

## Introduction to Semiotics

\*Material taken or adapted from *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*

**Connotation**—This is a commonly understood cultural or emotional association that some word or phrase carries, in addition to its explicit or literal meaning, which is its denotation.

**Cultural Construction**--The way in which culture, through the use of ideology, shapes our sense of reality and of ourselves, from the way culture constructs our racial and gender identities to the way it governs our experience of our spatial environment.

**Denotation:** The lexical (dictionary) definition of a word.

**Semiotics**--The study of signs. Semiotics is concerned with both the theory and practice of interpreting linguistic, cultural, and behavioral sign systems.

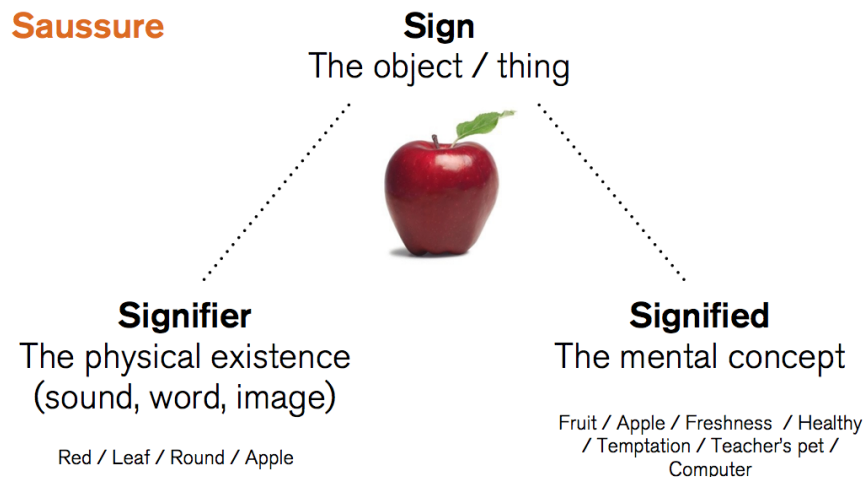
**Semiotics of Culture**--A research field within semiotics that attempts to define culture from semiotic perspective and as a type of human symbolic activity, creation of signs and a way of giving meaning to everything around. Therefore, here culture is understood as a system of symbols or meaningful signs. Because the main sign system is the linguistic system, the field is usually referred to as semiotics of culture and language.

**Sign**--Anything that carries meaning. Words, objects, images, and forms of behavior are all signs whose meanings are determined by the particular codes, or systems, in which they appear. One way to view signs is to consider them composed of a signifier and a signified. Simply put, the signifier is the sound associated with or image of something (e.g., a tree), the signified is the idea or concept of the thing (e.g., the idea of a tree), and the sign is the object that combines the signifier and the signified into a meaningful unit. Stated differently, the sign is the relationship between the concept and the representation of that concept.

For example, let's say that when I was a child I had a stuffed animal and that it was a stuffed rat. That rat was the **signifier**. Think what a stuffed animal could **signify** to a child. In my case, it **signified** safety, warmth, and comfort. So, when I walked into my room and looked at my stuffed green rat it was a **sign** to me that everything was ok. **Notice that the signifier and the signified cannot be separated and still provide a meaningful basis for the sign.** Today, that stuffed green rat is just a memory to me. I cannot even recall what I named it. In fact, as time passed that rat became a sign of something else. The rat is still a signifier but it signifies my early childhood when the world seemed calm, safe, and inviting. Now the rat could be considered a sign of my youthful innocence, long past and hard to remember, just like the name of that rat.

**System**--The code, or network, within which a sign functions and so achieves its meaning through its associational and differential relations with other signs. The English language is a sign system, as is a fashion code.

**Text**--A complex of signs, which may be linguistic, imagistic, behavioral, or musical, that can be read or interpreted.



## THE SEMIOTIC METHOD

Semioticians look at everything as a message, a sign, waiting to be decoded and analyzed. The application of semiotics to popular culture began in the 1950s with the work of Roland Barthes. Barthes was also responsible for establishing the political dimensions of semiotic analysis. In short, Barthes insisted, as our text relates, that all social behavior "is political in the sense that it reflects some personal or group interest" (7). In other words, things that don't necessarily look "political," like ads, movies, or television shows, are in fact political in the sense that they reflect individual and/or group ideologies. In our current culture, these ideologies are often concealed beneath images. Semiotics, therefore, with its vested interest in decoding signs, is concerned with interpreting these images. Of course, in order to decode an image, it is helpful to have a starting point. Therefore, when interpreting any kind of cultural phenomenon, whether it is an ad, movie, or television show, you should ask yourself the following questions:

- 1.) Why does this thing look the way it does?
- 2.) Why are they saying this?
- 3.) What are they really saying?

