

# Semiotics

## of Roland Barthes

French literary critic and semiologist Roland Barthes (rhymes with •smartŽ) wrote that for him, semiotics was not a cause, a science, a discipline, a school, a movement, nor presumably even a theory. •It is,Ž he claimed, •an adventure.Ž<sup>1</sup> The goal of semiotics is interpreting both verbal and nonverbal signs. The verbal side of the field is called linguistics. Barthes, however, was mainly interested in the nonverbal side, multifaceted visual signs just waiting to be read. Barthes held the chair of literary semiology at the College of France when he was struck and killed by a laundry truck in 1980. In his highly regarded book *Mythologies*, Barthes sought to decipher the cultural meaning of a wide variety of visual signs, from sweat on the faces of actors in the film *Julius Caesar* to a magazine photograph of a young African soldier saluting the French flag.

Unlike most intellectuals, Barthes frequently wrote for the popular press and occasionally appeared on television to comment on the foibles of the French middle class. His academic colleagues found his statements witty, disturbing, flashy, overstated, or profound, but never dull. He obviously made them think. With the exception of Aristotle, the four-volume *International Encyclopedia of Communication* refers to Barthes more than to any other theorist in this book.<sup>2</sup>

Semiology (or semiotics, as it is better known in America) is concerned with anything that can stand for something else. Italian semiologist and novelist Umberto Eco has a clever way of expressing that focus. Semiotics, he says, is •the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie, because if something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot, in fact, be used to tell at all.Ž<sup>3</sup> Barthes was interested in signs that are seemingly straightforward but that subtly communicate ideological or connotative meaning and perpetuate the dominant values of society. As such, they are deceptive.

Barthes was a mercurial thinker who changed his mind about the way signs work more than once over the course of his career. Yet most current practitioners of semiotics follow the basic analytical concepts of his original theory. His approach provides great insight into the use of signs, particularly those channeled through the mass media.

**Semiotics (semiology)**  
The study of the social production of meaning from sign systems; the analysis of anything that can stand for something else.

Barthes initially described his semiotic theory as an explanation of myth. He later substituted the term connotation to label the ideological baggage that signs carry wherever they go, and most students of Barthes' work regard connotation as a better word choice to convey his true concern.

Barthes' theory of connotative meaning won't make sense to us, however, unless we first understand the way he viewed the structure of signs. His thinking was strongly influenced by the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who coined the term semiology and advocated its study.<sup>4</sup> To illustrate Barthes' core principles I'll feature portions of his essay on professional wrestling entertainment.

### 1. A Sign Is the Combination of Its Signifier and Signified

The distinction between signifier and signified can be seen in Barthes' graphic description of the body of a French wrestler who was selected by the promoter because he typified the repulsive slob:

As soon as the adversaries are in the ring, the public is overwhelmed with the obviousness of the roles. As in the theatre, each physical type expresses to excess the part which has been assigned to the contestant. Thauvin, a fifty-year-old with an obese and sagging body . . . displays in his flesh the characters of baseness. . . .

The physique of the wrestlers therefore constitutes a basic sign, which like a seed contains the whole fight.<sup>5</sup>

According to Barthes, the image of the wrestler's physique is the signifier. The concept of baseness is the signified. The combination of the two—the villainous body—is the sign.

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in the ring who is inept at making Thauvin follow the rules. But nonverbal signifiers seem to have a natural affinity with their signifieds. Barthes noted that Thauvin's body was so repugnant that it provoked nausea. He classified the relationship between signifiers and signifieds as "quasi-arbitrary." After all, Thauvin really did strike the crowd as vileness personified.

