PART ONE

MEDIA
TEXTS AND
MEANINGS
As a starting point for our studies we should consider how media industries are organised around basic linear principles in a process of production, distribution and consumption.

Media companies such as Virgin, News International, Canal +, Bertelsman and so on are organised as businesses with departments covering finance, production, recruitment and so on that allow them to function as businesses. Individuals in such departments oversee the production of saleable materials through research, development, cultivation of the creative process and finally realisation of the final product to packaging ready for delivery. Consider a Nintendo video game as the end product of such a process. This product is developed and produced, then marketed and distributed (you can buy games in shops, by mail order or over the internet – maybe even borrow them from friends or obtain illegal 'pirated' copies of software). Finally, media products are consumed by viewers, listeners, web surfers, readers and so on. With Nintendo and its products, consumers spend hours mastering games, moving through each level relating to the pleasure, attraction and rewards we get from them.

In this first part of the book we are concerned with this final stage – media output – in very particular ways. For most of us our main experience of the media is as consumers of its output. What we ‘consume’ is the meaning of that output in newspaper stories, pop songs, billboard advertisements, radio and TV shows, films, photographs, computer games and websites. This meaning is the basis of the thrills, pleasures and informational aspects of media forms in all their variety – the very basis of their existence and success.

The four chapters in this part are intended to lead you through a step-by-step process of thinking about media output and meanings and the terms in which media studies describes and makes sense of this output through interpretation. Beginning with the acknowledgement of the fact that we already know what meanings media forms have, we aim to equip you with some procedures and tools that will aid you in making sense of how the media makes meaning and how we understand those meanings.

We'll look first at the nature of texts and methods of rhetorical and semiological analysis. In Chapter 2 (organising media in media texts: genre and narrative) we look at the different categories of media texts in terms of genre as well as a consideration of how stories are organised in terms of narrative. In the third chapter (Media representations) we pay attention to the way in which all media ‘represent’ the world (fictional or otherwise) and in particular to how we think about individuals and groups and what is at stake in such representations. Finally, Chapter 4 (Reality media) develops these themes further by thinking of the relationship of media meanings and the worlds the media depict or construct in terms of the truth claims they make or are assumed to make. In addition we'll tie all of these threads together in an extended analysis of a media text in order to work through ways of making sense of how meaning is made.

Chapters in this section:

Chapter 1: How do media make meaning?
Introduces the concept of text and the tools of rhetorical and semiological analysis that aid the understanding of how media meanings are made

Chapter 2: Organising meaning in media texts: genre and narrative
Examines types of media text and the conventions governing meaning and the organisation and structuring of stories and representation

Chapter 3: Media representations
Develops the idea of media representation to consider the specific issues and ways in which social groups and individuals are represented in media forms

Chapter 4: Reality media
Evaluates the relationship of media forms and meanings with the real, truth, fact and authenticity as well as our expectations of these ideas
Consider the image reproduced here and ask yourself some simple questions of the kind that we rarely ask (because we know the answers already): what is this? what exactly is going on here? and how do I know? Some readers might leap to a response along the lines of ‘it is obvious: it is an advertisement for Apple’s i-Pod’.

We would agree that it is an advertisement but could very well counter with the observation that there is nothing at all obvious here that tells us that this is about Apple or i-Pods. Copyright text in the bottom left-hand corner is small enough to be overlooked by most casual observers, although this is unnecessary to understanding this image.

It is an image – a processed silhouette in black, white and grey tones – possibly derived from a photograph or video sequence. In this image, nowhere does it tell us in words what it is or what is going on (which we take to be a young male listening to music on a piece of technology and ‘grooving’ along to it).

So this is a very simple looking piece of media output (advertising produced for Apple Computers, gracing billboards, pages of magazines, websites and so on) that is, in fact, a very sophisticated image indeed. It is sophisticated in that it is full of meaning at different levels. It draws upon a range of conventions and associations, with little or no attempt made to notify us of the fact that it is ‘doing’ something. That something is that it is communicating with us about an everyday activity and also a range of values to do with Apple’s i-Pod (youthfulness, freshness, funkiness and so on), which might or might not encourage us to buy this product.

It is worth noting, too, that like most advertisements nowadays this one does not exhort us to buy the product or, indeed, tell us anything significant about it (how many gigabytes of memory it might have, what it plays, how much it costs, how it compares with competitor products, etc.). Beginning to ask questions about the selection and organisation of the constituent parts of media images such as this one – without recourse to its creators – and thinking about meaning and the terms of analysis are the objectives of this first chapter.
What we will do in this chapter

This chapter introduces the concept of the text as a way of focusing on and analysing the meaning of media output. We will move on to explore the ways in which the media make meaning, by defining and using tools of rhetorical analysis and then semiological analysis. The kinds of questions we ask of this apparently simple advert, and the way in which we might make sense of how it makes sense, can be extended to newspaper articles, web pages, popular music recordings, magazine covers, films, computer games and all media products.

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- Distinguish between the artefactual, commodity and textual aspects of media outputs.
- Systematically identify the rhetorical devices involved in producing and organising meaning in media texts.
- Utilise tools of rhetorical and semiological analysis in support of detailed interpretations and arguments about the meaning of media texts.
- Begin to conceptualise the relationship of media meanings to social contexts.

KEY TERMS: affect; analysis and interpretation; artefact; cognition; commodity; construction; diachronic; langue; meaning; multi-accidentuality; paradigm; parole; polysemy; rhetoric; semiology; synchronic; syntagm; text.
Thinking about media as texts

Most people experience the media as consumers – solely through various forms of output, the end result of media production. That is to say we read newspapers, magazines and comics, we watch films and TV shows, listen to the radio and music, as well as using the internet and playing computer games. And, of course, we experience a range of media products in a variety of places – a pop song can appear on the radio, as a soundtrack to a film or in the background of a TV show.

We can distinguish between ways of labelling media output, by considering the following three-tiered structure:

- **First**, the output of the media has a physical form as an artefact. Media artefacts include DVD discs, tabloid-sized newspapers, reels of celluloid film, hard copy photographs or even the digital signals that comprise a downloadable song by any music band. These are all physical forms.

- **Secondly**, there is the economic value embodied in media output, in terms of commodity status. Here we refer to the cost and price that is put on media production and media products – the cost of a cinema ticket, which adds to the revenue of a film alongside DVD rentals and sales, for example. Even when we don’t necessarily pay directly for media products (advertising hoardings being one example, or songs heard over supermarket PAs) we are encountering an economic chain in which the value and cost of the media artefact is in some way related to some other expenditure that we might make. Either way, payment has been entered into, with some kind of profit expected.

- **Thirdly**, we can consider media output as a site for the generation of meaning value: what media output says and how it says it, and what meanings it has for us as individuals and social beings. Meaning here refers to the ways in which we are affected psychologically, emotionally, culturally, physically and intellectually by media output; the way in which it entertains, stimulates, informs us – giving us pleasure, shock or food for thought.

When we study texts, we are interested in asking questions about meaning rather than the physical results of production, distribution and consumption, or the way that output is produced, marketed and sold as a commodity defined by its economic status. Of course, we should be aware of the way in which these three ways of labelling media output interact, but for now let us insist upon the distinction as a means of exploring the particularities of text and the construction and relay of meanings.

Here, the use of the term ‘text’, as distinct from ‘artefact’ and ‘commodity’, displays the debt owed by the field of media studies to English literature. In literary studies, texts are books, poems or plays, which are read and analysed in terms of the meanings derived from the selection and deployment of words alone. Typeface, cover images, quality of paper, publisher and price are rarely, if ever, invoked as having any pertinence to the thrust of a narrative, metre or structure in the act of interpretation.

This debt to English literature is echoed also in the way in which we sometimes refer to analysis as providing a ‘reading’ of texts that encompass photographs, movies, pop music and so on. Likewise, in interpreting the text as a ‘creative’ and meaningful product of the media we aim to go beyond mere description in order to articulate fully what it has to say to us about the world.

Making sense of textual meaning

It appears to be a very simple matter to understand the meaning of media output as text – millions of us do it every day as a matter of course. We log on to websites, listen to the radio and watch TV. We encounter advertising across all media forms in a myriad of ways. So fast and so often do they appear that individual adverts barely register in our consciousness. But then we don’t have to stop and pay attention in the face of each advert we come across – if it were necessary to do so the roads might be blocked when we drive down the street past billboards and posters on the sides of bus stops or in shop windows! The rapidity with which we encounter media output and make sense of it, at least superficially, is thus shared across all media and is a key characteristic of contemporary life. Making sense of media texts is habitual, a constant in our everyday existence.

Making sense of media products

Identify five media products in your possession or that you have encountered in your consumption today. For each media product think of its status as artefact, commodity and text.

- How useful and straightforward are these categories for understanding your media products?
- Does any confusion between categories arise?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages to distinguishing between media as artefact, commodity and text?
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When we watch TV or listen to the radio, presenters and actors speak our language and refer to things, places and people we recognise in familiar ways: if they did not, the media might not retain our attention. We also understand aspects of the output of the media that are harder to explain in the same way as written or spoken language or recognisable images. Popular music doesn’t use words alone, sometimes making its sounds out of musical instruments as well as electronic blips and beeps taken from computer games and mobile phones. Even visual media such as film, TV and photography use aspects of light, colour and so on in a creative, allusive manner – much as our i-Pod advert does at the start of this chapter.

