



IS THIS HOW THEY
SEE ME
MASSES, MESSAGES AND MEANINGS

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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 Urban Mass Society.

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 → **The physical carrier of
meaning.**

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

Sign = Signifier + Signified

Signifier	+	Signified	=	(Sign)
	+	Love/Passion	=	(Roses=I Love You)
Writing on Card Love You) ("I Love You")	+	Love/Passion	=	(Words = I

Signifieds (meanings) must 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 arbitrary.

- 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 selecting and combining these particular signifiers -- 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 **both** 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.

Text

The carrier of the producer's meaning.

Decoding

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

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

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

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



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