## 2. A Sign Does Not Stand on Its Own: It Is Part of a System

Barthes entitled his essay "The World of Wrestling," because, like all other semiotic systems, wrestling creates its own separate world of interrelated signs:

Each moment in wrestling is therefore like an algebra which instantaneously unveils the relationship between a cause and its represented effect. Wrestling fans certainly experience a kind of intellectual pleasure in seeing the moral mechanism function so perfectly. . . . A wrestler can irritate or disgust, he never disappoints, for he always accomplishes completely, by a progressive solidification of signs, what the public expects of him.<sup>6</sup>

Barthes noted that the grapplers' roles are tightly drawn. There is little room for innovation; the men in the ring work within a closed system of signs. By responding to the unwavering expectation of the crowd, the wrestlers are as much spectators as the fans who cheer or jeer on cue.

Wrestling is just one of many semiotic systems. Barthes also explored the cultural meaning of designer clothes, French cooking, automobiles, Japanese seeing

yellow ribbons during the 1980 Iranian hostage crisis.<sup>8</sup> They traced the transformation of this straightforward yellow symbol into an ideological sign. Americans' lavish display of yellow ribbons during Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and the occupation of Iraq that began in 2003 adds a new twist to the Frys' analysis. I'll update their yellow ribbon example to illustrate Barthes' semiotic theory.

"Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree" was the best-selling pop song of 1972 in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Sung by Tony Orlando and Dawn, the lyrics express the thoughts of a convict in prison who is writing to the woman he loves. After three years in jail, the man is about to be released and will travel home by bus. Fearing her possible rejection, he devises a plan that will give her a way to signal her intentions without the potential embarrassment of a face-to-face confrontation.

Since he'll be able to see the huge oak planted in front of her house when the bus passes through town, he asks her to use the tree as a message board. If she still loves him, wants him back, and can overlook the past, she should tie a yellow ribbon around the trunk of the tree. He will know that all is forgiven and join her in rebuilding a life together. But if this bright sign of reconciliation isn't there, he'll stay on the bus, accept the blame for a failed relationship, and try to get on with his life without her.

The yellow ribbon is obviously a sign of acceptance, but one not casually offered. There's a taint on the relationship, hurts to be healed. Donald and Virginia Fry labeled the original meaning of the yellow ribbon in the song as "forgiveness of a stigma."

Yellow ribbons in 1991 continued to carry a "we want you back" message when U.S. armed forces fought in Operation Desert Storm. Whether tied to trees, worn in hair, or pinned to lapels, yellow ribbons still proclaimed, "Welcome home." But there was no longer any sense of shameful acts to be forgiven or disgrace to be overcome. Vietnam was ancient history and America was the leader of the "new world order." Hail the conquering heroes.

The mood surrounding the yellow ribbon had become one of triumph, pride, and even arrogance. After all, hadn't we intercepted Scud missiles in the air, guided "smart bombs" into air-conditioning shafts, and "kicked Saddam Hussein's butt across the desert"? People were swept up in a tide of "yellow fever." More than 90 percent of U.S. citizens approved of America's actions in the Persian Gulf. The simple yellow ribbon of personal reconciliation now served as a blatant sign of nationalism.



The yellow-ribbon sign functioned the same way for about three years after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, which was the centerpiece of America's "War on Terror." Millions of citizens displayed yellow-ribbon decals and magnets on their cars and trucks that urged all to "Support Our Troops." The ribbon called up feelings of national pride and memories of the shock-and-awe attack on Baghdad that had squashed immediate resistance; Saddam Hussein had been driven from office, his statue toppled; democracy was being established; and President George W. Bush had dramatically landed a fighter jet on an aircraft carrier proclaiming "Mission Accomplished." The yellow ribbon continued to signify that the soldiers' return would be joyous, but its message held no sense of shame. What had originally signified forgiveness of a stigma now symbolized pride in victory.

## THE MAKING OF MYTH: STRIPPING THE SIGN OF ITS HISTORY

According to Barthes' theory, the shift from "forgiveness of stigma" to "pride in victory" followed a typical semiotic pattern. Figure 26–1 shows how it's done.

