SEMIOTICS

The theory behind media literacy

A world of signs

Critical skills — and media literacy is a critical skill — are not natural or instinctive. Theory helps us to organize our thinking and to analyze what we see. Semiotics, the theory behind media literacy, provides:

- A ==common set of terms==, such as *sign* and *code* as defined by semi-oticians. These words and others will become tools for discussing and analyzing media texts.

- A ==framework for breaking down a media text into its component parts to reveal the text's purposeful structure==. This in turn will become useful to students when they construct media texts of their own.

- A way to ==map out relationships between media and other social phenomena==. The ideas proposed in the field of cultural studies serve a special purpose in helping students to understand the role media plays in a society's power structure and how media affects our view the society around us.

==Semiotics is the study of signs.== Media literacy is largely about reading and understanding the signs that the media produce and manipulate. The media are engaged in signify-ing practices, "a kind of symbolic work" that gives meaning to things and communicates that meaning to someone else (Hall 1997, 14).

Semiotic theory sets forth a model of how media texts are con-structed, of how signs are produced or selected and combined into messages. When we say that a medium has its own "codes and con-

PHOTO BY MICHAEL O'DONNELL

A street in Yerevan, Armenia. Charles Sanders Peirce, one of the originators of semiotic theory, stated, "The universe is perfused with signs."

ventions" — a creative language with its own rules — we are talking about sign systems (Kellner and Share 2005).

Cultural industries

Throughout this discussion of theory, we will turn often to writings in the field of cultural studies, a wide and diverse academic pursuit that ==uses semiotics as one of its tools.== Cultural theorists will help us

connect the analytical tools from semiotics with the ideology, values and motives contained in media texts.

To begin, we will define culture itself in semiotic terms:

> *Culture consists of the symbols of expression that individuals, groups and societies use to make sense of daily life.*

We think about life in symbolic ways, starting with the language we use to describe what goes on around us. According to the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, the act of thinking itself is a process of interpreting signs (Peirce 1991). We take symbolic action thousands of times a day: We wave, shake hands, say hello, talk on the phone, add up the cost of groceries, read a book. Each of these actions involves interpreting and using the signs common to us and others living in our culture.

Our world has many cultures, and we all live in several at the same time: the world, the nation, the community, the family — the culture inside our heads. We navigate each culture using a mutually agreed upon set of signs in a mutually agreed upon structure. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes that the human being "is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun," and he defines culture "to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be ... an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973, 5).

The media literacy movement is concerned mostly with those webs of meaning spun by the *mass media,* the producers of much of our culture:

> *Mass media are cultural industries that produce and distribute songs, novels, newspapers, movies, Internet services and other cultural products to large numbers of people.*

Media literacy practices, then, use semiotic theory to sort out the sign systems used and produced by the mass media, and to interpret what those systems mean.

What's in a sign?

Semiotics by its shortest definition is *the study of signs*. The simplicity of that definition belies a complex and far-flung field of study that crosses disciplines in the sciences and humanities.
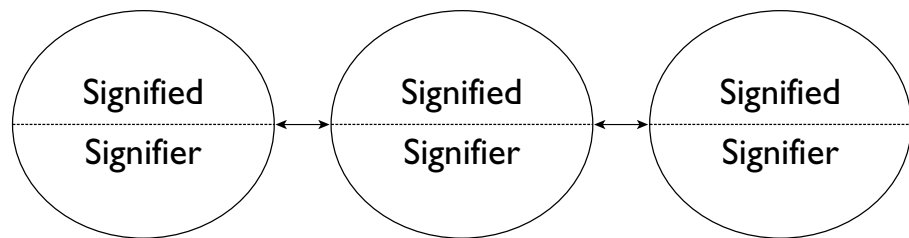
Semiotics originated in the work of two thinkers. In the late 19th

The average kitchen cupboard contains hundreds of signs of every variety. We live in a world awash with signs.
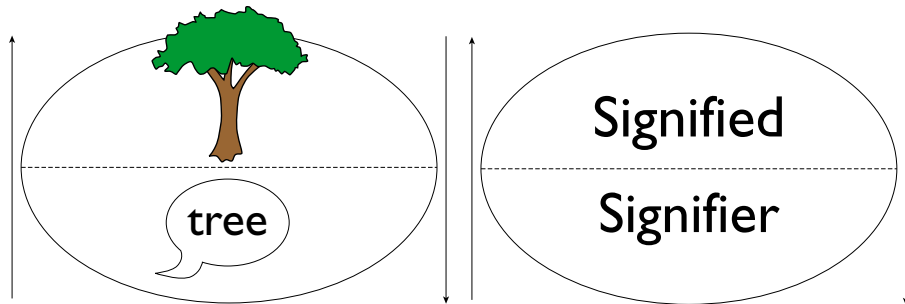
FIGURE 1▲ Saussure's two-part model of the sign.

