes and sports teams, religious symbols and leaders, soldiers, politicians and all kinds of public figures, celebrities, entertainers, and ordinary people when they appear in the media. As it is applied here in the context of media representations, a proxy is a person perceived as a sign with significant qualities that appeal to individuals in the audience who identify with the actions and experiences of others.

Proxy as a Category of Identification

As the science of signs, one aspect of semiotics is to identify categories of representations that produce meanings. Categories serve our cognitive tendencies to group together things with similar characteristics. But as Peirce explains through his description of "secondness," the meanings of things necessarily make sense in relation to other things that are different.[2] The distinctions that enable humans to identify objects, ideas, and events are further organized into categories. Interpretation is determined from within a specific context that may be further negotiated through collective understandings of experiences and their relationships to new situations and their potential meanings. As a category of representation, a proxy is a sign that appeals to a person in an audience who identifies with somebody else's pleasures, pains, actions, expressions, or experiences.

The idea of the proxy is not intended as a value judgment of the pleasures derived from identifying with celebrities, sports figures or teams, or any narrative sign system. The point is to recognize a proxy as a form of *semiosis*, the three-part process by which a sign and its object generate new signs in the mind of an interpreter.[3] The proxy is a category of signs that acts as an affirmation of the self through identification with the actions of others. The notion of a proxy illustrates Eco's semiotic theory of

the lie, in which people interpret the actions of others as a sign for their own experiences.[4] Exploiting this potential, media can manufacture identities capable of structuring values, beliefs, and practices while acting symbolically for audiences.

Assuming the anthropological role of a village storyteller, media appear to be a natural extension of our communities, while they create an endless variety of signs designed to appeal to mass audiences. The power of media is its influence and access to people who are invited to identify with characters in stories and people authorized to deliver essential news and information. Intended or not, mass media dominate social discourse using the proxy as an instrument of hegemonic power. Media producers have extraordinary power to shape images and ideas that dominate social discourse and influence large numbers of people. Most programming is primarily intended to attract large audiences that indirectly generate revenue. News and commentary programs obviously intend to inform and influence attitudes, beliefs, and practices. All political commentators act as proxies for audiences that expect them to articulate beliefs and attitudes. Entertainment programs and advertising depict many kinds of people and situations that have a subtle power to influence lifestyle.

Besides the appeal, a potential danger is that a proxy can effectively substitute for critical thinking when media personalities acquire broad powers to influence the way people understand the meanings and consequences of real events, ideas, or objects. Some people believe they are immune to the influences of media, social discourse, narratives, images, and speech. But people only know about new ideas and events that happen far away because of communication and mass media. Even those who do not intentionally seek regular exposure to media are affected by social discourse fed through mass communication. While people go about their everyday interactions, messages circulated by media permeate society, generating a *semiosic* process that continuously develops new variations of ideas.

Representations of stereotypes, general categories of people, and the extraordinary lives of celebrities appear to be normal because of repetitive media exposure. Identity is a local understanding of one's self, but it is negotiated through perceptions of others situated in a world of individual conditions and circumstances. According to Anton, "Both I [and] others are that through which the world is what it is, and also, other people are one of the conditions by which I am able to become who I am as I am one of the conditions by which others are able to become who they are."[5] But most media are commercially produced as top-down, one-way communications intended to affect the receiver in specific ways.

Audiences develop perspectives about things from identification with others, such as opinion leaders, who espouse ideas for a particular point of view. The media mythologizes individuals and categories of people who are well known. A *myth* is a connotative sign system that implies meanings within a particular cultural context that are accepted as true according to habit, without being verified.[6] Selective aspects of celebrities' lives appear to represent society's beliefs, values, and practices, and may be understood as normal even in their abnormality, privilege, and excesses.

The impressions that people have about the truth and circumstances in their world are interpretations of experience negotiated through social discourse. Now, as in the past, people engage in conversation using the prevailing media and technology of communication. Whether we are discussing face-to-face speech or the most advanced technologies, human communication is an invented system and necessarily follows an internal logic. The efficacy of communication essentially depends upon culture as a shared systematic way to represent and understand meanings.

Continuity is essential to logic because the meanings of things must be built in relation to other previously established ideas or beliefs. Culture is integrated into an atmosphere of coded understandings considered normal and inclusive in the sense

that members of a society are invited to identify with the values, beliefs, and practices shared by the group. The way we understand and use knowledge depends on our epistemology—how we know what we understand of the world. According to Postman, "Every epistemology is an epistemology of a stage of media development."[7] The expansive influence of electronic media and communication technologies implies a constant evolution of the way people acquire knowledge. Rapid developments in satellite communications and technologies, radio, TV, digital audio, cell phones, text messaging, computers, satellite navigation and surveillance systems, the Internet, and blogs have altered not just how we communicate, but what things are considered valuable and meaningful in people's everyday lives.

Media Representations and Real-World Practices

People assume to know and understand the world through what they find in the media. At the same time, a great deal of pleasure can be derived from identifying with media representations. Media discourse primarily exchanges ideas and rhetoric, rather than effecting material change in the world. Still, the experience of images, ideas, and messages appeals to individuals who identify with others engaged in a symbolic exchange that stimulates a sense of active unity between an interpreter and the real world.

Audience members can feel they really know a character in a play or a performer personally. Exposure can create an impression that spokespeople are authorities just because they have a presence in the media. The classic example is an actor appearing in a TV commercial saying, "I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV." He then proceeds to give the audience medical advice. Years after this commercial aired, Martin Sheen played the president of the United States on *West Wing*, appealing to many who were not happy with the actual president. The media are so normal and pervasive that in many ways communication technologies construct more potent and intimately meaningful

representations than the actual world. In some cases, simple narratives can promote questionable values and behaviors that will be addressed in the following section.

Examples of Proxy TV Advertisements

Media circulate ideas, images, and stories that entertain, argue, negotiate, persuade, and construct values and beliefs that are reflected in real-life practices. The broader applications of the semiotic notion of proxy are too expansive to address in this project. For example, political debate is an essential part of the democratic process; media select and authorize proxy speakers who choose topics and dominate discussions. Spectator sports create proxy heroes. Dramas, sitcoms, reality shows, and game shows all appeal to audiences who identify with them. Newspaper reporters, broadcast journalists, and commentators of all kinds invite audiences to trust them to deliver accurate information. These and other related topics are not in this chapter, but will be addressed in chapters 4, 6, and 7. Rather, the focus of this chapter is restricted to a narrow application of the role of the proxy exemplified by selected TV commercials.

Advertisers generally intend to appeal to a particular demographic audience. Whether they are speaking to kids on skateboards or moms with laundry to clean, advertisers try to persuade people to purchase products or services that will meet the needs of consumers. In some cases, a particular brand of product is distinguished by certain qualities that suggest it performs its designated function better than another brand. Sometimes advertising aims to create a need for a product, service, or new technology where none existed before. Identification with a brand can be understood because of personal taste for one kind of cigarettes or preference for one beverage, such as Coke or Pepsi, and can even develop into stereotyping personalities as with ads that exploit loyalties to competing computer operating systems such as Apple and Microsoft.

Advertising targets particular groups of people through messages that have less to do with the product than with promoting lifestyle decisions to consumers. "The television commercial is not at all about the character of the products to be consumed. It is about the character of the consumer of the products."[8] As many products, such as cigarettes or fast foods, are now understood to be unhealthy, "the balance of business expenditures shifts from product research to market research."[9] Among recent television commercials, the following examples were selected because they are interesting and demonstrate how a proxy can exploit identification and appear to advocate questionable or even irresponsible behaviors.

Fathead.com advertised on TV to market a series of products that are life-size images of celebrities, sport figures, and other entertainers to be mounted on walls. As an invention of popular culture, consumer demand must be created because these products are not necessary items. One advertisement presents a husband who is disappointed when his wife gives him a barbeque grill as a gift, so he puts it on the wall to demonstrate that he really wanted a Fathead product. His wife responds to his pouting and childish behavior with sympathy and understanding, and finally gives him an image of his favorite sports hero. Fathead images epitomize a simplistic version of a proxy that provides an indexical sign pointing to and simulating a real person. The product acts as a proxy by symbolically representing a close association between the image and the product owner.

Budweiser beer has a commercial called the "Fake Cup of Coffee." The commercial begins in what appears to be a scientific lab where a spokesperson asserts that new products are developed to improve people's lives. The scientists demonstrate a new office product, a "fake cup of coffee." Johnson, an office worker, uses the fake cup of coffee, which appears to emit steam when programmed to do so. At 4:30 p.m. Johnson leaves work to go drink beer. On their way out of the office, fellow employees see Johnson's fake cup of coffee steaming on his desk and

assume he is working late. The visual sequence of the commercial cuts to a party scene at a bar and the audience sees Johnson drinking beer and having fun. The next morning the boss arrives early, sees a steaming cup of coffee on Johnson's desk, and praises Johnson, who he assumes has already arrived and is busy working. The commercial cuts to Johnson at home sleeping contentedly. The audience knows that even though Johnson is not visible, the steam indicates that the coffee is hot, as if it was poured very recently, presumably by Johnson.

The steaming cup of coffee is a symbol within the office culture that signifies that a worker is using coffee as a stimulant associated with productivity. At the same time, the fake steaming coffee is an index pointing to a specific person who appears to have recently poured a fresh hot cup, implying the person is present and hard at work. As Eco famously noted about signs, anything that can tell the truth can also tell a lie.[10]

Twix candy bar commercials also normalize questionable behaviors. They have a series of commercials using the slogan, "Need a moment? Chew it over with Twix." One takes place at a professional baseball game. The third-base umpire is distracted by a couple of pretty girls in the front rows along the third baseline that are calling him and flirting. He returns their smiles and flirtatious behaviors. The audience hears the cracking sound of a baseball being hit and the announcer describes a high fly ball hit deep into the outfield. The commercial visually reveals the ball as it approaches the foul line and the announcer explains that we cannot be sure if the ball is foul or a home run. The other umpires converge on the third-base umpire and say it is his call. The audio shifts to a sound effect that is an icon sounding like a set of wheels screeching to a stop. The commercial announcer says, "Need a minute? Have a Twix." The distracted umpire jams a candy bar into his mouth and shrugs his shoulders. Then he turns, and still chewing, points in the air toward the direction that the ball had been hit. The hometown crowd bursts into applause and the announcer acknowledges it is a home run even though the gesture was completely ambiguous. The Twix-eating

umpire turns to face his colleagues with a smile and a shrug. In essence, the audience in the stands is depicted as having interpreted the pointing gesture as satisfying their desire for a home run. The umpire's gesture signals that he has allowed the audience to influence the call rather than fulfilling his responsibility to assert critical judgment.

Apple has a series of TV commercials creating a positive representation of their loyal product users. Physical appearance, personality, and style are used to distinguish those preferring the Apple Macintosh operating system from those using Microsoft operating systems. The Apple guy is slim and fashionable and has an easy-going, confident personality, while the PC guy is "geeky," overweight, and not fashionable.

VISA had an advertising slogan, "Don't let cash slow you down." A commercial depicts a colorful, carnival atmosphere at a shopping venue where everyone is using plastic to make purchases. The joyful spell is broken and everything comes to a screeching halt when one person—a negative proxy—uses cash (or worse, writes a check) in a line full of happy, enthusiastic consumers. The message is designed to communicate that cash and checks are out-of-date and inefficient and actually disrupt an otherwise happy community of credit card consumers.

CitiBank had a series of advertisements promoting their program to reward card users for charging their purchases. Oddly, the commercials feature people disingenuously saying "thank you" as a response to an unrelated situation. A woman sitting at a table in a nice restaurant asks a direct question to the man she is with: "When are we going to get married?" He hesitates, and then says "Thank you." She smiles and says, "You've never said that to me before," and he responds, "I mean it!" The announcer then says that everyone likes to be thanked and he explains the CitiBank rewards program. In another commercial in the same series, a woman in the produce section of a store asks another woman how long she has been pregnant, and the second woman answers, "I'm not pregnant!" The first woman responds, "Thank you!" The problem is that the "thank you"

is used here as a rhetorical device to avoid giving an honest response. In each of these cases, the proxy is the person who avoids responsibility.

These are just a few examples chosen to demonstrate some problems with the semiotic functions of the proxy in the context of television advertising. More can be done to explore the concept in a variety of contexts. For example, the pleasures and problems that can be derived from spectator sports are undeniably significant, as millions of people worldwide enjoy sports in very positive ways. Yet the role of the proxy among sports fans and teams contributes to building national identity and regional rivalries that have historically instigated violence. Because identity is such a powerful force in society, the topic needs to be explored fully across many applications that involve communication and media literacy. Understanding identity challenges epistemological assumptions by revealing individual, social, and cultural limits of perception. The following section explores three concepts related to identity.

Identity: The Semiotic, the Psychological, and the Social

In terms of media literacy, the semiotic function of the proxy is the recognition of surrogate identities. The notion of identification with media is illustrated by a short animated film called "Sigmund: The Spirit of the Olympics."[11] Sigmund is a small boy who watches the Olympics on television until his mother calls him away. While he is watching, Sigmund is momentarily transformed to physically resemble every character he watches playing tennis, basketball, fencing, boxing, or skiing. When we consume media, sequences of images and ideas appeal to our sense of identification with whatever we experience. "Identification is a psychological mechanism that is necessary for the formation of personality. We all identify with the characteristics of our type, but through identification we became deceived, or convinced that our personality is our nature."[12] Identity is continuously

negotiated between one's self and experience with others exhibiting characteristics of our type.

Ideas originating in different disciplines can help to clarify the concept of identity and the role of the proxy in media analysis. This section explores three categories of identity construction: the semiotic, the psychological, and the social. Identity provides the individual context of understanding that affects the interpretation of meaning. Semiotics addresses the process of how meaning is interpreted from objects, events, and ideas. The expression of meaning is always initiated by the perception of a sign that stands for something that can be interpreted to have consequences to someone. The *interpretant* is a semiotic concept asserting that a sign will generate a meaning to an interpreter, who necessarily understands the original sign in a new context. Psychological identity develops an ideal ego during early childhood, establishing an understanding of the self as an amalgamation of individuality with someone else as a model. Finally, social influences affect how individuals understand their own identity when they encounter multiple perspectives that offer alternative interpretations of things. Individuals experience *interpellation* when they identify with others who interpret signs as objects or ideas in ways that attract them, even when the consequences actually contradict the subjects' personal interests. These concepts can help explain the appeal of media and its power to engage diverse audiences into negotiating the meanings of objects and events.

The media analyst must be reflective to know and understand the one who is doing the analyzing. The function of identity is to provide the context of one's point of view. Effective media literacy requires critical analysts to know their own values and beliefs, recognize the nature of the media, and understand production technology and technique, as well as the context of messages and the intentions of the messengers.

An effective critical interpreter is conscious of identity and locations in time and space, while still recognizing an objective world that produces categories of phenomena that

systematically interact with others. Biological determination is natural insofar as age, gender, and aptitude affect one's ability to act. But the practical consequences of identity are negotiated through social conditions. If society restricts a person's development because of gender or race, an individual would have to overcome culturally constructed boundaries to fulfill her or his personal vision. As such, semiotic agency is an act of will. For example, someone can visualize becoming a physician or the president of the United States, even though history provides no existing role model for his or her type of person in the social environment. Given the opportunity, self-determination creates the potential to overcome socially constructed limitations, defy expectations or prohibitions, and effectively resignify a given individual or group. In contrast, the proxy occurs when identity is symbolic rather than active; one identifies with the roles and behaviors of others. Some role models are limited to interpersonal relationships, while mass media channel a broad range of images and experiences. Media tend to manufacture proxies in the process of reproducing culture. Thus media narratives tacitly claim to represent the nature of groups and individuals while they more accurately express habits of perception maintaining the dominant socially constructed images of identity.

Media literacy requires a high level of critical thinking that depends on logic, preparation, and self-awareness. Individual understandings of objects and events are always negotiated through social interactions that happen when people encounter others with different perspectives. Critical thinking requires people to be self-reflective. That means being aware of their own identities and the effects that existing knowledge and beliefs have on their ability to reason beyond their own preconceptions and the intended meanings of messages constructed for a particular purpose. A higher level of media literacy can be developed from a theoretical understanding of (1) semiotics and the concept of the *interpretant*, (2) an understanding of identity construction through the psychoanalytic concept of the *ideal*

ego, and (3) the ideological concept of *interpellation*. A description of each follows.

Identity and the Interpretant

Media representations are experienced as immediate, while the actual objects and events represented are necessarily remote from direct experience. The concept of the *interpretant* is central to understanding how media are interpreted in a variety of individual contexts. The interpretant is a sign formed in the mind of an interpreter in response to an original sign. It is the third in Peirce's semiotic three-way relationship between (1) the sign or representational expression; (2) its object, or the thing referred to by the sign; and (3) a potential to generate a new sign in the mind of an interpreter. That new sign is based upon the interpreter's understanding of the consequences of the original sign. The *immediate interpretant* refers to an initial response to a sign as an idea, while the *dynamical interpretant* refers to a potential development or change of interpretation. The *final interpretant* is the eventual understanding of a "true interpretation if consideration of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion were reached."[13] The practicalities of science and everyday life make it necessary to act as if a final interpretant can be reached, even though experience often proves this concept to be an unattainable ideal.

The interpretant is the embodied context of the interpretation of meaning. Any given sign standing for an object or meaning generates a new sign in the mind of an interpreter. Besides the time and space of a given sign, interpretation is processed through the perspective of the interpreter. Identity is negotiated from the accumulated experiences of an individual whose personal knowledge is understood through a logical continuity with social interaction and discourse. Again, the notion of a final interpretant is more a matter of consensus, rather than of proof. "Our perceptions themselves are, to some extent, constrained by previous opinions, and our thoughts by past thoughts, so

that it cannot be said that the only *determining* factor is a resistant external reality."[14] The world is unaffected by our opinions and beliefs. Interpretation, however, is a local, embodied understanding of practical consequences negotiated between individuals and their social context. Identity is similarly negotiated by the individual in relation to others.