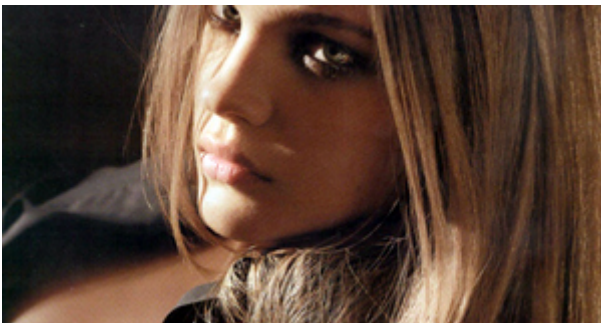
In short, since everything is political, you should, as our text states, take "nothing for granted when analyzing an image or activity" (8).

### STEPS FOR CONDUCTING A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

When conducting a semiotic analysis, whether it is of an ad, movie, or television show, the objective is to analyze its current social significance. So, for example, the objective of a semiotic analysis of an advertisement--Gap jeans for instance--might be to determine how the women featured in these ads affect our culture's conception of beauty. The underlying assumption of such an analysis is, of course, that the ad is in some way culturally significant and requires decoding and analysis.

*The following is a list of steps that you should follow when conducting a semiotic analysis:*

- 1.) Establish the sign to be decoded
- 2.) Set aside your opinion; your task is to analyze the current social significance
- 3.) Define/categorize the sign
- 4.) Determine what the sign means (analysis of images, language, etc.)
- 5.) Establish a set of signs (books, ads, films, etc.) related to the sign you are decoding
- 6.) Point out the differences and similarities between the sign and related signs
- 7.) Sketch the overall context (historical, cultural, and political) in which the sign appears
- 8.) Develop a list of questions, concerns, and/or issues that will guide your analysis
- 9.) Develop a focus (thesis) statement



**Sample Ad Analysis**

Possible assignment: Write a short, 200-300 word analysis of a women's fashion advertisement from a current magazine.

Preparation for this assignment requires the following:

- 1.) Locating an appropriate advertisement
- 2.) Going through the steps for conducting a semiotic analysis as outlined in the above-mentioned handout

After completing the steps, your posting should include the following:

- 1.) A thesis statement
- 2.) A short but detailed description of the ad
- 3.) An analysis of the ad that includes some of the details/discoveries that you made while completing the steps

**The following is a sample response to the above assignment:**

By depicting beautiful and successful women as white, thin, and submissive, high-fashion advertisements promote racist, sexist, and classist ideologies. An ad for Calvin Klein featured in a recent issue of W magazine is an apt example. In this ad, a young, attractive, and apparently wealthy thin white woman with dark blonde hair is sitting hunched over on the edge of a bed in an upscale home, peering down at the ground. Virtually expressionless, she appears to be either drunk or drugged, and her body posture suggests that she is vulnerable. This posture, as well as the dark colors of the ad, create a mood that is both depressive and mournful, almost as if the woman in the ad is, was, or is about to be the subject of some kind of abuse.

This ad bears resemblance to a number of other ads from the same magazine. Such companies as DKNY, Neiman Marcus, Piazza Sempione, Earl Jean, TSE, and Echo have full-page ads that feature thin, white upper-class women in both submissive and provocative poses. Given the overwhelming similarity of these ads, it's clear that high-fashion advertisers are in the business of promoting more than just products, namely images of beauty and success. The problem, of course, is that these images depict women as submissive (if not abused) objects, not to mention that they define beauty and success as "white and thin."

This definition of beauty and success has unfortunate social consequences. High-fashion ads such as those mentioned above, by associating beauty and success with such traits as "white," "thin," and "submissive," promote not only unhealthy and unrealistic images of beauty but class divisions based on racial priority. The message, in short, is that only Caucasian women are successful, and for these women, success is predicated on an ability to appear as a submissive, sexual object.

