

Understanding Media Culture

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Semiotics: signs, codes and cultures

The 'railway model' of communication

Most people who have gone through elementary school will be familiar with the simple, basic model of communication:

sender → message → receiver

'Communication' is what goes on when a 'sender' sends a 'message' to a 'receiver'. This *linear model* contains the three most important elements in all forms of communication and it also indicates the *direction* of the process. It is logically valid, but it is very simple. One could call it the railway model of communication. The railway is, as we all know, also a form of communication. Of course, when a place is said to have 'good communications', this does not necessarily mean that people often chat peacefully there. It means the place is well connected to other places by way of roads, railways, flight paths or ferries. The simple, linear model of communication actually compares the communication of writing, sound and pictures with the transportation of a parcel by rail. The parcel that someone wraps and posts will usually arrive safely and unchanged to the addressee, who will know exactly what to do with the contents. This is not necessarily the case when the media do the transporting, and when the parcels are various types of text.

The media actually most of the time do not communicate simple, unambiguous 'information' such as 'the time is now 6.30pm' or 'Rock star so-and-so was arrested for possession of heroin last night'. Such messages can easily be transformed into yes/no-type questions. They are either true or false. But what is the meaning of the little video vignette that opens the main newscast every evening? And when Tony Blair or George W. Bush appears on the TV screen, do their pictures mean the same to all viewers? And what about the direct, interpersonal communication between people in everyday life? Even the most common of sentences, such as 'the weather is

pretty good today' or 'I love you when you are like this' can be more or less enigmatic.

Both interpersonal and media communication is therefore a lot more complicated than the transport of parcels by railway. We need a more complex understanding of what goes on. But still, we do in everyday life feel we understand most of what is said both in the media and among people we meet. This chapter is about how both understandings and misunderstandings can be regarded, and at least partially explained, by a *theory of signs*, or *semiotics* (from the Greek *semeion*, sign).

The cultural competence of everyday life: signs and codes

Imagine turning on the TV and the first thing you see is the frame shown in Figure 4.1, from the opening credits of a feature film. What sort of film would you think this is? Most students will spend about a second deciding that it is a

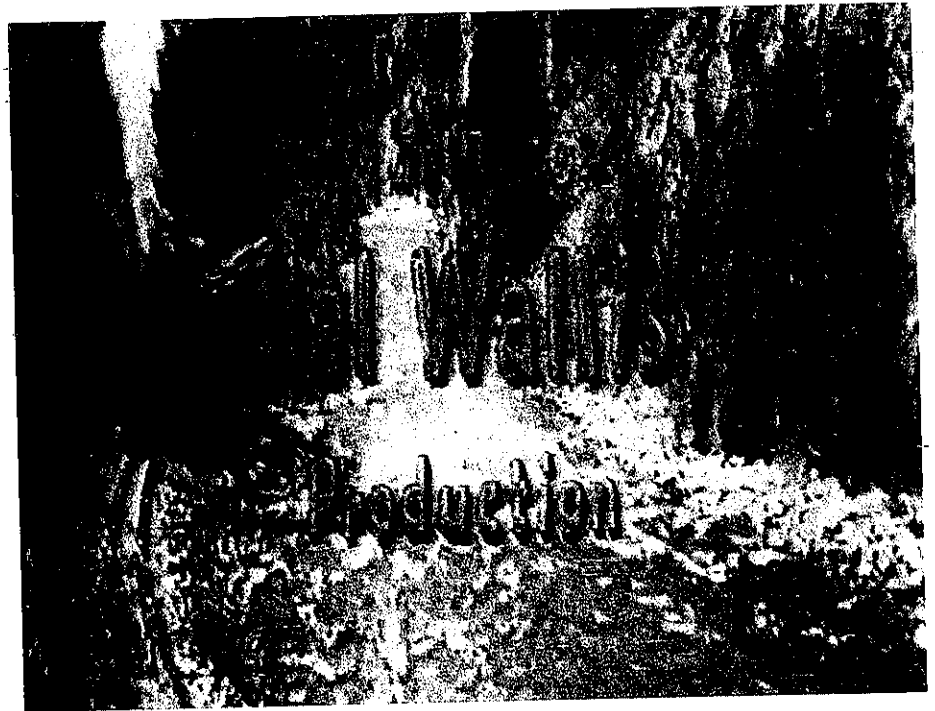


Figure 4.1 Still from *The Sons of Katie Elder*, Henry Hathaway, 1965.

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western. There are several reasons for this. We see an old steam locomotive, which will place the scene at least a century back in time, possibly more. The train passes through a wild mountain landscape. Both of these elements could well belong in a film that is located in Switzerland or Norway, or any other country with mountains and railways, but the text on the screen has words and names that we associate with English-speaking countries, and the USA dominates film production. So we might assume that the film is set in the USA at least 100 years ago. What visually decides that it must be a western, however, is the shape of the letters used. They somehow appear to be roughly cut in wood, and this sort of graphic form is a *sign* we have learned to associate with fictions from the Wild West. The steam locomotive and the landscape are compatible with this interpretation, and the same goes for the sound we hear: Elmer Bernstein's music, with prominent brass sounds in a symphonic orchestration of a piece expressing will-power, optimism – and horsemanship, i.e. a sort of galloping music we know from innumerable scenes of riding on the prairie and thereabouts.

In just a second, then, reasonably competent film and TV viewers will have 'read' what sort of movie this is from the picture and, possibly, the sound. It is a philological point worth mentioning that the word for 'read' in German, *lesen*, and in French, *lire*, are both etymologically derived from the Latin *legere*, meaning the putting together of diverse elements to form a new whole (etymology = the history of words). This is basically what we do when we read – we put together letters to form words, and words so that they form more or less meaningful sentences. But, as we have just seen, a similar process may take place with pictures and sounds. We see some figure we identify as a steam locomotive. We *link* this to a notion of 'the old days'. We see letters reminiscent of pieces of wood. We *link* this to a fictional genre, the western. The wild, mountainous landscape can also be linked to this. These elements mean different things, but they can all be brought together in our ideas about the western genre.

Each of these visual elements can thus be said to function as a *sign*. According to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), who coined the term *semiology*, a sign is a whole consisting of a *material signifier* and an *immaterial signified*. The signifier can thus be dots, lines, shapes, sound waves or whatever physical, concrete entity that we link to, or associate with, some idea or notion. We hardly ever stop to think about such associative connections, since they are established in accordance with a *rule* or *code* that we learned long ago. These rules are not in any book of law. They are *conventions*, that is to say 'agreements' established by way of habit in a community of users of the same language, the same sorts of pictures, music and so on. A code is a rule or convention that associates a signifier with a certain signified or meaning.

The relations between signifiers and signifieds: arbitrariness and motivation

As just mentioned, Ferdinand de Saussure was a linguist and consequently primarily interested in speech and writing, i.e. verbal language. One of the things that characterizes verbal language in relation to pictures is that the relation between signifiers and signifieds is accidental or *arbitrary*. There is nothing about actual dogs that determines that the sound 'dog' is used to refer to them. This is why the animal in question can be called *Hund* in German and *chien* in French. Same animal, different words. Some small children may, at pre-school age, wonder why 'hill' is not called 'butter' and why are the plants we can climb called 'trees' and not 'ball'? The answer is of course that this is simply the way it is. It is something speakers of English somehow agreed upon (established a convention on) a very long time ago. There is nothing, in principle, to prevent us from shifting to call cats 'dogs' and dogs 'cats' as of tomorrow. ('But wouldn't it confuse the animals?', the hero of David Lodge's novel *Small World* asked when he heard the latter sentence conclude a brief introduction to semiological thinking.)