With these observations in mind, we very rarely stop to consider how the media make meaning or indeed the range of meanings any one of the many thousands of media products might contain for us as individuals or for the many millions they are aimed at. When we read newspapers, watch films, look at photographs or play games, their meanings appear to be simple because we have no need to recall the work that has gone into preparing us for the act of reading or interpretation.

First, this work is that of media producers themselves. The expectations and ideas of writers, filmographers, musicians, programmers and designers, as well as the conventions and institutions they work within and the contexts that they share with us as consumers, all contribute to the way in which meaning can occur.

Secondly, we media consumers do ‘work’ that results from our upbringing and those wider cultural, social and historical contexts we navigate in our lives. Of course, to pay attention to the general factors contributing to and affecting our understanding of any media output might prove counterproductive to its purposes (polemic, entertainment, educational, selling goods, etc.) and our reasons for consuming it (pleasure, information, ‘vegetating’, etc.).

Thirdly, the main work that has gone into preparing us for our ongoing consumption and pleasure in the media is our regular acquaintance with its various forms: newspapers, TV and so on. This encounter with the media and the acquisition of a sense of how it works is akin to our acquisition of our mother tongue – it starts pretty much from the day we’re born, often unwittingly or without choice. We live in a media-saturated world, surrounded by media texts that even the most antiquarian of minds can hardly avoid.

Thus, media products come in a range of guises and make meaning through a variety of means, with many purposes, as part of a relationship between producer and consumer. Therefore, we can see that texts and textual meanings are always contextualised. In each case meaning is inflected first and foremost by the manner and mode of communication.

To illustrate what is at stake here, consider a very simple example – the typeface used in the presentation of the words in this book and available to you in any computer programme. In what ways is the meaning of a simple word like music affected here by the typographic choices made and deployed?

MUSIC
MUSIC
MUSIC
MUSIC

Imagine this word and any of the typefaces used here (or any available to you) on a CD cover (or a 12-inch vinyl record cover), on a pop-up page on an internet website, on a divider in a music shop rack or on a T-shirt or DVD cover. Perhaps we can imagine such things without the usual accompanying image or even any use of colour, and even then such absences are important choices in each medium’s textual meanings.

Why analyse media texts?

What is at issue here in developing as a critical scholar of media forms and meanings? Mainly, we want to draw attention to the fact that the media and their products are not natural, or ‘just there’. How they operate and convey the...
world to us is not necessarily a matter of obviousness or even consensus, however much it appears to be that way. While we should not dismiss casual ways of referring to the various media and what they provide — as a ‘window on the world’, ‘the real thing’, etc. — our first lesson is to appreciate that such phrases tend to reflect the habitual manner in which we consume any medium and the way that our acquaintance as consumers with the many media forms rarely involves establishing a critical distance. We know already what the media are saying to us, so we rarely bother to ask questions about how they make meaning that might, in turn, lead to questions of why they make meaning in the ways that they do.

We want to develop a mode of analysis in order to deal with these questions. Such an approach, when properly executed, presented and illustrated, aims systematically to convince others of one’s interpretation in order to support any argument or to make grander points about the social value, cultural insights and even the effects of media texts.

Tools for analysing media texts

Many of us often struggle to convey exactly what media texts mean to us with any precision and we often resort to very generalised evaluative expressions (cool, OK, brilliant, rubbish, etc.). We do, however, tend to pinpoint some very precise things when we talk about how moving a film is, how funny a radio interview is, how exciting or involving a pop song or computer game has been, or how concerned we are by a newspaper story. But these examples suggest an often under-developed way of speaking, where conversation tends to the superficially descriptive, rather than any systematic approach to an understanding of why we might exhibit such reactions towards media texts.

As scholars, what we need in order both to understand and explain how the media make meaning — in ways that we can all agree upon — is a common technical language that, as far as possible, avoids wholly subjective judgments. In this way, we should be like the most effective of media consumers and producers and, although even ‘objective’ academics rarely escape their subjectivity, by using a set of clearly defined terms we can support precisely argued and detailed interpretations of the media with schematic and methodical analyses. We can employ particular and transferable terms that will allow us to make sense of similar operations but different characteristics across media forms. These terms comprise a ‘meta-’, or greater, framing language to make sense of the media. What matters most is that we use this to get to grips with some methodical means of making sense of how meaning is made.

Here, we explore and enlist two interrelated approaches to explaining how the selection and organisation of media resources make meaning. These are two approaches that attend to different aspects of media meaning in different ways, asking different questions but ultimately working together as resources both in support of interpretations of the way in which meaning works and claims for the social significance of media meanings.

Analytical tools: rhetoric

For many people, the experience of consuming media texts feels very personal and intimately connected with the way we think of ourselves and indeed interact with others, in a spontaneous, unconscious manner. We laugh, we cry, we get excited — scared, agitated, concerned — in our consumption. In those media that deal with ‘actuality’ — such as newspapers, broadcast news, website updates and documentaries, and photographic reportage — we experience a parade of people talking or writing to us as individuals, supported by images of things which are explained in familiar terms for us. In the story-telling media — like film and TV drama or comedy, or comic books — we are placed in the position of spectators at the creation of events, whether ‘realistic’ or fantastic, which seem to be unfolding before our vicarious point of view.

We feel this personal involvement (most of the time) because the producers of media texts have mastery over a series of production techniques that we label media rhetoric. The first step in our approach to comprehending the manner in which texts are meaningful we therefore call rhetorical analysis.

Rhetoric

is the construction and manipulation of language by the creator of a text for affective purposes.

Rhetorical analysis asks: how are media texts put together as media texts? How do they organise and present meaning? Rhetorical analysis approaches media texts and their meanings as constructed out of the use of available techniques, styles and conventions in any medium. The intention of this construction is to position audiences in particular ways in order to elicit emotional, psychological or physical responses from them.

Ultimately, the aim of media in organising meaning is to get audiences to pay attention, and so aid cognition or their interpretation of the media text as a mode of communication. In this way we can examine photography, typography, film frames, page layout and design, musical conventions and so on, as well as the particularities of the use of words in the press and magazine journalism, in broadcasting, in songs, on websites, in dramatic dialogue and across all media forms.
Cognition refers to the way in which we, as individuals, acquire knowledge as well as apply it – the process through which we comprehend events and ideas in order to come to understand the world.

This approach to considering media forms and the way that they express ideas, to represent and reflect the real world or to construct fictional worlds, is one step towards overcoming a sense that the media simply reflect the world in some straightforward manner, operating as transmitters of information-based messages. In fact, rhetorical analysis suggests that meaning is not mainly about information, the tangible content of the media, but is tied to the way that we learn about that information: its presentation and the particularities of the medium. As we learnt from Marshall McLuhan (1965) in the introduction: ‘the medium is the message’.

The modern media are involved in a complex and sophisticated activity of social communication. We may not always recognise this activity because media workers are so skilful that their communication often seems ‘natural’ and ‘obvious’, partly due to our familiarity with media forms.

Rhetoric, language and meaning

In order to clarify our use of the term media rhetoric, it is useful to distinguish it from those other related concepts that inform media studies: language and meaning.

- **Language** is the material out of which a single instance of communication is created. It provides the basic units – in words and phrases, images and sounds – as well as rules that determine how they can be organised in texts – grammar and syntax.

- **Rhetoric** is the way in which language is manipulated to a particular purpose, such as the creation of emotion in poetry. Applied to media, we can think of the evocation of fear when watching a horror film or feelings of excitement and urgency when playing video games. Likewise, when we watch the news, certain subjects will cause us to attend to the story with concern and proper seriousness.

- **Meaning** refers to the interpretation of messages by the reader of the text.

Like the grammatical directions and conventions underpinning written and spoken language, rhetoric is concerned with the organisation of vocabulary. However, while grammar refers to organisation according to rules, rhetoric is organisation according to results. For example, we can illustrate this point by looking at a famous front page of a popular British daily newspaper referring to the London terrorist attack on July 7 2005. The front pages of several popular daily newspapers were particularly graphic. The aim was to grab the interest of the potential reader, presenting the front page not as an objective perspective on events but instead to evoke and ride on the emotion and anger of the reader. This use of invective on the front page of a British newspaper also speaks to the reader on their terms: the idealised ‘Daily Star reader’, for example, the common man or woman, engaging them, assuming that they share this particular, aggressive viewpoint.
Such examples suggest that rhetoric involves more than simply aiming to be effective in communication – getting a message across in an economic fashion (‘man bites dog’, ‘our aspirin clears headaches fast’). When we focus upon the rhetoric of acts of communication, we are interested in more than the conveyance of information; we connect the form that the communication takes with the possible response made to reading it. Such emotional responses are usually known as affective responses. Rhetoric is the art of manipulating these affective responses.