FIGURE 2▲ What is signified depends on the sign's two parts, but the value of a sign depends on its relationship to other signs.

Century, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) developed their semiotic theories independently, an ocean apart. Saussure thought of his *sémiologie* as a science that studies "the roles of signs as part of social life." For Peirce, his *semeiotic* was a "formal doctrine of signs." The word *semiotics* today is used to refer to both traditions (Chandler 2002, 2-4):

> *Semiotics is the study of signs. It involves the theory and analysis of signs, codes and signifying practices.*

So what is a sign? The word suggests the obvious: the traffic sign telling drivers to stop, the sign over a store telling customers that it sells groceries. These are indeed signs, but in semiotic theory, the word *sign* has a much broader meaning:

> *A sign is an image, object, sound or action that stands for something else, including objects and concepts.*

The first step toward becoming media literate is to grasp two ideas:

- Everything can be seen as a sign of something else. Those in the mass media understand this. They carefully select what they put in their messages — objects, images, words, sounds, even color — while taking into account the signifying value of each.
- Signs are everywhere. Peirce wrote, "The universe is perfused with signs," and the statement is even more true today that it was a hundred years ago.

We live in a semiotic world. Sitting alone in my kitchen, I see brand names on the appliances and food products. Digital clocks blink the time; notes from my family are stuck on the refrigerator; the newspaper sits on the table. I write on my computer, producing even more signs.

The mass media contribute a torrent of images and sounds that we must negotiate even as we walk down the street.

Every sign, Saussure wrote, has two parts, the *signifier* and the *signified*:

- The signifier is the material or physical form a sign takes, something that can be seen, heard, touched, smelled or tasted.

- The signified is the object or concept to which the signifier refers.

The signifier and the signified relate to each other through the process of *signification*, represented in Figure 1 by the arrows. The dashed line is known as *the bar*. Saussure considered the signifier and the signified as inseparable with each triggering the other. The bar suggests that the two can be separated to allow us to study the way signs work.

A sign makes sense only in how it relates to other signs, as part of a sign system. Saussure, concerned mostly with linguistics, wrote that in languages, "there are only differences," and a letter or a word is defined by what it is not (Saussure 1966, 120). Peirce expressed a similar thought in that we can know a quality of an object "only by means of its contrast with or similarity to another" (Peirce 1961, 27). Signs refer first of all to each other and make no sense by themselves, and they refer to each other in a systematic way (Figure 2).

FIGURE 3: The advertisement makes sense because of its differences from DaVinci's original. It is also an example of intertextuality.

In the most basic sense, the ability of a sign to communicate something depends on whether you can tell that it is different from another sign. Printers, for example, look for typefaces that are considered legible, meaning that we can easily tell the letters apart; we know the letter "b" because we can see that it is not an "h." As a more complex example, consider two versions of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (Figure 3). The image on the left is the original, one of the most familiar works of art in the world. The image on the right becomes meaningful as an ad for a hair-care product because it resembles the Mona Lisa but is also different. The advertisement seems to be saying that this product can improve even a universally accepted example of beauty.

The structure of codes

The differences between signs become apparent and meaningful when signs are organized into sign systems, or *codes:*

> A code is a system of signs, a "framework within which signs make sense" (Chandler 2002, 245).

When we internalize a code such as language into a "system of thought," the code enables us to make sense of what goes on around us (Scholes 1982, 143). We think in codes.

A code is subject to rules for how signs are selected *(paradigmatic)* and combined *(syntagmatic)*. The rules can be formal, as in language, or informal, as in personal interaction.

Each sign's meaning is determined by how it compares with other signs (paradigmatic) and also by the sign's place in the order of the code (syntagmatic).
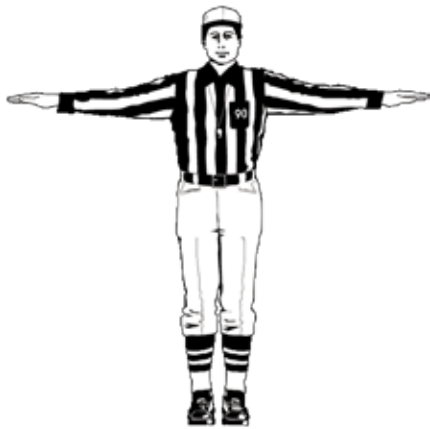
Let's return to our definition of culture as consisting of "the symbols of expression that individuals, groups and societies use to make sense of daily life." We could say, then, that a culture is primarily made up of codes. For the communicator, production and interpretation of media texts depends these codes (Jakobson 1971), with a text being a complex "network of different messages depending on different codes and working at different levels of signification" (Eco 1971, 425). Those who produce media texts understand this; a large part of what market researchers do, in essence, is try to "crack multiple consumer codes" (Stern 1994, 13).