Visual signs are different. If we on the TV screen see some shape that looks like a dog, we might say that what we see is a signifier that refers to the signified 'dog'. While the signifier 'dog' in the sentence 'The dog came running across the lawn' at least at first has no meaning other than a general 'dog-ness' attached to it, no particular breed and certainly no name, the visual dog sign on the screen is far more specific. At least as long as we are talking about a photographic sign or a 'realistic' drawing. It is a collie (Lassie, perhaps?) or a German shepherd (could it be Rin-Tin-Tin?), for example. Some would argue that photographs and realistic drawings are also coded signs. They are shaped in accordance with the *codes of perception* that we have, i.e. certain rules for the interpretation of visual or other sensory impressions that we routinely use in everyday life and that may not be shared by all cultures. In this case, they might not be known in cultures where the 'dog' phenomenon – wherever that may be – is unknown. As soon as one leaves behind photography and the most 'realistic' of drawings etc., it also becomes more clear that visual signs are also based in codes or conventions. A circle with scattered lines stretching outward around it is a conventional representation of, or sign for, the sun. We accept that this figure means 'sun' in, for instance, children's drawings, even if the sun does not actually look like that when one looks at it in the sky. The same applies to all simple drawings and other stylized, more or less abstract visual forms, such as road signs and the signs on the doors of public toilets that are to inform us whether they are intended for men or women. The latter do not much resemble real men and women, but we recognize them precisely as

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→ The relationship between signifier and signifieds in signs can, in other words, be *more or less conventional, more or less motivated* – from the totally arbitrary and consequently conventional in verbal language to the minimally arbitrary or clearly motivated in straightforward photography. We will return to this in a slightly different context below.

The two steps of signification: denotation and connotation

Some readers may have noticed that, in our description of the video still from the opening credits of *The Sons of Katie Elder*, above, we tried to signal how an audience, in effect, perceives what the screen shows – the signifiers – in two steps. We first identify a steam locomotive, and we then link or associate this phenomenon with 'the old days', history, a long time ago etc. We first see that the letters are reminiscent of pieces of wood, and then we link or associate this with the western genre. Such a sequence is, however, not really noticeable in real life. It is primarily an *analytical, logical or theoretical distinction* between two sorts of signification; in reality we perceive both meanings more or less simultaneously. The first of the two meanings – the first, most 'immediate' one – is, in the semiological theoretical tradition based in Saussure's work, called *denotation*; the second, 'indirect' meaning is known as *connotation*. Connotation (cf. chilli con carne – literally, chilli *with* meat!) is a 'with meaning', an additional meaning that is clinging to the first. The scholar who coined these concepts was the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev, who between the two world wars further developed the 'structural linguistics' that Saussure was trying to establish *as a foundation for the more general semiology that was his ultimate goal*. This general semiology was to study 'the life of signs in social life', as Saussure once put it. The French literary scholar and cultural critic Roland Barthes was then central among those who in the 1960s presented theoretical and analytical contributions both on the relations between denotation and connotation, and other themes within semiology.

An important part of the reason why the distinction between denotation and connotation was introduced, was the fact that the meanings or signifieds of signs tended to change with time and place. They are not absolutely and finally determined once and for all. The same signifier can mean different things for different people at different times in different locations. Signs that once had positive connotations can, for example, later come to have negative connotations. Certain symbols related to the Vikings were, for instance, commonly regarded as having positive meanings 'attached' in the

Scandinavian countries in the 1920s; but since Nazi organizations used them before and during the Second World War, it is now impossible to see them without the presence of a 'Nazi' connotation. From a totally different area one could think of how 'glam rock' star Gary Glitter stood (in his platform heels) for a kind of 1970s innocence, until he was convicted of downloading child pornography from the Internet (cf. the *Guardian* 12 November 1999). One could consider also how the traditional imagery of trades union solidarity (muscular men and heavy industry) appears after the impact of feminism, Thatcherism and the so-called new economy. In fashion, one can easily notice such changes in connotation over time. Clothes, shoes and haircuts that once connoted an attractive lifestyle now signify something backwards, 'hick' or stupid. Platform shoes were the thing to wear in the 1970s, looked incredibly naff for almost 20 years and then returned in the late 1990s as the preferred footwear for millions of young women all over the planet.

We can also illustrate the significance of the distinction between denotation and connotation by looking, say, at the visual signs that represent (signify) certain nation-states. Take the American Eagle: one might wonder why the land of the prairie and the wild west would not instead choose a cow or a horse as its animal. Eagles are not commonly seen where most Americans now live, while dogs and cats are ubiquitous. The choice of the eagle was made, of course, for certain historical reasons, similar to those that also made an eagle the visual symbol of Germany. The eagle is a bird that connotes pride, power – and a willingness to use violence if necessary in order to defend and feed itself. It is a predator. A cow is not. The figure of the eagle is on the first level a motivated, visual sign for a particular kind of bird – it *denotes* this bird. At the second level it *connotes* pride and power (and, to some, violence), so that it can be used as an *arbitrary or conventional symbol* for the USA.

It is furthermore worth noting that connotations in semiology are often seen as different from 'associations'. Connotations are culturally established, codified, shared 'associations' within a certain community, while 'associations' otherwise are individual, personal. If the American Eagle reminds me of a certain teacher I once had, this is an association. To media scholars it is primarily connotations that are of interest. Associations are primarily relevant for psychotherapists, family and friends.

Varieties of meaning: connotational codes and cultural differences

The notion of connotative meanings demonstrates how the semiology developed by Saussure, Hjelmslev and others has acknowledged that the meanings of signs can vary according to the contexts in which they appear.

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This is part of the *pragmatic* dimension of semiology. 'Pragmatic' here means 'determined by the specific situation' (that is to say, determined by the place, time and purpose of communication, the specificity of both senders and receivers). Signs of all sorts are always used and perceived in concrete historical, social and cultural situations, and even if most denotative meanings are more or less constant the variation of connotative meanings is of great importance to all sorts of communication. Connotative meanings are, just as denotative ones, regulated by codes, the conventions that link signifiers to signifieds. The notion of 'code' is therefore the key to the pragmatic dimension of semiology, since it is tied to certain cultural communities that share the conventions in question. *Culture* can, at least in this context, simply be defined as a *community of codes*. If one moves to a new place, and particularly to another country, it will take quite a while to get to know all the local codes, even if one may claim to 'understand the language'. Certain words, expressions, images and objects have a significance of which newcomers will not be aware. Even if one has moved to a country that is, culturally, closely related (say, from England to the USA or Canada, or from one Scandinavian country to another), one will soon notice that there are songs, names, stories and places one's new friends and neighbours know well that one has never heard of, that words one thought were quite innocent actually may cause embarrassment because they have somehow acquired, say, a politically incorrect meaning; so late-night conversations in bars or at parties may become problematic or even tiresome.

The notion of codes and the related definition of culture thus have important consequences not least for all sorts of international communication, both interpersonal and through mass media. Connotative codes that are peculiar to one culture can, for instance, make it hard to understand what goes on in an imported TV serial. In the 1980s the Danish researcher Kim Schröder (1988) interviewed groups of American and Danish viewers about the prime-time soap *Dynasty* after screening a particular episode for them. He asked his interviewees, among other things, to recount the events of that episode, in which the show's 'bitch', Alexis (played by Joan Collins), who spoke with a British accent, was threatened with the line 'Remember the Boston Tea Party!' A middle-aged Danish couple remembered that there was talk about some tea party in the episode, but could not really recall that there had been any tea parties in either this episode or any other episode they had seen. So they just supposed that such an event had taken place, possibly in an episode they had missed. In other words, they lost a point that was certainly picked up by all American viewers and probably by most British as well: the Boston Tea Party was, of course, the beginning of the American War of Independence and involved Americans dumping a shipload of tea into Boston Harbour. In order to understand that the line was a threat,

without resorting to tone of voice or facial expressions, one would have to know this historical reference – and thus know that it connotes war against the British – and also to perceive that Alexis spoke with a British accent (of a sort that connotes the arrogant upper classes). The Danish couple could not make these connections, and neither could most of *Dynasty's* audiences in over 90 countries.