The classical origins of rhetoric: some lessons and abiding concerns

If we take another definition of rhetoric as ‘the art of persuasive communication and eloquence’, the latter term indicates the way in which rhetorical analysis is concerned with style, composition and argument. Rhetoric, as an idea and a skill that could be learned, practiced and deployed, developed in the Ancient world. In fourth-century BC Athens, it was essential to be able to speak effectively for participation in the public life of this original democracy, exemplified by Aristotle’s famous Art of Rhetoric. Rhetoric in this context was used to appeal to an audience of one’s peers, to convince them of the validity of your position in a topic by the use of both reasoned argument and emotion: content accentuated by presentation and delivery.

Many European cultures, from the Romans onwards, were influenced by ideas of rhetoric, making its teaching and study central to their educational system and modes of communication, from the arts to religious treatises and sermons. The study of rhetoric reached its height during the Renaissance, later becoming associated with the kinds of rote learning found in English schools in the nineteenth century. In this instance, its association acquired the negative implications of a series of limiting structures guiding the manner in which one was expected to speak and understand the value of verbal communication. For insights into this history see Barilli (1989). This book has a particularly interesting chapter on McLuhan and the rhetoric of technology. You could also look at Herrick (2008).

We retain this sense of language use in our phrases that dismiss the ‘empty rhetoric’ of an argument or excuse ‘a figure of speech’. The influence of rhetoric has had a similar influence on the continent and, most interestingly, despite its equivalent decline has been important to the development of structuralism, deconstruction and concepts of discourse, manifesting itself in the development of the kind of theoretical vocabulary that has proven useful to media scholars (see p. 00).

You may have encountered the term ‘rhetoric’ elsewhere and, like many terms used in both academic and non-academic ways, we must be careful not to confuse meanings. We’ve mentioned ‘empty rhetoric’ and you may have often asked or been asked a ‘rhetorical question’. The first concept relates to the idea that arguments can be convincingly put, suggesting that one has heard something quite profound, yet ultimately insubstantial. The latter is sometimes mistakenly taken to refer to questions without answers. In fact, a rhetorical question is one designed to achieve particular ends. If someone asks of us, ‘Do you think I’ve got all day?’ the aim is to prompt us into action in the service of such a busy and important person.

Dictionary definitions of ‘rhetoric’ suggest that it has come to imply insincerity or exaggeration. Such negative associations come from a common perspective that to respond to ideas and words emotionally is inferior to a considered intellectual response. Although we should recognise this sense – and it will come up in our investigations elsewhere – we want to underline a more neutral sense of rhetoric.

We hope that a closer examination of media texts enhances rather than reduces the pleasure that we derive from them as media consumers. We want to comprehend both emotional and intellectual responses to media texts, valuing them while being attuned to the motives and manipulations at work in their production.

Rhetorical convention and the media

What is important to establish is the idea that rhetorical techniques consist of a series of conventions that can be learned, practised and understood. In the original sense, the emphasis of rhetoric was on verbal manipulation. It was about using well-chosen and well-organised words to achieve the desired affective response. However, the modern media text communicates through a number of channels, not just the spoken or written word, and so we use the term rhetoric to cover the choice and delivery of images, sounds and non-verbal interpersonal communication, as well as any other vehicle for conveying a message.

Each medium has particular rhetorical devices that are used by its practitioners and, of course, recognised and comprehended by audiences in particular ways. It is possible to draw up lists of rhetorical devices for every medium: the particularities of print media, popular music, of photography or film and television, and also to label them in groups for the sake of comparison. We should allow for crossover between media forms, of course, as no medium is discrete and self-contained, but here we offer a list of devices and ways of systematically identifying rhetoric that help to organise our approach to texts.

Please note – we’ve ordered our exploration of media rhetoric in particular ways in order to aid the development of your thinking about the construction of media texts. You may find this a limiting list, merely a starting point for categorising media rhetoric. If so, you should by all means
develop further categories useful to you and your understanding of media texts.

Identifying rhetorical media tools and techniques

Verbal rhetoric
Verbal rhetoric refers to the word as written and spoken. It is a label that points to the choice of words, the vocabulary used in media communication. It is concerned with what is written and spoken, although not immediately with how it is written or spoken, which is a matter of presentation and worthy of further reflection (see below).

Affect
The intellectual, emotional, psychological or physical responses to the rhetorical address of media texts.

Different styles of journalism use words in different ways to generate affects as we’ve seen in the tabloid examples above. Particular choices of words speak volumes about the product in which they appear. The distinction between the types of language used in a British tabloid newspaper such as the *Sun* is quite apparent when compared with the ‘broadsheet’ or ‘quality’ end of the market, manifest in publications such as the *Daily Telegraph*.

Like poetry, popular music often uses words and phrases in interesting, idiosyncratic ways that are familiar but at a remove from our everyday use. A UK band like the Arctic Monkeys, whose members employ colloquial terms such as ‘mardy’ (meaning touchy/moody) in their songs, have accentuated their individuality. This is compounded by the singer’s emphatic northern accent – a matter of presentation that we discuss below. By the same degree, the language conventionally used in gangsta rap songs when compared to those in country music songs would also illustrate this point.

The panel below uses some UK newspaper headlines to outline the key rhetorical figures and labels for the ways that words are used every day in the print media. These choices – whether language is ‘plain’ or euphemistic for instance – relate to each media institution and say much about the values directing it and its relationship with its audience. Here, we signal the type of paper: populist ‘tabloid’, which places emphasis on pictures over words, deploying colloquialisms; and ‘quality’, which tends to offer more extensive and wordy coverage.

While we can compare newspapers and the markets they serve – the assumed audiences they speak to or with – we could similarly examine the language of broadcasters and the vocabulary available to them. Differences between
### Common verbal rhetorical devices – examples in practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alliteration</th>
<th>Tabloid</th>
<th>‘Paddy Pantsdown’s furtive fling’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Alliteration is the repetition of starting letters of words in a phrase or sentence, effectively creating a kind of affective rhythm. In this example there are three alliterative phrases in the headline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhyme and allusion</td>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>‘Itsy bitsy, teeny weeny, Britney’s a dream in her bikini’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rhyme is an obviously poetic rhetorical device. It is used relatively sparingly in such media forms, except for humorous intent as here. The headline makes use of a famous pop song and is also therefore allusive. Allusions make direct or indirect references to other ideas, places, people or texts, generating affect based around the pleasure of recognition. Rhymes and alliteration are often used in advertising to make a product memorable. A classic example here would be advertisement catch-phrases such as ‘Beanz Meanz Heinz’ or ‘PPPPick up a Penguin’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euphemism</td>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>‘Wife takes knife to cheating hubbie’s meat and two veg’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Euphemism is the substitution of more acceptable terms for those that might offend some people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>‘Iraq is a pressure-cooker set to explode’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Metaphor is the substitution of one idea for another. This headline gives a vivid portrait in one metaphorical phrase of the socio-political conditions in one particularly troubled country. Metaphor is sometimes confused with <strong>SIMILE</strong> where one idea is compared to another, for example, ‘English footballers are like bulldogs’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metonym</td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>‘Face to face’</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Metonym refers to a part of something used to represent it as a whole (e.g. ‘I’ve bought some wheels’ for ‘I’ve bought a car’). This headline substitutes face for the two people concerned. You may also find the term <strong>SYNECDOCHE</strong> used in place of metonym, and for our purposes these terms can be used interchangeably.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellipses</td>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>‘You terrorist b@*!$@%s’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>An ellipsis is simply the omission of data, usually of what we take to be obvious. It is often written as a row of three dots. In conversation, missing information is supplied non-verbally through the way in which we inflect language and express ourselves: ‘What on earth . . . ?’. The use of ellipses in this headline fakes coyness about the use of bad language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cliché</td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>‘High noon: EU sends ultimatum’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cliché is the use of well-worn phrases, ideas, metaphors, allusion and so on to generate recognition, quickly deploying meaning.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Thinking aloud

These kinds of labels relate to spoken and written words but they can also have application to the visual and aural aspects of the media covered below. You could compile your own indicative list but think of the hoot of an owl, or a creaky floorboard or door used to evoke atmosphere in a scary movie – a cliché if ever we heard one!

Talk and pop radio, between DJs of different cultural backgrounds, would all serve as points of attention.

**Presentational rhetoric**

Our category of ‘presentational rhetoric’ opens up an enormous variety of factors to take into account in analysis of media meanings. We can begin the exploration of this category by asking: what happens to words once they are chosen and deployed in media texts?

The earlier example of the typeface used on the word MUSIC is a good example of what we have in mind here for the written word when it is inflected by design choices. Similarly, when we encounter the spoken word, presentation is concerned with how people speak – accents, volume, emphasis, pace, pauses and so on. Such things contribute to how we respond to the nature of the words chosen.

For instance, a presenter on a station such as the BBC’s World Service is expected to sound authoritative, clear and
Media producers work to particular guidelines about how they use available media languages and express themselves in their particular fields, that are often published in style guides and in-house manuals. Here is an example from the ‘Style Guide’ of the respected UK-based journal *The Economist*:

**‘Tone’**
The reader is primarily interested in what you have to say. By the way in which you say it you may encourage him either to read on or to stop reading. If you want him to read on: [. . .]

Use the language of everyday speech, not that of spokesmen, lawyers or bureaucrats (so prefer let to permit, people to persons, buy to purchase, colleague to peer, way out to exit, present to gift, rich to wealthy, break to violate) . . . It is sometimes useful to talk of human-rights abuses but often the sentence can be rephrased more pithily and more accurately. ‘The army is accused of committing numerous human-rights abuses’ probably means ‘The army is accused of torture and murder’.

