

### 3 the sign and its meaning-making processes

The ‘sign’ is the most fundamental unit of semiology. The sign is a unit of meaning, and semiologists argue that anything which has meaning – an advert, a painting, a conversation, a poem – can be understood in terms of its signs and the work they do. Signs make meaning in complex ways, and much of the technical vocabulary of semiology describes the precise ways in which signs make sense.

#### 3.1 what is a sign?

Semiological understanding of the sign depends in part on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, and in particular on his *Course on General Linguistics*. Saussure wanted to develop a systematic understanding of how language works, and he argued that the **sign** was the basic unit of language. The sign consists of two parts, which are only distinguishable at the analytical level; in practice they are always integrated into each other. The **Signified** is the first part of the sign is the **signified**. The signified is a concept or an object, let’s say ‘a very young human unable to walk or talk’. The second part of the sign is the **signifier**. The signifier is a sound or an image that is attached to a signified; in this case, the word ‘baby’. The point that Saussure made with this distinction between signifier and signified, and which semiological analysis depends upon, is that there is no necessary relationship between a particular signifier and its signified. We can see this if we think of the way in which different languages use different words for the same signified: ‘baby’ in English is ‘bimbo’ or ‘bimba’ in Italian, for example. Moreover, the same signifier can have different meanings; ‘baby’ can also be a term of endearment between adults, for example, and in English ‘bimbo’ does not refer to babies at all but is rather a term that stereotypes certain kinds of adult women. Whatever stability attaches to a particular relationship between a signifier and signified does not depend on an inherent connection between them, then. Instead, Saussure argued that it depends upon the difference between that particular sign and many others. Thus one meaning of ‘baby’ in English depends for its significance not on a necessary relation between the word ‘baby’ and ‘very young humans unable to walk or talk’, but rather on the difference between the sign ‘baby’ and other signs such as ‘toddler’, ‘child’, ‘kid’, ‘teenager’, ‘adolescent’, ‘adult’ and so on. The actual object in the world to which the sign is related is called the **Referent** sign’s referent.

The distinction between signifier and signified is crucial to semiology, because it means that the relation between meanings (signifieds) and signifiers is not inherent, but rather is conventional and can therefore be problematized. While ‘a sign is always thing-plus-meaning’ (Williamson, 1978: 17), the connection between a certain signifier and a certain signified can be questioned; and the relations between signs can also be explored.

The elaborate vocabulary of semiology is aimed at clarifying the different ways in which signifiers and signifieds are attached to (and detached from) each other. The first stage of a semiological analysis, though, is to identify the basic building blocks of an image: its signs. Bal and Bryson (1991: 193–4) point out that it is often quite difficult to differentiate between visual signs, because often there are no clear boundaries between different parts of an image. However, once certain elements of an image have been at least tentatively identified as its signs, their meanings can be explored.

Gillian Dyer's *Advertising as Communication* (1982) points out that the photographs of many adverts depend on signs of humans which symbolize particular qualities to their audience. These qualities – these signifieds – are shifted in the ad from the human signifiers and on to the product the ad is trying to sell. Here is Judith Williamson analysing an advert for the Halifax Building Society (see Figure 4.1), which offers mortgages for house purchase. Her focus is the way hands are signs.

The ring . . . stand[s] for marriage, and in [the] picture the strong male hand stands for 'Promise, Confidence, and Security'. The pictures are clichéd illustrations of three words. But the point of the ad is to undermine the 'Confidence and Security' offered by the man . . . The cliché of masculine security and promise is exposed, to show the need for the Halifax. Yet simultaneously, the image of the ad, the hand and the ring, etc., undermined in its literal sense of marriage-as-security, is used in all its clichédness to represent the promise, security and confidence offered in reparation by the Halifax . . . In other words, Security, signified by the hand, becomes a signifier, in its possible absence, of the need for Halifax; it is then returned to its original status of signified through the conduit of the product. (Williamson, 1978: 34)

Dyer (1982: 96–104) has a useful checklist for exploring what signs of humans might symbolize:

1 *representations of bodies:*

- *age*. What is the age of the figures in the photograph meant to convey? Innocence? Wisdom? Senility?
- *gender*. Adverts very often rely on stereotyped images of masculinity and femininity. Men are active and rational, women are passive and emotional; men go out into the world, women are more associated with the domestic.
- *race*. Again, adverts often depend on stereotypes. To what extent does an advert do this? Or does it normalize whiteness by making it invisible (see Dyer, 1997)?
- *hair*. Women's hair is often used to signify seductive beauty or narcissism.