Knowledge of codes is often, as in this example, directly tied to factual knowledge. But it is also a more vague sort of knowledge of conventional meanings in a certain culture, which one could call a knowledge based in *familiarity*, established through living within the culture. In a now classic analysis of a magazine ad for pasta products – the article 'The rhetoric of the image' – Roland Barthes demonstrated how different elements in the ad had 'Italian-ness' as a shared connotation. Barthes also pointed out how an apprehension of these signs for 'Italian-ness' would be dependent upon a previously established knowledge of, or familiarity with, certain tourist clichés that Italians (or Chinese, or Senegalese) do not necessarily have (Barthes [1964] 1977a).

Signs and what they refer to: language as a system of differences

We can also see the connections between semiology's understanding of the sign on the one hand, and notions of culture and cultural differences on the other, if we have a closer look at Saussure's theory of how signs actually acquire their meanings. As already mentioned, Saussure was primarily interested in verbal language and basic elements in his 'semiology' must be understood in light of that. One such element is the idea that there is an arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified of a sign, as evidenced in the fact that different languages have very different words for the same phenomenon; even so-called *onomatopoeic* words, words that imitate sounds (such as meow, growl and splash) are different. Anglo-American pigs say oink-oink, Scandinavian and Russian ones speak differently, it seems. But things are further complicated because the sign as a whole, both signifier and signified, is separate and different from the sign's *reference*, i.e. the external reality it is supposed to name or say something about.

The *signifieds* divide the world into categories – categories of 'content'. These categories or ideas of how the world is ordered, are not always dictated by the physical realities themselves; they are often culturally specific. The colour category 'brown' does not, for instance, exist in certain cultures, and the colour 'orange' did not exist at all a couple of centuries ago. The English

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language has fewer words for 'snow' than does the language of Inuits ('Eskimos'), while Arabic may have a particularly well-developed set of terms for camels. These are examples of how the signifieds are also to some extent culturally determined, relatively 'arbitrarily' organized. Anthropologists are familiar with such differences. They may even be so profuse and fundamental that different languages imply significantly different perceptions of the world and our existence in it. In the 1950s the anthropologist Whorf, in co-operation with his mentor Edward Sapir, developed what is known as the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* or *Whorf's hypothesis of linguistic relativity* (Whorf, 1956). This hypothesis is precisely about the close connections between the way in which a language is organized and how the users of this language perceive or experience the world. The empirical basis for the hypothesis was primarily in Whorf's studies of the language of the Native American tribe the Hopi. This language is not least grammatically extremely different from European languages. It has almost no nouns, and verbs are inflected in very different ways. Such radical differences obviously make it difficult to translate from one culture to another.

Saussure imagined that since the meaning, or the signified, of a verbal sign (such as the colour 'orange') does not spring from the 'thing' (here, colour quality) itself, it has to be explained as resulting from the principle that *the sign acquires its meaning through its relations to other signs*. The meaning of the sign 'orange' is determined by its relations to 'red', 'yellow', 'brown' etc. The signified of a verbal sign is, in other words, determined by its opposition to, or difference from, other verbal signs. *Language is a system of differences*. What is 'light' is determined by what is 'dark', what is 'hot' by what is 'cold'. This could be formulated as the principle that *meaning is constituted by difference*. At the level of the signifier in verbal language one can think of the way in which every word is composed of sounds that *differentiate meanings*, so-called *phonemes*. A person that lisps is fully understandable in English, but there may well be languages where a lisping 's' and a straight 's' may give otherwise similar words different meanings. To find out whether two sounds are phonemes, linguists will use a so-called *permutation test*; b and p are two closely related sounds, but the difference between them is important in English. You can demonstrate this by replacing the 'b' in 'bass' with a 'p': 'pass' means something other than 'bass' and hence 'b' and 'p' are meaning-differentiating phonemes in English.

The logic of the permutation test has been transferred to other areas in order to investigate whether some element in a complex entity has any significant role in the whole thing. Could one imagine Woody Allen playing the hero in the *Terminator* films instead of Arnold Schwarzenegger? Hardly—it would have made them parodies. But what about Bruce Willis or Steven Seagal? Would that have changed the meanings of the films, and if so, in what

way? What would *Desperately Seeking Susan* have looked like with Celine Dion playing Madonna's part?

In more philosophical terms, *the role of difference in our way of thinking* has attracted a lot of attention in the last couple of decades, and this is also the case within media studies. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the name of Pierre Bourdieu's most important book is itself *Distinction*, and this is one of many indications of how Bourdieu's work is marked by the *structuralist* tradition in the humanities and the social sciences that is derived from the structural linguistics or semiology of Saussure. It is, however, not least in relation to the problems of identity, which we dealt with in Chapter 1, that the notion of *difference* has been central in recent years. Since we tend to think in terms of differences, understood as *oppositions*, we immediately also think in categories that tend to render the imagining of gradual transitions, in-between things or states, and any interconnections between the two poles of an opposition quite difficult. The fundamental example is the opposition between male and female, which through enormous networks of connotations is used to order anything from sexual preferences to clothes, cars, behaviour and ways of thinking. Another example could be the racial opposition between 'black' and 'white'. 'Black' here tends to cover everything that is not absolutely 'white', thus radically polarizing and simplifying an enormous variety of skin colours and other so-called 'racial' attributes.

If our systems of differences or oppositions are seriously questioned or challenged, this may cause anxiety and even aggression since it may appear to threaten our identities. Open gayness can thus provoke discomfort, anxiety and aggression in some (bigoted) milieus. At the same time the play on gender differences in drag shows, the interest in sex-change operations and all the androgynous acts in the worlds of pop and fashion, clearly demonstrates how fascination and titillation can also be produced by 'dangerous' transgressions of these cultural borderlines.

The sign according to C.S. Peirce

So far in this chapter we have largely kept to the Saussurean tradition in the theory of signs, i.e. semiology. The most frequently used term for the theory of signs these days, however, is *semiotics* (hence the use of this term in this chapter's title). This term was coined by the American philosopher, physicist and mathematician Charles Saunders Peirce (1839–1914) who, independently of Saussure, had related ideas. His definition of a 'sign' is different from Saussure's, and he has other ideas as to the components of the sign. According to Peirce, *anything that in some way or other stands for something else in some respect or capacity* is a sign. It is thus already clear at the outset that Peirce does

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not take verbal language as his point of departure. For him, signs are something much more extensive – in fact, '*everything is signs*', to the extent that it means something to us.

Because '*everything is signs*', a consequent semiotics in Peirce's sense will have it that when we see a horse, at three feet distant, it is a horse sign that we see. We see forms and colours, and may hear sounds and recognize smells that we associate with the meaning 'horse'. If we go over and touch the horse, we will perceive more signs of the same, such as soft hairs over strong muscles, a mane and so on. If we are still in doubt, we may get some final sign evidence when the horse kicks us in the backside! Peirce's semiotics is, in other words, a theory of perception and a theory of knowledge (epistemology) at least as much as it is a theory of communication. It is, moreover, radically pragmatic, in that it makes the meanings of signs dependent on the situation, down to the variations on an individual plane: what is a sign for me need not be a sign for you. Thus the distinction between individual associations and collective connotations disappears, as does that between denotation and connotation.