Identity and the Ideal Ego

Psychology contributes to the development of identity. According to Lacan, a child begins to develop a self-image during a mirror phase, in which she first sees herself, or perhaps her mother, in a mirror. "It is here in the mirror phase, Lacan says, that ego comes into being through the infant's identification with an image of its own body."[15] Thus Lacan's psychoanalytic theory is a negotiated understanding between experience and perceptions of others.

> When a child sees its own image (for example in a mirror—but this can also be in the mother's face, or any "other" perceived as whole), it mistakes this unified, coherent shape for a superior self. The child identifies with this image (as both reflecting the self and as something other), and finds it a satisfying unity that it cannot experience in its own body.[16]

For Lacan, this is the "ideal ego" derived from an imaginary self as a conglomeration with others.[17] Individual experience is limited, but the senses and imagination can begin to integrate perceptions of others into an imagined identity of the self. Borrowing from the image of an "other" can provide a more unified, coherent, and satisfying mental image of the self. "Thus the Imaginary, as one of the three psychic registers regulating human experience (together with the Symbolic and the Real), involves a narcissistic structure in which images of otherness are transformed into reflections of the self."[18] The power of

identification is that one comes to understand the self in terms represented by others.

Identity and Interpellation

Identification has power that reaches beyond consciousness, because culture is pervasive. Media narratives position the audience as subjects to be included within the ideological conditions that define culture through the beliefs and practices of a society.

> Ideology operates, for Althusser, through INTERPELLATION, i.e. through the social practices and structures which "hail" individuals, so as to endow them with social identity constituting them as subjects who unthinkingly accept their role within the system of production relations.[19]

Breaking from Marx's position that ideology is a false consciousness, Althusser's notion of *interpellation* is a way that people identify themselves from within the structures of society. Thus, cultural narratives infuse images of race, class, gender, and age, for example, that position people to understand themselves according to values and beliefs imposed by the dominant ideology reproduced in the media. Institutional, professional, and personal identities, such as teachers, doctors, lawyers, friends, husbands, and wives, become representations carrying assumptions about the character of individuals within a category, just as cowboys, cops and robbers, soldiers, and spies take on mythical proportions. The habitual beliefs and practices of any group eventually become accepted as if they were unquestionable laws of nature. Historically applied to race and ethnicity, there are many examples of the domination, enslavement, or even annihilation of a group of people that are justified in this way.

Confusion between culture and nature is at the core of identity problems and is the central tool of ideological rhetoric. Using a semiotic proxy, people and institutions will attempt to represent

their own interests. Proxy is a popular tool used to dramatize a subject by staging an individual to represent a generalized characterization of a group of people or a particular political or social policy issue.

Narratives can be used to dictate perceptions about nature that are actually habits of cultural bias. For example, gender roles and the status of age in a particular society are established through cultural practices over time, until they begin to represent the natural order of things. *Interpellation* can potentially distort or subordinate self-image, working like the *ideal ego* and the *interpretant* to construct identity according to standards imposed by dominant cultural values and beliefs that may be inconsistent with the nature of an individual or group.

Media Literacy and the Semiotic Notion of a Proxy

Humans are innately social creatures, and we identify with others like ourselves. In a world so dominated by mass communication, media play a significant role in shaping identities, beliefs, and practices. Even those who do not intentionally consume media are affected through the circulation of ideas and social discourse. The effects of proxy are subtle, yet pervasive. Media circulate stories and information, even in the form of entertainment, about real and imagined people and events. Peirce explains that as ideas are continuously spreading, they affect the meanings of other, related things.[20] "In this spreading they lose intensity, and especially the power of affecting others, but gain generality and become welded with other ideas."[21] Thus, the media and the subtle effects of proxy propel the hegemonic process of social discourse, and generalities such as myths and stereotypes become normal within a culture.

At all levels of experience, representations are taken for granted while an interpreter is engaged in understanding the content of

signs, whether they originate in nature or from a communicator with the intention to convey meaning. Certain classes of identity retain authority in society, but people still need to be as well informed as possible and maintain a healthy skepticism in order to communicate with opinion leaders, doctors, lawyers, government officials, and experts of all kinds. In an environment saturated by media messages created to attract and influence people, media literacy is essential for a population to learn to think critically about issues, events, and ideas. Meanings are always communicated through signs, and while content is essential, knowing the semiotic processes of communication can only improve understanding.

Semiotics effectively articulates logical processes that occur when meanings are derived by interpreting signs. As semioticians have developed deep understandings of these processes, the language of semiotics has become increasingly exclusive. Using common words like *proxy* serves the need to communicate semiotic concepts to a population of media consumers who are uninitiated and disinterested in the more theoretical aspects of semiotics. As they are defined by the discipline of semiotics, the use of common terms like sign and symbol can become more precise, and therefore more useful. As media consumers are increasingly vulnerable to the manipulation of messages constructed with new technologies by sophisticated communicators, learning even the most basic semiotic principles can prepare people to better understand events and ideas represented in the media.

The idea of the proxy is that certain signs appeal to an interpreter who is sympathetic to the experiences and ideas expressed. In entertainment, the proxy will be read with pleasure and satisfaction. In representing reality, the proxy can be a convenient substitute for critical examination of issues and events that might be better served through more thoughtful evaluation. New cultural norms are always emerging through habitual consumption of innovations in communication. As virtual communities share

values, beliefs, and practices, the diverse uses of media raise questions about the meanings and social impact of communication technologies. The self-assessment necessary to recognize the semiotic functions of a proxy challenges all who wish to benefit from the discipline of critical thinking and from the knowledge necessary for media literacy.

CHAPTER 4

Audiences, Identity, and the Semiotics of Space

The communicative processes that engage audiences are central to understanding media literacy. One of the defining qualities of media is that they alter the contexts of events in time and space. The literature about space and time is rich and complex, but this chapter is limited to a practical treatment of these concepts in relation to media and audiences. *Audiences* are receivers of specific conventional modes of communication intended for many people. In spite of producers' intentions to program media to inform, entertain, or persuade, individuals are situated in time and space to experience, interpret, and understand meanings from their own diverse points of view.

The origins and contexts of media-produced messages and situated conditions of audience reception are always necessarily different. Media productions organize and preserve words, sounds, and images that can be accessed later in time and transported through space. Part of the power of media, however, is derived from a sense of immediacy and authenticity that the average receiver experiences, without considering potential illusions created by the production and distribution processes.

The divergence between the messengers' intentions and the receivers' experiences happens, in part, because stories appeal to the audience's identity while reproducing the teller's cultural assumptions. Stories are a special category of structured and organized communication that represents events, experiences, ideas, beliefs, and cultural practices. "If every story presumes a teller, it also presumes someone to whom the story is told."[1] Audiences receive stories as individuals and in various group settings. Sometimes stories entertain an audience, but they also convey cultural assumptions about various types of characters and events that happened at times and in places that are different from the context of the telling. Even to narrate a recent event, the process of telling a story suggests that "once upon a time" something happened. The content, style, or meaning of a story may obfuscate the original time and space of events, but the audience suspends disbelief and assumes the narrator intends to tell the truth, or possibly to entertain. For an audience to care, they must identify with the subject of a story.

Storytellers try to appeal to the identity of audience members and adapt strategies to communicate specific narrative content. Just as any face-to-face communication is affected by the personal characteristics of the individuals involved and the dynamics of their relationships, the notion of identity and the context of any situated experience will affect the interpretation of a story. Associations with others in society influence how identity constructs a point of view that allows narrative strategies to conceal assumptions about oneself and others. Even the language of a story privileges certain shared cultural beliefs about age, race, class, and gender, as well as other subtle conventional values and practices embedded in the telling of events and the explaining of their consequences.

The conditions for interpreting meaning are directly related to identification with the consequences of events. *Identity* is the essence of embodied consciousness, providing the location of

experience and the origins of the self in relation to others. Our bodies exist with capacities to perceive the world around us, and thus, inform our understandings of how to survive and how to interact with others in order to meet our more complex personal and social needs.

The tendency to differentiate oneself from others operates at many levels and is cultivated according to cultural expectations that form identity. The qualities that distinguish age, race, class, and gender act as signs standing for distinct categories of identity. The recognition of shared characteristics extends the physical self beyond its individual isolation and constructs an identity based on a notion of sameness or difference with others. The relationships we encounter establish a persistent process of distinguishing the self by understanding significant characteristics defining the meaning of who we are. Identity is a cognitive sign that guides mental processes and associations with behaviors that conform to or resist social expectations. Within a given community, identity is negotiated with others who share expectations about individual roles and relationships.

In order to serve the critical needs of media literacy, the way audiences understand themselves and the media must be distinguished from the goals of media producers. Individual and collective audience members have different perspectives than media producers about the pleasures and purposes of media consumption. As producers understand their craft and the situated nature of media, these differences impact the effects of media on society. Media create certain illusions that have powerful effects on audiences because production techniques and media distribution play with time and space in order to entertain, inform, and persuade audiences. The semiotics of space must be explored in order to understand the power media producers have to create programs and stories that appear to take place at different times and places than those in which audiences experience them.

The Semiotics of Space

Audiences receive media in a variety of locations, such as at home, in a car, in a theater, alone or in a group, and people understand their own experiences without much regard for their situated perspectives. Consuming media at home, in a personal space, has a very different effect than being in a public space, like a theater, with other people. But the great illusion of media is the sense that events are happening while the audience experiences them. There is an immediate impact on the audience, even though media communication alters events and conveys stories in new contexts. The pleasures of entertainment media depend on suspension of disbelief, but audiences also experience the immediacy of nonfiction media as powerful and persuasive. Without considering the effects of time and space, media have a potential to misrepresent people, objects, and the consequences of events. Spatial relations must be considered because of the ways they affect interpretations of media representations.

Space is a term used to describe dimensional aspects existing between any significant phenomenon and another. The semiotics of space is a descriptive process enquiring into the relevant significance of sign relations between objects and their spatial contexts. Since semiotics is the disciplined study of the life of *signs* that stand for or represent something, space is generally overlooked as the background to other objects of attention. Space is the paper on which I write my words, the silence that makes musical sounds have meaning in relation to other sounds, and the distance between objects whose meanings are dependent on spatial relations. Consider the possible effects on a listener who feels a speaker is standing too close. Space is taken for granted as the background to a priori perception of the world.

The study of space as a semiotic phenomenon suggests that the meaning of space, as a sign, is generally understood in relation to other concerns. In everyday life, space is rarely considered for its independent qualities, but is more generally

taken as a category of conceptions that act as background to other objects and relationships. Its qualities are secondary to the objects that tend to define it. The furniture in a room, for example, will define the function of the space. The foundations of such categorical thinking are shared by "many of the greatest systematic thinkers including Aristotle, Kant, Hegel," and Charles Sanders Peirce.[2] Peirce introduced many categories, including three essential, descriptive categories of signs that are best explained by Houser: "Firstness is that which is as it is independently of anything else. Secondness is that which is as it is relative to something else. Thirdness is that which is as it is as mediate between two others."[3] These categories help describe the meanings of space.

When we speak about the specific qualities of space, we are considering its *firstness*. However, if we consider the quality of space in a room, for example, we are already conceptualizing our enquiry in terms relative to something else, like the walls of a specific room. *Firstness* has been lost to *secondness*, because the meaning of the space in a room is necessarily dependent upon the relevance of other objects within that space. Finally, the *thirdness* of space is mediated by a third party, such as a person, in a particular space; meanings are interpreted from a specific point of view indicating the consequences of the qualities and relationships within a spatial sign system, such as a room.

In terms of media literacy, the events depicted in stories happened at a different place and time, before audiences could receive them. At the same time, the qualities of the space the audience inhabits will affect interpretation. The effects and meanings of media are relative to the identity and spatially situated conditions of the audience.

Media, Authority, and the Theory of Relativity

Regardless of the production processes, audiences are primarily interested in the content of the media. But producers and

technologies affect representations of ideas, information, and events that are manipulated to tell stories to people in remote locations at arbitrary times. Shifting contexts allow media producers to influence audiences by representing authority, even when they acknowledge they have none. Recall the earlier example of an actor who says, "I am not a doctor but I play one on TV," and then proceeds to give the audience advice about a medical product. Media can manipulate appearances, creating iconic signs so the context of a person who looks like a doctor in a place that looks like a hospital asserts the authority of a doctor. The authority of a physician is derived from expertise, but signs of authority are relative to the institutional setting and the appearance of someone who looks like a doctor. Such iconic representations exploit cultural assumptions grounded on superficial appearances rather than well-reasoned critical assessment.

According to Einstein's general theory of relativity, the geometric properties of space are not independent, but are determined by matter.[4] The matter referred to are the objects that exist within the context of a space being represented. Thus, the signifying properties of a hospital space are represented by relationships between people who are distinguished by institutional costumes and power structures established through interactive roles, the use of technological equipment, and the kinds of events that happen in a hospital setting. Space, in and of itself, does not evoke a reaction until it becomes the background to something perceived as consequential.

According to Einstein, time is the expansion of space.[5] Space is assumed to be static if it is observed only according to matter or objects that infer some relationship to other objects or matter. As a sign, space produces meanings when objects or events are recognized as dependent on the distinct qualities of their context. Media literacy challenges us to integrate knowledge of the conditional nature of space/time relationships into interpretations of stories and media information.

Phenomenology of Perception

Perceptions of space begin with the body of an individual. *Phenomenology* is the study of the conscious experience of things just as they are perceived. The physical capacities of the body as a means of conscious perception through sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and reason all engage in interpreting the meanings of experience. Science has been a progression of discoveries made possible through observation and technologies that enhanced human abilities to perceive and discover new facts and details that inspire new levels of understanding. For example, human eyes can see a certain range of things, but a microscope extends human vision to reveal a whole level of previously invisible phenomena. In the same sense, the telescope brings distant objects into view, and the doctor's stethoscope extends the capacity to hear the heart and lungs.

Radio and TV convey feelings and impressions of reality with a different quality than print media. Real events depicted in the media are arbitrarily selected and framed according to the intentions of the producer and specific character of any particular medium. Without losing the pleasure of suspending disbelief, media literacy prepares audiences to recognize the verisimilitude of the media, its potential to represent the world, and to deliver its selective representations to the audience.

Knowledge develops when observations reveal qualities that signify meanings or consequences to the observer. The processes for understanding meanings require the mind to recognize distinctions, note the significance of objects, ideas, events, and relationships, and anticipate effects. According to Merleau-Ponty, perceptual experiences and the "organization of these experiences into causal relations" are thought processes by which conscious beings establish a semiotic view of the world.[6] Because understanding is based on one's relationship with the phenomenon in question, critical thinking has the potential to develop knowledge at various levels through thoughtful reasoning.

Communication requires another level of thought to create a representation of human experience mediated in the mind of a communicator. Perception is the capacity to apprehend and interpret the meanings, whereas communication involves the capacity to represent ideas and information to be shared among other conscious beings. "Thus perception and thought have this much in common—that both of them have a future horizon and a past horizon and they appear to themselves as temporal, even though they do not move at the same speed or at the same time."[7] Time and space are indistinguishable at this level because communication is the representation of objects and ideas originally perceived in a spatial relationship with the world, but remembered because something became meaningful. Spatial relationships may establish the context of perceived causality, but when signs lose immediacy they can potentially take on a general significance regardless of space and time. Space plays a less obvious part in constructing meaning than other, more active modes of communication. Communication draws attention to the content of messages, while space contributes to the quality of those messages, without being obvious about its role in constructing meaning.

Media integrate multiple, simultaneous sign systems to represent human interactions. For Hall, language is more than a "medium of expression," in that languages represent a "major element in the formation of thought."[8] Languages represent different "culturally patterned sensory screens."[9] For example, Hall observes, "Americans and Arabs live in different sensory worlds much of the time and do not use the same senses even to establish most of the distances maintained during conversations."[10] In the same fashion that McLuhan[11] speaks about technology as extensions of the human body, Hall recognizes the significance of media and technologies developed to enhance specific perceptual capacities that overcome limitations imposed by the nature of the body. The computer is an

enhanced brain, the wheel is better suited for travel than the foot, and the telephone extends the range and distance of the voice.[12] "Language extends experience in time and space while writing extends language," thus "man has shifted evolution from his body to his extensions," which has accelerated the evolutionary process.[13] As language and objects that extend perceptual capacities of the body become normal within a given culture, they are integrated into relationships and influence the meaning of space.

In the case of communication, media determine a radical departure from the human experience of embodied isolation. Speaking of the television as an "electronic hearth," Tichi argues that, in the late 1940s, American families were sold the idea of television through a spatial metaphor suggesting that TV continued the traditional role of the family hearth as a space to gather and exchange stories.[14] Media represent reality to such a great extent that audiences believe in the immediate presence of the "message," while generally ignoring the technology of the messenger. The technologies of audio and video production literally bring distant places close while emulating a cultural space from another time and place. What is critical about media like television is that the technology obfuscates the remote locations of events because viewers experience television programs in their homes, and the meanings are interpreted there and then.

We define space according to its practical use in every situation. Imagine a child with a dollhouse and some tiny objects used for furniture. Starting with a pile of little objects in the middle of a model room, the child will begin to arrange the furniture according to a conventional sense of how it would be used. The space is defined by the distribution of the objects and their relationships with people.[15] A space designated as a classroom can be radically altered by placing seats in a circle, which avoids the traditional power structure imposed by rows of seats in opposition to a formal speaker's lectern. Thus, the

organization of space can be used as an extension of identity and power in human relations. According to Foucault,

> Architecture...is only taken as an element of support, to endure a certain allocation of people in space, a *canalization* of their circulation, as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations. So it is not only considered an element of space, but is especially thought of as a plunge into a field of social relations in which it brings about some specific effects.[16]

Thus, the semiotics of interior space is a symbolic representation created to maintain an established social distribution of power.