Our definition says a code has rules, although the rules of some codes are rarely articulated. We know that body language does carry meaning, or in semiotic terms, that body language *signifies*. But we probably would not think of body language as a code with any formal rules. Even so, body movements often have deep meanings that vary from culture to culture and from situation to situation. Consider just one gesture, the handshake. In the United States, business people use the handshake as a greeting and as welcoming sign to a new colleague or prospective customer. A weak handshake can give a wrong impression that may be difficult to overcome, while a firm handshake sends a strong signal for the relationship to follow. At least one American university includes a section on how to shake hands in its curriculum (**http://linguistics.byu.edu/resources/lp/lpc3.html**).

Others have tried to articulate the rules governing informal body language. The magazine *Cosmopolitan* on its Web site offers a "body language decoder" for young women trying to gain an informational edge on their male friends (**http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/body-language/**).

Code subsets

A code often has specialized subsets. One formal subset of the code of body language is the football referee's signals (Figure 1.5). Spoken and written languages have these subsets, too; medical and military jargon are two examples. These specialized subsets allow people to communicate efficiently within the context of their profession.

The rules governing a code work in two ways: *paradigmatic* rules concern a sign's *value*, and *syntigmatic* rules concern the order in which signs are combined.

Value is not what a sign "means," or in semiotic terms, what it signifies. The value of a sign is a category or typology that depends on a sign's relationship to other signs. The value of a written or spoken word could be its part of speech — noun, verb or adjective, for example. The value of a word also could relates to its synonyms, antonyms and homonyms.

Here is an example: Consider two musical instruments, the oboe and the Armenian duduk. They share the *value* of being wind instruments with double-reed mouthpieces, but we can tell a duduk from an oboe by their differences. We know what a duduk is by referring to the other instruments that it isn't: oboe, bassoon, English horn. This idea becomes more clear when we consider a word that has only one other comparable word, such as our earlier example of "father" and "mother." Being a father can be defined to some degree as not being a mother.

Figure 1.6 shows a useful way of thinking about the relationship between signs, each its own sign system. Paradigmatic substitutes are aligned along the vertical axis and syntigmatic order along the horizontal axis. Words with a shared value can be substituted for one another. The idea of an orange dog or a brown apricot seems silly: *The brown apricot ate the orange dog*. But the statement makes sense as a sentence because the words have logical *values* in the correct *order*, according to the rules of the English language. If we change the words

PARADIGMATIC RULES DETERMINE VALUE

A	small	dog	was	brown
The	big	cat	is	orange
Our	tall	apricot	looked	fast
			saw	slow

SYNTAGMATIC RULES DETERMINE ORDER

FIGURE 4: The right signs in the right order allow for unambiguous communication. It prevents *abberant decoding*.

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around at random, the sentence ceases to make sense: *Brown the ate dog orange pomegranate the*. Syntigmatic rules are flexible to a certain extent. In the *Star Wars* movies, the character Yoda speaks in weirdly inverted sentences, such as the often quoted line from *Return of the Jedi:* "When 900 years you reach, look as good you will not." We understand what Yoda is saying, although it takes a bit of conscious decoding.

In analyzing any sign system, sooner or later we must decide on the basic unit of the system. In Figure 4, the basic sign unit is a single word. Umberto Eco, using Peirce's terms, classifies the basic sign units as *tokens* and *types*. In written language, the total number of tokens is the total number of words used; the total number of types is the total number of *different* words, ignoring repetition. This is not as simple as it sounds. How do we classify homonyms, words that are pronounced alike but have different meanings? Or synonyms, words with the same meaning but spelled differently? Nevertheless, tokens and types add insight to the structure of sign systems.

Saussure uses the word *langue* to refer to the rules and structures governing a code. Because everyone using the code has to agree on the rules, Saussure believed those rules came from social interaction. If we accept this idea, we can see why the culture of a nation or society is so closely entwined with its language.

Saussure gave the name *parole* to any single act of using the code. A spoken or written word or sentence is *parole*. The difference between *langue* and *parole* is the difference between language and speech, or between code and message. Any medium or genre or other type of communication has *langue,* an underlying structure.

Real or not real:
The immateriality of signs

Return for a moment to our definition of the *signified* as a "concept." In Saussure's semiotics, the signifier calls up a mental image, not a material object. We see the signifier and think about the object it stands for; we do not experience the object directly. What is signified is not the object, only an idea of the object. As Saussure put it, "Both parts of the sign are psychological" (Saussure 1966, 16).