**Figure 4.1**  
*Advertisement*  
 (Williamson,  
 1978: 34)

- *body*. Which bodies are fat (and therefore often represented as undesirable and unattractive) and which are thin? Are we shown whole bodies, or does the photo show only parts of bodies (women's bodies are often treated in this way in cosmetic ads)?
  - *size*. Adverts often indicate what is more important by making it big.
  - *looks*. Again, adverts often trade on conventional notions of male and female beauty. Susan Bordo's book *Unbearable Weight* (1993) is an excellent discussion of, among other things, how adverts picture bodies in ways that depend on cultural constructions of race, gender and beauty.
- 2 *representations of manner*
- *expression*. Who is shown as happy, haughty, sad and so on? What facial and other expressions are used to convey this?
  - *eye contact*. Who is looking at whom (including you) and how? Are those looks submissive, coy, confrontational?
  - *pose*. Who is standing and who is prone?

- 3 *representations of activity*
  - *touch*. Who is touching what, with what effects?
  - *body movement*. Who is active and who is passive?
  - *positional communication*. What is the spatial arrangement of the figures? Who is positioned as superior and who inferior? Who is intimate with whom and how? Hodge and Kress (1988: 52–63) have a useful discussion of positional communication.
- 4 *props and settings*
  - *props*. Objects in adverts can be used in a way unique to a particular advert, but many ads rely on objects that have particular cultural significance. For example, spectacles often connote intelligence, golden light indicates tranquillity, and so on.
  - *settings*. Settings range from the apparently ‘normal’ to the supposedly ‘exotic’, and can also seem to be fantasies. What effects does its setting have on an advert?

Dyer’s list provides a good way of specifying in some detail how a visual image of humans produces certain signifieds. However, this kind of interpretation clearly requires the kind of extensive knowledge of images of culturally specific social difference and social relations.

#### focus

Look at the adverts reproduced in Figures 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4. What do the various human figures signify?

### 3.2 ways of describing signs

There is some debate about how useful Saussure’s legacy is to semiology beyond this fundamental understanding of the structure of signs. Bal and Bryson (1991) and Hodge and Kress (1988) both argue that Saussure had rather a static notion of how signs work and was uninterested in how meanings change and are changed in use. Other writers wonder whether a theory based on language can deal with the particularities of the visual. Iversen, for example, suggests that the relation between signifier and signified is different in many visual images from that in written or spoken signs:

Linguistic signs are arbitrary in the sense that there is no relation between the sound of a word and its meaning other than convention, a ‘contract’ or rule. It is clear that visual signs are not arbitrary, but ‘motivated’ – there is some rationale for the choice of signifier. The word ‘dog’ and a

picture of one do not signify in the same way, so it is safe to assumed that a theory of semiotics based on linguistics will fall far short of offering a complete account of visual signification. (Iversen, 1986: 85; see also Armstrong, 1996; Hall, 1980: 132)

Both Bal and Bryson (1991) and Iversen (1986), therefore, while acknowledging the importance of Saussure's discussion of the sign, prefer to turn to the work of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (see also Wollen, 1970: 120). This is because 'Peirce's richer typology of signs enables us to consider how different modes of signification work, while Saussure's model can only tell us how systems of arbitrary signs operate' (Iversen, 1986: 85).