This can also be seen if we look at a graphic representation of Peirce's model of the components of the sign (see Figure 4.2). The 'sign' is that which stands for something else, and the 'object' is that which the sign stands for. The interpretant is the signification or meaning that the sign has for someone. A simple, stylized drawing of the sun may be the sign. The object is then the sun we (sometimes) see in the sky; and our thought, '[this is] the sun', is the interpretant. ('Interpretant' is of course derived from the word interpretation, and does not refer to the interpreter but the interpretation.) An important point here is that the object is not the thing itself, not 'the actual sun'. In line with the example of the horse above, the object is also a sign, i.e. certain phenomena (light in the sky, heat) that we interpret as signs of 'the sun'. And it is not only the object that is a sign in its own right, the same goes for the interpretant – the word or term 'sun' in this example. The interpretant may

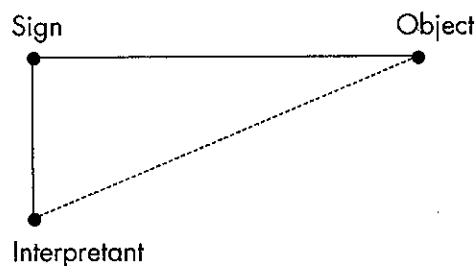


Figure 4.2 Peirce's model of the sign.

itself result in a new interpretant, in a new triangular sign. The sign 'sun' may for instance be interpreted, associated with or perceived as 'star', a radically more distant and possibly extinguished sun. The new object will then be 'a star (in the sky)'. The term 'star', the new interpretant, may then by some be taken to mean 'movie star' – and a series of new interpretants is then made possible. Such processes of ever new interpretations or signs are called *unlimited semiosis*. They may be reminiscent of how conversations may develop at more or less festive occasions where various associations made by participants can lead far away from the subject first discussed. In media studies it may be more relevant to think of how literary texts or films are interpreted again and again, including reinterpretations of previous interpretations. In the field of political communication one might think of how terms such as 'environmental' or 'environment friendly' have gone through similar chains of interpretants and signs, *mediated by or produced by the media*.

Peirce's model of the sign and the idea of 'unlimited semiosis' imply that *it is impossible to determine the final and absolute meaning of signs*. This way of thinking is highly dynamic, i.e. oriented towards the shifts in meaning according to specific situations and a high degree of flexibility in the sign systems that cultures consist of – and that the media produce and mediate.

Peirce's three kinds of sign, and a discussion of photography's relation to reality

Peirce distinguished between three kinds of sign, according to *the logical relation between the sign and that which it stands for*.

1. Signs where the relation is *arbitrary* and totally *conventional* (cf. the discussion above) are called *symbols*. Verbal language belongs in this category, as do the colours of traffic lights, certain logos and other phenomena we must have learned a certain code to enable us to grasp the meaning of.
2. A second group of signs are *icons* or *iconic signs*. These are signs that *resemble* what they stand for. They are simply pictures, or sculptures, i.e. two- or three-dimensional representations of a more or less photographic or 'realistic' type. A photograph of the US President is an iconic sign for the US President.
3. Making up the third and last group of signs are *indexes* or *indexical signs*. 'Index' is the Latin and English word for the first finger of each hand, frequently used to point at things, and an indexical sign, so to speak, points at that which it stands for. It does so in the sense that there here is a *causal* relation between the sign and that which it stands for. Smoke is an indexical sign that something is burning and snort indicates (i.e. is an

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indexical sign for) a bad cold. The *symptoms* doctors look for when arriving at a diagnosis are indexes of disease or injury. The *clues, leads or traces* that detectives look for are indexical signs for the murderous activities they are investigating.

These categories can actually become key terms in interesting theoretical debates with practical consequences. Photographs are, for instance, clearly iconic signs, but it has been disputed that they also are indexical. The first problem here is that a sign can belong to more than one of Peirce's categories – in fact, maybe all three of them at once. But the question of whether photographs are indexical signs concerns photography's status as a medium for objective documentation, a technology that delivers indisputable facts. Photography can be said to be indexical because it in a sense is a pure 'effect' of the light reflected by the object(s) in front of a camera when a picture is taken. Photography is accordingly a purely physical-chemical effect, untouched by human hands, so to speak, and consequently an 'objective' representation of whatever was in front of the camera. The counter-argument is that the photographer has to make a number of choices – of framing, point of view, lenses, lighting, film speed etc. – plus another set of choices when developing a picture in the darkroom. Taken together, all of these choices provide the photographer with so much space for his subjectivity that photography is no more indexical than is any drawing.

This sort of thinking can lead to a quite provocative conclusion when the issue is whether computer-manipulated photographs in the media should be explicitly marked as such (e.g. 'This photograph has been digitally manipulated'). The Danish philosopher and media scholar Søren Kjørup (1993) has, for instance, argued against such a procedure, since it would imply that the public is encouraged to regard ordinary photographs as *not* 'manipulated', as pure and objective documentation. Kjørup was not surprisingly met with the argument that it in fact is a direct physical-chemical reaction that imprints an image on the light-sensitive film, and that whatever manipulative possibilities the photographer has, this simply means that photography has a documentary potential that is of a totally different kind than that of any artist with a pencil, however clever. Defending the indexical character of photography is also a defence for prevailing notions of *truth* – the idea that there are certain facts, especially concerning physical reality, that are objective, i.e. indisputably correct information about an objective reality existing independently of those who study it and their approaches to it. To present as ordinary photographs computer-manipulated pictures where the alterations made are not detectable is, according to this view, to tamper with notions of truth that are fundamental to modern science, politics, law, and a number of other social and interpersonal domains.

The question of whether computer-manipulated photographs should be marked as such in the (journalistic) media is, then, just a small part of a larger discussion on the status of photography and photographic media in general as providers of objective representations of reality. This is obviously of central importance to the question of how we are to regard the footage and still photography that are so integral to television news, current affairs and other documentary programmes. I would, for my own part, suggest that even if we maintain that photographic representations are indexical signs, this does not have to mean that we believe they deliver totally objective, indisputable renditions of what went on, or goes on, in front of the camera. There are good reasons to sympathize with those who warn against an unproblematic faith in photography.

This question and issues related to it are central in many media contexts. They also point to the importance of understanding semiotics in light of, and in combination with, the other perspectives on media texts that we will deal with in subsequent chapters. We will, therefore, return to the question of photography and truth in the final section of this chapter.

Code-shifting and codes that delimit sign systems

I said above that a code is a rule that links a signifier to a signified, but the same signifier can also be linked to different signifieds. There is, moreover, also another important meaning of the concept of 'code'. We will approach these issues by way of one of the first scenes from the film *The Sons of Katie Elder* (see Figures 4.3 and 4.4).

The sheriff stands on the platform as a train arrives at a station somewhere in the American west, and a guy wearing black clothes, black hat and a four-day beard gets off. The stranger asks about directions, and the sheriff points out the way he should go. The guy in black then disappears and the sheriff's deputy asks the boss if he knows the newcomer. 'No,' answers the sheriff and looks, slightly worriedly, in the direction in which the stranger has disappeared, 'but I know the type, and I don't like'm.'