**Following the Steps**

The above response was composed after completing the steps outlined in the semiotics handout. Here is the information I generated while following these steps:

**Establish the sign to be decoded**

I will be analyzing an advertisement for Calvin Klein found in a recent issue of W magazine.

**Set aside your opinion**

Done.

**Define/categorize the sign**

Judging by the image, and from what I already know of fashion advertisements, this ad for Calvin Klein falls into the category of "haute couture," or "high fashion."

**Determine what the sign means (analysis of images, language, etc.)**

In this ad, a young (20-24), attractive, and thin white woman with dark blonde hair is sitting hunched over on the edge of what appears to be a bed, peering down at the ground. She is dressed in a relatively short black evening dress, and she is wearing black heels. Given the fact that her right foot is arched and pushed slightly forward, I am assuming that she is looking at her shoes. Her face is virtually expressionless, and it seems as if she is either drunk or drugged. In either case, her lack of expression and body posture suggest that she is in some way vulnerable. Where is she? What is she doing? Although the use of muted brown makes the background of the ad difficult to discern, she appears to be in the bedroom of an upscale home (hard wood floors, cherry doors, etc.). Perhaps it's the end of

the night, and she's just beginning to settle in. Perhaps she was at a party and wandered off. Regardless, it's clear that she is part of the upper crust of society.

Looking back at the ad as a whole, its dark colors as well as the expression and posture of the model create a mood that is at once depressive and mournful, almost as if the figure in the ad is (or was) the subject of some kind of abuse.

Finally, although not visible from the scanned copy, the ad contains a minimal amount of text, located on a white background below the ad. Just below the bottom right edge of the photograph, it reads, in poetic form, "Barcelona / Bilbao / Dallas / Dubai / New York / Paris / Seoul / Singapore." And slightly further down but in larger lettering, it reads, "Calvin Klein." The implications here are manifold. First, these cities are noted as fashion centers. Second, and more importantly, the language of the ad implies that Calvin Klein's importance and influence is by all accounts global. And when you consider what this advertisement suggests, Calvin Klein's influence is questionable at best.

### **Establish a set of signs (books, ads, films, etc.) related to the sign you are decoding**

In the first case, this ad was part of a series of ads from Calvin Klein featuring the same woman. In the other ads, she is also dressed in black clothing. At the same time, however, the other ads have her featured in considerably more provocative poses. In one ad, for example, she is lying on a bed with her eyes closed; she is dressed in nothing more than black heels and black pantyhose, and her hands are covering her breasts. It can be assumed, of course, that this is the same bed she was sitting on the edge of in the previous ad. Now, however, she is nearly naked.

These ads also bear some kind of resemblance to a number of other ads from the same magazine. Such companies as DKNY, Neiman Marcus, Piazza Sempione, Earl Jean, TSE, and Echo have full-page ads that feature thin, white upper-class women in both submissive and provocative poses. Given the overwhelming similarity of these ads, it's clear that "high fashion" advertisers are in the business of selling specific images of beauty and success. The problem, of course, is that these images depict women as submissive (if not abused) objects, not to mention that they define beauty and success on racist and sexist terms.

This specific image of beauty and success is not, however, confined to these advertisements. Similar images of women can be found in non-fashion ads, television shows, movies, and music videos.

### **Point out the differences and similarities between the sign and related signs**

I have already discussed some of the similarities among high-fashion advertisers, but it's interesting to note that advertisements for everything from alcohol to cars promote like-minded images of women. In these ads, the women might not always be depicted as successful, but the majority of them feature thin, white, and seemingly submissive women.

### **Sketch the overall context (historical, cultural, and political) in which the sign appears**

Historically, Calvin Klein is known as a controversial figure. His ads from 1995 that featured young models in provocative poses blurred the line between photography and pornography. It should come as no surprise then that this ad is designed to raise more than a few eyebrows. Beyond the obvious call for attention, however, the ad is also part of a culture that values style over substance, surface over depth, image over word, and profit over social benefit.

### **Develop a list of questions, concerns, and/or issues that will guide your analysis**

- What are the social consequences of depicting women in this particular fashion?
- Is there an agenda behind depicting women in this fashion? If so, who does it benefit?

### **Develop a focus (thesis) statement**

By depicting beautiful and successful women as white, thin, and submissive, high-fashion advertisements promote racist, sexist, and classist ideologies