Avoid, where possible, euphemisms and circumlocutions promoted by interest-groups. In most contexts the hearing-impaired are simply deaf. Female teenagers are girls, not women. The underprivileged may be disadvantaged, but are more likely just poor. Decommissioning weapons means disarming.

And man sometimes includes women, just as he sometimes makes do for her as well. However, it is often possible and even preferable to phrase sentences so that they neither give offence to women nor become hideously complicated. Using the plural can be a helpful device. Thus ‘instruct the reader without lecturing him’ is better put as ‘instruct readers without lecturing them’.

...some sentences resist this treatment . . . Avoid also chairpersons (chairwoman is permissible), humankind and the person in the street – ugly expressions all. And, so long as you are not insensitive in other ways, few women will be offended if you restrain yourself from putting or she after every he. [. . .]

Do not be hectoring or arrogant. Those who disagree with you are not necessarily stupid or insane. Nobody needs to be described as silly: let your analysis show that he is. When you express opinions, do not simply make assertions. The aim is not just to tell readers what you think, but to persuade them; if you use arguments, reasoning and evidence, you may succeed. Go easy on the oughts and shoulds. [. . .]

Do not be too didactic. If too many sentences begin Compare, Consider, Expect, Imagine, Look at, Note, Prepare for, Remember or Take, readers will think they are reading a textbook (or, indeed, a style book). This may not be the way to persuade them to renew their subscriptions.

Source: You can read this online at www.economist.com/research/styleGuide/ and it is also published in hardback form for the general reader/writer as ‘an invaluable companion for everyone who wants to communicate with the clarity, style and precision for which *The Economist* is famous’.

This guide is given to all journalists who write for this publication. It is unlikely, therefore, that anyone who consistently avoided these rules – writing in text speak or a version of the tabloid style seen above – would find their work in print. Such guides do particular jobs that relate to the image of the media consumer constructed by its producers – ensuring that they get what they paid for (here a relatively high standard of journalism and reportage).

You should seek out other versions of such guides – for TV, radio, film and so on. Otherwise you should bear in mind their existence as we proceed through the next few pages. As we suggest, rhetoric when applied to media forms and communication is about much more than the types of words employed and how they are arranged.
reliable. It may be something of a shock to some listeners around the world therefore when the voice is changed, as it occasionally is, by the inclusion of speakers with regional British accents, perhaps speaking of ‘yow’/you or ‘sarf’/south or ‘oop North’ for ‘up North’. In more informal radio programmes in the UK, such as those on popular music stations such as Radio One or Virgin, to have a regional accent and casually colloquial delivery has not only become acceptable but has become expected, and perhaps even a necessity for gaining and retaining certain audiences. Across the world, the march of MTV in its local guise and the employment of younger, casual presenters clearly illustrates the issues here, especially when compared to the manner in which traditional newscasters deliver their material.

By paying attention to issues of presentation, if we think about words we can see how the manipulation of delivery creates complexity and affects ‘affect’. This applies to the way that something is said but is also accentuated through accompanying gestures. Television presenters in actuality programming, as well as the actors in fictional forms, are taught to be aware of the vital importance of the non-verbal aspects of their delivery – those aspects of inter-personal communication we call ‘body-language’.

There are non-verbal rhetorical devices that have been specifically devised for television. For example, the presenter of a news programme will frequently nod in the direction of a supposed colleague about to give a report, even though the colleague may not literally be sitting in the direction of the nod. The viewer is expected to interpret the nod as implying that the speaker is in the same studio and that there is no continuity lost between the two shots. In practice, however, the inserted speaker may well be pre-recorded. There is no malicious deceit intended here (although the created illusion is deceitful); the intent is to avoid disruption in the comprehension and attention of the audience. Occasionally things can go wrong, although there is never any sense that the deceit is exposed – we as viewers enter into the deceit willingly.

Presentational rhetoric also allows for the way in which sound can be used to create ‘space’, distance and ambiance. In radio, for instance, sound effects – ‘natural’ background noises – are employed to signal that we are outside, and footsteps approaching or moving away fade in and fade out. Most films and TV programmes nowadays employ ‘foley’ operators in order to create sounds to support the images we see, in order to accentuate ‘realism’ and ‘verisimilitude’ (Yewdall, 2007).

Of course, under this category of presentation we need to account for the choices of décor and location in audio-visual media, as well as the appearance of items in photographs and on the page (printed or web-based). One way is through the concept of *mise-en-scène*. This is a French term originating in theatre to label all the contents of the stage and their arrangement. It was taken up by film critics as a way of labelling everything within the film frame and, as such, overlaps with the theatrical in labelling those things ‘staged’ for the camera. This can refer equally to they way in which reality is captured for the benefit of documentary film or the way that it is arranged in support of fictional film. Furthermore, this term also labels all of the things we perceive on a screen which affect our perception, such as lighting arrangements and the relationship of on-screen and off-screen space. Aspects of *mise-en-scène* include, therefore: setting, costume and make-up, lighting and movement in the frame, as well as the acting and gestures of performers and presenters. It is a term that we can employ not only for the analysis of film but also for TV, photographic content, computer games and some aspects of websites (see Bordwell and Thompson, 1988: 196–228).

The lesson for us here in a consideration of rhetoric is that, while words are important, and they are sometimes the most important aspect of media forms, they constitute only one element in the text. The way that words are presented and inflected, amplified and obscured, and sometimes completely absent, is an important reminder that the media is about much more than words – even when words appear to be primary, on speech radio for instance or in pop songs. The word ‘love’ can produce a very different affect when voiced in the context of a metal song or of a slow r’n’b tune.

As a broad category, ‘presentation’ directs us to consider the very organisation of sound (its amplification), the choice of instrumentation in a piece of music (acoustic instead of electric guitar, falsetto instead of bass vocals), the colours of magazine or web page backgrounds. It is not that presentation is a simple category that means everything and nothing – it serves as a lead-in point to considering the nature of media choices and organisation.
Simon Frith: ‘Why do songs have words?’

Sociologist and popular music scholar Simon Frith has posed the question ‘Why do songs have words?’ He offers a means of considering the rhetoric of pop songs and how they create meaning. The issue here is that there is no reason why music should be accompanied by words and, even though most songs are comprised of music and lyrics, the latter are often misheard. In spite of this, analysts have tended to concentrate on words as the index of what songs mean and how they have value for consumers. Frith usefully points out all of the other rhetorical aspects of performance – sound and so on – that condition lyrical meaning and may in fact relegate words to a minor role in a song for its listeners:

In songs, words are a sign of a voice. A song is always a performance and song words are always spoken out, heard in someone’s accent. Songs are more like plays than poems: song words work as speech and speech acts, bearing meaning not just semantically, but also as structures of sound that are direct signs of emotion and marks of character. Singers use non-verbal as well as verbal devices to make their points – emphases, sighs, hesitations, changes of tone; lyrics involve pleas, sneers and commands as well as statements and messages and stories (which is why some singers, such as the Beatles and Bob Dylan in Europe in the sixties can have profound significance for listeners who do not understand a word they are singing) (Frith, 1988).

Photographic devices

Some media forms need more specialised terms for the particular rhetorical choices and techniques available within that medium for dealing with content. The act of pointing a camera and taking on a point of view, of focusing or obscuring aspects of a scene seen though a lens, underlines the power of the photographer and the medium over which they have control.

Here is a list of six of the most common devices used in photography and in other forms of rhetoric used in the capture and construction of media images. Our list here might also apply to drawings, collages and so on, as used in...
Retouching. This refers to ways of accentuating aspects of a picture (tonal distinctions, amplifying or dulling colour for instance), as well as processing out or substituting unwanted elements within a picture.

Cropping. A subtler and more immediate rhetorical device than retouching is to cut out unwanted material by adjusting the edges of the picture. This can be done ‘in the camera’ during a shoot or in processing afterwards.
Juxtaposition. This refers to the placing of one picture or part of a picture alongside another. We may read them as constituting a single text and thus come to a third meaning. Juxtaposition may also take place in the frame at the point of composition, of course, wherein objects are thrown together due to the choice and perspective taken by the photographer or image maker.

advertisements and animations, as well as material deployed on websites, etc. These devices are common enough to be picked up in newspapers and magazines by you in order to identify and explore them in use. They should not be taken as exhaustive or unchangeable, though, any more than is our list of verbal devices.

Editorial rhetoric
This category refers in general to the organisation of the moving image, although it has relevance to audio media such as radio and music and, indeed, the use of sound within TV and film.

Primarily, our concern under this heading is with the rhetoric of the moving image (film, TV, computer games) and how technology and the grammar of the image are used, both of which have a great deal to do with the demands of narrative and realism (see Chapters 00 and 00). For the moment, though, let us begin to think about sequence and available rhetorical devices.

Thinking aloud
This list of rhetorical devices available to photography was formulated by the practices and conventions of a pre-digital age. Is there any way in which this list is altered or added to by technologies of digitisation? Do some aspects of this list seem more important to designers and photographers?

