READING A: EXTRACTS FROM **Lacey, Nick. (1998) "Semiotics."** *Image and Representation: Key Concepts in Media Studies. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., pp.56-75.*

SEMIOTICS

The 'study of signs' was founded, simultaneously and without knowledge of each other's work, by Ferdinand de Saussure in Switzerland and Charles Peirce in the USA; they termed their creation semiology and semiotics respectively (the root of the term is the Greek *semeion*, sign). Semiology and semiotics mean the same, although the latter term appears to have gained greater currency.

At the heart of semiotics is the study of language and how it is the dominant influence shaping human beings' perception of and thoughts about the world. Semiotics is also a wonderful tool for analysing images. Although the terminology (signifier, signified, paradigm, syntagm, synchronic, diachronic, and so on) may at first make the science appear obscure, semiotics is an important discipline in the study of media language.

Signifier and signified

Saussure's revolutionary approach defined signs structurally. He stated that the sign is the sum of the *signifier* and *signified*: the signifier is the perception of the sign's physical form which may be material, acoustic, visual, olfactory or a taste; the signified is the mental concept we learn to associate with… [the object below]. The relationship between the sign and its *referent* (the actual object the sign is representing) is the *signification*.

Denotation and connotation

[…] Denotation is simply about identifying a sign; when we perceive something, through any of our senses, the word or words (signs) we attach to the perception is the denotation. Denotations operate at the first-order level of signification. The relationship between the signifier and signified is usually arbitrary. The fact that a furry animal with four legs that barks is called dog in English was selected from a multitude of other words (ignoring for a moment the ancestry of the English language); dogs could have been called cats or fardels. This explains why we have different languages throughout the world; if the signifier determined the signified, the word for the animal called a dog in English would be very similar, if not the same, in all languages (in fact there would probably be only one language) […].

[…] Our understanding of signs rarely stops at the level of *denotation.* Once we perceive a sign, we often have particular associations with that sign which colour our understand- ing; for example, a person who dislikes dogs would have negative feelings about the sign 'dog' whereas a cat lover would feel positive about the sign *'cat'.* These associations are a second-order system of signification, or *connotations* […]. (It can be argued that even the first-order system of signification, denotation, is itself a connotation because we learn to *associate* a particular signified with a signifier.) […]

Meaning and context

[…] Meaning cannot exist in individual signs, because of their arbitrary nature, but is derived from their context. For example, we can only understand the two different meanings of 'dog' in the following sentences because of the other signs (words):

1. 'The dog barked loudly at the postman.'
2. 'The man said he'd dog Noam forever.'

If we read sentence (1) to say 'the follow tenaciously loudly at the postman' then it is obviously nonsense. So a sign's value, the particular meaning 'dog' represents in this case, is created by the difference between it and other signs in the same context.

This isn't, however, just a result of the sign 'dog' having more than one meaning; all signs only have value because they are different from other signs. As Thwaites et al. (1994) ably sum up:

> If a sign gets its meaning from other signs, it works through a system of differences (from what it isn't), rather than identity (with itself). It means something not because it has some fixed identity, but because it is different from other signs. We could put that in a succinct but paradoxical form by saying that what is sign is due to what it isn't. […]

Paradigm and syntagm

Langue is organized along two axes, those of selection and combination. Saussure called these the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes:

• the *paradigm* is the vertical set of associations;
• the *syntagm* is the horizontal, or sequential, arrangement (beware,
this can be confusing because the synchronic dimension is vertical).

The paradigmatic dimension is not fixed but determined, in the main, by the syntagmatic arrangement, which, in turn, is determined by la langue. Take the sentence:

'The cat sat on the mat.'

In this context the most obvious paradigm associated with the subject of the sentence, 'cat', is that it belongs to the category 'domestic animal', so we are most likely to use this paradigm to determine the meaning of 'cat' . Other paradigms to which the sign 'cat' can belong are 'the cat family', 'lazy animals' and 'mammals'. There is always more than one sign in paradigms. For example, in the domestic animal paradigm:

'The cat sat on the mat.'
    dog
    tortoise
    hamster
    parrot
and so on.

The only reason we understand what referent the sign 'cat' refers to is because it is not a dog, tortoise, hamster or any other domestic animal; as was stated above, it is the qualities that distinguish one sign from another that give the sign meaning.

To form a syntagm, the paradigmatic dimension must combine with other paradigms, which it does according to the rules of *langue.* The syntagm then anchors the meaning of individual signs (from the paradigms) by creating a context; in other words, it helps us to choose the appropriate paradigm of a sign. For example, it is unlikely that we would assume 'cat' belonged to the paradigm 'mammal', in the example above, because it could result in such absurdities as 'the whale sat on the mat'. Other paradigms in this sentence include 'floor covering' (mat, carpet, rug and so on).

Paradigms, by their very nature, expand the possible meanings of a sign; the syntagm prevents confusion by limiting the number of meanings. This is the way signs have conventional meanings despite their arbitrary nature. A classic example from everyday life of these dimensions is a three-course menu which offers a choice of starters, main dish and dessert. Diners are asked to choose from three paradigms, which have a conventional order (the langue), and their syntagmatic choice gives them a three-course meal.