An audience already acquainted with western movies will, of course, know very well why the sheriff answers as he does. The stranger is obviously a bad guy; *he is wearing bad guy signs all over him* – the black clothing and the four-day stubble. But today's audiences also know that these features are not *always* signs of badness. The pop star George Michael was in the mid-1980s a sweet and well-groomed boy, as part of the duo Wham!, and in the video for their single 'Wake me up before you go go', he was seen jumping around in a white polo shirt and white shorts. But then Wham! broke up and George Michael decided, after a while, to appear as a mature, serious artiste. Consequently

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Figure 4.3 Still from *The Sons of Katie Elder*, Henry Hathaway, 1965.



Figure 4.4 Still from *The Sons of Katie Elder*, Henry Hathaway, 1965.

pictures of him began to appear, showing him dressed from head to toe in black clothes and sporting four-day 'designer stubble'. Instead of a black hat, though, he wore dark sunglasses. This attire did not mean that he wanted to portray himself as a 'baddie'. On the contrary, he rather wanted to present himself as totally *honest*, as fully *authentic* in what he was now doing. In the pop world, then, black clothes and four-day stubble growth has another connotative meaning: they stand for a sensitive soul, a thoughtful sort of character, a 'deep', melancholy and quite introverted personality that, all the same, has a strongly felt need to express himself. The code here is obviously different from that used in the western movie.

In the 1980s, large sections of the younger generation began to dress in all-black clothes, directly inspired by the codes of the world of pop music. They rarely had black hats, but they would quite often dye their hair black instead. Dark sunglasses also went well with this style, since they might signal an introverted nature and, perhaps, 'bitter experience', 'depth' etc. (Some readers may remember the ironic pop refrain 'The future's so bright I gotta wear shades'.) Millions of younger people signal in this way that they are deep, sensitive and melancholy, and have a strong need to devote themselves to creative self-expression.

There are, however, interesting connotative links between the two meanings of the same signifiers. The bad guy is someone who tends to live on the other side of the law, and so he stands in opposition to well-ordered society and ordinary people's trivial, law-abiding lives. The artist has been seen, since the nineteenth century, also as a bohemian, someone who breaks ordinary rules of conduct, stands in opposition to mainstream norms of decency and lives on the outskirts of established society. It is this figure that George Michael and other people in black and with four-day stubble refer to. The bad guy and the artist are still different meanings, and the point here is that *it is the context in which the signs appear that determines which connotations are relevant*. The codes on the level of the single sign are replaced *in accordance with codes at a higher level*. These higher-level codes define which types of sign belong together – they are codes that define *sign systems*. For westerns, a particular *western code* applies; for the world of pop music, there is a *pop code*. Such codes regulate which signs are admissible into the systems in question and decide the meanings, or signifieds, of these signs. 'Black clothes' are a sign that is part of both the western code and the pop code, but is assigned different meanings within the two systems.

Some people may prefer the term 'rock code' to 'pop code', since the traditionally more colourful, bright and 'simple' top 40 pop music is perceived as different from more ambitious and 'serious' rock music, where blue or black denim and leather dominate the attire of both stars and fans. The word 'pop' in the term 'pop code' is, however, used in a more inclusive way

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here, covering popular music in general, so that it also provides a space for that country music artist who always dressed in black, Johnny Cash. In his case, the colour black actually referred both to his background as a 'bad guy' (prison experience) and his status as an artist of a slightly melancholy kind.

What we have here called a pop code is a code that regulates the meanings of various sorts of appearances in the world of pop music, but there are also musical pop codes, and these regulate, say, which instruments might be used and combined, which rhythms are acceptable within this sort of music, what styles of singing are permitted and so on. Such musical codes – varying with the ever-expanding spectrum of styles within the field(s) of popular music – constitute the *genres* of popular music.

Genres as codes – historical and theoretical genres

In a semiotic context, one can define a 'genre' as *a code that regulates which kinds of signs can be combined in which ways within a certain category or 'family' of texts*. The word 'genre' is derived from the Latin *genus*, which means 'family'. The word 'text' is related to the word 'textile' and its original meaning is 'tissue', i.e. a set of individual elements closely knit to become a whole. A text, then, is a tissue of signs.

Genre codes are relatively stable, but not at all unchangeable. They are, just like all other codes, determined by cultural conventions, agreements among people within a culture. Screenwriters and film directors, for example, sometimes try to change genre conventions by removing old and/or adding new elements to the traditional mix. The audience will sometimes accept such changes, sometimes reject them. Those that are accepted will then become part of what one might call the 'vocabulary' of the genre in question, if they concern elements such as typical locations, typical characters, objects (such as weapons) and so on. One example could be the change that took place with western heroes in the 1960s, which was particularly obvious and influential in Sergio Leone's so-called spaghetti westerns such as *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* – the hero was now not necessarily particularly moral any more. But changes could also relate to the 'syntax' of the film, the chain of events that make up its narrative; in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, a number of westerns ended up with the death of the leading character(s). Both of these developments were departures from what has often been considered the classic western code, where a fundamentally good hero rides into a community of pioneering farmers and gets rid of their enemies before riding, totally unscathed, into the sunset.

The notion of genre is highly important to the understanding of all sorts of

media content, and we will return to it several times throughout this book. Journalists' knowledge of the genres of news media ensures that they know how to create reportage or an article. Their familiarity with the genres of their trade enables them to work quickly within certain predetermined forms, and the audience's familiarity with these forms also makes it easy for them to identify what is being communicated in journalistic texts. In many media, genres also work as informative tags for consumers. Video rental stores arrange their stock in a few, rough genre categories (such as 'action', 'comedy' and under the catch-all 'drama'). At cinemas films may have slightly more nuanced genre tags: 'action comedy', 'romantic comedy'. These are examples of what the literary scholar Tzvetan Todorov, who lives in France, has called *historical* genres, i.e. genres that are, or have been, operative in the communication between media producers (such as journalists, the film industry, authors and publishers) and their audiences. Todorov also talks about *theoretical* genres, however. These are classifications that have been constructed later, by scholars or critics, but that were not originally used in the communication between media producers and audiences.

The most frequently used example of such a theoretical genre is the film-historical concept *film noir*. This refers to a large group of Hollywood films from the 1940s and 1950s which, at that time, had other generic tags. But certain French critics in the 1950s thought they could identify certain important common features of these films – specifically filmic devices such as lighting and camera angles, certain favourite settings (wet city streets at night, sparsely lit rooms), certain characters (the frayed, cynical detective, the beautiful and dangerous woman), and certain types of recurring themes and ambiances. These critics, therefore, implicitly referring to the French literary genre *roman serie noir* (a name these novels were given because they were published with black covers), coined the term 'film noir', which ever since has been the object of research and teaching, and has become part of every film fan's vocabulary.

One could say of film noir that this genre is a code that was *constructed* some time after the making of these films, and so is, in a sense, less 'authentic'; but one might also say that later critics and researchers merely *exposed and named* a code that was in fact operative at the time the films were made – even if neither Hollywood nor film audiences were consciously aware of it. This is actually the way it is with most codes in our culture. We are not consciously aware of them in our daily lives, they are just parts of the taken-for-grantedness that is characteristic of how we, most of the time, relate to the world we live in, including the media. Codes are much easier to spot at a distance, in time or space. The term *critical distance* refers to this fact. 'Critical' means *distinguishing*, the ability to distinguish one thing from another, and that requires a certain distance – at least mentally, as a conscious effort. This point

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not only refers back to the notion of 'pure taste' in the previous chapter, it is also something we will return to in the next chapter, which focuses on hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation.