Whether on celluloid, videotape or in digitised form we can think first of all of the manners in which our categories from photography and presentation – mise-en-scène particularly – are the foundation of our comprehension of any moving image. Let’s imagine and describe a short film sequence to illustrate this point and combination.

At first, we see a close-up of a person’s face glancing downward in a worried manner. A close-up in this instance usually encompasses all of the key features of the face. The scene ‘cuts’ suddenly, to another close-up, of someone’s arm and wristwatch. A cut is simply the change from one view to another in film or TV, images that have been ‘shot’ by different cameras or by the same camera at different times. These shots are then sequenced or edited together.

The next shot is of a house, with a person running away from camera toward its front door (we don’t see the person’s face but clothing and hair suggest that they are the same person as in the previous sequence). The next scene is the interior of a room and the sound of pounding on a door.

Even with this brief description you will possibly perceive the beginnings of a story, although the five shots would take only seconds to present in real time.
The important point here is that a set of images presented in such a way invites us to read them as a sequence, given our familiarity with the ‘grammatical’ organisation of film. It is possible that such shots could all be filmed on separate occasions – it is unlikely that they would be shot in the seconds it takes to ‘read’ them, although TV studios with multiple camera set-ups can achieve this.

We could take a still image from each of these brief shots and analyse it separately. In the first, for instance, we would recognise signs of anxiety from the non-verbal rhetoric which the actor uses. A juxtaposition of this image with a still from the second shot forces a connection between the two. The person is looking at their watch and worried about time. The producer of this sequence might have shot the same sequence in a different fashion. We could have had a medium-shot showing a person looking at their watch without a cutaway. Here, the affective response demanded of the audience is more dependent upon the non-verbal rhetoric of the actions of the actor than the rhetorical organisation of shots. It is up to the filmmaker to choose whether the story is better told through lengthier shots and a single scene or a rapid sequence. In this instance, the rapid cutting could be used to accentuate the anxiety of the individual and mood of the scene, although this is not solely achieved through rapid cutting.

Here we can identify three elements in the way in which these scenes work together in such a sequence to produce an effect (impression of a connection in space and time between shots) and affective response (urgency, anxiety – intrigue as to what is beginning to unfold). The first element concerns the significance of the image presented – its sign value – which we go on to discuss in more detail below, under our discussion of semiology. This aspect is shared across all media forms (the anxiety could be conveyed in other ways, too). The second aspect is the framing – shared with photography and other aspects of illustration. The final element of editing – sticking together or juxtaposing scenes of movement – is integral to film, although we should recognise how radio and popular music make use of sequential editing in the same manner to create wholly new meanings from disparate elements.

The repeated rhetorical device that we’ve described in our sequence is known as a motivated cut. An illusion has been created of a person looking down at a watch, anxious because of time. There is a motivated connection between the two, cued in our interpretation of the sequence by the editing. In much the same manner, the third scene of a house is connected by the fact that it is edited in sequence. The fact that the figure is running away, coupled with the quick cut, suggests a motivated link between anxiety, time and action – the ‘illusion’ of action continues. The third scene also acts, belatedly, as what is known as an establishing shot. The house identifies a space for the focus of action; we see it from within and without if we accept the motivated link with the fourth scene. The last scene (interior) might be shot elsewhere – in a studio, for instance – while the other four are shot ‘on location’. An association is made between the actions seen in scenes 1 to 3 and the pounding on the door, confirming the link (we assume the
person running ‘against’ time to the door to be the source of the noise).

All of this is, of course, a constructed illusion but one that, if done well, involves us – partly through intrigue (what is happening? why?), as well as the evocation of anxiety and concern (the affective response – again, effective if this has been done well). It is doubtful whether a skilled producer would worry very much about how to present this short element of a greater story. The rhetorical organisation would seem to come ‘naturally’, as an obvious way to present the tale. The tale might also be told by using a continuous shot, as well as a moving camera that might be equally effective and affecting. Less so, perhaps, would be a reliance on the actor or a voice-over ‘explaining’ what was happening.

Any effective use of rhetoric tends to go unnoticed, however, simply because we are so used to this technique: we take it for granted, usually only noticing when it is done badly or in a very unusual manner. For film and TV, as well as computer gaming, editing rhetoric contributes to and organises our sense of space and time. The length of shots, alongside the rapidity and perspective of ‘cuts’ between shots, are what give a text its particular rhetorical character and aid sense making, recognition, involvement and pleasure on the part of audiences. This is true for ‘real-life’ or ‘actuality’ media (current affairs, news, documentary) programming as well as fiction.

Sequence length and organisation also have relevance when considering radio. Dramas and ‘actuality’ make use of cutaways and the editing together of different material, recorded at different times and sometimes used to evoke difference in space and time, to produce similar effects to the moving image.

Analysis and the individual perspective

A question worth asking yourself is: how does any attempt to analyse ‘affect’ and meaning relate to the kinds of likely responses in the majority of an audience? We might, of course, make idiosyncratic readings but this might be perverse given the manner in which media texts seek to address audiences. Any answer here will relate to how informed our analysis is by our own position as media consumers. Thus, it is always useful to begin with our own intuitive responses to media texts – these really do matter, as does a response to the text as a cohesive whole – rather than beginning with an attempt to ‘spot’ rhetoric at work.

Of course, while our own position as a consumer is an important starting point, we should recognise its limits. If we find ourselves relatively unaffected by a media text, for instance, and if we were to rely on this subjective starting point alone, we might get stuck. To usefully move beyond our own response, we should think of an implied rhetorical position for the audience, just as we think of the rhetoric constructing the text. If confronted with a response along the lines of ‘this does nothing for me’ we should ask instead, ‘how is this text asking me to respond?’

This is not to suggest that we should be overly concerned about absolutely right and wrong analyses as such, but in certain circumstances it would be perverse to go against what seems a likely or ‘intended’ affect. However, do be cautious about claiming intent on behalf of producers – without direct access, one cannot be sure and, even then, ‘affects’ may be far more or far less significant than producers planned.

Thus, to pursue the point about affect and the position of the audience. Portentous tones from newsreaders on the occasion of natural disasters mean that we are expected to respond to stories appropriately (concern, sympathy or
Think of rhetoric as a means to an end – media language appealing to us as members of a potential audience in the first instance and then, once our attention has been won, working in support of the maintenance of our attention in the face of enormous distraction and competition for that attention (and, of course, cash!). Consider, for instance, flicking though the dial on a radio or through TV stations on the occasions when we’re not searching for anything in particular (we’re not always habitual viewers, listeners or readers). How then do media producers seize our attention for their products in a saturated field of similar products? We go to a magazine rack and may be confronted with several publications all dealing with a subject we might be interested in. Many of these works may even feature the same kinds of content and, superficially at least, may seem indistinguishable. On what basis do we make choices in such an instant?

Thinking aloud

Think of rhetoric as a means to an end – media language appealing to us as members of a potential audience in the first instance and then, once our attention has been won, working in support of the maintenance of our attention in the face of enormous distraction and competition for that attention (and, of course, cash!). Occasionally, when watching a film, we may find that its technique or budget might militate against the aspirations of its creators. Then we might find ourselves sneering at its appearance and failure, responding to it in ways that were unintended simply because it is not effective in marshalling rhetoric.

One final word on the ‘implied audience’ is worth making. Students sometimes leap to the conclusion that a text featuring particular social groups is providing a cue and a clue to the audience that is being addressed. There is some value in this, of course. If we take hip-hop music as an example, it is a cultural form derived from African-American experiences and histories. Interestingly, however, it is consumed across a huge variety of cultures, notably white middle-class Americans, who became the key audience for this genre in the 1990s. To assume a direct correlation between appearance and audience, then, is a fallacy and requires some consideration (if this were the case then the main consumers of pornography would be women!).

Analytical tools: semiology

Most academic disciplines seem to have an ‘ology’ somewhere in their scope. It indicates that they are a serious, systematic and logical endeavour. The Greek logos – from whence we get the suffix-ology – indicates a rational principle and order to explaining phenomena. The ‘ology’ of media studies (although not ours alone) is called semiology. The prefix sem comes from the Greek for sign (rather than the Latin for half) and is to be found in words such as semaphore – signalling with flags or lights – and semantics – the study of meaning in linguistics.

Developed long before and outside media studies, semiology is particularly useful for us in studying the process of media communication. As we have suggested previously, communication has sometimes been seen as a process by which information passes from one person to another, or from one to many in the case of mass media forms such as broadcasting. In emphasising the conveyance of information, this process approach to understanding communication assumes that meaning is, literally, a matter of encoding and decoding what needs to be communicated. The media operate as mediator in this process – the bit inbetween the communicator and receiver/s. Semiology takes another perspective to communication as mediation, rather in the manner of our rhetorical approach, by seeking to identify the factors that contribute to the way in which meaning is made in the act of mediation – how the content of media messages come to have significance and mean what they do.

Semiology is the attempt to explain how things mean what they mean and the various ways in which things mean what they do. It is therefore the study of meaning and the different systems that make meaning possible. These ‘systems’ include images, colour, bodily gestures and music, as well as the various fields of mass communication, i.e. media forms in all their variety. Where rhetoric draws our attention to the importance of what someone is saying (e.g. on a TV screen), along with the setting, the way that they speak and so on, in placing and ‘affecting’ us, semiology goes further to consider why specific things – a ‘posh’ accent, a black face, a suit and tie, a steel grey backdrop, the street rather than the studio – mean what they do.