Performance Space

Performance spaces are consciously planned to determine general conditions that situate the audience as receivers.

> The performance space—whether it is the stage of the live theatre or the cinema and television screen...transforms the most ordinary and everyday trivia of existence into carriers of significance. Hang an empty picture frame on the wall—and suddenly the texture of the wall makes anything within it significant.[17]

All media establish a space for recontextualizing the meanings of things that have different meanings in other contexts. "When Marcel Duchamp put a urinal onto a pedestal and exhibited it in an art gallery, he made use of this magical quality of the stage" that "proclaims itself of being on exhibition, being pregnant with significance."[18]

The semiotics of mass media are complex spaces insofar as images and stories are already mediated by the producers and production processes before they reach an audience. If the story is fiction, the realistic aspects of the image and the narrative content are intended as poetic and symbolic references to real

spaces. If a story is intended as nonfiction, the nature of spatial realities determines that media events represent remote locations. The specific nature of the media, and the value added by the authoritative voice anchoring elite perceptions, suggest that events are interpreted wherever the audience is. Mass media, such as television, radio, and the Internet, bring voices and images from remote places into personal spaces that can convey a human quality and a sense of intimacy that implies the persuasive qualities of direct personal experience.

A camera image defines space through objects, depth of field, and inference of what is not in the frame, but is presumably part of the field of vision of the camera operator. The intended meaning of representations is revealed in the language of the narrator defining the representation of space. Camera technology empowers the operator to establish "semantic categories which a particular language provides for the representation of space."[19] When the audience watches events occurring in remote locations, the meaning has already been determined for them by professionals using the grammar of representation, which attempts to limit the range of interpretations. Thus, the culture of broadcasting, and all media distribution, being endowed with control over powerful technology and access to mass audiences, tends to communicate a preferred interpretation of events.

Media have a capacity to communicate and enable multiple levels of perspective that demonstrate the postmodern condition. News programs, for example, report stories that necessarily interpret events that took place in remote locations at an earlier time. Audiences receive narratives that necessarily include the interpretive perspectives of the people who are retelling the stories. But the identity and perspective of everyone in the audience will affect their final interpretations of the meaning.

Media production technologies can easily be used to create illusions, so producers determine the ethics of telling the audience what they are looking at. Advertisers want to create demand for products, and they use media to appeal to audiences and

make their products as attractive as possible. Political commentators use language and statistics to obfuscate facts and convince audiences that their predictions about the future consequences of events are substantive. Journalism and news programming was guided by ethical traditions based on reporting events and attempting to be objective about what had actually happened, but such conventions have been challenged in recent years. The profit motives of broadcasters and the fact that opinions are based upon political ideologies are not necessarily clear to audiences. Audiences need to understand the limits of verifiable information and how to distinguish opinions from facts. Still, the distribution of any ideas or information suggests that speakers have authority, if only because of their presence in the media.

A good example of the potential of illusion created by media production is *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, which will be covered in detail in chapter 6. This is a fake news program on Comedy Central Network that has been recognized for its news coverage, even though the program is intended as comedy entertainment and makes no claims to be an authoritative news source.[20] *The Daily Show* effectively informs while it entertains, but comedians, by definition, want to be funny and may use exaggerations or distort facts intentionally. Jon Stewart appears as the host and anchorman in New York, with other comedians on the show imitating news reporters. Using production technology called chroma-key, fake news reporters appear to be speaking to Stewart from remote locations around the world. Chroma-key technology is capable of creating a visual illusion by superimposing a live image of a reporter over video images from anywhere in the world. The television audience sees a split screen, with Stewart in the studio and the reporter appearing to be at a remote location. After the report, the camera pulls out to reveal the comic reporter standing in front of a blue chroma-key screen on stage in New York, right next to Stewart.

The Daily Show often uses previously broadcast news footage to construct humor and reveal errors, distortions, and lies about politics and actual events. The writers and comedians often depend on archive recordings to set up the context of jokes. When a politician, government representative, celebrity, or other public figure makes a statement, video from earlier broadcasts can be used to humorously demonstrate a previous statement or event that contradicts the more recent report. Video and commentary from earlier broadcasts of conventional news reports can change or distort the context of subsequent stories. Even as comedy, this process can enhance understanding by correcting chronological sequences of events or adding background and historical perspectives that may have been omitted in earlier stories on other news programs. Revealing the rhetorical strategies of politicians or the technological manipulation of time and space may be entertaining, but it generally has no real political consequence. Still, an informed, media-literate public has much to gain from understanding production strategies and techniques and recognizing potential distortions or media illusions and the expressed differences between facts and opinions.

The visual and narrative components of video and film ask the audience to suspend disbelief, ignore its own sense of realism, and enjoy the grammar of motion picture illusion. In the film *Fargo*, Steve Buscemi plays a violent criminal who buries a suitcase full of ransom money in the snow on the side of a straight, flat, visually endless road. As he digs a hole in the snow, Buscemi looks up at a perfectly straight fence line beside the road. With no distinguishing features to define space, the desperate criminal uses a small plastic window scraper to mark the location of his treasure in the snow. The space, defined by its relationships with objects, positions the audience to know he will not be able to find the money later.

Audiences willingly suspend disbelief in order to enjoy a made-up story world created by the filmmaker. The spatial origins of mediated images may happen by chance, but storytellers

intentionally construct interpretations that fit random events into contexts that portend meaning. The semiotics of chance events that may have no meaning in and of themselves evoke a generalizing tendency to ascribe meaning from a given point of view based upon past knowledge and experience.[21]

Defining Spatial Paradigms

The original *Star Trek* TV series used an opening sequence announcing that space was the final frontier. While they were referring to the cosmos outside the earth's atmosphere, the English word *space* has many possible meanings that all stand for relationships defined in terms of what separates objects or events. Space is paradigmatic in that it defines categories of distinctions, and all meanings are based upon distinctions. Meanings established through spatial relationships are always possibly understood at many levels, but without a fixed point of view there is no hierarchy among the possible interpretations. Identities are defined by shared perspectives and by asserting value judgments about the correct interpretation of objects or events that actually have no meaning in and of themselves. A tree does not necessarily exist to provide lumber or shade or to be appreciated for its beauty, but someone may interpret it that way. When rain falls, by definition, water drops from the sky to the ground. But if you plan a picnic, the rain might disrupt your plans. On a farm with young plants withering in dry ground, the rain may be a positive sign, meaning that the plants will grow. In other words, language lets us describe information, ideas, and experiences, but our choice of words and manner of representation also demonstrate a point of view, a context, a set of conditions, and motives that may limit or extend the meanings of perception grounded in space.

Ultimately, spatial relationships have a profound impact on the way we interpret things in our everyday lives. According to Hall, the term *proxemics* refers to the "interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of

culture."[22] For example, space provides a meaningful dimension contributing to the nonverbal aspects of communication based upon cultural norms that dictate appropriate distances for people to stand from one another in specific social situations. We continually adjust to considerations about proximity established by cultural aspects of nonverbal communication. Buildings are designed as places for people to live and conduct social affairs. Within these spaces, meaningful settings are constructed in order to carry out social processes according to established notions of how people and objects are organized in space. Consider the differences expressed by spatial relationships in a person's home, as opposed to a restaurant, a sales counter in a store, a courtroom, a prison, a playground, or a classroom. As mentioned earlier, alternative organizations of a classroom environment can restructure the hierarchy of power and relationships between people and objects, and thus affect learning.

Negotiating the Semiotics of Space

Although we are not always aware of space and its capacity to alter the meanings of things, in some situations, such as when designing architecture, humans intentionally construct and control some aspects of space. Kostogriz uses the term *thirdspace* to describe a learning environment privileging multicultural human perspectives, in which individuals take up different points of view without a preconceived hierarchy of a dominant ideology.[23] Rather than a geometric conception of objects located in space, *thirdspace* describes a cognitive space allowing competition between and negotiation of interpretive meanings. In calling attention to a literacy of multiple perspectives, Kostogriz calls for a

> dialectic of multicultural spaces in which we live and learn in order to reveal contradictions between the global and the local, between centres and peripheries, between the individual and the social, between the politics of universal knowledge and

> situated knowing in everyday practices. In a word, we need a theory (a knowledge) of the production of cultural-semiotic and intellectual spheres in multicultural conditions; one that injects a third dimension into thinking about the possibility of crossing, erasure and 'translation' of the boundaries in the cultural production of identities and textual meanings.[24]

Space is generally taken as an area between objects, but third-space refers to a cognitive space in which the meaning of a sign is negotiable. Like the semiotic concept of the *interpretant*, the relationship between a sign and its meaning is mediated in the mind of an interpreter who considers knowledge from a particular point of view.

Media Literacy, Semiotics, and Space

The purpose of this chapter has been to explicate some media literacy issues related to the semiotics of space. There are many other dimensions of space, provoked by concepts such as quantum physics and string theory, that would require study beyond the scope of this project. Semiotics provides a system to organize and understand qualities and characteristics of signs according to similarities, differences, and relationships. When we observe space as a sign, new ways of understanding are possible and the meanings of media phenomena can be discussed as they pertain to our everyday lives. Immediate experiences in space tend to appear uniform because of a habit of seeing things from a limited perspective. Media and space must be understood with consideration of multiple levels of representation and perception. The *secondness* of space, as background to other signs, needs to be considered in the process of logical, semiotic analysis. Finally, audiences and identities generate *thirdness*, which mediates perception and potential for multiple points of view, revealing the negotiated nature of meaning.

Audiences will interpret media from alternative perspectives and need to appreciate the intentions of media producers and the potential effects of production processes. The qualities and

contexts of space and time affect stories and the audience's interpretations. Considering the verisimilitude of the media and the selective power and priorities of producers, media-literate audiences must consider the nature of the media, its potential to distort reality or create illusions, the limits of representing the truth, and the differences between verifiable facts and speculative opinions.

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CHAPTER 5

Entertainment, Culture, Ideology, and Myth

Entertainment media are generally understood as various forms of amusement, but the pleasures of entertainment media do not conceal their impact on society. Media products and innovations take many forms, such as television programs, advertising, film, the Internet, electronic games, literature, and comic books, to name a few that provoke perpetual debates about their effects. Entertainment and nonfiction, such as the various forms of journalism, raise questions about representations and issues related to politics, sex, violence, and crime, and their impact on social values, beliefs, and practices within a given culture.

Culture, ideology, and myth help to describe how groups of people understand aspects of the world in which they live. The term *culture* refers to groups of people that share particular values, beliefs, and practices. One culture can be distinguished from another because members of different cultural groups tend to understand the meanings of signs in different ways. The values, beliefs, and ideals that shape the ways in which people act are called *ideology*. Much of what constitutes ideology and culture is guided by *myth*, a connotative system of representations that imply vague understandings based on past practices and

stories that are not supported by substantial, verifiable evidence. Mythologies represent a collective system of interpretive perspectives, including ideologies often shared and debated within a culture. Beyond the passions of divergent cultures and the ideologies and myths of various interest groups, semiotic methods can inform social discourse by providing clear criteria for critical analysis of the observable aspects of media.

Every example of media will have specific qualities that suggest its uniqueness and the need to adapt critical thinking to particular issues. There is no one correct way to analyze media, but there are some general considerations that can help guide the active observer toward media literacy and a useful understanding of the knowledge and effects that can be communicated by entertainment and nonfiction media. This chapter illustrates how to adapt semiotics to the analysis of an episode of *The Simpsons* as a demonstration of culture, ideology, and myths conveyed through entertainment television.

Cartoon Comedy and the Construction of Culture

Marge, Homer, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie are the familiar names of characters in *The Simpsons*, a television program that has enjoyed great popularity for many years. As a genre, *The Simpsons* is an animated cartoon and a situation comedy that appeals to a large, diverse audience. Both children and adults are fascinated by cartoons "because they are understandably engaged by the complex blend of aesthetic, narrative, visual, verbal, and ideological codes at work in them."[1] Cartoons like *The Simpsons* are drawn to resemble the general characteristics of human beings. The characters are not intended to look real, but the narratives of situation comedies use realistic social structures, settings, and institutions. Each character is a sign for gender and familial roles played out in relation to the social systems that prescribe behaviors.

Like other systems of representation, situation comedies should not be dismissed as mere entertainment. Television programs aim to fulfill emotional needs for pleasure through an

ideology of mass culture.[2] *The Simpsons* offers comic situations based on normal family and community structures and institutions, but derives humor from a blatant resistance to authority through the attitudes and behaviors of its characters. Because television entertainment is not supposed to be real, stories can address actual social problems and ideological tensions without appearing to confront established institutions. Shows like *The Simpsons* offer an expression of resistance to those who lack power in society. The writers and producers of *The Simpsons* exaggerate issues through colorful cartoon characters and animated action in an otherwise typical television situation comedy that also demonstrates strong support for the dominant ideology of class-structured American society.

The following sections look at the processes of adapting a semiotic approach to analysis of an entertainment narrative in order to encourage media literacy. An episode of *The Simpsons* is examined as a popular television *text* by taking a closer look at constructions of cultural identity and the circulation of ideas and values presented as entertainment. As a cultural trace, *The Simpsons* reflects established character types in a program that is infused with representations of age, gender, and class, and is driven by cultural assumptions and mythologies.

Media representations of characters and situations tend to become familiar and normal to the audience, even if they are exaggerated and inaccurate. *The Simpsons* was selected as an example of entertainment that appeals to many people. The analysis is not intended as a value judgment and is not meant to condone or condemn the program. Rather, semiotic analysis of media is generally intended to provide empirical data to inform social discourse and raise the level of media literacy. Media literacy promotes critical thinking that can help consumers become aware of how to better understand the content of media, production techniques, generalizations about values, beliefs, and stereotypes, and the potential impact of such representations on the ways society negotiates the meanings of media.

The Processes of Applied Semiotic Analysis

Semiotics provides many tools that can be adapted to the specificity of a media artifact and can help to build understanding of the processes that construct meanings. Those tools function primarily by describing how signs represent meanings, so a critical observer can look beyond the content and intended meanings of a text to examine the structures and processes used to communicate.

The simplest, most obvious representations are the first places to look for questionable beliefs and practices, because familiarity makes people comfortable with their own assumptions about what appears to be normal, and therefore what is believed to be true or correct. Signs necessarily exist in relationships with other signs in a given context. Meanings are often derived from a *code* that prescribes how things are organized systematically, like the objects in a room, the rules of a game, or different styles or combinations of clothing that suggest various meanings. The relationships between any given sign and everything around it can generate a sign system. Together, the signs within a sign system establish a code. A *code* determines how the meaning of one sign depends on its relationships to other signs. The characters in a story are understood according to codes, just as the notion of a family implies certain relationships between a husband and a wife, parents and children, and the communities in which they interact.

Language, sounds, and images follow elaborate structures and rules for constructing meanings through stories. Analyses of the structures and processes of communication reveal assumptions that sometimes provoke worthy questions about beliefs and practices portrayed in the media. The following section briefly describes several of the semiotic tools employed in the forthcoming analysis of *The Simpsons*.

The function of a sign is to represent meanings, and this is accomplished in many ways. The most consistent characteristic of a sign is that it signifies, expresses, or represents something.

But a sign is not the thing it represents; a sign is an expression of the meaning or object that it stands for. And while the qualities of any given sign make it distinguishable from other signs, all meanings are derived from signs that interact from within a context.

While the narrative is analyzed using a semiotic perspective in consideration of the interpretant and the relationships between a sign and its object as icons, indices, and symbols, the sequence of signs listed from the broadcast is diagrammed using a structure derived from Saussure. The *signifier* is understood as an expression or representation of an object or meaning called the *signified*. The signified (object or meaning) is further understood to refer to a *denotative* or explicit meaning, and a *connotative* or implied meaning, that reflects some social context for interpretation (see figure 5.1).

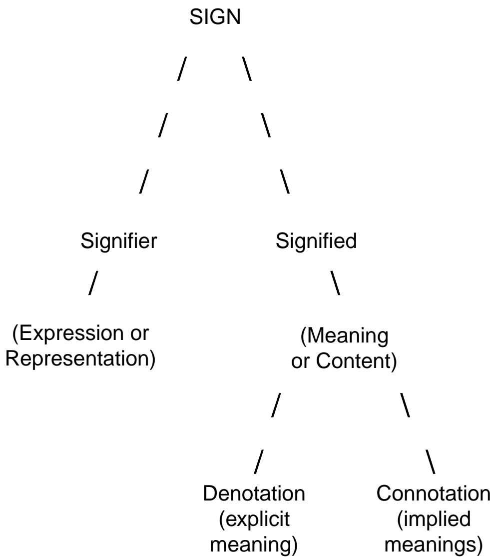

Figure 5.1 Sign Relations between Signifier, Signified, Denotation, and Connotation

Again, as described in preceding chapters, it is helpful to consider the three levels of characteristics of signs and sign relations that produce meanings. First, identify the singular qualities that make a sign distinguishable. Second, consider the relationship between the sign and its specific, or denotative meaning. And third, recognize the contexts of signs and their relationships with the contexts of possible interpretations. This last consideration is especially significant, because there is a logic that is specific to the characters and events in any story that is received by audiences in a different context affected by the nature of media.

These semiotic concepts are tools for understanding media and communication. The following analysis will illustrate these and other methods in an applied fashion that will hopefully provide greater clarity to issues important for media literacy.