Barthes claimed that every ideological sign is the result of two interconnected sign systems. The first system represented by the smaller coin is strictly descriptive—the signifier image and the signified concept combining to produce a denotative sign. The three elements of the sign system based on the "Tie a Yellow Ribbon . . ." lyrics are marked with Arabic numerals on the three images of the smaller coin. The three segments of the connotative system are marked with Roman numerals on the images of the larger coin. Note that the sign of the first system does double duty as the signifier of the Iraqi War connotative system. According to Barthes, this lateral shift, or connotative sidestep, is the key to transforming a neutral sign into an ideological tool. Follow his thinking step-by-step through the diagram.

Denotative sign system  
A descriptive sign without ideological content.

The signifier (1) of the denotative sign system is the image of a yellow ribbon that forms in the mind of the person who hears the 1972 song. The content of the signified (2) includes the stigma that comes from the conviction of a crime, a term in jail, the prisoner's willingness to take responsibility for the three-year separation, and the explosive release of tension when the Greyhound passengers cheer at the sight of the oak tree awash in yellow ribbons. The corresponding

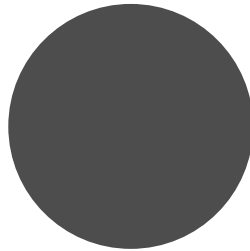


FIGURE 26–1 Connotation as a Second-Order Semiotic System  
Based on Barthes, "Myth Today"

denotative sign (3) is “forgiveness of a stigma.” For those who heard the song on the radio, the yellow-ribbon sign spoke for itself. It was a sign rich in regret and relief.

don't defend, and they certainly don't raise questions. So it's up to the semiologist to expose or deconstruct the mythic system.

Throughout his life, Roland Barthes deciphered and labeled the ideologies foisted upon naïve consumers of images. Although the starting-point signifiers

the final words of the “Gloria Patri,” a choral response that many Christians sing in worship:

As it was in the beginning,  
Is now and ever shall be,  
World without end. Amen. Amen.

For believers, singing these words about anything or anyone but God would be unthinkable. Barthes wouldn’t grant even that exception. All his semiotic efforts were directed at unmasking what he considered the heresy of those who controlled the images of society—the naturalizing of history.

## THE SEMIOTICS OF MASS COMMUNICATION: “I’D LIKE TO BE LIKE MIKE”

Like wrestlers and ribbons, most semiotic signs gain cultural prominence when broadcast through the electronic and print media. Because signs—as well as issues of power and dominance—are integral to mass communication, Barthes’ semiotic analysis has become a seminal media theory. As Kyong Kim, author of a book on semiotics, concludes:

Information delivered by mass media is no longer information. It is a commodity saturated by fantasized themes. Mass audiences are nothing more than consumers of such commodities. One should not forget that, unlike nature, the media’s reality is always political. The mass signification arising in response to signs pouring from the mass media is not a natural process. Rather it is an artificial effect calculated and induced by the mass media to achieve something else.<sup>12</sup>

The advertisements that make commercial television so profitable also create layers of connotation that reaffirm the status quo. During the 1998 NBA playoffs, one of the most frequently aired spots featured Chicago Bulls’ superstar Michael Jordan slam-dunking the basketball over a variety of helpless defenders. He then gulps down Gatorade while a host of celebrity and everyday admirers croon his praises. The most memorable of these adoring fans is a preschool African-American boy, who stares up in awe at the towering Jordan. “Sometimes I dream,” we hear him sing, “that he is me.” He really wants to be like Mike.

Obviously, the commercial is designed to sell Gatorade by linking it to the virtually unlimited achievement of basketball’s greatest player. To partake of this liquid is to reach for the stars. In that sense, the little boy, rather than MJ himself, becomes the spot’s crucial sign. Within this denotative system, the youngster’s rapt gaze is the signifier, and his dream of becoming a famous athlete is the signified. The resultant denotative sign—a look of yearning—has the potential to move cartons of Gatorade off the shelf. But as the signifier of a secondary connotative system, it has greater cultural impact.