If we think about this proposal, we might conclude, as some media theorists have, that nothing real exists independently of our use of codes. Another way of saying this, as a cultural theorists might, is that language "does not reflect reality but rather *constructs* it" (Chandler 2002, 25).

Many things we think of as real we know only from hearing about them or seeing them in a mediated form. In interpersonal communication, we here a friend tell about her vacation and we see her photographs. We did not experience of the vacation, but we can conceive of it and believe the vacation was real.

Any event that happens in the world apart from us we experience this way, often through a mass medium. As we relate what we see and hear in a media text to the world around us, we may think that we are experiencing "reality," but we must remember that media give us is a carefully constructed version of "reality." The cultural theorist

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FIGURE 5: Patriotic signs are used extensively in ads.

Stuart Hall states that the media *re-present* events to us, and in doing so, attach meaning to those events.

So what is real? Hall makes the distinction between *what things mean* as separate from *whether things exist*. Of course, things exist "out there" as material objects, Hall says, but he adds that "nothing meaningful exists outside of discourse." This, he says, is far different from saying "nothing exists outside of discourse," a statement he believes is false. When we talk about a thing or an event, or when we hear or see a re-presentation of an event in the media, it enters our consciousness and we begin to *making meaning* out of the event.

"As far as *meaning* is concerned, you need discourse ... the frameworks of understanding and interpretation to make meaningful sense of it," Hall says (Hall 1997, 12).

Discourse is a signifying practice, and in our discourse we deal with concepts as well as material objects. Concepts that are culturally important to us exist *only* as ideas expressed by language: freedom, independence and patriotism, for example. Those concepts and the images associated with them are powerful precisely because they don't exist outside of our talking and thinking. Saussure assumed that concepts did not exist "independent of words" (Chandler 2002, 61). Hall adds that concepts "allow us also to think about a wide range of things, which are not, in any simple sense, 'out there in the world.' That's a very rich notion" (Hall 1997, 10).

Concepts such as freedom and patriotism are powerful because they are open to interpretation and even manipulation. Media message makers know this and are eager to exploit these concepts (Figure 5).

Let us reconsider Hall's statement that *nothing meaningful exists*

outside of discourse and apply that idea to a major event in recent U.S. history, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Imagine a student at a college in the American Midwest who has overslept on the morning of September 11. She tosses on some clothes and rushes to school without hearing a radio, watching television or reading a newspaper. She arrives in the classroom and finds the teacher and other students staring transfixed at a TV screen showing the smoking heap that had been the World Trade Center in New York.

Up until that moment, the attacks *did not exist* for her. We speak of events being off our radar, meaning that news of the event hasn't crossed our informational horizon. In that sense, the theorist who says nothing exists outside of discourse might have a point, as our student would attest. But the attacks did exist, and even if our student had been a hermit in the remotest corner of the globe, the news eventually would have reached her.

Back in the classroom, she sees television pictures of destruction and asks what happened. Her classmates tell her that airplanes hit the towers and they collapsed. The pictures on the screen begin to take on meaning.

Throughout the morning of September 11, 2001, people across American gathered around television screens as the story of the attacks unfolded on CNN, CBS, ABC, NBC, FOX or another news source. During the day, the news networks tried to provide meaning: Were the crashes accidental? Did the terrorists have other targets? Who was behind the attacks? How many people were killed?

For most Americans, the attacks of September 11, 2001, still exist only as portrayed in the media — as portrayed though discourse. The media shaped their reality.

The arbitrary nature of signs

A principle of media literacy states that each medium uses its own creative language with its own rules — its own "codes and conventions" (Kellner and Share 2005, 374). A *convention* is something people in a culture have agreed to, either through a formal decision or through collective habit or use.

Saussure said that signifier and signified have no natural or direct link. No "natural" link exists between the word *sun* and the star at

FIGURE 6: Salvador Dali, *La persistencia de la memoria* (1931) or *The Persistence of Memory.*

the center of our solar system. We could use any word to mean "sun" as long as we all agreed on its use.

For many of us, this idea of the arbitrary nature of signs is difficult to accept because we are so deeply invested in our native language. But we can see this arbitrariness when we explore other languages; the word for sun in the Armenian language is արեւ, pronounced *arev*.

This does not mean that communication through a sign system is arbitrary. You and I cannot violate the rules of the code and expect to be understood. But the mass media often send messages that purposefully bend or break the rules to attract attention or make a point. Artists also play against our expectations — against the code — as in Figure 6, Salvador Dali's surrealist painting *The Persistence of Memory.* Although the painting goes against how we expect a clock to appear, objects in the painting are recognizable.