Syntagms and paradigms

Genre codes and their changes can theoretically be understood by way of a central pair of concepts in semiotics (actually, in structural/structuralist linguistics). We have already in a sense demonstrated this in a somewhat loose, metaphorical way by speaking of changes in a genre's 'vocabulary' as opposed to changes in its 'syntax'. A syntagm is normally the same as a sentence, but one may also think of it as something more extended, as referring to the *linear dimension of a text*, its 'sequenciality'. Grammar lessons at school might have taught you that different languages have different patterns from which correct sentences are made; in the place of the subject, say, one might place nouns, not verbs. This gives us wide, but not unlimited, sets of possibilities when constructing sentences. The categories from which we make choices when filling the designated places in the sentence pattern, can be called *paradigms*. There are verb paradigms, adverb paradigms, and so on, that consist of all verbs, all adverbs and so on respectively. *Paradigms may be thought of as 'storage shelves' where one finds and takes out the words one needs to fill certain places in the syntagms.*

If we then move from grammatical analysis to a semiotic analysis of signification, similar or analogous conditions apply. All sorts of signification can be thought of as organized in 'syntagms' where the components are selected from paradigms, which here will be groups of verbal or other signs *with a similar or related meaning*. The relation could either be of the type called *parasyonymy* (i.e. semi-identical meaning, as between 'warm', 'hot' and 'boiling') or it could be of the type called *antonyms* (i.e. contradictory pairs such as 'hot' versus 'cold', 'light' versus 'dark' and so on). The main thing, according to the French film semiotician Christian Metz, is that paradigms consist of a number of units that compete for the same place in the syntagmatic chain, and that any chosen unit (word, picture, sound etc.) gets its meaning *through a comparison with those that could have appeared in the same place* (Metz, 1982: 180ff.).

There is a noticeable inspiration from Saussure's idea of language as a system of differences here, and it is precisely the extension of this idea to cover *all media and forms of communication* by way of analogy that is important. A stereotypically French pedagogical example of a syntagm could be the menu at a restaurant. It is ordered in accordance with a culturally specific sequence of various types of dishes that make up a decent meal: starters, main courses,

cheeses and desserts. This sequence can be regarded as a culturally specific *syntagmatic code*. If someone orders the courses served in the reverse order, it will at least be met with raised eyebrows. (In Britain, however, the cheese course usually follows dessert in the menu order in many restaurants, and in the specific ritual of port and stilton cheese beloved of Oxbridge colleges.) For each element in the syntagmatic chain, each course, there are paradigms from which one makes selections. Not just anything will fit as a starter, and what fits as a starter will not be found in the paradigm of desserts. Another example could be clothing. There are paradigms for headwear, upper- and lower-body garments, socks and shoes. Wearing a pair of knickers as a hat will be a breach of a paradigmatic code – and also of a syntagmatic one. For there are syntagmatic codes for combinations: a tuxedo, say, does not go with jogging trousers. It is a breach of the code, as is ski boots worn with a ball gown. Such breaches of codes can, of course, be designed to attract attention. They may therefore also be used successfully in humour or advertising.

In film and television we might therefore imagine lighting, camera angles and the like as selected from 'storage shelves', or paradigms, full of more and less adequate alternatives; and every selection will contribute to a meaning that would be changed if other selections were made. One problem with such a transfer of the idea is that words are *discrete* – i.e. clearly separated entities – while selections of filmic elements, such as lighting and camera angles, will most often be made from continuous scales where the differences will be gradual. Still, the idea that those who make a film or any other text continuously make choices among alternatives that have consequences for the meaning of the final 'syntagm' or product is clearly both sustainable and important.

The paradigmatic dimension of texts is, then, the selection of elements for the places in the syntagmatic chain, and the relations between the selected elements and the alternatives. This is a key to the *theme* of a text – that is, what it can be said to be about at a deeper level, and how it treats its subject(s). One can, for example, think of the choice of characters for a fictional story in a particular medium. From the paradigm 'women', one can choose from a variety of possibilities – and the same is, of course, the case for the paradigms 'men', 'human relations', 'settings', 'conflicts' and so on. The prime-time soap *Dynasty* – which I refer to often due to the fact that I wrote a book about it (Gripsrud, 1995) – had a couple of female lead characters who were clearly older than probably all other leading ladies in US prime-time TV fiction – in their forties or so. The show therefore came to thematize women's ageing and the question of what this process is supposed to mean. When action movies have female 'heroes' instead of the usual muscular men, they thematize the notions of femininity in our culture. In both of these examples we are talking about conscious choices made by producers. The *unconscious choices* – those

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that have been arrived at 'automatically' – may be even more interesting, since they will be related to (be indexical signs or symptoms of) norms and understandings that are so engrained that one does not even stop to think about them.

The 'character paradigm' of American soap operas was once described as follows by an American critic:

Soap opera people belong for the most part to the socially and professionally successful. They are well-groomed and cleanly limbed. They live in homes with no visible mops or spray cans that yet wait shining and ready for any unexpected caller. At the same time, almost all of soap opera's characters are drawn from the age group that spans the late teens into middle-age. They constitute what might be called the legitimately sexually active portion of the population. And the great majority come from the generation that reaches from the mid-twenties into the mid-forties. That is to say, they suggest a sexuality that has transcended the groping awkwardness of adolescence but that never goes beyond a commerce of bodies which are personable and smooth – even the older men are clean older men.

(Porter, 1982: 126)

This characterization of the genre code that guides the selection of characters by the writers of American soaps obviously says something about the dominant American culture. The British code tends to provide a paradigm of characters that is radically more inclusive in terms of looks, ages and degrees of success in life. Paradigms such as these, and the selections made from within them, can thus often tell us something about underlying, not necessarily acknowledged, features of a society and a culture, or a way of thinking. They become *symptoms*, and a clever textual analyst may be able to formulate a diagnosis. Such analyses are therefore sometimes called *symptomatic readings*. These diagnose not so much the psyche of the individuals who created the text, as the society, culture or milieu that they are part of, and share values and ideas with. A symptomatic reading is an *interpretative strategy*, and we will return to this and related issues in the next chapter.

Images and verbal language: *relay* and *anchorage*

Up until now I have mostly talked about the sentences of verbal language and other types of texts where the elements follow each other in a time sequence, or along a sequential axis. But what of singular images or still photography? Is it also possible to speak of syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions in such cases? My earlier examples from clothing would suggest that it is.

Images are composed of elements that are not as clearly distinguished as the word signs of verbal language. The meanings of images are therefore also most often more unclear, fleeting, plural. This is one central reason why images are most often combined in some way with verbal language. In film and television they are accompanied by dialogue, writing (graphic signs) and/or music. Press photos are accompanied by a caption and/or article or story. Images in advertising are accompanied by a text, at the least the logo of the company or trademark in question. Art pictures as a rule have a title, but at times artists may wish to say that spectators can interpret their piece as they like, and thus the title is 'No title'. In the above-mentioned article by Roland Barthes, 'The rhetoric of the image', he distinguished between two types of function that verbal language can have in relation to images: *anchorage* and *relay*. The term 'relay' (French = *relais*) originally referred to the change of horses at posting stations in the (very) old days, but it here, accordingly, means that the text adds something that is not actually present in the image, i.e. adds some new element of meaning to the whole. A fresh horse takes over. A caption in a dialogue-bubble in a comic is a much-used example of this. Anchorage is, however, perhaps the more fundamental function, which is to point out *which of the many possible meanings of an image are thought to be the most important*. This is in a sense also what the relay function does – it draws attention to certain possible interpretations and specifies them by way of additional information. But at the same time – and Barthes overlooked this in his analysis – *the image will also anchor the verbal text*; that is to say, it will influence or shape it to some degree, in some way. We will now look at a particular example.