At the connotative level, the original “look of yearning” suggests a new second-order signified—a more general kind of dreaming about one’s future in which the ad’s audience is invited to participate. Viewers are encouraged to wish for careers and goals that are virtually unobtainable, even in the best of circumstances. The CEO of Microsoft, the conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Hollywood’s most glamorous talent, the president of the United States, and the world’s leading AIDS researcher constitute the lofty heights surveyed by the gaze that the connotative shift implies.



With its attractive visuals, uplifting soundtrack, and good-natured humor, the commercial functions as a glorification of unfulfilled desire, the very essence of its second-order sign. This is America, after all, so think big, aim high, and don't be satisfied with anything but the top. Do what it takes—and purchase what is required—to be the very best. Ideologically speaking, it is this kind of naturalized longing that enslaves the average citizen and fuels the capitalist system. Although the commercial evokes a warm, fuzzy reaction from the viewer, it surreptitiously enforces our fundamental cultural myths about unlimited possibilities for success, myths that—according to Barthes—maintain the dominance of those who hold the reins of commerce and power.

Furthermore, Barthes would no doubt seek to expose the semiotic sleight of hand that subtly drains the second-order connotative system of the historical reality implicit in the original sign. At this denotative level, the African-American boy's fixation with MJ is necessarily embedded in a long history of racial injustice and economic hardship. Michael Jordan's accomplishments, as well as the dream of his pint-sized fan, exist in a world in which African Americans must strive particularly hard to succeed. As the documentary *Hoop Dreams* brilliantly portrays, the desire-filled faces of the kids who populate the rough basketball courts of urban America also reflect the poverty, substance abuse, shattered families, and harsh, big-city surroundings that constantly threaten to engulf them. Nonetheless, the yearning connoted by the second-order system generated by the commercial is utterly stripped of this rather grim social reality. The boy, his life, and his dream are deftly co-opted by the system. Or so Barthes would argue.

Katherine, a student who read the semiotic analysis above, was inspired to look for other connotative sign systems involving Michael Jordan and his admirers.

Michael Jordan played most of his games (especially his slam dunks) with his mouth hanging wide and his tongue wagging. This came to signify talent, expectation of greatness, and pride. Jordan wannabes across the country have picked up this little quirk. For them, keeping their mouth open signifies Michael Jordan and, therefore, being cool, talented, and better than everyone else. The image of superiority, however, is not derived from any comparable history of success or talent of their own; it's based on myth.

## CHARLES PEIRCE: A TRIADIC ALTERNATIVE TO SAUSSURE AND BARTHES

More than one hundred years ago, while Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure was

Figure 26–2 portrays the relationship among the three elements in Peirce’s sign system. Because the representamen and the interpretant are akin to the signifier and the signified, I’ve bracketed Saussure’s terms from his dyadic model for easy comparison with Peirce’s triadic conception of signs. What stands out, of course, is Peirce’s addition of the object. Peirce was a philosophical realist. Unlike hard-core social constructionists and most postmodernists today, he thought many referents actually existed apart from their linguistic descriptions. Saussure wasn’t so sure. And although the solid line connecting the representamen [signifier] with the interpretant [signified] is consistent with what Saussure saw as their inseparable bond, the dotted line between the representamen and the object is an added factor that has been affirmed by later semiologists. It portrays that there is no direct relationship between the word and the thing to which it refers.

Even though Saussure coined the term semiology (semantics), his concern was with spoken and written words as signs—the province of linguistics. That’s probably why he thought all signifiers are arbitrary, with no logical connection between the signifier and the signified. It was Barthes who took Saussure’s dyadic conception of the sign and extended it to visual images. Barthes thought nonverbal signifiers had a natural affinity with their signifieds. (Recall his description of the wrestler’s body as vileness personified.)