Peirce's three-part sign

Peirce in his writings does not agree with Saussure that all signs are arbitrary. Peirce said a sign must have some "real connection with the thing it signifies" and gives the example of the weather vane. The weather vane is a "sign of the wind" that "would not be so unless the wind made it turn round" (Peirce 1991, 141). Peirce incorporates this idea into his own three-part model of the sign.

Peirce's model included two parts similar to Saussure's signifier and signified:

■ Peirce's *representamen*, often called the *sign vehicle,* is the form of the sign in sound or image.

■ The *interpretant* is the sense made of the sign. The interpretant is a mental construct, or in Peirce's words, "an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign."

■ To these two parts, Peirce added a third that he called the *object* (Figure 7), something that exist "out there."

The interpretant, then, is the idea a person has of the object when he or she sees the sign vehicle. Do not confuse the term *sign vehicle* with the word *sign*. The sign vehicle is only part of the sign.

All three are essential to Peirce's model. The sign is "a unity of what is represented (the object), how it is represented (the sign vehicle) and how it is interpreted (the interpretant)" (Chandler 2002, 29).

Peirce's model makes a place for "reality" that Saussure's two-part signification process does not. Second, the three-part model implies that a person must receive the sign and to some degree determine its meaning. Said another way, the meaning of a sign "is not contained within it, but arises in its interpretation" (Chandler 2002, 32). Peirce's model acknowledges that objects such as trees do exist, but Peirce also acknowledges that when someone utters the word "tree," those who hear it will bring to mind differing concepts. They will imagine different trees.

Peirce, unlike Saussure, considered meaning-making to be a dialogue if only between you and your inner self. The Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin wrote that when a sign enters this inner dialogue, it enters a "tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from other, intersects with yet a third group" (Bakhtin 1981, 276). The interpretant that comes out of

Saussure	Peirce
signifier	sign vehicle
signified	object
	interpretant
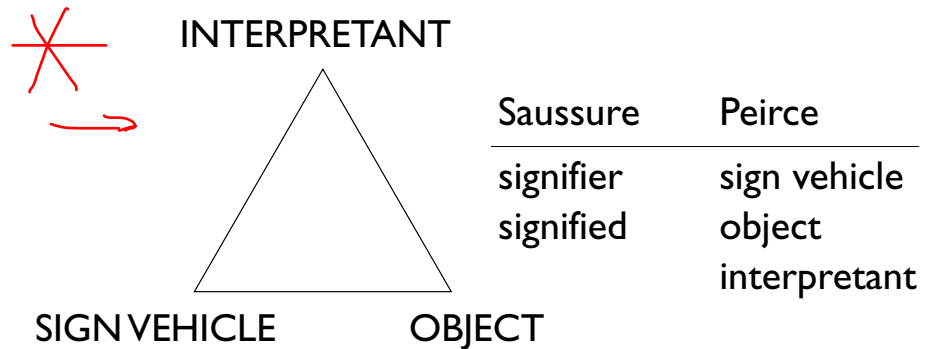
FIGURE 7▲ Peirce adds the *interpretant* to Saussure's model, giving the viewer of a sign an active role in determining a sign's meaning.

FIGURE 8▼ We process each of the sign modes by different methods.

Sign mode	Iconic	Indexical	Symbolic
Signifies by	Resemblance	Physical or causal connection	Convention
Examples	Mug shot	Footprint (animal) Smoke (fire)	Corporate logo Church symbol
Process	Recognize it	Figure it out	Must learn it

this environment often can be something quite different from that of someone else.

A principle of media literacy is that audiences negotiate meaning. This principle springs from the concept of signification as dialogue. When the media sends a message, it must consider the audience's culture — its language, its value judgments and accents, and its codes.

FIGURE 9: Turkish President Abdullah Gul, left, and Armenian President Serge Sarkisian met Sept. 6, 2008, in Yerevan, Armenia. Gul came to watch Turkey play Armenia in a World Cup qualifier game. (Misha Japaridze/Associated Press)

Symbolic, indexical and iconic

The connection between a sign vehicle and its object, in Peirce's scheme, can be described as three sign modes (Figure 8):

- ■ **Iconic mode.** The sign vehicle's meaning is expressed through resemblance. The iconic signifier appears similar to its object, and we process the sign through recognition.
- ■ **Indexical mode.** The sign vehicle's meaning is expressed through a physical connection with its object, through cause and effect. The indexical signifier is evidence that something exists or has occurred, and we process the sign using reasoning.
- ■ **Symbolic mode.** Meaning is arbitrary, and we process the sign using a set of conventions we have learned.

Do not mistake the term *mode* for *category*. A sign can signify in any and all of the three modes depending on how the signifier is inter-

preted. In Figure 9, Armenian President Serge Sargsian, right, shakes hands with Turkish President Abdullah Gul.