Our approach to investigating meaning is further complicated by the technical language used in semiology. Often, it seems that the technical language used is simply there in order to baffle outsiders, i.e. non-academics. However, one of the reasons why technical language is employed is to ensure that we all have a shared set of
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precise and agreed-upon terms. This allows us to proceed quickly to investigate meaning in a particular and precise manner, and to underline the interpretations we make and the way that we present them. With its set of technical concepts, we use semiology with the aim of explaining the way in which meaning is created. Ultimately, semiological approaches suggest that any explanation is not to be found in the text alone, nor in the mind of the person reading the text, but in interaction between text and reader.

Case Study

Rhetorical analysis

This magazine uses a range of rhetorical techniques to address its potential readers and do its ‘work’ in appealing to them. The layout is typical of many popular magazines and this one belongs to a broader group of women’s publications. The title is in the largest type, at the head of the page/cover and a mid-shot of a female model (sometime celebrities are used) is posed in a ‘natural’ situation (a bedroom – we see the edge of a bedpost), rather than a single-coloured background as is sometimes the case. Around her are arranged various ‘teasers’ related to the content, designed to arouse our interest further. It is worth drawing attention to the hyperbolic ‘WIN!', announcing a competition for a print of ‘your’ baby, thus appealing to those who are likely to be reading this magazine. The implied audience here is pregnant women who may already have kids – note the strap line ‘baby & you’.

There’s metaphor here in the ‘baby on board’ line, which compares being a mum with sailing a ship (‘sail on through . . .’, etc.). Alliteration is here in ‘Sweet Sleep’, while allusion works in the reference to the song title ‘Anything You Can Do (I Can Do Better)’. All of these things offer a menu of items coherently focused on the central subject, which, appositely, is the figure of the pregnant mum-to-be framed by these strap-lines.

Note the presentation of the cover in terms of the colours used (muted, pastel) and also the type of model used – she is obviously pregnant but not heavily so. Why do you think this is, and what kinds of ideas about pregnancy are at work here? With such questions we’re starting to move beyond the organisation of the text in terms of available rhetorical techniques, and on to a differently nuanced way of thinking about meaning. For instance, the pastel colours can be thought of as feminine, but our rhetorical tools will not serve us in pinpointing why some colours might be so considered. Likewise, this presents a rather benign image of ‘healthy’ pregnancy, a period that for many women is a fulfilling time but is also one of the most taxing physical experiences they’ll ever undergo. To understand these aspects of the text, the way that meaning is created and some of the complex questions arising, we need a further approach that will complement and build upon rhetoric. This is called semiology.

Foundations of semiology

The basis of semiology is to be found in the conceptions of two visionary yet very different thinkers working at the start of the twentieth century. These are Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. They provided a basic set of templates for the work done by later thinkers in semiology, such as Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, who took de Saussure’s and Peirce’s ideas in directions they
most likely could not have anticipated. Nonetheless, their vision was to consider that their ideas could indeed be developed further, offering a range of possible applications in the study of meaning.

Both de Saussure and Peirce sought to move beyond the consideration of everyday communication acts (what is said between individuals in any socially located situation) to work at a more generalised, theoretical and abstract level, in order to identify the systems and systematic processes governing communication, meaning and sense making in modern societies.

Core ideas in the semiological approach
The first stage in getting to grips with semiology is to understand the core assumptions made in this approach.

De Saussure was a Swiss linguist whose innovation lay in a move from philology and etymology (where language and words originate historically, or diachronically) to examine the structure of language in use (its synchronic function – see below). He did not publish widely during his life and his most influential work, Course in General Linguistics (1993) was published posthumously in 1916, built from lecture notes made by his students at the University of Geneva.

His work was influenced by the sociologist Emile Durkheim, as well as the political philosopher Karl Marx (see p. 00). His ideas were appropriated by later thinkers and structuralists (see p. 00) such as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (see p. 00) and Roland Barthes (see below).

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913).

Thinking aloud
‘Psychologically, what are our ideas, apart from our language? They probably do not exist. Or in a form that may be described as amorphous. We should probably be unable according to philosophers and linguists to distinguish two ideas clearly without the help of a language’ (Saussure, 1993).

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914)
Peirce was an influential American philosopher of ‘pragmatism’ who wrote widely on mathematics, logic and the sciences. His invention of ‘semiotics’ – at virtually the same time as de Saussure’s semiology – resulted from his logical approach to philosophy as a doctrine of signs designed to make sense of the world. Below, we tend to favour de Saussure’s approach to explaining signification, as Peirce’s was somewhat different in emphasis.

For Peirce, the sign or ‘representamen’ describes how something meant something to someone, standing for something in his or her mind, communicating with those to whom the communication was addressed. In this argument, all communication is built therefore on the relation of ‘representamen’, interpreter and idea. His works set out a complex variety of classes of sign that has not proven amenable to practical use. However, his idea of sign-object relationships – ICON, INDEX and SYMBOL – are resonant and is dealt with below.

Note: Semiotics or semiology?
Any survey of the field will reveal that different people use alternative names to refer to the study of signs. The term ‘semiology’ comes from a suggestion in the work of de Saussure. Peirce called his approach ‘semiotics’ and many writers prefer this name. It does not really matter which you use as the terms can be considered to be interchangeable.

We can see these as three contentions that consolidate some of the ideas we’ve been touching upon already:

First, media texts are seen as constructions. In media studies, we often use the term ‘construction’ to refer to the production of texts. In this we are emphasising the idea that texts are not ‘natural’ occurrences but are manufactured.
There is an obvious sense in which the newspaper we read or the TV programme we watch is manufactured – part of an industrialised, technical process pursued by media workers. When we think of things in this way, we are recognising that media products are constructed as artefacts and as texts that are sites of meaning. Simply put, this means that, as well as being manufactured as print on paper, sounds in a musical recording or as moving images, they are manufactured or constructed out of elements of language and existing meanings. One of the main aims of semiological analysis has always been to examine how media conventions compare to written or spoken language, in order to generate and deploy meaning.

Secondly, the semiological approach starts with the acceptance that meanings are the result of social convention rather than any ‘essential’ property in things, or in the relationship of words or other signs to the things or concepts depicted. If meaning was an essential property of things themselves then the meaning would be ‘in’ things or, for us, the text for all time, fixed and unmoveable, and any interpretation would be either right or wrong. However, we only read a text in a particular way because we are used to associating particular signs with particular words or images (or sounds) included in a text. In semiology, then, meaning is seen as socially determined. It is social convention that is the source of meaning. Following de Saussure, we view these conventions as the organisation and rules of language.

We can formulate a third contention based upon the ideas of construction and social values underpinning meaning. If texts are constructed from language (written, or from media ‘languages’), and the meaning of language is created by social conventions, then the meaning of the text is as much the result of these conventions as it is the intentions of the people who produced the texts.

In the study of fine art or English literature there is, traditionally, an emphasis placed upon individual artists or authors – the creative genius as the fount of the value of the artistic product (see p. 00). In media studies, we tend to emphasise the view that socially conventional meanings and the forces that determine them are as important, if not more important, than the conscious intentions of the text’s producer or producers. In this approach, a single text is seen not as indicative of the originality or singularity of a producer but as telling us something about social convention. So, the meaning of a news article, for instance, or a piece of popular music, is not fixed by journalist or musician, producer or designer, singer or songwriter, but by the conventions that are used both by media workers who produce texts and the readers who consume them.

This is of vital importance because it allows us to understand that the language we use will be interpreted in ways that go well beyond our individual intentions. These sorts of meanings are often referred to as ‘hidden-meanings’ or ‘sub-texts’ because they seem to be things of which we are not primarily conscious and are subsumed to the obvious or ‘main message’ of a text. Debates about racist or sexist language would be good examples of some of the things we are thinking of here.

**Semiology in textual analysis:**

**sign, signifier and signified**

Semiological thought proposes that the basic unit of communication is the sign. If we think of those things we usually recognise and label as signs around us – road signs, exit signs, shop signs – this will give us an idea of the central premise here. Think of traffic signals, for instance, and the use of red, amber and green in signalling stop, get ready and go. Semiology suggests that there is nothing intrinsic to the colour red that demands ‘stop’ (elsewhere red might mean ‘danger’, ‘hot’, ‘sexy’ or simply not amber, green or blue, for instance). On each set of traffic lights, the red light works to direct us to stop, just as green tells us to go.

De Saussure’s foundational work concentrated on written and spoken language and, for the purposes of explaining how words work as signs, he suggested that signs could be thought of as consisting of two, indivisible aspects: signifier and signified.

The signifier refers to the physical properties or aspects of a sign that lead them to be perceived in some way. In spoken language, this could be a word as it is spoken (it has a physical existence as audible sound waves) or written (these words, on this page, exist as lines, curves and circles recorded in ink). The signified is the conceptual aspect of the sign – the association or idea conjured up by our perception of the signifier.