Peirce included nonverbal signs in his system right from the start. Unlike Saussure, who didn’t classify signs by type, Peirce described three different kinds

idea to which they refer. Examples: smoke as a sign of fire; fever as a sign of illness; a wind sock as a sign of the direction and speed of the wind; a wrinkled brow as a sign of confusion.

Cine-semiotics, a branch of semiotics that informs filmmaking, draws upon Peirce's distinctions among signs.<sup>14</sup> Symbolic signs are usually quite obvious—religious films that use the sign of the cross; courtroom dramas that show the scales of justice; adventure thrillers that quickly train audiences to associate a particular musical score with impending disaster. (*Jaws*, anyone?)

Directors known for realism draw upon signs that index, but film them sparingly. They foreground natural scenes and actions rather than scripted images. Their aim is for the film to reveal the world as it is rather than for wath0.83 0 Td (*Jaws*,

Roland Barthes' semiotics fulfills five of the criteria of a good interpretive theory (see Chapter 3) exceedingly well. His qualitative analyses of middle-class values and practices are fascinating and well-written. As readers of his essays, we chuckle with new understanding at how consumers of mediated images are taken in, and only belatedly realize that Barthes was describing us. More than most interpretive scholars, Barthes intended that this new realization would inoculate us against being sucked into thinking that life should not, and could not, be altered. He wanted to change the world.

When it comes to the good-theory standard of a community of agreement, however, semiotics doesn't quite deliver. Barthes spoke and wrote for wide audiences, so he can't be accused of presenting his ideas only to true believers. But are connotative systems always ideological, and do they inevitably uphold the values of the dominant class? Many who study the theory are dubious. Perhaps there are significant semiotic systems that suggest divergent perspectives or support alternative voices. To some students of signification, Barthes' monolithic Marxist approach to mythmaking borders on conspiracy theory. These interpreters are unwilling to accept the idea that all representation is a capitalistic plot, or that visual signs can't be used to promote resistance to dominant cultural values.

University of Pennsylvania political scientist Anne Norton expands Barthes' semiotic approach to account for other possibilities. For example, she argues that Madonna's MTV persona signifies an autonomous, independent sexuality that inspires young girls to control—rather than be controlled by—their environment. In effect, Madonna's "construction of herself as a 'material girl' subverts the hierarchies and practices evolved by its dense tissue of references."<sup>15</sup>

In the same vein, UCLA media scholar Douglas Kellner writes that through Madonna's deliberate manipulation of stereotypes and imagery, female "wannabes" are "empowered in their struggles for individual identity." Although her provocative outfits and unabashed eroticism may seem at first glance to reinforce traditionally

patriarchal views of women, her onstage character refigures her body as “the means to her wealth” and recasts her sexuality as “a form of feminine power.”<sup>16</sup>

Whether or not we accept Barthes’ claim that all connotative signs reinforce dominant values, his semiotic approach to imagery remains a core theoretical perspective for a wide variety of communication scholars, particularly those who emphasize media and culture. For example, cultural studies guru Stuart Hall builds directly on Barthes’ analysis of myth to establish his critique of the “hegemonic” effects of mass communication.<sup>17</sup> Hall’s innovative analysis, though, deserves a chapter all its own.

## QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. What are the signifier and signified of a favorite item of clothing or jewelry? Can you think of a way that this sign has already been stripped of history?
2. Why did Barthes think it was crucial to unmask or deconstruct the original denotation of a sign?
3. Identify two or more distinct nonverbal signifiers from different television reality shows that have basically the same signified—“You’re out of here.”
4. “It’s not over ‘til the fat lady sings”: what are the denotative signifier, signified, and sign to which this statement originally refers? When spoken about a baseball game, what connotative shift has altered the meaning of the original sign?

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## A SECOND LOOK

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Recommended resource: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Annette Lavers (trans.), Hill and Wang, New York, 1972, especially “The World of Wrestling” and “Myth Today,” pp. 15–25, 109–159.

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