On the **iconic** level, Armenians would recognize their president and probably would recognize the Turkish president. If not, the caption would clarify their identities, raising the question of whether any signifier is completely iconic. We know who they are through the convention of attaching a name to a person. But the iconic mode is at work because the men in the photo *resemble* real, well-known men.

On the **indexical** level, the photo is evidence that the men met and shook hands. Photography has held a privileged spot among media as providing "evidence about a scene, about the way things were" that is "better evidence than any other kind of picture" (Mitchell 2001, 24). A painting can be a picture of something fanciful (Figure 10), but the photo as signifier *adheres* to the referent, to the thing it signifies. Digital photography and the ability of artists to alter photographs in fantastic ways could make photographs less believable and thus less indexical; we cannot assume that a photo is "truthful." But most people would accept this photo as *evidence* that the men met.

On the **symbolic** level, the photo contains signifiers that would be meaningful to people in many cultures, such as the handshake, a symbol of friendship, trust and cooperation. The men wear business suits and are surrounded by other men in suits, indicating some sort of formal or official meeting. These are sign vehicles that signify through convention; we have to *learn* their meaning.

FIGURE 10: William Adolphe Bouguereau, *Virgin of the Angels* (1871)

The photo of the Turkish and Armenian leaders is symbolic in ways that are meaningful only to those who have studied Armenian history. Turks of the Ottoman Empire first invaded Armenia in the 11th Century, and for centuries parts of historical Armenia have been under Turkish rule. In the late 19th Century, as nations began to win their independence from the crumbling empire, the Turks began a reign of oppression on Armenians living in Turkish territory. It culminated in attacks and forced emigration that lasted from 1915 to 1918 and left more than a million Armenian dead. Armenians refer to this as the first genocide of the 20th Century, but the official Turkish position rejects the label of genocide. Today, relations remain frozen between Armenia and Turkey. The Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Minnesota presents a retelling of the Armenian genocide, along with photos and other evidence at **www.chgs.umn.edu/histories/armenian**.

Gul's visit, then, was deeply symbolic to Armenians and something of a calculated risk for the Armenian president.

A continuum of meaning

Another way of thinking of the iconic, indexical and symbolic modes would be as a continuum (Figure 9).

These continua should not be taken too literally. The indexical signifier is less motivated than the iconic signifier, but the difference between an indexical signifier and an iconic signifier is more than a difference of degree. The indexical sign vehicle signifies in an entirely different way from the iconic.

But the continua make the point that iconic and indexical signifiers are more *constrained* by *referential signifieds*. If an iconic sign vehicle (signifier) resembles its referent (signified), then its meaning is limited to what it resembles. A symbolic signifier, with only an arbitrary connection to its signified, is not constrained in meaning. Along the continuum, then, as a signifier is placed more and more to the right, it signifies more through convention and refers less to a *specific* signified. Saussure uses the term *motivation* to indicate the relationship between a signifier and its signified. An iconic signifier is said to be highly motivated by its signified, while a symbolic sign is considered unmotivated.

Scott McCloud offers another continuum, or rather a set of continua, in which a signifier moves from photographic resemblance of a

ICONIC → INDEXICAL → SYMBOLIC
MOTIVATED → NOT MOTIVATED
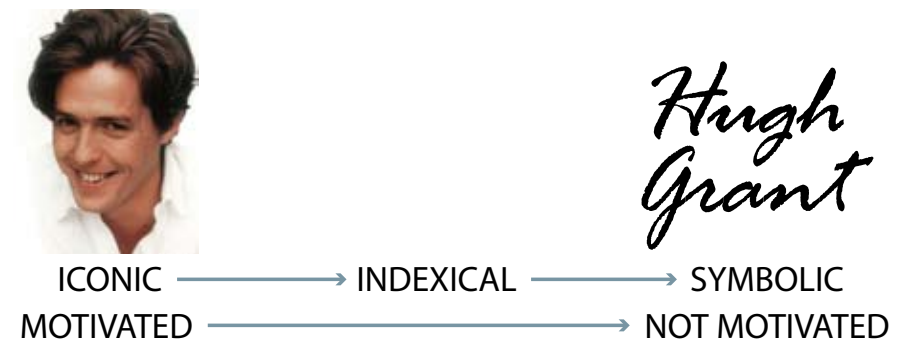
FIGURE 11▲ The continuum from iconic to symbolic is handy, but the indexical sign doesn't always fit at the halfway point.

FIGURE 12▼ For Scott McCloud, signs fall along a continuum from those we can recognize (received) to those we must learn (perceived).