The key to media analysis is developing a sense of what is significant and worthy of attention, but the initial goal is to understand the logic of how meanings are communicated by signs. Particularly in media, in which objects and events are represented after someone else experienced them, the nature of the medium affects the way signs generate meanings in relation to other signs coded by associations and distinctions that are grounded in time and space. Further, it is essential to recognize the life of signs because, just as the meanings of words are defined by referring to other words, the meanings of signs always refer to other signs that are affected by changing contexts. An observer must be aware that the process of interpreting generates new signs in the mind of the interpreter, and so the identity of the interpreter constitutes a new context that must be considered. Because individuals may interpret meanings differently, recognizing the empirical nature of signs and the semiotic processes that communicate meanings are essential to accurate and reasonable discourse. Self-knowledge is essential for the analyst because everyone brings established memories, ideas, beliefs, and cultural values to their interpretations.

An important step in media analysis is to identify the smallest significant expressions of meaning, such as words, sounds, and images. The context of media communication is generally coded as fiction or nonfiction, and meanings circulate within the form of the media, as well as to the audience. Typically, the audience seeks pleasure from entertainment, but media producers code messages that represent values and beliefs in subtle, yet powerful, ways. By focusing on the signs, codes, and processes of representation, the analysis is descriptive in ways that avoid a singular, context-specific interpretation.

Semiotic Analysis of the "Flaming Moe's" Episode

The following semiotic analysis includes a description of the scripted text, sounds, and images of the "Flaming Moe's" episode, written by Robert Cohen and directed by Rich Moore and Alan Smart. It originally aired November 21, 1991, and is included in *The Complete Third Season DVD Collector's Edition*.[3] Discussion is limited to signs and sign systems relevant to the analysis, so certain aspects of the program will be covered in more detail than others. The original broadcast also included network station breaks and advertising, constituting the flow of television images and messages.

Every detail is not necessary for an effective analysis, but the actual scene-by-scene sequence of the show helps to demonstrate the narrative development and the functions of events, locations, and characters of the story. Table 5.1 that follows provides a scene-by-scene description of the narrative sequence. The purpose of the table is to follow the *syntagmatic*, or sequential, structure of the narrative while representing the relationships between the denotative and connotative meanings of each scene of the story. The *denotation* describes the explicit elements of the story content while the *connotation* suggests a possible implied interpretation.

Table 5.1 Scene-by-Scene Analysis of *The Simpsons* "Flaming Moe's" Episode

A. Scene	*B. Shot Content*	*C. Graphics or other content*	*D. Sound/ speech*	*E. Connotation or Narrative Function*
1. Opening sequence	Various family members in action		Theme music	Animated family, situation comedy
2. *Eye on Springfield*	Iconic Hollywood	TV show within *Simpsons* TV show	Upbeat music	Glorified fame, riches, and fast life
3. Bart and Homer	Reference to Lisa	Cross section of house, rats, asbestos…	Girls plotting against Bart	Segue to Lisa's room
Candle wax game	Girls playing		Shape of wax is husband's job	Mythology that women are determined by men
Truth or Dare	Girls chase Bart	Bart runs, Homer watches	Homer: "That's it! I'm out of here."	Adolescent sex play: Segue for Homer to go to Moe's Tavern
4. Moe's Tavern	Moe is sad, and out of beer		Business is slow	Drinking alcohol as social norm
Homer's flashback	Recalls inventing Flaming Homer	Fire provides magic ingredient	I don't know the science…but fire made it good…	Magic solution to the crisis
Moe lies	Moe claims he invented the drink	Moe and anonymous customer love the drink	Moe says the drink is called Flaming Moe	Disequilibrium sets plot in motion
5. Moe's success	Crowds include celebrities	Moe rejects offer to sell drink recipe	"Only an idiot would give away a million dollar idea"	Moe's success is Homer's crisis

Continued

Table 5.1 Continued

A. Scene	*B. Shot Content*	*C. Graphics or other content*	*D. Sound/ speech*	*E. Connotation or Narrative Function*
Moe hires waitress	Woman shows intelligence and determination		Moe : "I like your moxie."	Exceptional female character; Waitress is messenger and Moe's conscience
6. Bart at school	Inventors we admire	Flaming Homer invented by Homer Simpson	Everybody knows Moe invented the Flaming Moe	Development: Building sympathy for the victim
7. *Aerosmith* performs at Moe's	Moe joins in as a friend of the band	Cartoon images of real people	Popular song: "Walk this Way"	Cultural capital of celebrity icons
At the Simpsons' home	Marge suggests talking to Moe		Moe says it's just business	Moral dilemma
Homer confronts Moe	Waitress hears Homer claim credit for drink		Is it true?	Waitress motivates plot as messenger and conscience
8. Flaming Moe's song	Parody sequence	Graphic effects imitate film	Drink your misery away at Flaming Moe's	Interlude: Intertextual reference to *Cheers*
Another offer to buy the recipe	Delivery of cough syrup	Offer of a million dollars		Narrative crisis
Moe and the waitress	Waitress says share credit with Homer		Moe agrees	Moral dilemma
At the Simpsons' home and beyond	Homer sees everything as Moe		Moe, Moe, Moe	Obsessive compulsive, provoking a narrative crisis
Homer tells the secret ingredient	Moe is about to sign the million dollar contract		Villain tears the contract, leaves with the money	Narrative climax
9. Moe's tavern	Tavern is back to original condition	Homer apologizes, friends have a drink together	Moe says some things are too good not to share…	Resolution; return to equilibrium

When audiences watch television entertainment, they generally suspend disbelief in order to simply enjoy the experience. In contrast, a critical analyst wants to recognize the values and assumptions imbedded in a media artifact and must therefore identify the creative processes and the nature of the media. The writers and producers of narrative entertainment like *The Simpsons* are concerned with appealing to an audience by representing generalized real-life situations and characters, and the analysis explores the relationships between representations and real-life concerns conveyed through the storytelling processes. The made-up world of *The Simpsons* appeals to the audience because the situations are authentic enough to raise questions about real values, beliefs, and practices. The audience identifies with characters and situations that provoke dilemmas that must be resolved in the process of telling a short story. In this case, the principle problem is that Moe the bartender takes credit for a drink that his friend Homer invented, and while he makes money to save his failing bar business, the story raises questions about the values of honesty and friendship.

Scene One: The introductory sequence begins with a cartoon image of clouds parting and the words "The Simpsons" appearing while a chorus of voices sings "The Simpsons" like a choir of angels. Upbeat orchestral theme music continues throughout the opening sequence.

Bart Simpson appears frowning, presumably because he is being punished. He is writing on a classroom chalkboard, "underwear should be worn on the inside." He rushes out of the classroom at the 3 p.m. dismissal bell.

The scene cuts to Homer at work at a nuclear power plant, wearing a protective suit and handling radioactive materials. A whistle blows, and Homer removes his protective clothing and drops the dangerous materials, without regard for safety, as he rushes out the door.

Next, Marge is reading a magazine while Maggie, the baby, moves down the checkout conveyor belt. The baby disappears, then pops her head out of the grocery bag, and Marge smiles.

The next image cuts to Lisa playing saxophone in the school band with joyful abandon. Her playing is integrated into the theme music as she walks out of the band room door. The family comes together as Homer pulls his car into the driveway, Bart flies over the top of the car on a skateboard, Lisa arrives on her bicycle, and Marge pulls her car into the driveway, chasing Homer into the house. Finally all the family members are at home, but just as they sit on the couch to watch TV together, robbers take the couch. The sequence ends with the entire family on the floor, looking wide-eyed at the TV.

Typical of television situation comedies, the opening introduces the principle characters, their roles and personalities, and some characteristic images or activities. The sounds, images, and characters themselves act collectively as a sign system to represent the program as a lighthearted comic satire about a family. Each character fits a particular paradigm defined according to conventional expectations for the roles within the family and community. Variations of the introductory sequence are used at the beginning of every episode of *The Simpsons*, but the general identity and the individual roles and personalities of all characters are consistent. Homer is a working dad, but not very smart. Marge is a pleasant character, a sensible mother and homemaker. Maggie is a toddler who generally does not speak, but contributes by her expressive presence. Bart is an energetic, irreverent little boy who regularly gets into trouble. Lisa is creative, idealistic, and lighthearted, as her saxophone performance demonstrates, but she also shares her mom's sensible nature. All take up conventional age and gender roles negotiated within the structures of the family. When the robbers take their couch, *The Simpsons* characteristically adapt to the circumstances of the world around them.

Scene Two: Following the introductory sequence, the episode begins with the opening of a television news magazine parody. With a sailboat in the background, the announcer says: "Hello, I'm Kent Brockman and this is *Eye on Springfield*!" A series of

quick images follow, including frequent appearances of women in bikinis, accompanied by upbeat music. An iconic Hollywood-style sign that says "Springfield" and Larry's Chinese Theater, with celebrity hand- and footprints in the sidewalk, act as indexical signs referring to actual famous Hollywood attractions. A hot tub scene, a dog racetrack, a model in a bikini posing with a statue of the fictitious town's founder, Jebediah Springfield, and lots more close-ups of women in bikinis follow. Together, the signs infer that the imaginary Springfield is an exciting, glamorous city resembling qualities of a mythological Hollywood, rather than the mundane, middle-class, suburban neighborhood home of the Simpson family. Opening with a TV program within a TV program, the audience is positioned to identify with the point of view of the regular characters in the show.

From behind the television set, a reverse shot reveals Homer watching the show on TV. Homer says, "Wow, infotainment!" As is characteristic of many humorous references used in *The Simpsons*, the word infotainment is a sign of the times and an intertextual reference that depends on the audience's preexisting knowledge. An intertextual reference is a representation in one context that refers to a commonly known sign from another context. *Eye on Springfield* refers to a popular genre of news-style programs that have the look and feel of *60 Minutes*, *Hard Copy*, *20/20*, and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.

As Homer is watching, the announcer presents a series of teasers indicating stories the show will feature. Brockman says, "Tonight we salute the twenty-fifth anniversary of the great Springfield tire fire; twenty-five years and still burning strong," sarcastically celebrating a pollution problem. He continues, "We watch Springfield's oldest man meet Springfield's fattest man," while an image of two people is displayed with a caption that says, "Opposites Attract?" Homer identifies with the qualities expressing fatness. Homer feels competitive with the fattest man, saying, "He's not so fat," making a joke of the idea

that, for Homer, being exceptional at anything can be a source of pride.

The next segment is an interview with the heavyweight boxing champ from Springfield, Dredrick Tatum, who looks and sounds like the infamous celebrity and former boxing champion, Mike Tyson. This is an indexical sign pointing to an actual person, and one of many intertextual references drawn from popular culture that the writers assume the audience will know. If the audience does not recognize Tyson, the joke is meaningless. The segment concludes with the announcer saying, "But first, part seven of our eye-opening look at the bikini," which segues to the next plot development scene.

The preceding scene is a humorous depiction of contemporary entertainment, with its focus on celebrities, uncritical attention to oddities and extremes, and most prominently, the sexual objectification of women's bodies.

Scene Three: The plot shifts as Homer is interrupted when Bart enters the room. Bart notices the TV images of women in bikinis and comments, "Whoo! T and A!" His comment relies on the audience knowing what "T and A" stands for, and again reinforces the appeal of the objectification of women's bodies, even to a young boy. Homer asks Bart why he is still up. Bart replies that Lisa is having a slumber party and asks, "Who can sleep with those five evil hens cackling and plotting against me?" Homer responds saying, "What an ego!" suggesting that they have better things to talk about, when they are in fact talking about Bart.

The next visual sequence moves upstairs in the house to Lisa and her friends. It appears as if a camera is moving up a cutaway section of the house to the second floor, showing dead rats, lead pipes, and asbestos on the way. The imitation of camera movement is not necessary with cartoon animation, but it exploits the established grammar of film narrative leading the viewer visually from one space and time to another. Once again, the awareness of hazardous materials in the environment is a parody and a sign of the times.

In Lisa's second-floor room, the girls giggle about Bart and then play the candle wax game by dripping wax into a bowl of water. The first girl explains: "Now remember, Wanda, whatever shape the wax takes, that's what your husband's job will be." The girls watch as the wax drips. Wanda sounds disappointed saying, "It's a mop. My husband will be a janitor." Lisa comforts Wanda with her optimistic interpretation: "That looks like an Olympic torch to me. Your husband could be an Olympic athlete who will go on to have a great acting career!" Wanda lets another drop of wax fall, but is again disappointed saying, "It's a dustpan." Lisa responds ominously, "The wax never lies." The next image is the outside of the Simpsons' suburban house, while inside the girls propose moving on to play "Truth or Dare."

The candle wax game is a powerful representation of social hegemony demonstrating the dominance of patriarchal thinking. First, preteen girls are looking for the wax to be an iconic sign that resembles something that could be associated with some kind of work. The mop further acts as a symbol of a social class distinction, suggesting that the children understand that a janitor is of a lower class than an Olympic athlete. Lisa's optimism demonstrates the ambiguity of signs when she proposes an alternative interpretation by reversing the visual orientation of the drop of wax so it resembles an Olympic torch.

Overall, the scene represents young girls believing in a mythology that men will establish the quality of their lives, because men are determined by what they do, while women are defined by men.[4] Mythology can be understood as a sign system and demonstrated when the connotation or implied meaning of a sign is mistaken as the nature of something, when it is actually a cultural habit.[5] While it may be accurate to claim that women have historically been dependent on men, the potential for women to be self-determining depends on social and political circumstances that restrict or allow women to pursue independent lives. It is not predetermined, as the wax game suggests, that all women will marry or that men must determine

the nature of women's lives. The girls' reaction to the wax game happens between the characters in the television text, but the narrative reproduces a value system that, it is assumed, the audience will accept as normal.

The scene is brought to a conclusion when the girls play "Truth or Dare." A girl with braces on her teeth is dared to kiss Bart. In the kitchen, an unsuspecting Bart is tackled and kissed by the girl. Bart threatens to tell Mom and Dad, and the girls put a jinx on him so that he can't speak until somebody says his name. The scene continues with various situations pitting the girls against Bart. Homer demonstrates his characteristically childish attitudes until Maggie, the toddler that generally never speaks, turns up with excessive makeup, jewelry, and high-heel shoes after Lisa and friends give her a "makeover." Homer finally says, "That's it, I'm outta here," and he leaves to go to Moe's Tavern. Thus, besides the jokes and conflicts between Lisa and her friends, Bart, and Homer, these opening scenes set up a transition to the main plot of the episode.

Scene Four: Homer goes to Moe's Tavern. Moe is unhappy because business has been slow. He complains, "People today are healthier and drinking less. You know, if it wasn't for the junior high school next door, no one would even use the cigarette machine. Increased job satisfaction and family togetherness are poison for a purveyor of mind-numbing intoxicants like myself." The humor and the writer's choice of words consistently depend on topical currency drawing on social issues and conditions of 1991. Antismoking campaigns and family issues were increasingly significant topics of social discourse.

Business was so bad that Moe was out of beer. After some more discussion about the situation, Moe offers to make a mixed drink. Homer then recalls the night that he invented the drink that will motivate the remainder of the episode's plot. A flashback takes the audience to a night when Marge's sisters, Patty and Selma, were presenting a slide show of their vacation in Czechoslovakia. Patty and Selma are represented in opposition

to the women objectified earlier. They are gruff and smoke cigarettes, a marginal behavior referred to earlier in the scene because of health concerns. A series of images in the slide show illustrate their inability to shave their legs while on the trip. One of the slides emphasizes Patty's hairy legs, which shock Lisa as well as Bart, who says, "Aye, carumba!" Shaved legs are not natural, but are a symbol consistent with the objectification of women.

Homer continues his story saying, "As I stared up at that hairy yellow drumstick, I knew I needed a drink." But as Homer heads to the kitchen for a beer, Selma informs him that she took the last one. He responds, "I decided to mix the little bits that were left in every liquor bottle. In my haste, I had grabbed a bottle of the kid's cough syrup." He mixes it in the blender, pours a glass, and drinks it, explaining, "It passed the first test: I didn't go blind." But then, as he sits back down beside Selma, watching the slide show, an ash from her cigarette ignites Homer's drink. Homer says, "I don't know the scientific explanation, but fire made it good." He calls the drink a "Flaming Homer."

Moe asks Homer to make a Flaming Homer, and he gathers the ingredients, including the cough syrup. Moe tastes the drink and is not impressed until Homer suggests lighting it on fire. Then Moe says, "Wow, Homer, it's like there's a party in my mouth and everybody's invited!" He gives the drink to another customer, who says that it is delicious and asks what it is called. As Homer starts to say, "It's called a Flaming" Moe jumps in front of him and takes credit for the drink, saying, "Moe! It's called a Flaming Moe! That's right, a Flaming Moe. My name is Moe, and I invented it. That's why it's called a Flaming Moe. What, why are you looking at Homer? It's a Flaming Moe, I'm Moe."

This scene introduces two classic elements of narrative. The ritual of lighting the drink on fire adds an element of magic that can make a story extraordinary. It doesn't matter why, but "fire made it good." More significantly, Moe violates his friendship with Homer when he claims credit for the drink. This is a lie

that disrupts the equilibrium of the story, a disturbance in the plot that must be resolved. Typical of any good story, there is a critical moment that is a sign of a disturbance or problem for the characters who necessarily have roles to play in relation to the process of resolving the issue. Moe and Homer were friends, but this event changed their relationship. Although Homer may seem to be an unconventional hero, the rest of the narrative will be motivated by this event and Homer's quest to right the wrong that was done to him. But first, because the "Flaming Moe" initiated the narrative conflict through the act of stealing credit for creating the drink, it is now a sign that needs to be developed further. Note that the elapsed running time so far is seven minutes.

Scene Five: Moe's Tavern is crowded, and everyone is drinking a "Flaming Moe." The place has been remodeled, has a salad bar (which is fashionable, but out of character for Moe's regular working class clientele), and is now crowded with stylish and affluent looking new customers. Even Barney, one of the regular drunks at Moe's, is represented in upscale clothing. Celebrities like Krusty the Clown arrive, and bouncers control lines to get in at the door. Clearly, the new popularity of Moe's is because of the Flaming Moe drink. A woman applies for a job as a waitress and Moe speaks to her in a lustful and suggestive manner. She is persistent and self-assured and Moe hires her.