**SIGN = “dog”**

Signifier = image of dog (physical properties made up of coloured dots in photograph)

Signified = “dogness”
We hear or read a word such as ‘dog’ and we think of what de Saussure would term ‘dogness’, i.e. the concept signified or triggered by the signifier. We could get somewhat distracted here by discussion about the apparent imprecision of the signified. You might automatically think of your dog, or any other specific dog, for instance, but how do you know that that was the dog I had in mind? Our image above pinpoints a specific individual dog that represents a particular type of dog that, in turn, conjures up a heap of associations, the operation of which we’ll qualify below.

For our purposes, we can move on by noting that, when we communicate, we put words together to create meanings in specific ways. Our attempts at communication are sometimes precise and literal, ‘I took my dog to the vet’s on Smith Street’, and sometimes more nuanced, metaphorical even: ‘You look dog-rough!’ or ‘I’m going to kill that dog of a boyfriend of mine’ (neither phrase would merit a trip to the vet or the police, we assume). Semiology provides us with tools with which to make sense of both the precision of meaning in use but also the way that meaning can sometimes escape ‘intention’ (I did not have your dog in mind at all!).

While some new scholars will struggle with these propositions and ideas, perhaps treating language and communication as a more transparent thing than it is, we should at least understand that, once we accept the centrality of the sign and the explanatory aspect of signifier and signified – which are always indivisible – we can begin to explore the wider ideas of semiology. De Saussure’s intent was not to present a conceptual idea of the elements of the sign which would lead us to analyse each sign individually with regards to its components, but merely to suggest something fundamental about the operations of language. To focus on the analysis of signs at the level of signifier and signified, as if this was the basis of understanding, would be a mistake. The object of our attentions must remain at the level of the sign but the conceptualisation of the function of a sign will prove useful in getting to grips with the way that meaning works at different levels.

In de Saussure’s study, the consequences of which we continue to deal with, he drew attention to the apparent arbitrariness of language within systems of signification. This means, for instance, that there is nothing about the collection of bound papers, ink, illustrations and so on that you hold in your hand which demands that it be termed a ‘book’. It is merely convention that gives it this label, which is distinctive within the system of language simply by being a choice that is not hook, look, cook or any other word and that, when placed in an order of signification (‘I hold in my hand a book’ might be one order), operates as a noun. Likewise, nothing about a four-legged furry animal that wags its tail and chases cats demands that it should be called ‘dog’ – convention and culture confer this label. We need only look to the written and spoken variety of languages around the world to see the enormous variety of methods and conventions for describing the world (dog becomes, for example, chien, hund, el perro). If things themselves had properties that demanded specific labels, language differentiation would not exist!

**Media signs**

As a linguist, de Saussure was interested in written and spoken language as a signifying system. Language consists of a lexicon of words (hundreds of thousands in the English language), made of phonemes and letters – the sounds of speech and the lines on a page which constitute writing – which, when combined into sentences, according to rules of grammar and conventions of usage, have significance and communicate meaning. De Saussure also suggested that the same approach could be brought to bear on any form of communication or signifying system. Just as words (as signs) are collected together to make a particular piece of communication in writing or conversation (these sentences for instance), de Saussure suggested that we could break down other pieces of non-word communication into basic units or individual signs.

In looking at the modern mass media, that would mean we could extend the semiological approach in order to identify the signs in, and signifying practices of, computer games, TV programmes, podcasts, magazine articles, adverts, pieces of music or films. Of course, some signs would be words (written or spoken), but others would be images or parts of images (colours, typefaces, representations of people, places) or aspects of sound.

As we learnt in our approach to rhetoric, the manner in which a word is used or inflected – spoken or written – has the potential to condition its impact in particularly affective ways. We can see how one can delve much deeper here, beyond effect, especially when we begin to think about the associated meanings that a certain typeface has on a page or a mode of delivery in acting or speech.

### Identifying semiological tools and techniques

**Signs – selection and combination**

It is rare for us to encounter simple signs individually and, as such, we are confronted by them in the context of greater signifying systems. For sure, we might pass road signs, or rush around looking for the sign indicating ‘Men’ or ‘Women’ when we need to relieve ourselves urgently. However, in conversation or when apprehending the mass media we encounter a proliferation of signs combined together in creating meaningful texts.
In newspapers, single written word signs are combined into sentences, paragraphs and then into full stories. These written elements are then combined with other words presented in larger typefaces to form headlines, often further combined with photographs, diagrams or other forms of illustration (courtroom drawings for instance). Such illustrations are themselves combinations of different elements, perhaps facial features, hairstyles, clothing and background elements such as the location of the image.

In television programmes, combinations appear even more complex. Single spoken words are combined into lines of dialogue, which are combined with visual elements (mise-en-scène) such as the facial features of the presenters or actors, their hairstyles, clothing, the furnishing of the studio or images of outdoors. All of these signs are part of an animated text, inflected by the rhetoric of lighting, camera perspective and framing, as well as the editing process.

In any instance, the media workers who produced the text chose each sign and then combined them together. By this means a text is constructed and signifies in tandem with and indivisible from its affective operation. In semiotics, meaning is viewed as being determined by the selection of signs and their combination in texts. For this reason semiotics is a method that make sense of the process and signifying results of selection and combination.

English speaking students and users of semiotics will come across a number of semiological terms derived directly from the French of de Saussure. These technical terms are worth outlining here in order to indicate the systematic nature of this approach and also to aid your familiarity with terms that are sometimes deployed in academic work without qualification.

**Langue**

is a term which refers to a whole system of signification and its elements – the distinctions and oppositions which allow meaning to emerge, determined by the rules and principles of combination shared by the communities who recognise and use this system of signification. (Thus, alongside ‘French’ we could identify the langue of food and its presentation in menus, which order food from starter to dessert and coffee.)

**Parole**

refers to any particular ‘utterance’ derived from the system of signification or langue.

**Paradigm and syntagm**

refer to the principles or rules of how language or any signifying system is put together. Paradigm is a term that refers to what we could call the ‘vertical’ relationship between any words in a sentence or sign in a system - an element which could be substituted for another similar sign. Signs in language are organised in linear fashion to make more complex structures such as sentences or ‘syntagms’ which demonstrate the possibilities of paradigmatic selection.

Thus, in a sentence (or syntagm) such as ‘it was a lovely sunny day’ the adverb ‘lovely’ – selected from a huge paradigmatic set – might be substituted for another such as ‘beautiful’. This mode of description has relevance to the mass media, as we’ll see in our discussion of genre in the next chapter (p. 00)

**Diachronic and synchronic**

De Saussure’s originality lay in his attention to the study of language and the processes of meaning making in use at a particular time – in other words taking a synchronic approach. A diachronic approach would attend to changes in language over time in terms of its organisation and principles. For our purposes, we could study media signifying systems in this way – noting the ways that websites, for instance, have altered the ways in which they signify or ‘mean’ over a relatively short period.

Whether we use such terms or not they have a function and use in supporting analysis of the way that meaning works. Such tools are not the object of the analysis of texts, and the best way to become familiar with them is to use them as appropriate in relation to the starting point of the meaning of a text.

**Verbal and visual signs**

It is easy to ‘spot’ verbal signs – each word is clearly a sign itself. In spoken and written language, words constitute a minimum element of meaning, easily distinguished from each other and usually organised in linear fashion (in the Western world we read from left to right and top to bottom of the page, spoken words come one after the other). It is far harder to do this with other types of sound and images. The reason for this is that images, particularly photographs (or ‘moving’ photographs in the form of film or seamless video sequences) seem like reality and not like verbal signs at all. We can take in a photograph in its entirety immediately, just as we would when looking at the world! Also, it is sometimes hard to accept that images do not have an essential meaning. If we look at a photograph of a tree, it seems obvious that it means ‘a tree’ (and indeed a specific tree at that) because it looks like a tree – a specific tree. You do not need to attend to social convention to work that one out! We’ve seen plenty of trees in fields and, in encountering an image of tree, we know that it is indeed a tree! There is no need to learn a special language or principles of meaning to understand this, in the same way
that we learn to speak, read and write, under the tutelage of parents and teachers.

Furthermore, it is hard to be sure in any exact way what the signs are in a non-word-based text. It is difficult to identify a clear, distinct basic unit that is equivalent to a word when we examine film trailers or instrumental dance tracks, for instance. Can we think of images and musical (or other) sounds as signs in the same way as words, as comprising signifier and signified?

The problem with thinking about non-word-based texts as constructions made up of socially conventional language elements is that it seems to go totally against the widely held view that sounds or photographs are ‘real’. Reality is the antithesis of the constructed. This sense is reinforced when we look at a TV report ‘live’ from the scene of some unfolding drama, or hear a live broadcast of an interview on radio. Images, particularly, seem more ‘naturally’ related to the objects that they represent. This sense of realism is a very strong feature of mass media and our consumption of it. It is an important object of semiological study and features in Chapter 00.

Ultimately, the point to bear in mind is that, once an object is ‘captured’ by a signifying system (a tree in digital photographic form or on filmic celluloid, for instance), it is no longer that original ‘innocent’ object. It now exists as a sign – something selected and embraced within a system of communication.

Complex signs – testing significance and getting to grips with analysing meaning

Signs – words in a sentence, sounds in a song, images and performances in films – work together to make a greater whole whose complexity is derived from their combination. We can think of such combinations as meaningful texts made out of complex signs. To change any element in the set up of a complex sign or greater text would alter its meaning, although in each case we can see that some elements are more important than others.