RECEIVED ←→ PERCEIVED
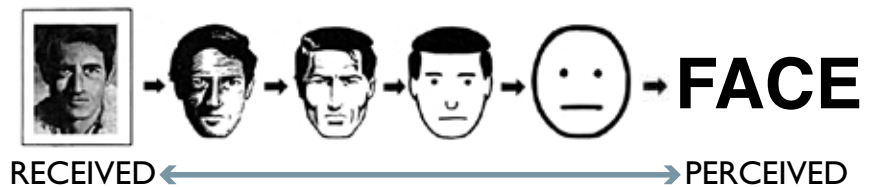
person to simpler and simpler versions until it becomes the completely symbolic word face. Figure 1.13 differs somewhat from McCloud's original diagram so that the terms used are more in agreement with Peirce's theories.

Note that the word *face* could mean any face, even that of a clock or a building rather than a person, but the photographic image can stand for only one person. Another way of thinking about this idea is to consider the level of details in an image: The more detailed the image, the more motivated that image is as a signifier.

Those who work in mass media take this into account when choosing what signifiers to include in a media text. Often when a person is chosen to appear in an ad, the advertiser is looking for someone of average appearance. The aim is to present someone with whom consumers can identify.

Structuralism and media studies

When Saussure and Peirce first expressed the concepts behind semiotics, they were most concerned with written and spoken language. Others since have taken their ideas and applied them to a wide range of social phenomena. The concept that codes have paradigmatic and syntigmatic rules gave rise to *structuralism* and the application of semiotics to fields of study ranging from cinema to anthropology.

A key idea of structuralism is that any social practice is similar in structure to language. Structuralists "search for the 'deep structures' underlying the 'surface features' of sign systems" (Chandler 2002, 5).

Structuralism contributes directly to media literacy instruction and practice. The structure of a text is a special code related to how it is constructed.

Media texts that share a common code and structure are grouped into a *genre*. Genre, a French word meaning type or class, is used in media theory to refer to a distinctive type of text. The term goes beyond naming and classifying media. In semiotics, a genre can be considered a code within the text that is shared by those who made the text and those who view and interpret it.

A genre is not a clear, sharply defined group of media texts, nor are we limited to one accepted criteria for how we divide texts into genres. We could assign genres based on medium (radio, television, movies) and discuss how the visual language of TV is different from that of movies. But what happens when movies are viewed on television? Or when a television show is made into a feature-length film?

Even so, any student can recite three or four common genres for TV shows or motion pictures: comedy, documentary, western, science fiction, animation. Each uses a common code that the producer and the viewer understand. If we see a man in a movie wearing futuristic

FIGURE 13: *Nanook of the North* (1922) is considered the earliest documentary film

clothing and driving a flying car, we understand that the movie producer is "speaking" to us in the code of science fiction.

A science fiction movie shares its conventions with other science fiction movies — and with moviegoers. The shared codes provide *context* in the form of objects and sounds that signify a sense of place. Generic codes save the media producer the need to explain the setting of a movie. The moviegoer knows the genre and understands how it works. In the words of literary theorist Jonathan Culler, a genre is a "contract" between the author of a text and its reader, with expectations that the author will comply enough to make the text intelligible.

Genre is an important concept for media literacy teachers. When we say that a producer of a media text seeks to make the work seem "natural," we often mean natural to a certain genre. Roland Barthes argued that we make sense of the events within a text by its relationship to other texts within a genre, not by its relationship to real life.

As an example, think of the conventions common to documentary movies:

- Events are not staged to create a fictional sense of reality; reality is "captured" by the filmmaker.
- Subjects represented are real, not fictitious "characters" or "protagonists."
- The filmmaker makes no effort to obscure the use of the camera. The camera and the act of filmmaking are made obvious.
- The filmmaker attempts to argue a point of fact.
- The filmmaker supports the argument using visual evidence.

Through more than 80 years of producing documentaries, beginning in 1922 with Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (Figure 13), film producers have established these documentary conventions.

Gillo Pontecorvo in his 1965 film *The Battle of Algiers* exploits documentary conventions to make his fictional film feel authentic (Figure 14). The scenes seem unrehearsed; they unfold almost haphazardly. He uses hand-held cameras that follow the action at eye level, simulating the actions of a documentary cinematographer. We are made aware of the camera on purpose, and of its power to produce "evidence." One analysis stated, "Shot on the streets or Algiers and cast primarily with non-actors — including Yacef Saadi, who was one of the leaders of the 1957 uprising — the film, based on actual events, seemed to have been snatched from real life" (Smith 2008, 109).

The danger is that the viewer will see it as history, rather than a representation of history. At least one history teacher uses Pontecorvo's movie in class (Vann 2002). And the Pentagon showed the film in 2003 as a lesson in counterinsurgency. A flier for the screening read: "How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film" (Kaufman 2003).