An agent from a large chain of bars arrives and offers to buy the recipe for the drink, but Moe refuses. Harv Bannister, the representative from Tipsy McStagger's, pours his Flaming Moe drink into a container so that he can take it to a lab to analyze it. Barney hears Moe turn down the offer to sell the recipe and says, "Good for you, Moe. Only an idiot would give away a million-dollar idea like that!" Homer hears the exchange and groans, expressing his frustration and alienation.

In this scene, the value of Homer's invention is established by Moe's financial success and the offer to sell the recipe to a large corporation for a lot of money. New characters are introduced;

the new waitress and the agent from Tipsy McStagger's are signs that will serve specific functions in further plot developments. The woman who is the new waitress has been represented as thoughtful, intelligent, and resourceful, and she will later act as Moe's conscience. The agent from Tipsy McStagger's is a villain represented by sinister motives, and he will return to force a resolution to the plot.

Scene Six: The next scene opens in Bart's classroom with a student presentation on the theme of "inventors we admire." The teacher, Ms. Krabappel, who also appears at Moe's bar as a lascivious character seeking sex with everyone (including Homer), calls on Bart for the next presentation. A paper bag with a serrated top resembles Bart Simpson's hair, creating an iconic visual joke when Bart pops up from behind the bag. Bart goes to the front of the class and makes his presentation saying, "The inventor I admire is not a rich man or a famous man or even a smart man. He's my father, Homer Simpson." He proceeds to explain that his father invented the "Flaming Homer," but a student and the teacher protest that everyone knows the drink is called a "Flaming Moe" because Moe invented it. Bart persists saying, "My father invented that drink, and if you'll allow me to demonstrate" He takes a blender and bottles of liquor out of the paper bag. Ms. Krabappel asks, "Bart, are those liquor bottles?" Bart responds, "I brought enough for everybody." Ms. Krabappel says, "Take those to the teachers' lounge! You can have what's left at the end of the day."

Again, this scene further establishes sympathy for Homer and the injustice of the situation. The audience shares information unknown to the characters within the story world. Even the rambunctious Bart is a sympathetic sign, expressing his innocent affection for his hapless father. The success of the Flaming Moe is enigmatic due to the audience's understanding that the moral implications of the drink depend on the interpreter's point of view. The success of the drink is represented as a *floating signifier* that can have alternate meanings determined

by different contexts. Homer feels that his friend has wronged him and that he deserves recognition for inventing the popular drink. To Moe, it's just business, as he says to Homer in the following scene.

Scene Seven: Moe gets a new neon sign installed that says "Flaming Moe's." A series of vignettes illustrates Moe's success and notoriety. The mayor declares a Flaming Moe's Day, Moe is headline news, and is hailed as a brilliant success on magazine covers. Celebrities enhance the popularity of the bar. The popular rock band *Aerosmith* performs, and Moe is included as a friend. Having actual celebrities, such as the members of *Aerosmith*, appear as themselves on *The Simpsons* changes the cartoon images of the program to *indexical signs* referring to Steven Tyler and the other *Aerosmith* players, who are real people, and it exploits the cultural capital of their fame and popularity.

At the Simpsons' home, a series of exchanges reference the Flaming Moe drink and further frustrate Homer. When Marge suggests that Homer should talk to Moe, he refuses. But out of habit, he decides to go to Moe's for a beer. At the bar, a bouncer does not let Homer enter because he is not on the list, but he sneaks in through the bathroom window. There he finds a well-dressed Barney, who introduces his new friends, Armondo and Ralphy. While Moe is performing "Walk This Way" with *Aerosmith*, Homer meets Ms. Krabappel, who comes on to him saying, "Hiya, scrumptious. Do you want to ignite my drink?" Again assuming that members of the audience are familiar with popular culture, *Aerosmith* and their song "Walk This Way" act as animated self-referential indexical signs.

Next, Homer confronts Moe about stealing the drink recipe and not sharing the success with him. The waitress overhears the conversation and asks Moe if it is true. He claims the situation is complicated. Moe tells Homer that it's business and that it's not personal. Homer protests, but the cash register and the crowd are so noisy that Moe can't hear Homer. Again, note that the elapsed time is 14 minutes and 16 seconds.

Scene Eight: The next scene begins with an intertextual reference, a song and visual sequence that imitate the opening theme from *Cheers*, another popular situation comedy that takes place at a bar. The music style and sound are recognizable and the lyrics are a satirical adaptation:

> When the weight of the world has got you down and you want to end your life.
> Bills to pay, a dead-end job, and problems with the wife.
> But don't throw in the towel, 'cause there's a place right down the block,
> Where you can drink your misery away.
> At Flaming Moe's, (background vocals: Let's all go to Flaming Moe's),
> When liquor in a mug can warm you like a hug.
> And happiness is just a Flaming Moe away. Happiness is just a Flaming Moe away.

This parody is interesting because it not only pokes fun at another popular TV program that takes place at a bar, but the words of the song also satirically challenge the meaning of the perpetual drinking portrayed as an innocent social gathering on *Cheers*. In contrast, *The Simpsons* always represents alcohol consumption as a normal but unsavory pastime.

Another evening begins with the new crowd at Flaming Moe's tavern. The agent from Tipsy McStagger's offers Moe one million dollars for the drink recipe. He explains that his lab analyzed the drink, but they just can't get one ingredient. Just as Moe refuses the offer, thirty cases of cough syrup are delivered, but the agent apparently doesn't catch on.

Another sequence of vignettes dramatizes Moe's success and Homer's frustration. Homer goes to a different bar for a beer and has a bad experience. Moe appears on TV and is interviewed on *Eye on Springfield*, which refers back to the opening sequence of the episode. Homer and Marge go to a lawyer, who tells them

they have no case against Moe. Homer is getting increasingly angry and has a fight with Marge.

Then Moe and the waitress are in bed relaxing, and Moe says, “Now that’s what I call a Happy Hour.” The waitress says, “Morris, something troubles me.”

Moe responds, “Don’t worry, baby, my mother won’t be home for another twenty minutes.” The woman continues to say that it was wrong for Moe to cheat Homer and that he should sell the recipe and share the money with Homer. Here, the waitress fulfills her function as a *messenger* and an agent of moral conscience. Finally addressing the moral dilemma of the narrative, this sign will be necessary for closure to the events of the story.

At this point, Homer is becoming delusional. Everything he sees and hears is a sign that looks like or sounds like “Moe.” Homer keeps mumbling “Moe…Moe…Moe” Marge says, “Bart, are you going to ‘Moe’ the lawn today?” He answers, “Okay, but you promised me Moe money.” Marge replies, “I Moe, I Moe.” This goes on until Maggie, who never speaks, removes her pacifier and says, “Moe.”

Back at the bar, Moe agrees to sell the recipe to McStagger’s. The agent has a contract and one million dollars. He says that they usually just steal the product and put the owners out of business, but they just could not identify the secret ingredient. Just as Moe is about to sign the contract, Homer appears from above, hanging from the rafters. He tells everyone the secret ingredient is cough syrup. The McStagger’s agent says, “Thank you, Mister Nutball,” as he tears up the contract and leaves with the money.

Scene Nine: In the next scene, bars everywhere are selling copies of the Flaming Moe. Homer visits Moe’s bar, which has returned to its former run-down appearance. They chat about Moe’s waitress, who left to pursue a movie career. Homer apologizes for telling the secret and losing the money. Moe says, “Maybe some things are too good to be kept a secret.” The friends are reconciled and the narrative has achieved equilibrium. Moe

gives Homer a free "Flaming Homer." Homer asks, "You think *Aerosmith* will be in tonight?" Moe says, "I doubt it." *Aerosmith* music plays and the final credits roll. The show ends with a total elapsed time of twenty minutes and twenty-nine seconds.

Ideology and Narrative: The Simpsons *"Flaming Moe" Episode*

The range of ideological production in a television program like *The Simpsons* depends on the audience's recognition of self-reflective and self-referential meanings.[6] As cartoons, *The Simpsons* obviously are not real people, but the audience recognizes their human characteristics and their conventional roles as members of a family. "To appeal to a diverse viewership, television texts employ, to different degrees, an ideological ambiguity that will accommodate a wide range of ideological values."[7] *The Simpsons* manages to transcend its cartoon nature and produce an element of believability that generally conforms to the dominant ideology of contemporary American society.

As a cartoon, *The Simpsons* is heavily coded for the recognition of aural and visual signs. Codified images imitate camera techniques with angles, close-ups, long shots, and various spatial orientations used to focus the audience's attention on specific signs. For example, eyelashes are used as a sign of gender in a facial close-up on *The Simpsons*, since only female characters have them. Objectifying female body parts may seem ridiculous in this context, but it reflects an ideological norm for media.

Part of the humor in *The Simpsons* is the exaggerated complacency toward contemporary social or environmental problems. In the same sense, entertainment in mass media is so pervasive that social and political issues are perceived as a natural part of the environment. As a result, audiences tend to recognize real-life situations, while they remain oblivious of the role of ideology in media, even in a television show like *The Simpsons*.

Typical of many sitcoms, the narrative structure of *The Simpsons* centers on a member of the household and a problem with school, a job, a social situation, or a family dispute. The "Flaming Moe's" episode was randomly selected as representative of a typical ideological theme: easy material gain versus the value of friendship. The dominant storyline centers on the inept adult male family member, the husband and father, Homer Simpson. The principal characters and locations include Homer, Moe the bartender, and Moe's Tavern. The Simpsons' home and family, Marge, Lisa and her friends, Bart and his school class and teacher are secondary characters and settings that form a consistent backdrop to the story world.

Representations of age, race, class, and gender reflecting social norms are typical of *The Simpsons*. Marge's sisters, in contrast to the exaggerated objectification of women in bikinis, are generally represented as crude and offensive. Homer refers to them as "Marge's beastly sisters," and responds in shock to a picture of Patty's unshaved leg by calling it a "hairy drumstick." The sisters are consistently depicted as abrasive, sarcastic, ill tempered, chain-smoking, and unmarried. While the principal female characters, Lisa and Marge, are generally represented as intelligent, optimistic, loyal, and sensible, their characters usually manifest through roles in relationship with men.

At Lisa's slumber party, the girls play a game by dripping wax from a candle into a bowl of water. The rules are explained as "whatever shape the wax takes, that's what your husband's job will be." The girls are characterized by their gossiping, playing with clothes and makeup, and having fantasies of husbands. They see themselves in the future as women willingly subordinate to male counterparts, in conventional roles as wives and mothers.

In another game, "Truth or Dare," one of the girls accepts a dare to kiss Bart. A kiss would ordinarily be a sign of affection. The context of the dare makes the kiss a floating signifier. The kiss becomes an act of aggression that contradicts the

connotation of female subordination. After succumbing to the kiss, Bart chooses to jump out of a window rather than be further humiliated by the girls. Bart and Homer are both represented as self-indulgent and less than capable, compared to their female counterparts.

All through the first scene, Homer is watching TV. Distracted by the kids, he decides to go out for a beer. This move tends to shift audience attention from the moment-to-moment sequence of events to the functions of individual characters and locations. Homer's drinking and his time at the bar are represented as normal, even when he appears inebriated and foolish. In fact, Homer's complacency and childish, irresponsible behavior, and Bart's rejection of authority and image as an underachiever who is proud of it, have *cultural capital* as representatives of the American male.[8] These characteristics have helped to make them popular.

The narrative plot is driven by the *disequilibrium* created when Moe steals Homer's invention. Homer is left out of Moe's fame and fortune. When Moe eventually decides to sell the formula for the drink for a million dollars, Homer tells the secret of the recipe in order to get even with Moe. He ruins the business deal, and Moe's tavern returns to the way it was before he lied and took credit for the drink. The story returns to *equilibrium* when Moe and Homer, after resolving the conflict, are back where they started, as working class friends having a drink in a quiet bar. The value of friendship has overcome greed. The underlying mythology is that they could have become rich and lived happily ever after.

While the details of this analysis are beyond what the average person needs to consider, the intent was to demonstrate that entertainment media depend on cultural assumptions, values, beliefs, and mythologies in order to attract audiences and fulfill their expectations about the ways of the world. Individuals can benefit by recognizing how stories generalize about groups they might be identified with. Society can benefit by acknowledging

stereotypes as oversimplified or exaggerated, and possibly derogatory, representations of groups of people. Over time, certain practices that appear normal, such as smoking, can come into question. Without destroying the pleasures of media, the processes of representation and the influences of mass media can be questioned and understood.

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CHAPTER 6

The Narrative Semiotics of *The Daily Show*

Continuity, Social Discourse, and Rebroadcasting News Stories

Experience is spontaneous and continuous. Only after the fact is conscious experience translated into language, stories, and descriptions that engender understanding of the world around us. According to William James,

> events separated by years of time in a man's life hang together unbrokenly by the intermediary events. Their names, to be sure, cut them into separate conceptual entities, but no cuts exist in the continuum in which they originally came.[1]

By naming events and ideas that emerge from the continuum of experience, specific experiences are isolated because they have special significance. The concept of *continuity* exploits the meanings of things that can be referred to because they were known from past experience, and therefore understood as knowledge.

The concept of continuity is central to bringing individual experiences together through social discourse. This chapter explores how continuity is essential to the processes of social

discourse and specifically focuses on its application as a communication strategy used by writers for *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* on the Comedy Central television network. According to Hollander, many young people seek out late-night comedy shows such as *The Daily Show* for information about news and politics.[2] This chapter demonstrates how *The Daily Show* writers effectively inform an audience that lacks historical perspective about public affairs and politics and is primarily interested in being entertained.

The Daily Show has received several Peabody Awards in recognition of its contributions to broadcast journalism and specifically for coverage of elections in 2000 and 2004.[3] The show is not about serious politics as much as it is about current social discourse, and the stated intent of the show is to entertain. The writers and performers themselves state that they feel no constraints to be other than entertaining "fake" news reporters.[4] Their writing, however, demonstrates logic and continuity, and provides context that informs the audience about current situations. While they may not intend to directly affect social change, the humor on the show provides an appealing way to discuss difficult issues.

The advertising on Comedy Central during *The Daily Show* gives a clear indication of the advertisers' anticipated demographics of the audience. The ads between program segments typically include MasterCard, an alcoholic beverage called Disaronno, BMW cars, Verizon Wireless telephone service, *The Dave Chappelle Show* on Comedy Central, AOL, General Motors, Right Guard Deodorant, and Bowflex equipment.[5] The products and the style of the advertising signify assumptions about the audience as young, mostly male, educated, and upwardly mobile.

Attracted by the comedic style of the show, historically relevant stories and archival news footage illustrate the context of current events and educate an audience that would not ordinarily watch television news. Quoted on conventional news programs,

The Daily Show humor evokes insight while its reporters consistently deny authenticity. The following sections explore the semiotic conditions of the comic narratives on *The Daily Show* that challenge the efficacy of more conventional news broadcasts. The narrative continuity constructed from rebroadcasts of news stories, told with the intent to entertain, also informs the audience of the significance of events whose meanings are obscured in conventional broadcast journalism.

All news reporting involves a process of retelling, or representing events that happened at other times, in other places. *Semiotics*, as the study of the processes that represent ideas, objects, and events, can effectively demonstrate how storytelling processes use signs such as words, sounds, and images to represent ideas, sequences of events, and contexts of interpretation. Semiotics pioneer Charles Sanders Peirce argued that "knowing implies a continuum and cannot take place without it. But a continuum implies ordered relations, while every relationship contains an element, more or less, of representability."[6] Thus the news cycle begins when an event happens, broadcasters interpret and tell (or re-present) the story in a new mediated context, and audiences interpret its meaning. This process necessarily requires some level of knowledge built upon continuity in relation to characters and events. Each element is represented as a sign within the contexts of time and space that act in turn as systems of signs. This process is demonstrated by the strategies applied by *The Daily Show* writers in constructing comic narratives about current events.

The following sections discuss current issues in journalism, the semiotic theories used to analyze the writing strategies of *The Daily Show* writers, and an analysis of texts from *The Daily Show*. The strategies for constructing narrative continuity that will be discussed include: a general category of *logical continuity*, which references specific archive reports to expose linguistic and interpretive errors and distortions presented by journalists or politicians; *historical continuity*, which relies on archive footage

to put together ideas, verifiable facts, and events that happened over a period of months or years; and the building of *internal continuity* within a narrative.

The Problem with Broadcast Journalism

Conventional broadcast news sources have lost credibility and efficacy.[7] Assumptions about the watchdog aspects of media have been challenged. Accusations of bias in the news and questions about the moral influence of entertainment programming continue to provoke discussion about social responsibility and the impact of media. The broadcast industry, technology, and regulation are all in transition. As part of contemporary social discourse, mainstream news outlets go out of their way to avoid the appearance of being liberal.[8] Still, in spite of a lack of scientific evidence, the majority of media consumers believe that journalism is biased.[9]

While the precise nature and history of the current crisis in broadcast journalism are beyond the scope of this project, some perspective can be gained by recognizing changes that began following the 1987 elimination of the Fairness Doctrine by the Federal Communications Commission.[10] The Fairness Doctrine was an "attempt to ensure that all coverage of controversial issues by a broadcast station be balanced and fair."[11] The regulation was intended to ensure that when opinions were expressed on the public airwaves, opposing views would be allowed equal time to respond. The convention among journalists was to report events as objectively as possible, and to clearly identify commentary as opinion, so that it could be understood as distinct from news reporting. The media have changed, however. Rather than acting as a watchdog for society, broadcast journalism appears to act like other big businesses that want to please consumers. "Driven by market pressures, the erosion of journalism-as-public-inquiry has only hastened in the post–September 11 environment, in which most commercial news media outlets aligned

themselves soundly with the White House and the apparatus of state security."[12]

With accusations of bias from all directions, it is not surprising that young adults are not attracted to conventional news sources. For many young people, late-night comedy television is believed to be an important source of political information.[13] "According to a Pew survey in *Rolling Stone* magazine, 21 percent of people eighteen to twenty-nine years old are watching shows such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* instead of CNN or reading the newspaper."[14] Tuning in for entertainment, youth audiences are exposed to programming that must attempt to establish the significance of current events.