Peirce suggested that there were three kinds of signs, differentiated by the way in which the relation between the signifier and signified is understood:

- |               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>Icon</b>   | 1 <b>icon</b> . In iconic signs, the signifier represents the signified by apparently having a likeness to it. This type of sign is often very important in visual images, especially photographic ones. Thus a photograph of a baby is an iconic sign of that baby. Diagrams are also iconic signs, since they show the relations between the parts of their object.  |
| <b>Index</b>  | 2 <b>index</b> . In indexical signs, there is an inherent relationship between the signified and signifier. 'Inherent' is often culturally specific, so a current example familiar to Western readers might be the way that a schematic picture of a baby soother is often used to denote a room in public places where there are baby-changing facilities.  |
| <b>Symbol</b> | 3 <b>symbol</b> . Symbolic signs have a conventionalized but clearly arbitrary relation between signifier and signified. Thus pictures of babies are often used to represent notions of 'the future', as in a postcard produced by the Italian communist newspaper <i>Il Manifesto</i> (see Figure 4.2). This shows a sleeping baby with a raised fist, and the text 'la rivoluzione non russa' ('the revolution isn't snoring/sleeping' but also 'not the Russian revolution'). |



Icon



Index



Symbol



**Figure 4.2**  
 Advertisement for  
 the Italian  
 newspaper  
 Il Manifesto,  
 circa 1994

Signs are complex and can be doing several things at once; so you may have to describe the same sign using several of the terms discussed in this section.

#### focus

Study the adverts reproduced in Figures 4.3 and 4.4, using the terms introduced so far in this section.

What are the photographs' signs? What do each of the photograph's signs signify? In doing this, are they indexical, iconic, or symbolic? Are there syntagmatic signs? What about the text? What signifieds does it evoke? Given the signifieds attached to the visual signifiers, what qualities are viewers of these ads meant to associate with the product?

There are other ways of describing signs. Signs can be distinguished depending on how symbolic they are. Signs can be **denotive**, that is, describing something: a baby, a soother. Roland Barthes (1977) suggests that signs which work at the denotive level are fairly easy to decode. We can look at a picture of a baby and see that it is a baby and not a toddler or an adult, for example. A related term is **diegesis**. Diegesis is the sum of the denotive meanings of an image.

**Connotive** But signs can also be **connotive**. Connotive signs carry a range of higher-level meanings. For example, that postcard uses a picture of a baby as a connotive sign, because that baby connotes the future when the revolution will happen. Connotive signs themselves can be divided into two kinds:

- Metonymic** 1 **metonymic**. This kind of sign is something associated with something else, which then represents that something else. Thus in the postcard example, babies are associated with notions of the future, and the baby is thus a metonymic sign.
- Synecdochal** 2 **synecdochal**. This sign is either a part of something standing in for a whole, or a whole representing a part. Thus the city of Paris is often represented by a picture of one part of it, the Eiffel Tower: the image of the tower is a synecdochal sign of Paris as a whole.

Again, it is important to stress that any one sign may be working in one or more of these ways.

Thus semiology offers a detailed vocabulary for specifying what particular signs are doing.

### 3.4 signs and codes, referent systems and mythologies

Section 3.2 noted that certain sorts of signs – indexical, symbolic and connotive especially – refer to wider systems of meaning. These ‘wider systems’ can be characterized in a number of ways. They have been called ‘codes’ by Stuart Hall (1980), ‘referent systems’ by Williamson (1978) and ‘mythologies’ by Barthes (1973). Each of these terms means something rather different, and each has somewhat different methodological implications.

**Code** A code is a set of conventionalized ways of making meaning that are specific to particular groups of people. In the context of making television news programmes, for example, Stuart Hall (1980: 136) comments on what he calls the ‘professional code’ that is mobilized in the work of producers, editors, lighting and camera technicians, newscasters and so on. This professional code guides such things as ‘the particular choice of presentational occasions and formats, the selection of personnel, the choice of images, the staging of debates’. It has a ‘techno-practical nature’ according to Hall because it operates with ‘such apparently neutral-technical questions as visual quality, news and presentational values, televisual quality, professionalism and so on’ (Hall, 1980: 136). The makers of adverts have their professional codes too, which result in the frequent occurrence visual structure described by Goldman (1992) as photographic image, text, mortise and graphics (see also Dyer, 1982: 135; Myers, 1983). Adverts depend on other sorts of codes too. Crucially, they depend on the codes held by the particular group of consumers to whom their makers want to sell the



**Encoded** product (hence the use of focus groups by advertising agencies to find out what those codes are). Thus the Chanel ad analysed by Williamson (1978) depends for its effectiveness on its audience 'knowing' that Catherine Deneuve is beautiful, stylish and chic; she has to be already **encoded** as such for the advert to be able to transfer those signifiers from her to the perfume. An audience unfamiliar with Deneuve would not be able to make sense of this advert.