Others consider it to be propaganda. One reviewer wrote that *The Battle of Algiers* "was designed as a propaganda device, one that would convey the revolution's ideals with the immediacy and drive of a cinema verite documentary" (Hornaday 2004).

Pontecorvo has stated the need to "win over audiences." He set out to "impose a dictatatorship of truth that gave the impression of a documentary, a newsreel. This despite the fact that it was a work of fiction." He added that the grainy newsreel photography "was crucial" (Pontecorvo 1992).

Pontecorvo's use of conventions from one genre to use in another is an example of *intertextuality*. Advertising uses intertextuality as a standard procedure. Indeed, advertisers could not get their message across in a single printed image or a 30-second television commercial without the rich context provided by film and literary genres.

Final thoughts on theory

Theory gives us the tools to understand that universe by revealing common conventions and practices. Media literacy is as much about understanding the people who make media texts as it is about the texts themselves. To study media is to become familiar with the imaginative universe in which the media producer's every act is a sign. Theory applied well will help us crack the code.

FIGURE 14: Jean Martin as paratrooper Col. Mathieu in Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*.

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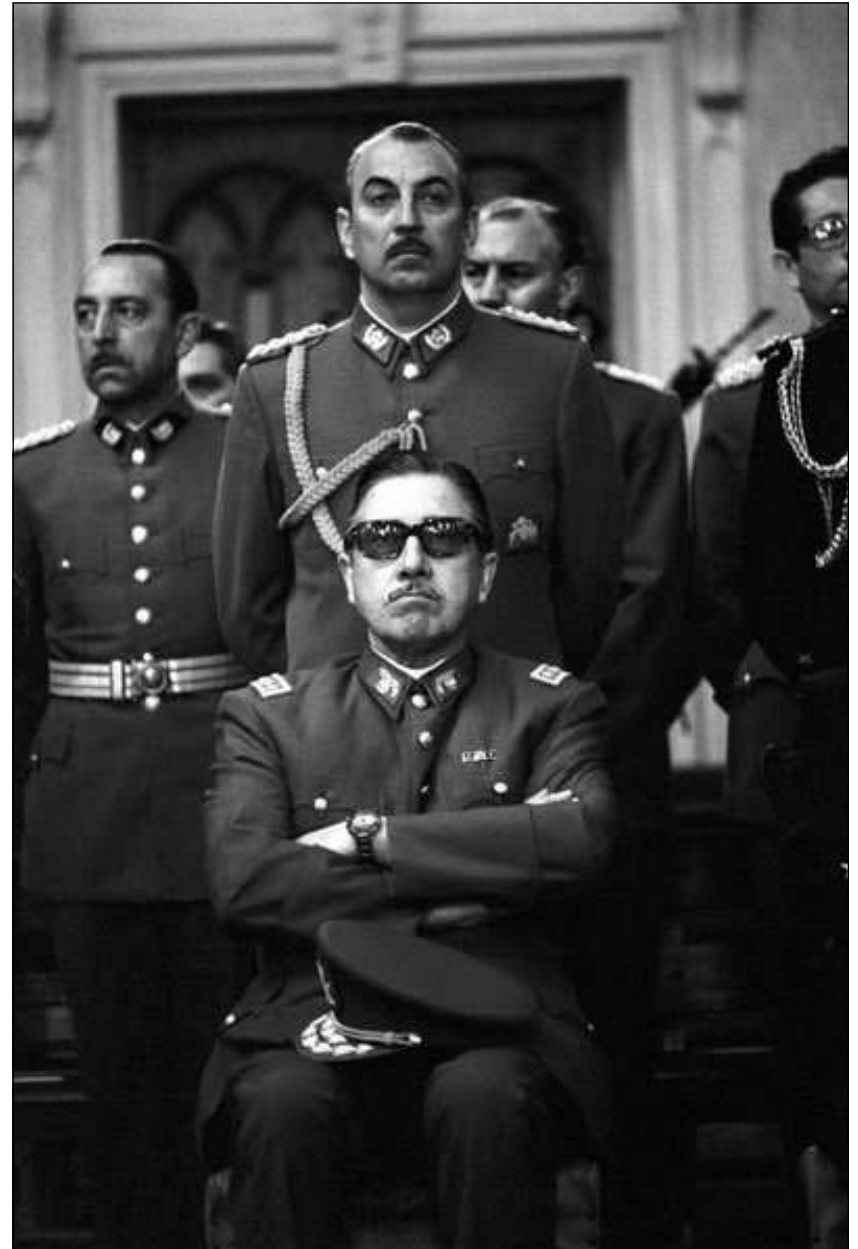
Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet shortly after he took power in September 1973. This image is loaded with signs, some obvious and some not.