The Semiotic Problem with Broadcast Journalism

As a discipline applied to the research and analysis of broadcast and electronic media, semiotics employs a distinct method of thinking about the world. Much of semiotic research necessarily builds on naming and describing observable phenomena that are useful when research questions explore representation and the processes of interpretation. Language and images are central to representing stories, but broadcasting engages another level of signification by using technology to physically convert and transmit messages through time and space. Semiotics considers all aspects of signs, through observation, description, and classification of meaning-producing processes. "It may be possible to say that every empirical science is engaged in finding data which can serve as reliable signs; it is certainly true that every science must embody its results in linguistic signs."[15] By explicating the structures, categories, and processes of representation used in science and everyday life, semiotics can help us better understand how the meanings of things are interpreted within cultures and communities, and identify the criteria for verification and the limits of representing the truth.

Central to understanding mass media and television news coverage of current events are the problems of interpreting the meanings of things that happen in remote locations. As a defining characteristic of all media, messages have been selected and represented before they can be received; media messages are already removed from their original context. But audiences experience stories, representing things that already happened for others in another context, with a sense of immediate perception. The news story is generally a sign representing an event. According to Peirce's "Critical Logic," the object of a sign is true regardless of what anyone or any group believes.[16] For example, the word "tree" is a sign that denotes an actual object; that is, a tree (a sign) is a tall woody plant (an object). Semiotics is concerned with not only what a sign stands for, but also how meaning is expressed. Something like a tree exists as a sign in nature, but the meaning of the tree will depend on the context and perceived consequences to an interpreter. Someone in a park may understand the tree for its beauty or shade, while a logger may understand the tree because of its potential to be made into lumber. Likewise, an event may actually take place, but the meaning of the event becomes a matter of interpretation derived from the actions of signs, or *semiosis*: "the building up of a structure of experience through sign relations."[17]

Semiosis is not a description of simple relativism. Signs must be read according to appropriate criteria for understanding. Continuity "comes into play, because the task of such a theory is to secure the correspondence of a given content conveyed by an expression and a real and actual state of the world."[18] When the referent of a sign is not a clear and present certainty, a lie or misinterpretation is possible. An *icon* based on the qualities of a sign that produce a resemblance can be mistaken for an *index*, or a physical relationship between a sign and its referent. There is a structural matrix that must follow certain rules for combinations of signs, or a sign-function may represent "something to which no real state of things corresponds."[19]

A news story is a narrative representation of events recontextualizing the elaborate relationships between signs that are potentially perceived to have a variety of consequences or meanings by various different interpreters in the audience. In other words, individuals understand news stories because they have some existing knowledge or opinions about characters and events; their interpretation is built upon continuity with the meaning of something they already know or believe. "A peculiarly intellectualistic justification of dishonesty in the use of signs is to deny that truth has an other component than the pragmatical, so that any sign which furthers the interest of the user is said to be true."[20] However, the problem of intended dishonesty is different than the problems of consistency or ambiguity when representing absent signs of people and events from other times and places.

Real events represented in the media generate a semiotic problem because news stories describe more than the actual qualities of the event. Assumptions dominate individual perspectives because of "the problem of the forgotteness of being."[21] The interpreting subject, whether a reporter or a person in the audience, is not necessarily aware of his interpretive point of view, or the historical, geopolitical complexities affecting the way other people may understand and interpret the meanings of events from another point of view. According to Morris, "The interpreter of a sign is an organism; the interpretant is the habit of the organism to respond, because of the sign vehicle, to absent objects which are relevant to a present problematic situation as if they were present."[22] The continuity of signs suggests that "an organism takes account of relevant properties of absent objects, or unobserved properties of objects which are present," and thus the significance of ideas are related to the observer's established understanding of the practical consequences of an event.[23]

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur held that humans use stories to rationalize meanings and give coherence to events as they

"perpetually reinscribe lived experience semantically through the comforting balm of narrative."[24] All stories recontextualize events, and audiences of broadcast news experience stories and images that are, in addition, mediated by broadcast technologies. The audience forgets about the communication technologies and experiences the story world as a spontaneous conjunction of human expression and embodied perception.[25] *The Daily Show* is prerecorded, and the jokes target stories and images recycled from other broadcasts and archive footage. So the narrative content of the show draws from stories about events that happened at other times and places, and had already been selected as news, mediated, narrated, and finally reused by *The Daily Show* writers.

An event, in and of itself, has no meaning without being interpreted by someone who understands it from a particular point of view. While even the highest standards of journalistic practice necessarily represent a point of view, complaints about media bias are expressions of alternative interpretive perspectives, especially when they are politically motivated.[26] Individual and group identities filter perception and privilege some rational continuity of ideas while ignoring others. A sign can only represent an object or a perceived "quality" of an immediate object.[27] A story about an event uses a variety of signs to express meaning. Critical understanding necessarily calls upon consciousness to recognize the relationships between events and ideas while still appreciating the continuity between complex layers of interpretation.

The power of narrative extends the continuity of ideas across genres of representation. Good writing necessarily draws strength from logical connections; characters in a story function and develop in relation to other characters and significant events. Stories are developed by explaining how one set of circumstances shifts to new contexts and circumstances, until the resolution of a situation. The following section explores Peirce's concept of *Synechism* as a theory addressing the continuity of

ideas that is helpful in understanding the semiotic structures of expression and meaning embodied in the narrative style of *The Daily Show* writers.

Synechism and the Continuity of Ideas

Charles Sanders Pierce was a noted lexicographer writing for Baldwin's Dictionary and the Century Dictionary during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in addition to his better known contributions to semiotics, logic, and pragmatism.[28] Peirce used the term *Synechism*, from the Greek word meaning "continuous," as a philosophical theory that he proposed to explain "the tendency to regard everything as continuous."[29] "*Synechism* is that tendency of philosophical thought which insists upon the idea of continuity as of prime importance in philosophy and, in particular, upon the necessity of hypotheses involving true continuity."[30] Continuity functions at many levels, referring to different kinds of sign relations, including all categories of ideas across spatial, temporal, and socially constructed relationships. A continuum is characterized by the fact that between any two elements, a third element is a necessary possibility.

In a sense, this proposition incorporates Peirce's ideas about *thirdness* and the *interpretant* in that signs (1) have distinguishing qualities, (2) are related to other signs, and (3) are necessarily interpreted by an embodied consciousness which creates a new sign in the mind of the interpreter. "As a sign expresses an object or meaning, the *interpretant* is a sign in the mind of an interpreter."[31] Peirce describes how continuity acts as a "law of mind" as follows:

> Logical analysis applied to mental phenomena shows that there is but one law of mind, namely, that ideas tend to spread continuously and to affect certain others which stand to them in a peculiar relation of affectability. In this spreading they

> lose intensity, and especially the power of affecting others, but gain generality and become welded with other ideas.[32]

Peirce used the term *Synechism*, meaning continuous, to stress the importance of continuity in semiotic theory. As one becomes conscious of signs, signs express a meaning. "The communicative act is the continuous cycle between expression, perception, and interpretation—the signifying capacity, and the continuum between human consciousness and the world of intelligible things."[33] Thus, continuity is a function of semiotics.

Synechism bridges the distinctions between empirical sciences and speculative reasoning extended to metaphysics, theology, and philosophy. Peirce states, "In particular, the synechist will not admit that physical and psychical phenomena are entirely distinct."[34] Things exist as mental phenomena, but ideas have no direct impact on the nature of events and objects. Beliefs and ideas are built upon hypotheses about the real effects that those ideas have on human lives. Ideas motivate people to act according to their beliefs, with expectations for certain outcomes.

The notions of *continuity* and logic function in the same ways that words are always defined by references to other words, and the meanings of ideas and events are derived by references to other ideas and events. Continuity between mental experiences and the way people act affects the course of human events in the physical world. Historically, ideas have motivated people to engage in violence predicated on beliefs and ideas, such as during the Protestant Reformation or the American Civil War. The continuity of ideas is generally internal to a culture and can appear to be subtle, but can provoke violence against those with different beliefs. For example, among Muslims today, notorious animosities exist between Sunni Muslims, who believe that Mohammed was the "last prophet of Allah and the Koran as the revealed word of God," and the Shia sect which, "while recognizing the supreme authority of Mohammed, also acknowledged the legitimacy of later messengers."[35] To an outsider,

these distinctions do not fully explain the intense meanings that motivate violence from within the Muslim culture.

As news items, stories perpetuate ideas about things that are already removed from the immediate experiences of the audience. As Peirce's "law of mind" suggests, ideas tend to "lose intensity, and especially the power of affecting others, but gain generality and become welded with other ideas."[36] Thus, by the time a news item appears on *The Daily Show*, the story has lost intensity, but fulfills audience's expectations for information as irony and humor.

The Daily Show Writers and Continuity

On Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, comedians imitate news reporters. With Stewart as host and anchorman in New York, fake reporters appear to be speaking to him from remote locations, such as England or Iraq. But after the report, the camera pulls out to reveal the comedic reporter standing in front of a chroma-key screen used to create a visual illusion so the reporter can appear to be anywhere in the world while actually on stage in New York with Stewart.[37] The potential to use this technology to lie is always present for broadcast journalists, but *The Daily Show* is premised on claiming a lack of authenticity to the news reports it presents. Stephen Colbert, a comedian who formerly played a reporter on *The Daily Show*, described himself as a well-intentioned, poorly informed, fake reporter.[38] In spite of all the denials, the program has received awards and formal recognition as "one of television's best newscasts by the TV Critics Association," and "*Newsday* named Stewart as the single most important newscaster in the country."[39] Thus, *The Daily Show* is a hybrid of comedy and authentic news that exploits mainstream news media, adding a comic layer of interpretation, and pointing out the failures of conventional standards of news reporting.

Using semiotics, every aspect of *The Daily Show* can be analyzed as a text. A *text* is constructed using many signs that may

have meaning individually, but also must be analyzed according to how they function collectively. Each sample was selected because of specific qualities that demonstrate particular structures, relations, and sign functions.

The comedy style of *The Daily Show* is often built upon irony and sarcasm, a form of humor using words and ideas to mean the opposite of what they ordinarily mean. *The Daily Show* writers provide their own discourse analysis by isolating the language, style, and content of political speech. Through advances in mass communication technology, recorded archives of information and events cultivate a collective social memory available for writers to use in reconstructing continuing narratives. *The Daily Show* scripts include descriptions and illustrations that situate events in a context so their meanings can be understood through logical association with other events. In other words, *The Daily Show* writers use reports that were broadcast in the past by conventional broadcast journalists or CSPAN as references to create humor using logical continuity. When a politician says one thing today, and archive news footage from the past provides evidence of a clear contradiction, logical continuity reveals the inconsistency.

Using archive footage from earlier broadcasts, *The Daily Show* ridicules the norms of conventional news programs. Stewart's style often relies on silence in order to comment with complete ambiguity, letting the audience make logical assumptions, while avoiding explicit interpretations. He says a lot during silences with slow deliberate gestures that animate responses to news items. Sometimes, even devoid of verbal commentary, his style is rich in visual expression. A slow, sly smile and momentary glance effectively express condescending commentary. Stewart will exaggerate, modifying his voice with an affected vocal style, and use expressions like "ooooooohhh myyyy," or utter cartoon-style sound effects. He will elongate his neck while pulling his shirt collar open with his finger to illustrate his need to relieve the tension from his necktie, all the while glancing coyly at and away from his audience.

The Daily Show writers assume that the audience lacks an awareness of historical contexts relevant to social discourse, and so they use logical continuity to construct narrative relationships between past and current events. Logical continuity is a general category that refers to the meanings of signs that may appear ironic if they are not consistent with other signs. *The Daily Show* regularly features background stories based on archive news footage or narratives intended to provide context to news stories. Historical contexts set up opportunities to point out inconsistencies, provide evidence of lies, and otherwise exploit the mistakes of public officials and the absurd ideologies of opinion leaders.

Historical continuity was used to construct the logic of a report about the 2005 Israeli pullout from the Gaza Strip. This comic sketch featured a complex outline of the historical background of the event. Stewart gradually appeared to grow a long beard that turned gray as he explained that this event was the

> latest step in a struggle that began in 1967 when Israel claimed the Gaza Strip after the Six Day War. Although you could make the case that it began in 1949 when Egypt and Israel drew armistice lines after the Arab Israeli War. Uhh, I guess technically, the 1917 Balfour Declaration really kicked this whole thing off with support for a Jewish national homeland.[40]

Stewart continued by mentioning Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, the Mongol invasion, the birth of Mohammed, the death of Jesus, and finally, the birth of Abraham in 2150 BC. All the while, the sequence was edited together to look like Stewart's fake beard was growing longer and longer. He ended with a comment to the audience that the show will be "running a little long."

Demonstrating *logical continuity*, one of *The Daily Show* regular features was called, "Great Moments in Punditry as Read by Children." Children reading from transcripts portray rival

political commentators who recently appeared on the Fox News Channel. The context of the discourse appears ridiculous with children speaking the words of adults. The humor relies upon the children as a new medium and new context for the stories. The children obviously don't understand what they are saying. As *sign vehicles*, the children signify an innocence that alters the meaning of the text from the original Fox News broadcast.

The Daily Show writers often depend on archive recordings of news reports to make jokes about political situations. For example, opening with Senator Arlen Spector from Pennsylvania saying that President Bush made specific "factually incorrect" statements, Stewart then followed up with multiple examples from archive footage of news broadcasts in which Bush contradicted himself.[41] In another example demonstrating logical continuity, they began with footage from the February 6, 2005, Fox News broadcast of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld saying that the war in Iraq could continue for another twelve years. Then Stewart compared those statements with others from a February 7, 2003, broadcast when Rumsfeld stated that the war in Iraq "could last six days, six weeks, but I doubt six months."[42] These indexical signs document contradictory statements. In spite of the ever present potential to manipulate the meaning of events, real video archival footage provides evidence spanning time and space that clarifies narrative continuity and interpretation of political consequences.

A common comedy technique is to use repetition to create *internal continuity* from particular words, phrases, or ideas established earlier in a comic routine. *Internal continuity* is the logic of an idea or event that refers to another idea or event within a defined context, for instance, a particular cultural system, such as mathematics, or a specific narrative, so that it only makes sense within that context. *The Daily Show* writers generally construct narrative relationships demonstrating continuity between past and current events. On a more immediate level, the writers create obvious relationships between disparate elements in one

night's program. When Zell Miller, a recently retired Democratic Senator from Georgia, was scheduled to appear on *The Daily Show* to promote his book, *A Deficit of Decency*, the writers set up the former Senator by preceding his interview with a series of tasteless adolescent sex jokes.[43] Using tapes of then President Bush's wife, Laura, the recordings were edited and manipulated to make jokes about George Bush in ways that were probably intended to be indecent and to provoke Miller.

In short, Mrs. Bush joked about when the president was first learning about horses. She actually said that he once stated that he wanted to milk a stallion. The comic routine that followed clearly implied that the president was intending to engage in sexual acts with male horses. In the interview that followed, Miller noted the preceding jokes on the show were "a *little* indecent," to which Stewart replied with emphasis, "a *little*?"

The writing and performance clearly demonstrate that free speech guarantees the right to criticize, and even insult, public officials. Miller complained that the First Amendment of the United States Constitution was not written to protect the free speech of hip-hop singers who "shout obscenities into [his] grandson's ears."[44] The audience, composed of people that listen to hip-hop as the music of their generation, could interpret Jon Stewart's facial expression to mean that he disagreed; in fact, the First Amendment does make such a guarantee. So, using the continuity of ideas, it appears that *The Daily Show* writers intended to set up the possibility for this confrontation with the earlier comedy sketches that pushed the limits of acceptable topics of humor and ridicule.

The set up began with archive footage of a presidential press conference on April 28, 2005, and the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, on April 30, 2005. Stephen Colbert appeared as *The Daily Show* "Senior White House Correspondents' Correspondent," claiming to have been present at the Correspondents' Association Dinner. Responding to Stewart's comment that the First Lady was funny and a "bit

ribald," Colbert said, "Jon, what you saw was the early show, the one they do for the cameras. I was there for the midnight show when the cameras get turned off and the First Lady felt free to speak her filthy, filthy mind." Producing a small tape recorder, he continued by explaining that he "snuck in this little recording device." He warned the audience, "That horse joke you mentioned? Get the kids out of the room Mom, 'cause here's how she told it after hours." A picture of Mrs. Bush was shown next to the tape recorder as the First Lady's altered monologue began:

> I'm proud of George, he's learned a lot about ranching since that first year when he tried to milk the horse. What's worse, it was a male horse. What's even worse than that, he knew it was a male horse. He specifically said, "Bring me a stallion with the biggest (*bleep)* you can find. And you know what? Bring me two. 'Cause I want to (*bleep)* off one horse while I'm (*bleep)*ing off another, and I don't want to stop until I'm bathing in a bucket of horse (*bleep)*."[45]

Stewart stopped Colbert abruptly, saying "Stephen! Stephen, that is enough! I do not want to hear that! No, that is enough! Wow, my eyes are burning! That is honestly too much!"

Stewart began his interview with Zell Miller by commenting about the Democratic Senator's controversial appearance at the 2004 Republican Convention. The conversation went as follows:

> Miller: "What I am trying to do with this book is to sort of put out a warning sign: Danger, Bridge out ahead."
>
> Stewart: "Are you here to fire me?"
>
> Miller: "No. Although I didn't like that segment that you had about Mrs. Bush right there. I thought that was a little over the top."
>
> Stewart (laughing the whole time he spoke): "A *little*! What, are you kidding me? That wasn't a little over the top? That was, if I may say, disgusting!"