Relatively simple images may be thought of as syntagms where all elements are presented and perceived simultaneously. The individual elements can be thought of as chosen from paradigms in such a way that they form a 'sentence', statement or utterance. The caption or title can put us on the trail of this utterance. But in, for example, film and television, the verbal text that makes up the title of the film or programme will be known to us before we get to see the images. The images may then help us understand what an often quite enigmatic or ambiguous title is supposed to mean.

In the mid-1980s I, quite by chance, saw a late-night programme called *The Very Hot Gossip Show* on public service TV. The television announcer declared that this was going to be a really hot show with the dance group Hot Gossip. It was then up to the actual programme to provide an explanation of this somewhat strange description.

The still shown here as Figure 4.5 is the first image in the show's introductory sequence, before the title has appeared on screen. What we see here is the lower part of a pair of legs, with fishnet stockings and high-heeled shoes. The street has cobblestones and there is a reflection of light from a lamp



Figure 4.5 *The Very Hot Gossip Show*

off screen – of the soundtrack consists of heels clacking.

If we regard this image as a syntagma, it is composed of elements chosen from paradigms. From the paradigm of the street (farmland, forest, street lamp in the city, and that is modern European cities, concrete). The paradigm of the walking style (plain walking, the dress up to look like a prostitute, the walking style of a prostitute). Finally, there's the paradigm of the stockings (fishnet stockings are high-heeled stockings, more or less indistinguishable from fishnet stockings).

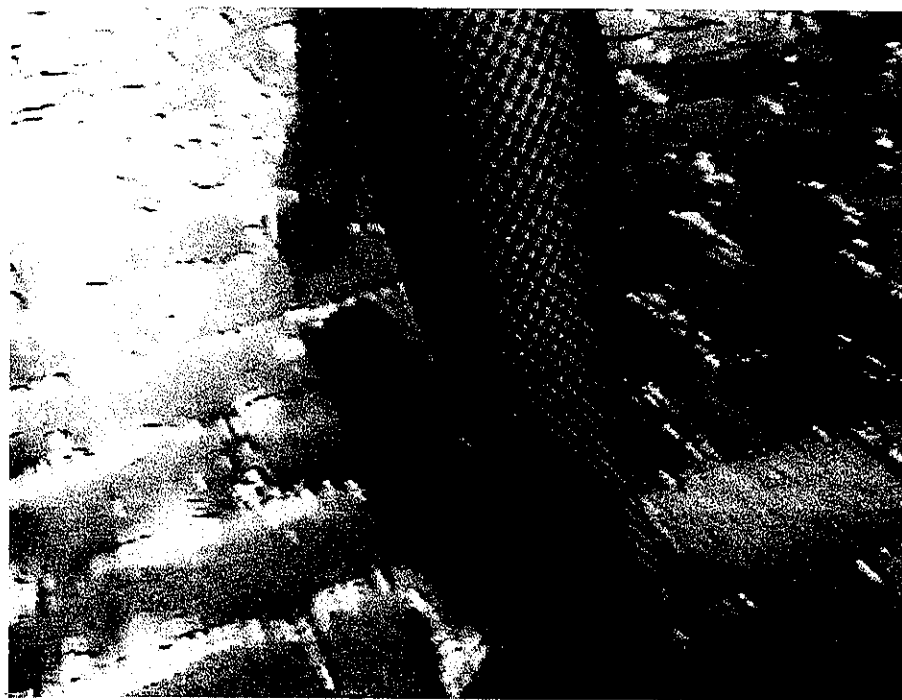


Figure 4.5 *The Very Hot Gossip Show* (1).

off screen – otherwise, it is quite dark. This is all there is to see. The soundtrack consists of very low-volume disco-like pop music and the sound of heels clacking against cobblestones.

If we regard this image as a syntagm, we can say that the signs are chosen from paradigms for location, lighting, road surfaces, shoes and stockings. From the paradigm of 'locations' one has chosen 'city street' instead of farmland, forest, desert or kitchen. The light is not daylight or twilight, it is a street lamp in the darkness of night. The road or street surface is cobblestones, and that is mostly associated with small streets, possibly back streets, in European cities (where the main streets are of asphalt and the pavements concrete). The shoes are not football boots, shoes made for jogging or just plain walking, they are high-heeled shoes. Such shoes are used when women dress up to look particularly stylish and attractive – they result in a particular walking style that many men find erotically and aesthetically appealing. Finally, there's the fishnet stockings – not tennis socks or leg warmers. Fishnet stockings are historically associated with risqué women's performances in more or less indecent circumstances; they are not 'sensible' legwear, they are

made for the erotic exposure of women's legs. If one now puts together the connotative meanings of the visual part-signs in this image, one arrives at a syntagm that, in verbal language, can be formulated roughly like this: 'erotic exposure of a woman's body in a city back street at night'. One may thus suspect that *The Very Hot Gossip Show* is to be about prostitution.

Later sequences confirm this interpretation (see Figure 4.6). The woman's face (or the very feminine transvestite's) is heavily made up and, walking towards her comes a pair of military boots and uniform trousers – a very manly man, in other words – with whom she quickly establishes a rapport under a street lamp before they disappear together, arm in arm. (It is also interesting to note that the sexual difference is further underlined by a racial one – she is an extremely pale white, he is a black man.) The analysis we performed of the first frame of the show can be said to have 'anchored' the show's somewhat enigmatic title, pointed out which of its many potential meanings applies.

This show also makes the notion of codes relevant in another way. Judging from the explicit sexual nature of the dancers' presentations in various numbers (including suggestions of sado-masochism and various other 'kinky'



Figure 4.6 *The Very Hot Gossip Show* (2).

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sexual pursuits) and the ways in which they were filmed, the programme was one of the most pornographic ever to be shown on public service TV anywhere (pornographic is a Greek word that originally meant 'portrayal of a whore'). But it created no public debate, most probably because the dancers kept their clothes on. 'Pornography' is coded as the display of *naked* people in sexual postures and activities.

Semiotics and interpretation

We have already defined 'culture' as a *community of codes*, i.e. a set of ideas about what signs mean and how they may be put together, which is shared by a large or small group of people. 'Communication' is a Latin word that originally meant 'making (something) common (or shared)'. Communion, commune, communism, communitarianism – and, of course common – all have the same root. The concepts 'code', 'culture' and 'communication' are thus closely related in many and complex ways. It should also be obvious from all we have been through in this chapter that a model of communication that likens the communication of meaning to the straightforward sending of a parcel by train cannot be used as more than a minimal point of departure. Culture understood as a community of codes is both a *prerequisite* of communication – as a shared condition for the process – and a *complicating factor*. The model must be lowered into the cultural sea of codes, to put it poetically. In addition, this sea of codes is also surrounded by other social, material structures and processes – institutions, technologies, markets, social classes, gender relations, racial relations and so on. We have talked about such things in the first chapters of this book, and we will return to them later, for instance in the next chapter, which focuses on hermeneutics.

Semiotics – understood as a joint term for the traditions of both Saussure and Peirce – deals with dimensions of the process of communication that social-scientific research in the field has traditionally overlooked. This is why the sociologist Stuart Hall, then at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, could create a sort of watershed in the history of media research simply by introducing the notions of signs and codes in his article on en- and decoding (see Chapter 2 of the present volume, on influence). Semiotic theory is mainly developed with a view to the understanding and analysis of texts, i.e. the entities that are 'transported' in a process of communication. But, as we have seen, semiotics is also a highly important aspect of a more general theory of culture. It therefore also provides a productive approach to what goes on when the media's texts are produced, as well as when they are received, used and understood by audiences.

