

The Ubiquity of the Media Environment

 Our lives are saturated with media technologies and images.

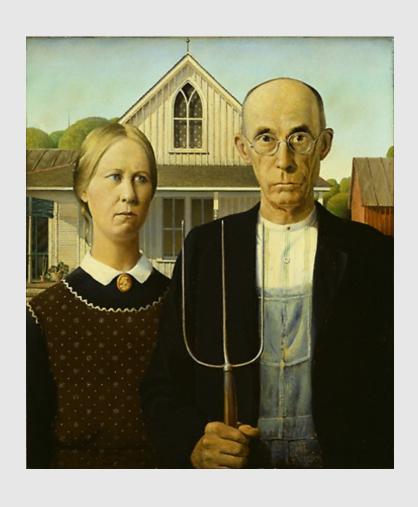


The Mass Society Questions: What happened to American Culture and Politics? (1865-1939)

- How did we get to the point where the public—or rather, the "masses"— can have their hearts and minds shaped by mass mediated propaganda?
- How did we get to the point where the new, powerful means of mass communication have become polluted with mindless "mass culture"?

The Answer: The Transition from Rural Community to <u>Urban Mass Society</u>.

Rural Community (Gemeinschaft)



- Social stability.
- Strong collective values.
- Reliance on traditional authorities.
- Folk culture: organic, participatory.

Urban Mass Society (Gesellschaft)

- Atomized individuals without social ties pour into city.
- Cut off from traditions, values, folk customs.

The new urban masses: isolated, anonymous individuals crammed together in the new industrial city.

Semiotics: The Study of Signs (Symbols)



- Signs are things

 (objects, words, images) that have a meaning.
- How do roses—a
 physical object—
 communicate
 meanings (such as...)?

Sign = Signifier + Signified

Signified → The meaning itself.

The abstract "concept" carried by the signifier.

Signifier \rightarrow The physical carrier of meaning.

Word (sound), Word (written), Image, Object.

Sign = Signifier + Signified

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Signifier + Signified = (Sign)

+ Love/Passion = (Roses=I Love You)

Writing on Card
Love You)

("I Love You")
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Signifieds (meanings) <u>must</u> be associated with, or "carried" by, signifiers (physical carriers) in order to be communicated from one person to another.

Sign = Signifier + Signified

Two Important Points:

1. You cannot communicate abstract concepts without physical carriers (images, words on a page, the sound of my voice).

The Arbitrary Nature of Signs

- 2. The relationship between signifiers and signifieds is <u>arbitrary</u>.
- There is nothing inherent in the roses that requires us to associate them with "passion."



Could you fix my Dodge Dakota?

But, if Signs are Arbitrary, How Did (S)he "Get" What I Meant?

Cultural Codes and Conventions

- (S)he "got" the meaning because (s)he and I shared the same cultural codes and conventions.
- These codes and conventions tell us both to associate the signifier of a bunch of roses with a particular signified or meaning "I love you."

So What Does Semiotics Have to Do with Cultural Studies?

• The job of the analyst is to determine how a media **text** links up **signifiers**—that is, certain images, certain forms of language, and certain sounds—to communicate particular **signifieds** (ie, particular social and cultural meanings).

Cultural Studies: Textual/Semiotic Analysis

- What meanings (signifieds) did the author intend to communicate by <u>selecting</u> and <u>combining</u> these <u>particular signifiers</u> -- these particular words, images, or narratives?
- How is the text, and others like it, encouraging us to think about ourselves, others, and the society we live in?

Denotation and Connotation Two Levels of Meaning



What is he handing you? (denotation)

What does it mean, at a cultural level? (connotation)

- Denotation → The Surface, Literal Meaning of a Sign.
- Connotation

 The Implicit, Expressive, Cultural Meaning of a Sign.
- A single sign can express
 <u>both</u> denotative and connotative meanings.

Stuart Halls Encoding Decoding Model

Encoding

Producers Assemble signifiers and arrange them to communicate particular meanings. The intended Meaning is the preferred meaning.

<u>Text</u>

The carrier of the producer's meaning.

<u>Decoding</u>

Audience actively interprets the text, drawing on their own personal experiences to produce a particular reading of the text (i.e. to associate the signifiers with specific signifieds.

Three outcomes of decoding

<u>Dominant reading</u> = audience decodes meaning of the text in line with the producer's intentions (viewer reproduces the "preferred meaning"



<u>Oppositional reading</u> = Audience rejects totally the social and political meanings and values "preferred" by the producer.

<u>Negotiated reading</u> = audience endorses some elements of the message, while rejecting other parts.

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