Codes can be researched in a number of ways. Goldman (1992), for example, seems to use a very informal (and implicit) kind of content analysis of the adverts to reach his fourfold characterization of advertising's visual code. Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1986), on the other hand, use content analysis explicitly to examine the visual structure of adverts. They also interview the producers of adverts to explore what codes they deploy in the production process. Similarly, Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993), in their study of the photographs used in *National Geographic* which was examined in the previous chapter, supplemented their content analysis with interviews with the editors, writers and photographers at the magazine, in order to explore the codes they mobilized to make the publication look the way it does.

As Hall (1980) makes clear, codes allow the semiologist access to the wider ideologies at work in a society. 'At the connotive level, we must refer, *through* the codes, to the orders of social life, of economic and political power and of ideology', because codes 'contract relations for the sign with the wider universe of ideologies in a society' (Hall, 1980: 134). Thus Deneuve/Chanel are encoded as beautiful and glamorous, and that code is a particular expression of the ideology that all women should be beautiful and glamorous for men. Hall (1980) describes such ideologies as 'metacodes' or

**'Dominant codes'** 'dominant codes'.

#### 4 on audiences and interpretations

##### **Polysemy**

The meanings of signs are, therefore, extraordinarily complex. This complexity means that their meanings are multiple, and this multiplicity is referred to as **polysemy**. A sign is polysemic when it has more than one meaning. How is it then that Williamson (1978), for example, can speak of an advert as having a powerful meaning that positions its viewers in a specific imaginary social place? Is polysemy limited in some way? Williamson argues it is. This section explores how semiology argues that most images most of the time produce what Hall calls the **preferred meaning**.

##### **Preferred meaning**

Any . . . sign is potentially transformable into more than one connotive configuration. Polysemy, however, must not be confused with pluralism . . . Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested . . . The different areas of social life appeared to be mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into dominant or preferred meanings. (Hall, 1980: 134)

##### **Preferred readings**

These preferred meanings (or ideologies) become **preferred readings** when they are interpreted by audiences in ways that retain 'the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted on them' (Hall, 1980: 134).

There are two ways in which semiologists explain the production of preferred readings. The first of these focuses on the visual and textual relation between an image and its viewer, and the second emphasizes the social modalities of the reception of an image.

Figure 4.3 to work, for example, you need to know that Silver Cross is a company that makes prams and pushchairs. If you don't – and I imagine lots of readers of this book might not, although most readers of the magazine where it originally appeared probably would – the ad simply does not make its intended connections. Williamson (1978) does not talk about ads that fail like that; her focus on 'the image itself' produces what Slater (1983: 258) calls a 'radically internal analysis of signification' which cannot address these sorts of issues. This is perhaps the most telling criticism of semiology (and one that Bal and Bryson, 1991, for example, writing fifteen years after Williamson, are keen to dispel).

## 6 summary

- semiology depends on the distinction between the signifier and the signified of the sign. This distinction enables semiology to focus on the transfers of signifieds between signs.
- the transfer of signifieds is understood as structured through codes, and codes in turn give on to wider structures of meaning. These wider structures can be described as dominant codes, ideologies, mythologies or referent systems. These structures limit polysemy.
- signs, codes, dominant codes, ideologies, mythologies and referent systems can all be challenged by the diversity of ways of seeing.
- visual images have social conditions and social effects, which are articulated both through the image itself and through the social modality of the logonomic system.
- semiological studies focus on the image itself and there is thus little attention paid to audiencing and little concern for reflexivity.

## further reading

Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1973) remains one of the best exemplifications of semiology; it consists mostly of short essays each looking at elements of post-war French culture, but the last section on 'Myth Today' is a more analytical account of his approach. Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson's essay in *Art Bulletin* (1991) is a good introduction to semiology's more recent themes.