Semiotic theory is important in discussions of the relations between reality

outside of media texts and these texts' representations of that reality. We have already talked, in several sections of this chapter, about how both Saussure's and Peirce's versions of semiotics render the relations between language and external reality, between signs and that to which they refer, problematic and variable. Even if photographic signs – photographs, film and video footage – can be awarded a special status as indexical signs in the sense of C.S. Peirce, semiotic theory still contributes to an understanding of the uncertainty that may well arise when one is to decide what such photographic signs actually *mean*. It is, in particular, the notions of 'connotation' and connotational codes' that can do this, since they refer to the variability of all meanings.

One example (which, I admit, is of particular interest to me as a Norwegian, but still useful as a general illustration) can be taken from the soccer World Cup, which took place in France in 1998. In the final minutes of Norway's match against Brazil, the referee awarded Norway a penalty. It was unclear to most people, both in the stadium and in front of millions of TV screens, whether he had good reason to do so, even to those of us who had been glued to the screen when the Brazilian supposedly committed a foul. According to the English writer Julian Barnes, in *Time* magazine, the global TV audience agreed that the Norwegian player Tore André Flo just 'unexpectedly sat down', that he was faking it and 'collapsing for no good reason'. All available footage from any camera angle and all studio experts seemed to agree that the referee had been tricked, and so the Norwegians were consequently considered 'lucky bastards' (Barnes) to win the match with the aid of the penalty, while the Brazilians were considered victims of a fraud.

However, after 'everyone' had been talking about this for a couple of days (still according to Barnes), 'an obscure Swedish video clip' emerged which showed that Flo's shirt had actually been (illegitimately) pulled, to the extent that he ended up on his behind (see Figure 4.7). This saved the honour of Flo and the Norwegian team, while confidence in television's total overview and precise rendering of facts was left a little tarnished.

The interesting thing here is that trust in television's coverage was weakened by a video clip – in which everyone, including Julian Barnes, chooses to have full confidence. And, judging from this Swedish video clip, it does actually seem reasonable to argue that the penalty was justified. But, had the Brazilians hired a few top American lawyers, things might after a while have looked different, at least to Brazilians and others with a reason to distrust the moral stature of Norwegian soccer players.

It is indisputable that the Swedish video clip shows that Flo's shirt is pulled by a Brazilian player, so that it stands out 'like a sail', as Norwegian coach Egil Olsen put it at the time. This was the objective, indexical signified of the photographic sign. But it was hardly this alone that resulted in the penalty. Shirt-pulling is not allowed, but it has become so common in football that



Figure 4.7 World

hardly any referee whistle because the penalty was the shirt-pulling imagined American professional player that he was pulled would be very persuasive power player and person village of Stryn disposition that other countries, Norway as a slightly backward inhabitants) would



Figure 4.7 World Cup 1998: the Flo shirt-pulling incident.

hardly any referee in an international match at this level would blow the whistle because of it, and especially not within the penalty area. The reason for the penalty was that the referee and, later, everyone else, assumed that it was the shirt-pulling that caused Flo to sit, quite suddenly, on the ground. Our imagined American lawyers might have claimed that this experienced professional player with the British club Chelsea had simply chosen to *pretend* that he was pulled so hard that he fell when he just felt his shirt pulled. It would be very hard to prove them wrong from the video images alone. The persuasive power of the video clip depends on how one perceives Flo as a player and person. To Norwegians, he is simply a great guy from the tiny village of Stryn in fjord country, and so he has a non-photographable moral disposition that makes calculated dirty tricks unthinkable. To people from other countries, such as the referee and Julian Barnes, it may be that ideas of Norway as a peripheral, well-ordered, quite innocent and in some ways slightly backwards country (lots of nature, only four and a half million inhabitants) would have a similar effect when assumptions were to be made

about Flo's morality. Interviews with him and so on could also have supported the assumption that this sort of country boy would not be capable of dirty tricks. These, then, were the connotative codes at work when the video clip was seen as demonstrating beyond doubt that the penalty was correct. But, as our American lawyers might have suggested, Flo could instead be regarded as an experienced, enormously wealthy player in one of the toughest soccer leagues in the world – the British, a cynical sports circus. Then the indexical document might easily appear, at best, to be dubious evidence of the correctness of the penalty.

Another, and more serious example – which is also much more well known – occurred in Los Angeles in 1991. When the African-American Rodney King was arrested in March of that year, a man by the name of George Halliday was standing nearby with his video camera, taping what went on. He sold the tape to a local TV station for US\$500. This was the basis of something the American film scholar Michael Renov (1993: 8) described as follows (to paraphrase his words): disagreement over the interpretation of a video tape resulted in a violent rebellion and damages estimated at about US\$700 million.

Holliday's 81-second take shows, in unclear, badly lit pictures, that a man lies on the ground while a group of police officers stands around and above him, hitting and kicking him. This is the indexical information the images provide. The disagreement that (somewhat surprisingly to most people) arose, concerned the question of what this scene actually *meant*. Most of the roughly one billion people around the globe who saw this piece of video thought they saw an example of brutal and, in policing terms, totally unnecessary violence. One might say that the overwhelming majority of TV viewers spontaneously applied a moral connotational code for the interpretation of fights, which awards sympathy to the underdog – a person lying on the ground while attacked by several enemies, the guy who is alone against many. But the white jury from the white suburb in the ensuing trial did not apply such a code, not after the policemen's lawyers had completed their analysis of the footage in court. Through innumerable repetitions, uses of new framings, slow-motion, reversals and stills, the video sequence was in a sense emptied of the moral and emotional significance perceived by most TV viewers. The spontaneous code was replaced with another, which it (finally) became possible to use. A space was opened up for moral and emotional connotational codes that members of the jury and many in their social category have readily available: black Americans in confrontations with the police are connotationally interpreted as dangerous, violent, drug-intoxicated criminals; thus the police officers' claim that the abuse of King was necessary because he was aggressive became believable.

Both of these very different examples show how semiotics provides

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concepts and ideas that may seem very abstract and far removed from actual experience and current public issues, but that become highly useful and meaningful if applied within some larger context of interpretation. They therefore point in the direction of the next chapter, which is about hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation; but we can also find such a pointer from another angle.

Semiotics may function very well in historical studies, but it is basically a *synchronous* (contemporary) sort of approach, not *diachronous* (oriented towards time that passes). This is due to its links with structural linguistics, which is principally about describing language as a *system* rather than a historical *process*. It cares little about the origins and historical developments of words – it is, rather, interested in how language is organized *now*. Similarly, the theoretical offspring of structural linguistics in the humanities and social sciences more generally, *structuralism*, is also primarily interested in society as a particular set of relations between contemporary elements than in the historical processes that resulted in the current situation. Saussure called the fundamental set of principles in language *langue*. The concrete, endlessly varied *use* of language in society, called *parole*, has its precondition in the system. The system, precisely because it is fundamental and underlying, can only be studied through analyses of *parole*, i.e. concrete uses of language. In literary and film studies, inspired by such ideas, a lot of work was done, especially in the 1960s, to identify the fundamental principles – *langue* – of each of the two arts or media. Correspondingly, anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and his followers tried to identify the underlying system of ideas in a great number of narratives (myths) in various societies; and sociologists have tried to identify the system that underlies and is shared by concretely varying social relations and situations in different countries.

These structuralist efforts that, as we have said, are closely linked to semiotics in terms of a shared point of departure in structural linguistics, can also be seen as implementations of a certain *strategy of interpretation* – they are all looking for something more fundamental underneath the confusing, complex surface of appearances, a surface that nevertheless carries symptoms or traces of what is hidden underneath. A scholarly tradition that is particularly preoccupied with such strategies and the nature of interpretations in general is *hermeneutics*, and it is this that my next chapter will be about.