Iconic

[…] An iconic sign bears a resemblance to that which it represents and can be an image, images or graphical. A photograph is iconic: we may recognize a photograph of a particular pet but we know that the photograph is not the actual pet. Similarly a recording of a dog barking is aurally iconic.

An iconic sign does not necessarily have to resemble physically what it refers to: maps are graphical iconic signs. However, in order to read, say, ordnance survey maps, we need to understand the codes used (such as contour lines).

Index

An index sign has a direct relationship, or causal link, to that which it represents. For example, a thermometer is an index of temperature. A picture of someone sweating lying on a beach is an index of heat.

Shots of the Houses of Parliament are often used in films to establish the setting of London. Obviously the image of the Houses is iconic, but it is simultaneously an index in that it represents more than itself. The relationship, of course, is that the Houses are situated in London. Similarly, the Eiffel Tower is an index of Paris; the Opera House, Sydney; the Kremlin, Moscow; and the Statue of Liberty, the USA. Indexes, or indices, can be specific to individuals; for example, the presence of a car is an index of the car's owner.

Symbolic

Language is the most obvious symbolic sign because, as Saussure described, its relationship with what it represents is arbitrary. Indeed, any arbitrary sign must be symbolic since it can only be a sign because there is a consensus about what it means. Formal signs are usually symbols, for instance those used in the Highway Code […].

Myths

[…] Roland Barthes' crucial contribution to semiotics was his definition and exploration of myths. Barthes was not concerned with archetypes, untruths or Greek myths and legends, but how signs take on the values of the dominant value system - or ideology - of a particular society and make these values seem natural. For example, a flower with red petals, green leaves and a thorny stem signifies the mental concept rose; this is at the first level of signification or denotative level. The level of denotation gives the basic meaning of the sign. However, the sign 'rose' can, in tum, signify the mental concept of romance, particularly if it is red and placed in the context of St Valentine's Day. Romance is a myth that defines heterosexual love as tender and caring; the female is passive and the male active in the relationship. How does this 'flower with red petals, green leaves and a thorny stem' take on the meaning of romance? We have already seen how the original denotative sign can become the signifier of a second-order system of signification, creating a connotation. Barthes showed that Saussure' s sign can become a signifier to create, not only a connotation, but a myth.
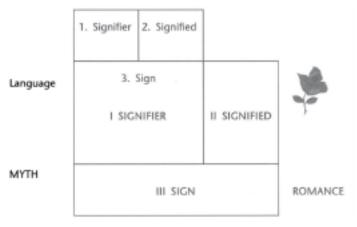

Figure 2.6

Source: adapted from Roland Barthes, Mythologies (St Albans: Granada, 1973) p. 115.

Because it is virtually impossible to understand 'a red rose on Valentine's day' as anything other than meaning romance, it appears that a signifying system, which is a connotation, is acting as a denotation. Myths are connotations that appear to be denotations. This 'trick' allows myths, in texts, to structure the meaning of the communication without appearing to do so, they efface their own existence. Like continuity editing, myths position the audience in a specific relationship with a sign and simultaneously disguise
themselves. As we did with image analysis, it is necessary that we deconstruct the meaning of myths in order to understand how they work.

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For example, consider an after-shave advertisement that includes an image of a fast car: in this text the fast car connotes masculine power and is part of a system of signs which create the myth of masculinity. Masculinity is a social creation, gender, rather than a biological definition. To be defined as masculine in Western society the male needs to be strong (masculinity), physically skillful, rugged and adept in the use of technology. The use of cars in advertising (they are almost always fast- when did you last see a three-wheeler advertized?) often symbolizes these aspects of masculinity: they are powerful (speed), comer beautifully and, obviously, are (advanced) technological creations. […]

[…] The identification of myths, because they appear natural, can be difficult. As we shall investigate below, even Nature is a myth: while clearly nature in its unmediated form is natural, society's idea of what makes up nature is clearly a social construct. This is particularly evident in any documentary text which talks about 'Mother Nature': this can lead to many deterministic assumptions about nature.

Myths are a potent way of making meanings in society. Other areas that Barthes investigates in Mythologies include: wrestling; holiday writing; soap-powders and detergents; margarine; Einstein; striptease. […]

Binary oppositions

We have established that signs do not possess intrinsic meaning but are defined by relationship to other signs: signs are defined by what they are not. One of the most powerful creators of a sign's meaning are binary oppositions. Here signs are contrasted with signs which have meanings which operate in opposition. For example: town and country; man and woman; child and adult; public and private; civilization and savagery. Binary oppositions, like all signs systems, are not natural descriptions but cultural creations. Binary oppositions are often structurally related to each other and function to order meanings. For example, the town and countryside are characterized by the following oppositions:

town	country
artificial	natural
polluted	clean
over-crowded	deserted
exciting	boring
commercial	non-commercial
dangerous	safe

These lists consist of connotations of both town and country. Taken together they form myths of urban and country life […]

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