Stewart respectfully discussed various perspectives on the topic of decency with the Senator before concluding the interview. He closed the interview by thanking his guest and showing appreciation for his appearance, but added irony saying, "we disagree on a lot of things. Well, (pause) let me say this; we disagree on everything!"[46]

Stewart smiled pleasantly while he insulted his guest. His style, tone, and demeanor, however, were very respectful. Miller seemed pleased with his appearance and the way he was treated on the show. The joke for the audience had to do with the "indecency" of the earlier sketches, and Miller's subsequent rebuke of indecency in the media. The *internal continuity* of the program prepared the audience to laugh at Miller's expense. Having time to anticipate Miller's agenda, because he was planning to promote his book, *The Daily Show* writers prepared an absurdly contradictory situation, and Jon Stewart executed it. Stewart was always polite, very gracious, and respectful of his guest. The segment ended when Miller and Stewart thanked each other and smiled while the audience responded enthusiastically.

Continuity of Ideas and Social Discourse

In spite of obvious exaggerations, biases, and distortions used for comic effect, *The Daily Show* generally provides accurate reports, context, and meaningful insights about news and current events. Whereas mainstream news programs often fail to adequately inform audiences of contexts for interpretation, *The Daily Show* writers focus on narrative continuity in order to evoke humor for an audience primarily expected to be young adults.

In contrast, conservative commentaries on networks like Fox News generally emphasize semantics and assert value judgments that express an emotional appeal. For example, when Bill O'Reilly appeared on *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart commented

that weapons of mass destruction were never found in Iraq. Rather than explaining his point of view, O'Reilly insulted Stewart, calling him a "pinhead" for buying into "leftist" thinking.[47] Without addressing the question, O'Reilly depended on personal tenacity and used "name-calling" as a rhetorical strategy to dismiss the logic of the conversation. In contrast, Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* writers use critical logic and humor to develop a continuity of ideas that serve as an active contribution to public debate. *The Daily Show* model of critical interpretation demonstrates an essential logic for reporting and discussing current events in a democratic society, as well as a practical application of semiotics.

Semiotics is effectively limited to its descriptive capacities. It reveals structures that produce meaning, and opens the process for qualitative interpretation of a text. Analyzing the communicative processes and understanding how signs represent meaning still leaves qualitative data open to interpretation. Semiotic media analysis thus relies on critical theory, cultural studies, and social theory for a final interpretation and discussion of data.

This chapter explored the notion of *continuity* as it is applied to narrative discourse. The writing strategies for constructing narrative continuity that were discussed include *logical continuity*, which uses archive reports to expose linguistic and interpretive errors and distortions presented by journalists or politicians; *historical continuity*, which relies on archive footage to pull together ideas, verifiable facts, and events that happened over a period of months or years; and the building of *internal continuity* by introducing material to set up something that will predictably make sense later within the program. Many other semiotic theories are useful for media analysis and are more commonly applied to culture, literature, film, science, and other forms of text analysis, but the concept of continuity is essential to developing effective communication strategies.

Broadcasters understand that they must appeal to their anticipated demographic audience. *The Daily Show* writers use their understanding of the audience in order to maintain the allure of the program. In a similar way, educators must pay attention to the age, background, and academic standing of students in a classroom in order to design an appropriate level of the course material. Context is understood to be important to the learning process, as it is in all effective communication.

In order to prepare informed communication professionals and citizens in a media-saturated society, educators need to consider the processes of storytelling in a context of broadcasting and electronic media. The professional communicator generates the necessity for media literacy in response to evolving techniques and technology, and in order to understand the changing nature of the essential differentiating characteristics of specific media.

New ideas and new technologies in mass communication always build on the past. People might think new ideas come from out of the blue, but Oliver Sacks suggests that there is no "blue" out of which ideas come.[48] Ideas and understanding are built upon past knowledge or experience, and social discourse is necessary to progress in a democratic society. Broadcasting is now unquestionably central to building an informed public, and "democratic theory rests on the assumption of an informed electorate."[49] Questions about what people actually learn about the news from late-night television entertainment are difficult to answer.[50] Hollander argues, "Entertainment-based programs are better suited for [recognition] in terms of understanding what they contribute to a viewer's public affairs knowledge, particularly for younger viewers."[51] Clearly, *The Daily Show* provides entertainment, but it also informs its audience and builds recognition of current political discourse. During a questionable period in broadcast journalism, writers for *The Daily Show* contribute to public discourse about public policy and political campaigns, and certainly provide an effective alternative for a youth

audience. The truth of facts, or accuracy of historical events, has not been part of this discussion, but *The Daily Show* writers provide background information necessary to make sense, or nonsense, of the news. They write for an audience that needs a little humor and a lot of context with their news and current events.

CHAPTER 7

News, Culture, Information, and Entertainment

News stories reflect an anthropological human practice of sharing information and ideas about events that help us understand the world around us. Our ancestors may have gathered around a communal fire to share stories of the day's events, but today's storytellers work for businesses that use mass communication to reach vast numbers of people. Following well-established institutional practices, media producers are generally dependent on many kinds of expensive technologies and equipment to create and distribute media products intended to inform, entertain, or persuade audiences.

This chapter looks at how the institution of broadcast journalism tells its stories to a community comprised of the diverse population represented in the audience. The power and impact of mass media affect many people, and raise significant ideological questions about the veracity and objectivity of news reporting in general. Those questions are not the focus of this chapter, but are important issues addressed in many other studies.[1] The focus here is to explicate the everyday communication practices of TV news, associated with the cultural processes of storytelling, that help negotiate the meanings of events. At the same time, a basic semiotic method will be used to demonstrate how

an applied structural analysis of a simple ninety-second news story can reveal how cultural assumptions, values, and beliefs are negotiated within stories about real events. Semiotics can effectively show the objective limits of describing an event and the creative potential of interpreting its meaning.

It is reasonable to assume that media producers have specific intentions each time they create something for mass communication, but the potential impact on audiences is more complex than those primary motives. For example, persuasive media, such as advertising, often use the latest production techniques, music styles, and well-written scripts designed to entertain while they are primarily intended to inform consumers about products and convince the audience to buy them. While the purpose of entertainment media is supposed to be the amusement of the audience, a great deal of information is always conveyed as well. At the same time, nonfiction programming also carries a great deal of entertainment value. News stories are generally intended to be factual reports about actual events. Yet as Merleau-Ponty explains, "there is more and less in the novel than there is in true little incidents."[2] Information and ideas in news programs and other nonfiction media are communicated as stories, about real people and events, that appeal to a greater community that shares a variety of concerns about the issues immediately affecting the principle characters in a narrative. "The taste for news items is the desire to see, and to see is to make out a whole world similar to our own in the wrinkle of a face."[3]

Inasmuch as the rhetoric of nonfiction media, such as news programs, is persuasive, their claims to represent the truth are an attempt to restrict interpretation of events and affect human attitudes and actions.[4] Likewise, images in the media are not "reality," but they are constructed in order to project a sense of "realism."[5] In this age of electronic information and mass communication, most of what people learn about the current events of the world, and how they learn about them, are remote from direct, personal experience.[6] A complex web of issues and

incidents conveyed as newsworthy through newspaper, television, radio, social media, and the Internet contribute to the formation of beliefs that shape social behavior and the practices of everyday life. Thus, the realism implied by news productions tends to naturalize the validity of representations of events and information.

Given its power to shape human experience and social perspectives, it is interesting to note that TV news can be defined as "what the television news department covers and airs on a given day."[7] However, the explicit day-to-day content of the news is not the focus of study here. This project is concerned with the form and structure of stories about real events. To address the goals of media literacy, the question is not about *what* the daily content of the news is, but *how* meanings are constructed. Critical thinking is necessary to observe the implied, or *connotative* meanings behind the explicit, or *denotative* facts presented in news stories. Through a tradition of storytelling, in which meaning transcends the explicit description of an event, the news narrates stories about lives that invite audiences to identify with characters and negotiate the meanings of events, practices, and policies. As a news story becomes the subject of public discussion, the tacit cultural perspectives hidden in the news production process have enormous potential to affect the values, beliefs, and practices of society.

Television news stories seem to provide a thread that weaves individual lives into a tapestry of images representing meanings for the social world. Most of the factual information in the news can be stated in just a few moments, but people who watch TV news are predisposed to a more personal experience. The analysis that follows is based on an old news story that was chosen because its form and structures provide a good example of the storytelling practices of broadcast journalism. The everyday practices of broadcast journalism include the task of regularly producing a program that meets broadcast scheduling deadlines while addressing the immediacy of covering current events.

Even though technologies, government regulations, and journalistic business ethics continue to change, the essential nature of broadcast journalism and storytelling remains consistent.

The Analysis of the Semiotic Text

Journalists love an event that is interesting but inconclusive, because the serial nature of such a narrative allows them to build the story over time. Like the episodes of a soap opera, the development of such an event can take days, weeks, or months of reports and updates that continue until the situation is resolved in some fashion. When an event involves a celebrity, the story attracts attention because people who are well known appeal to audiences as a general sign of something familiar and desirable. For example, a musician, actor, politician, or sports celebrity is an established sign of success, wealth, or power to many people. If a celebrity is the victim or accused perpetrator of a crime, the social significance of issues related to such an event is amplified by the general appeal and familiarity of that person. So when celebrities such as the late Michael Jackson, Mike Tyson, O.J. Simpson, Paris Hilton, or Martha Stewart are accused of a crime, the news reports attract attention and subsequently stimulate social discourse about issues related to the story that reflect public debates about moral codes, social practices, and government policy, in addition to the nature of the actual events. Each individual broadcast report constructs an independent story that ultimately builds the larger narrative and frames the issues in serial fashion.

The following analysis of a recorded television text demonstrates a basic semiotic method. A table like the one in chapter 5 is included as an illustration of sign relations and the production strategies of the producers. An outline of the observable structures of the report reveals how writers and producers narrate a simple event and create a visual sequence from a variety of available materials in order to build the

identity of the characters and illustrate the potential social implications of the story.

Table 7.1 lists a step-by-step, scene-by-scene sequence of signs used to represent a broadcast report from CBS News that aired on January 6, 1994.[8] Since a television news report is constructed with a variety of signs, such as words, sounds, still images, and moving images that appear over time, a semiotic analysis looks for the smallest useful elements of representation. All signs have meanings in relation to other signs, and together they work as a system to generate a code. In a television news broadcast, the codes include the systematic way aural and visual elements are sequentially organized using available technologies to cut and paste the necessary pieces of the story.

The table of the Kerrigan news story provides a concise representation of the content and organization of a ninety-second news report. Columns one through four provide abbreviated descriptions of the observable denotative signs. Column number one, on the left, lists a sequence of video clips edited together to represent the whole report. The terms *cut* and *dissolve* indicate transitions from one image to the next. The abbreviations *MS* and *CU* represent the camera position: *CU* stands for a close-up, and *MS* stands for a medium shot, which takes in more of a full figure and background. Columns two, three, and four, from left to right, contain *denotative* descriptions of the shot content of what the viewer sees; graphics that are superimposed over the shot content; and the sound, which can include the voice of a reporter, an interviewee, or recorded sound from archived video footage. Finally, column five lists the *connotation*, or implied meanings, of the signs interpreted from the collective sign systems suggested in columns one through four. Connotative meanings always reveal cultural perspectives grounded in a context. In the case of news media, the cultural perspective represents practices affected by production technology, deadlines, and business ethics that incorporate a pretense of providing a public service by informing audiences about events that are relevant to

Table 7.1 Kerrigan News Story, January 6, 1994

1. Edits	*2. Shot Content*	*3. Graphics*	*4. Sound*	*5. Connotative Meaning*
January 6, 1994, CBS	**90-second report duration**			Established news authority
	Connie Chung in studio	Kerrigan	attack on an	objective journalism
	picture not smiling	photo insert	"Olympic figure skater"	serious event
cut MS	Kerrigan skating	Date: 11/13/93 News Archive	natural sound "beautiful!"	Being there on location
cut	Kerrigan posed on ice	Date: 2/21/92 News Archive	Adams: "U.S. best hope"	Graceful
dissolve MS	same		Skater attacked	heroine/victim
2 cuts to CU	getting medal, smile	News Archive	attacker escaped	Mystery
cut to outside	snow witness interview	Joan Ryan Sportswriter	"like a little girl"	Vulnerable, feminine
cut to MS	Kerrigan spins and smiles	Date: 2/19/92 News Archive	released from hospital	just a scare
cut	two men in car		brothers rush to her side	family/male protector
cut to file, archive footage	Monica Seles collapse	Date: 4/30/93 News Archive	reminded of Monica Seles	female sport victim paradigm
cut back to	interview brothers in car—mic	Mike Kerrigan	"the first thing I thought of…"	intertextuality of TV news
cut CU	interview young man	skater Rocky	worry about attack	fear: sports figure/victim
cut MS	woman in TV editing studio	Adams, CBS	Kerrigan back on ice tonight	continuing narrative

society, public policy, and social discourse. Table 7.1 is followed below by a more descriptive analysis that takes up other semiotic perspectives.

The report of January 6, 1994, began at 5:40 p.m. with a head-and-shoulders shot of Connie Chung in the CBS News studio. The well-lit news reporter's desk, Chung's serious expression, and her formal clothing and makeup are all signs that construct a code of a professional studio news anchor. An iconic two-dimensional globe and a wall of television and computer monitors fill the background of the set. This sign system is an arbitrary cultural construct that works at the connotative level to signify the news set as an authoritative site of electronic surveillance of the world.

In the upper right corner of the screen is a head-and-shoulders photo, an indexical sign for a recognizable figure skater with a graphic insert labeled "Kerrigan." The still photograph is clearly not part of the rest of the set, and the image of Kerrigan's head metonymically stands for the whole person, an admired celebrity athlete, and the sport of Olympic figure skating.[9] The indexical sign works through an existential connection in the photographic process suggesting that Kerrigan had to actually appear before the camera at some time.[10] Chung begins, saying,

> In Detroit today, someone attacked a US Olympic figure skater just weeks before the 1994 Winter Olympics. The skater was rushed to the hospital, the assailant escaped. Correspondent Jacqueline Adams reports.

Although the indexical sign of Nancy Kerrigan is clearly visible, Chung does not identify the skater. This omission is a rhetorical attempt to assert Chung's objectivity and shifts the interpretive responsibility to the correspondent, Jacqueline Adams. As a narrative device, the identification of the existents—characters and setting—is suspended in a move that postpones the narration of the problematic circumstances that generate the disequilibrium

that will set the plot in motion.[11] Storytelling strategies are an integral part of the culture of TV news broadcasters because, while most events take only a few moments to describe, the audience must have something to watch. The talking head of a reporter is monotonous and becomes boring in a dynamic, active medium like television. So background about characters and the setting of a news item, such as the circumstances leading up to an exciting sports event, can effectively set up a story that is initiated by a singular dramatic moment.

The notion of *disequilibrium* motivates the plot of a story; an event happens that must be rectified in order to bring the elements of a narrative back into balance and end the story. Following Chung's introduction, correspondent Adams picks up the narration of the story:

> Figure skating champion Nancy Kerrigan is the United States' best hope for a gold medal at the upcoming Olympics. But this afternoon, Kerrigan was attacked by an unknown assailant after practicing for this weekend's US Figure Skating Championship in Detroit.

Adams is not visible while she speaks. The video images illustrating Adams' narration consist of an edited sequence of five separate scenes that are unrelated to the actual event. The scenes are identified by superimposed graphics indicating the dates "November 13, 1993," and "February 21, 1992." These visuals are intended to introduce Kerrigan as a character worthy of our attention. As an effective storytelling device, the producers know that the audience needs a reason to care about Kerrigan before she becomes the victim of the attack that generates the singular event of the actual story. Kerrigan is shown performing on the ice and then receiving a medal for winning a competition. The natural sound from the original broadcast precedes Adams' narration. We hear performance music and the television sports commentator emphatically saying, "Beautiful!" over cheers from

the audience. Equilibrium is thus established. The setting is the competitive world of women's Olympic figure skating. Kerrigan is the principle character of the narrative demonstrating aesthetic appeal ("Beautiful"), the admiration of others (cheers from the audience), and the heroic qualities of a champion symbolized by being awarded a medal.

As the images of Kerrigan as the beautiful heroine play, Adams' narration continues with the details of the precipitous event. The story moves from a state of equilibrium to disequilibrium. The reporter establishes her credibility and authority through access to those who witnessed the event. Witness reports are referenced to validate descriptions of the "attack" with a "blunt instrument." The visual segment ends with Kerrigan being awarded a medal denoting her success in figure skating competition, while connotatively signifying her heroism.

At the same time that we watch Kerrigan getting a medal, the sound track of Adams explains the disposition of the villain of the story: "Her assailant, a man who'd been seen videotaping her practice, escaped." The storytelling requirements of television necessitate a continuous visual element, because the audience is watching even when no image exists to reinforce the narration. In this sequence, an expositional style of editing is used to select visuals to illustrate the narration. Images from random time frames are juxtaposed while maintaining the impression of a smooth and logical narrative.[12] The narrative is clearly a serial form, since the escape of the assailant guarantees that the story will continue. Kerrigan, who was originally a sports hero, is now defined by her role as the victim of violence in a mystery story.

At this point, forty-five seconds into a ninety-second report, the video content shifts away from the random time/space assemblage of images of Kerrigan performing. The preceding segment used the phrase, "witnesses said," which provides a phrase leading to the assumption that the following image is a witness interview taped on location. The graphic over the image of a speaker reads, "Joan Ryan, Sportswriter." The image locates

Ryan outdoors, at night, in the snow. The mise-en-scene signifies the connotation, which is never explicitly expressed, that the image was taken at the scene of the crime in Detroit, outside the skating arena, later that day. There is a microphone with a TV logo held up to her face by a disembodied hand. The hand is an indexical sign that points to the invisible body of the reporter while the "witness" Joan Ryan acknowledges the presence of the reporter by speaking to her.

Ryan establishes herself as a witness as she speaks (presumably about Kerrigan) by using the phrase, "I heard her say." Kerrigan's character is further established in Ryan's five-second speech:

> Her dad picked her up in his arms like a little girl . . . and took her away . . . and I heard her say, "Dad, it hurts so much."

The connotation of the witness report suggests an innocent, childlike, female victim in the arms of a masculine protector. Kerrigan is clearly defined as good in opposition to the evil attacker. Despite her heroism and prowess as an athlete, she is redefined in a feminine, dependent role in keeping with narrative tradition.

The report continues with correspondent Adams explaining that the injuries were not serious. The accompanying visual shows another random archival image of Kerrigan spinning on the ice and smiling to the crowd on February 19, 1992. The next video scene jumps to Kerrigan's brothers in a car, "rushing to her side near their home outside Boston." The narrator then establishes a significant paradigmatic character function through an *intertextual reference* to an earlier news story. An intertextual reference is a narrative strategy that uses an established meaning from another text or story from another time to explain a current situation. Speaking about Kerrigan's brothers, Adams reports that, "News of the attack reminded them immediately of last April's court side assault against tennis champion Monica Seles." Monica Seles is a *floating signifier* in popular culture as a

female tennis champion who also signifies a celebrity victim of violence. A visual clip dated April 30, 1993, shows Seles collapsing after being stabbed in the back on the tennis court during a match. While the narration signifies an established paradigm of a "female athlete as victim," the intertextual reference strengthens the function of Kerrigan's character in the current narrative.

The next visual image moves from Seles back to the Kerrigan brothers in the car, again making a radical leap in time and space. Mike Kerrigan says, "That's the first thing I thought of," presumably referring to Monica Seles, as the narrator stated earlier. The syntax of his utterance, however, suggests that he was responding to a direct question. Thus, the reporter may have been deliberately seeking to establish the intertextual reference to help illustrate her narrative.

Next, a full screen, head-and-shoulders shot appears, and is identified by a superimposed graphic as "Rocky Marval, figure skater." There is no indication of time or place, so the appearance implies a current response to the attack on Kerrigan. As he speaks, Marval's discourse builds on the theme of fear of random violent attacks against athletes.

The final scene of the report is labeled "Jacqueline Adams, CBS News." Adams is situated in a production studio in front of video editing equipment with the image of Kerrigan frozen on the monitor screen. The context of the studio places Adams in the hi-tech environment of the investigative reporter. She moves the narrative into the future by saying, "Despite today's scare, Kerrigan's manager says she will be back on the ice tonight," and back in competition the following day. A rhetorical move promises a continuing story built upon the human drama of Kerrigan's desire to compete after this frightening incident and the mystery of the escaped assailant. The narrative is thus expanded to anticipate two later events: the capture of the assailant and the success or failure of Kerrigan's next performance.

In the final scene of the report, Adams looks directly at the TV camera, because reporters use direct address to signify the

act of speaking personally to the audience.[13] Adams closes by asserting her authority through an institutional association and location saying, "Jacqueline Adams, CBS News, New York."

The Semiotic Implications of the Story

In summary, there are several signifying practices of importance in this initial report of what became known as the "Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan story." First of all, the "attack," which took only a moment in time to transpire, is the actual event that marks the beginning of the story. As a straight chronicle of the event, the essential facts could have been given more simply. For example, it could have been stated that after skating practice on January 6, 1994, Kerrigan was injured as the result of an attack and that the assailant escaped. On the *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic* levels of the story, however, a great deal of planning and production went into creating an original news story. The *paradigmatic* level refers to the process of establishing the relationships and functions of the elements of the story, such as the characters and settings. The *syntagmatic* level refers to the individual segments assembled into the sequence of the news story built from a singular event to construct an original narrative structure. Like most stories, a disruptive event initiates disequilibrium that must eventually return to a condition of equilibrium to provide a sense of closure to a narrative. This suggests the myth that stories of real people begin and end in perfect balance.

Several levels of narration should be noted. These levels indicate the ideology of certain power negotiations conveyed through specific signifying practices that establish positions of authority and believability. For example, the appearance of news reporters in the media is a statement that asserts the authority to report the news. By using direct address to speak to the audience and by withholding the name of the principle character, Chung maintains the appearance of objectivity in presenting only basic facts. Both Chung and Jacqueline Adams maintain a detached

narrative position outside of the story in order to appear to be objective observers of the events.[14] Adams is constructed as somewhat less authoritative than Chung by her involvement in the investigation and background of the story. Although Adams narrates mostly offscreen, she eventually ends her report with direct address and asserts her affiliation with CBS News.

There were three other narrators that did not address the camera directly, but spoke to an unseen interviewer or a disembodied hand with a microphone. Sportswriter Ryan, brother Mike Kerrigan, and figure skater Rocky Marval are all involved in the "story world" and thus are identified with less authority as narrators.[15] They function as *messengers* that connect layers of the story. Their contribution helps build the *syntagmatic* construction into a coherent narrative. The story was necessarily built from visual fragments and interviews that were assembled sequentially to build the story. On a discursive level, the segments extended the story beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the actual event by assembling the individual paradigmatic elements into a more interesting and complete narrative. Ryan's testimony removed Kerrigan from her celebrity status in the skating world to signify her as a "vulnerable female with a personal family life." Kerrigan's brother Mike was possibly manipulated into making the intertextual reference to Monica Seles and thereby reinforcing a semiotic construction of a category of the vulnerable female sports figure as victim. Finally, Marval was used to develop the mythic theme of fear in the world of athletes through his identity as a U.S. figure skater.

The discursive construction of this ninety-second news broadcast used a system of signs that moved freely back and forth in time. Coded as a singular event, images and stories from years past combined with projected implications for the future of the narrative. The broadcast set out to report an event with a temporal base of only the few seconds it took for one person to strike another, but the story did not begin, nor did it end, with that singular event. The signifying practices of this broadcast build on cultural myths and convention, and reveal a system of values

beyond the denotative signification of a news report based on information about a shift from one state of affairs to another.

Discussion

While much has changed in journalism as an institution over the years, there has been a long-standing tradition of trying to report objective accounts of events and trying to represent opposing views addressing political situations. Opinions and commentary were to be identified as distinct from news reporting. As an institution, journalism had a degree of credibility and a reputation for established practices intended to provide reliable information. The authority of mainstream American journalists was generally viewed with respect for trying to provide accurate accounts of events. The popularity and authority of a particular journalist may depend a great deal on personality, but credibility depends on the institutional structures and practices that provide verification of the accuracy of news reports.

With the popularity of the Internet and the *blogosphere*, new channels for the free expression of ideas have opened, but there are no criteria for verification. Anyone with Internet access can post statements and make claims that reach large audiences and often refer to other Internet sites as a source of information. As a statement is repeated without verification, readers may accept its authenticity with no way to verify its accuracy. The authority of mainstream journalism has been challenged, and the needs for critical thinking and media literacy are greater than ever.

The accuracy of reports about real events is obfuscated by the popular appeal of opinions and beliefs. While the virtual environment of the Internet has given voice to many outspoken contributors, concentration of ownership in a profit-driven corporate media, new technologies, and the expense of conventional news reporting have all contributed to significant changes. Competition for advertisers and regulatory changes have generated opportunities for entertainers and editorial commentators

who appear as conventional looking news reporters while espousing sensational speculations about events that appeal to audiences predisposed to a particular ideological point of view. The rhetorical strategies of opinion leaders who label and dismiss dissenters appeal to passion rather than reason, and are intended to restrict interpretations. The audience is addressed inclusively as "we" and "us," and those who violate ideological codes are objectified as "them" and "others" who do not understand reality. In a world of media influences, the ability to think critically and independently depends on media literacy.

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Glossary of Terms

a priori: A type of knowledge that is assumed to be reasonable or to appeal to common sense without observation or evidence.

abduction: A method of reasoning distinguished from induction and deduction by Peirce as a process that initiates the beginning of a new idea, an argument, or hypothesis derived from experience. It is a back and forth negotiation that seeks to recognize shared qualities that suggest an association between a familiar sign and something new.

aha reaction: A thought-stopper that initiates questions that need further attention. Like Peirce's concept of abduction (above), this reaction instigates research about inconsistencies between representations, knowledge claims, assumptions, and what further investigation may reveal to be truth.

audiences: The receivers of various conventional types of communication intended for one or more people. Groups of people attracted to particular media demonstrate shared characteristics, or a *demographic*, that describes the *audience* by age, gender, ethnicity, or special interests.

blogosphere: A name used for Internet-based sites of social discourse.

code: A systematic organization of signs whose meanings are determined in part by their relationships to other signs within a given context. Examples might be the arrangement of furniture

in a room, the rules of a game, or conventional manners of behavior.

connotation or connotative: An implied meaning that assumes a cultural interpretation beyond the denotative meaning of a sign. Connotation includes a denotative meaning, but adds value implied by the meaning of a sign in a specific context. For example, a car is a specific kind of vehicle of transportation, but the connotation of a new, expensive model implies that the owner is wealthy and enjoys an elevated social status signified in part by the ownership of the car.

continuity: The notion that meanings are produced through a logic that relies on past knowledge and experience to interpret new phenomena. Continuity functions in the same manner that words are always defined by referring to other words, and the meanings of ideas and events are derived from other ideas and events.

cultural capital: A condition of a sign that is valued or recognized to be important by a particular cultural group, such as having fashionable clothes or a prestigious car.

culture: A group of people identified by common ways of understanding and behaving. Cultures tend share values, beliefs, and the interpretations of signs in specific contexts and can be distinguished from other groups of people because they have different characteristic ideas and practices.

denotation or denotative: A common, specific, or conventional meaning of a sign. Like the most basic definition of a word in a dictionary, denotation refers to a simple descriptive meaning.

disequilibrium: A condition necessary to motivate the action of a narrative by establishing circumstances that force characters in a story to act in order to resolve a problem or answer a question. Thus, the circumstances that create disequilibrium motivate the characters in a story to return the narrative to a condition of equilibrium.

dynamical interpretant: A concept from Peirce that refers to a stage of interpretation with a potential for development or change.

epistemology: A philosophy examining how we know what we understand of the world and how we can verify claims of knowledge.

equilibrium: A condition in a narrative in which no problem or question exists to motivate the plot of a story. Disequilibrium is necessary to provide circumstances that motivate characters in a story to resolve a problem or answer a question.

final interpretant: The eventual understanding or belief in a true interpretation in which the meaning of something can motivate one to act as if no further consideration of the matter would change an opinion.

firstness: From Charles Sanders Peirce, *firstness* addresses the independent qualities of a sign that allow it to be perceived as representing a meaning to an interpreter.

floating signifier: A sign that changes meaning in different contexts, such as the "V" hand signal that celebrated victory after World War II during the mid-twentieth century and represented "peace" as a sign of resistance to the Vietnam conflict twenty years later.

genre: Categories of media that are based on general and specific qualities, such as fiction and nonfiction, comedy, drama, romance, science fiction, westerns, detective stories, and so forth. Genre demonstrates characteristics that set up certain expectations for audiences, but may also deviate from expected patterns and extend an established form.

hegemonic process: Refers to how ideas or beliefs are communicated and gain dominance because they appeal to a sense of what is natural, or at least normal, in society.

hegemony: Refers to dominance in general. Specifically in cultural studies, hegemony is the notion that certain ideas and practices gain dominance and influence within society.

historical continuity: The notion that understandings of historical events contribute to the meanings of subsequent events.

icon: A sign that establishes a meaning because it resembles general qualities or characteristics of what it stands for. Examples include a simple drawing, such as a straight vertical line with diagonal extensions that vaguely looks like a tree, or the form of words called onomatopoeia, in which a word sounds like its referent, such as "meow" or "bang."

identity: The ways in which a person understands and defines oneself in various contexts with others. Identity can include many qualities and characteristics at once, such as age, race, class, gender, occupation, and sexual preference, and various elements of personal history, values, ideology, or beliefs.

ideological silences: Assumptions that are not acknowledged but are expressed through rhetorical or narrative strategies as ideas that demonstrate values and beliefs by implying how one is to act in certain situations.

ideology: A system of values, beliefs, and ideals guided by a worldview that shapes the ways in which people act.

immediacy: A powerful capacity of media to create realistic representations, especially when received by audiences in personal spaces such as their homes. By transmitting sounds and images that represent real or imagined events and people, media create a sense that people and events are actually present. This is very effective in both fiction and nonfiction.

immediate interpretant: Refers to an initial response to a sign as interpretation of an idea.

index: A sign that has a physical or material connection to what it means. The power of an indexical sign is that it points to something that actually exists, in the same way that an index finger that points to an object. Smoke can be understood as an index to fire, and a beeping sound might be an index to an oncoming car. A fingerprint or foot print, or other physical clues in a detective story, are other examples of indices.

internal continuity: The logic of an idea or event that refers to another idea or event within a defined context, for instance a particular cultural system such as mathematics or a specific narrative, so that it only makes sense within that context.

interpellation: From social theorist Althusser, identification with others who interpret signs, objects, or ideas in ways that appeal to a person even when the consequences actually contradict the subject's personal interests. Interpellation is a way that people identify themselves from within the structures of society.

interpretant: An aspect of a sign that indicates the possibility for multiple interpretations from a variety of perspectives. The *interpretant* is a semiotic concept asserting that a sign will generate a meaning to an interpreter who understands the original sign in a new context that suggests specific consequences to that interpreter.

intertextual reference: A narrative strategy that seeks to exploit an established meaning using another text or story from another time to explain or illustrate a current situation.

logical continuity: A notion that assumes that any word or idea produces meaning by association with other words or ideas.

messenger: A character that functions by advancing the plot of a story by communicating new information or asking questions essential to developing or resolving the narrative structure.

myth: A connotative sign system of representation that implies meanings within a particular cultural context that are accepted as true according to habit without the possibility of verification. Mythologies represent a collective system of interpretive perspectives, including ideologies that are often shared and debated within a culture.

paradigmatic: In narrative, this refers to categories of representations establishing the relationships and functions of the elements of the story such as the characters and settings, for example a hero, villain, victim, or helper. A paradigm may function as a model, an example, or even a worldview.

phenomenology: The study of the conscious experience of the world just as it is perceived. Phenomenology addresses the perception of meaning in the same way that semiotics describes its expression.

proxemics: As defined by Edward T. Hall, the study of how humans use and understand space and spatial relationships in communication and culture.

proxy: A person who substitutes for or acts on behalf of someone else. As it is applied in the context of media representations, a proxy is a person perceived as a sign with qualities that appeal to individuals in the audience who identify with the actions and experiences of others.

referent: The object of meaning that a sign refers to.

reflectivity: The ability to see yourself, know how you feel or think about categories of life situations, and understand your own "worldview" (or paradigm) as distinct from how others may view the world, a set of circumstances, or a particular event.

secondness: From Peirce, the relationship between a sign and its object or meaning. Secondness provides the grounds for semantics, establishing the relationship between a word and its basic, literal descriptive meaning.

semantics: The study of the meaning derived from the relationship between a sign and its most basic meaning.

semiosic: An adjective used to describe how signs refer to objects that are interpreted to have meanings. Semiosic thus describes the referential, meaning-producing processes that are characteristic of semiotics.

semiosis: The continuous process of signs referring to other signs, generating new signs and meanings initiated by the perception and interpretation of a single sign. For example, words are always explained by referring to other words. Similarly, any new object or idea will suggest other known objects or ideas to an interpreter.

semiotician: A person who engages in the study of signs and the processes that represent meanings.

semiotics: The systematic study of signs and the processes that represent meanings. Communication is always a semiotic process involving signs from a sender, or that exist in nature, that represent meanings to a receiver who perceives and interpret them.

sign: Anything that can stand for or represent something else.

sign vehicle: The actual expression, such as a word, sound, or image, that acts as a sign that stands for something.

signified: The object or meaning expressed by a signifier.

signifier: An expression or representation standing for an object or meaning.

space: The dimensional qualities defining the context of signs, objects, or events. Thus space is defined by relationships between objects or boundaries rather than its own independent qualities.

symbol: A sign that can only be understood if it has been learned from others who share a cultural understanding of its meaning. A symbol is a conventional sign that is potentially very powerful because members of the group who understand the meaning of it share many assumptions. Words, flags, and images with religious significance are examples of symbols.

synechism: Peirce used this term, from the Greek word meaning continuous, as a theory that he proposed to explain how ideas and meanings are continuous. *Synechism* is that tendency for thought to be continuous, just as ideas refer to other ideas and words to other words, which is important to hypotheses testing.

syntagmatic: Refers to the sequential organization of signs organized by a meaningful structure. Sentences maintain syntagmatic structures that follow specific rules for the organization of words in precise ordered sequences. Likewise, word chronology

refers to a natural order of narrative syntagmatic structures that build stories from descriptions of characters and events.

text: A collection of signs or a sign system that may be organized to have meaning as a whole. A text may be analyzed according to how signs function collectively, such as in a story, a book, the elements of an image, a play, a television program, or a movie.

thirdness: From Peirce, the mediated nature of sign relations has three elements including the sign, its referent, and its potential to be interpreted. Thirdness acknowledges that each interpreter independently understands a sign and its relationship to an object or meaning because of its practical consequences. Thus a new sign is created in the mind of the interpreter as the third of the three elements of the semiotic process.

thirdspace: From Kostogriz, this term describes a learning environment privileging multicultural human perspectives in which individuals take up different points of view without a preconceived hierarchy of a dominant ideology.

Notes

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