The greatest test facing those new to semiology is making the leap from the recognition of the concept of the sign as an explanatory device to an examination of signs in use and, in particular, signs in use together as complex entities, as part of a textual system – be it a newspaper article, pop song, website or TV programme. We need to consider how to make sense of texts that are not only combinations of signs but are built upon very complex signs indeed. For instance, here’s a promotional photograph (media artefact) which works as a (media) text to present Destiny’s Child (a pop band):

Foregoing any detailed interpretation, just for the moment consider this text as a combination of visual signs – women, dresses, jewellery, a rug and so on. We could get bogged down in the detail here – noting in rote fashion the significance of black hair, brown skin, etc., all of which are important individually. But to do so ignores their combination as greater units of meaning.

Each aspect of the image of each woman constitutes, in itself, a complex sign: each woman is dressed, posed and presented (all aspects explained as rhetorical organisation) in a particular way, constituting a site of various signs, creating a greater whole. And together they create a greater sign – the band Destiny’s Child – as part of this photographic text (organised around particular rhetorical principles: medium distance shot, clearly lit, the trio organised and balanced along triangular principles).

This deconstruction seems obvious, but it is intended to suggest that the basis to analysing such a text is not to
ask ‘where are the signs?’ We should understand immediately that every element is signifying – that’s what signifying systems do. Nor should we look from top left to right and downwards, to ‘scan’ for signification – that is not how such texts work rhetorically or semiotically. Rather, we need to ask: what are the most significant elements of this text? Which signs are most meaningful and how are they meaningful within the hierarchy of the text?

Looking for elements that are significant is the basis of a good approach to the evaluation of visual signs such as those that constitute this text – or indeed other types of complex media sign. We can ask ourselves if we were to change an element (or a variety of elements), would this alter meaning in any significant manner? We wouldn’t do it literally but replacing one person, object or location (or sound, or accent) with another means we can judge the contribution that element makes to the meaning of the text. This is usually called a significance or ‘commutation’ test. It is unlikely that the significance of elements in a text will be absolute, that an element will be either entirely significant or not significant at all. All signs are significant but meaning and value are relative things. So some elements may be central to meaning as a whole – to substitute them would change the meanings of a text as a whole. Others, if substituted, may lead to no change at all or only slight inflections of meaning.

If we focus on words in a text then, clearly, the most basic parts of these significant elements will be the words selected. However, even words do not just contain verbal elements – in print or when spoken. Typography, size, colour, intonation, clarity, pitch, words on a page in a specific layout – all of these indicate how significance can be underwritten. Here, replacing the actual women in the image above with others – The Sugababes or anonymous models, for instance – would work at the level of contextual – depending upon who is deploying and interpreting the sign – would work at the level of connotation. Thus, a sign such as the union flag might connote ideas such as Britishness, patriotism and unity. However, in some circumstances – on the cover of a BNP pamphlet for instance – connotations might be of exclusivity and hostility to non-British people (i.e. nationalism, possibly racism). Seen from the perspective of some people in countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan, the flag might connote ‘liberator’ or ‘oppressor’ in equal measure. It might simply be unrecognised.

These terms are perhaps the most important to us in the area of interpretation. The denotative allows us to describe significant aspects of texts, using these as a basis for further levels of (connotative) interpretation.

**Denotation and connotation: levels of signification**

De Saussure’s idea of the sign did not concentrate on the signed or associated idea with any great detail but it is apparent from any understanding of his work that we cannot just think about the idea triggered by signs in simple terms. When we perceive signs, we do not usually think about one idea but potentially a whole range of ideas generated by the sign. This aspect of signification was most profitably explored by the French theorist Roland Barthes.

Barthes took up terms developed by de Saussure and Peirce and deployed them in productive ways to think about the social context and role of the media. The terms most interesting to us at this juncture are those of *denotation* and *connotation*. Barthes suggests that any sign will be associated with an initial aspect of signification but that this aspect will trigger further associations. The first aspect or level of signification is the most obvious, literal or generally agreeable. We see an image of a Union flag (the UK’s official symbol): most of us would agree it is of a Union flag. This is the *denoted* level of meaning. In some circumstances of course it might serve to denote ‘UK’ – stamped on goods or the back of an Olympic runner, for instance.

Further associations, more abstract, debatable and contextual – depending upon who is deploying and interpreting the sign – would work at the level of connotation. Thus, a sign such as the union flag might connote ideas such as Britishness, patriotism and unity. However, in some circumstances – on the cover of a BNP pamphlet for instance – connotations might be of exclusivity and hostility to non-British people (i.e. nationalism, possibly racism). Seen from the perspective of some people in countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan, the flag might connote ‘liberator’ or ‘oppressor’ in equal measure. It might simply be unrecognised.

These terms are perhaps the most important to us in the area of interpretation. The denotative allows us to describe significant aspects of texts, using these as a basis for further levels of (connotative) interpretation.

**Sign-object relations**

Alongside the consideration of significant elements in a text and the triggering of associated ideas, we can also identify types of relationship between signs and the objects to which they refer, which are particularly useful for those non-verbal languages that proliferate across the media. A sense of these relationships indicates the function of different signs within texts, aiding us also in comprehending and identifying the complex ways in which meaning works.

Peirce suggested three possible relationships between signs and the objects to which they refer. Do note that
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For instance) are indicative of this relationship, as are footprints in the sand discovered by a castaway (other humans are here). You will note that these examples suggest that iconic signs can have a dual relationship with the object depicted or referred to – the image of a footprint is also iconic!

3. **Symbolic**

Here the relationship of sign and object is a habitual or merely conventional one. This relationship is exemplified by words – spoken or written: there is no reason why a series of lines and circles such as CAT should describe a four-legged creature (nor is there any essential reason why the sound of the word should be seen as a reference to that creature!). Alongside words we could add signifying objects, such as flags. Red, white and blue in various combinations represents ideas of the UK, USA, France and various other nations, as well as the cultures and values that these countries are thought to represent.

**Key thinker**

**Roland Barthes (1915–80)**

Barthes was a French literary critic and theorist, whose approach to semiology, applied to mass media and everyday culture, as well as his consideration of photography in particular, set in place some of the basic tools for media studies.

In his studies of literature, Barthes expressed a concern with the way in which literary language represented its particular worlds and conveyed social ideas – that representation is never ‘innocent’. He attended to aspects of literary rhetoric that have great import to the kind of analysis we pursue in these chapters, noting how such systems of communication work in conventional ways to appear natural, disguising the values supporting them.

An early work of note was his collection of essays, *Mythologies* (Barthes and Lavers, 1972). These short analyses of aspects of popular culture (wrestling, films about Romans – see below – film stars’ faces, new cars, steak and chips) were published in French magazines between 1954 and 1956, then collected and supported by a methodological essay ‘Myth Today’ (see Chapter 00). Barthes innovation was to draw upon de Saussure’s semiology as a means of understanding contemporary cultural texts as signifying systems in a particular context (post-War France undergoing a consumer boom). He went on to refine his approach and apply it ‘scientifically’ to further aspects of signifying systems, such as fashion, offering radical critiques of the habitual manner in which we make sense of the world (see p. 00).

From: ‘The Romans in Films’

In Mankiewicz’s *Julius Caesar*, all the characters are wearing fringes. Some have them curly, some straggly, some tufted, some oily, all have them well combed, and the bald are not admitted, although there are plenty to be found in Roman history. Those who have little hair have not been let off for all that, and the hairdresser – the king-pin of the film – has still managed to produce one last lock which duly reaches the top of the forehead, one of those Roman foreheads, whose smallness has at all times indicated a mixture of self-righteousness, virtue and conquest.

What then is associated with these insistent fringes? Quite simply the label of Roman-ness. We therefore see here the mainspring of the Spectacle – the *sign* – operating in the open. The frontal lock overwhelms one with evidence, no one can doubt that he is in Ancient Rome. And this certainty is permanent: the actors speak, act, torment themselves, debate ‘questions of universal import’, without losing, thanks to this little flag displayed on their foreheads, any of their historical plausibility. Their general representativeness can even expand in complete safety, across the ocean and the centuries, and merge into the Yankee mugs of Hollywood extras: no matter, everyone is reassured, installed in the quiet certainty of a universe without duplicity, where Romans are Romans thanks to the most legible of signs: hair on the forehead (Barthes and Lavers, 1972).

Photographic depictions – still or moving – are the most obvious of signs that have an iconic relationship with the objects they depict.

1. **Iconic relationship**

This describes the physical similarities between a sign and its object. The smiley face icon is one of the most basic means of representing a human being and a human emotion, and one recognisable even to babies who have yet to develop language. Other simple signs of this nature might be stick men or women of the kind one finds on toilet doors.

2. **Indexical**

The operation of this sign-object relationship is defined by cause (sign) and effect (object). ‘Noises-off’ in film (owl or wolf calls in a scary movie for instance) are indicative of this relationship, as are footprints in the sand discovered by a castaway (other humans are here). You will note that these examples suggest that iconic signs can have a dual relationship with the object depicted or referred to – the image of a footprint is also iconic!

Photographic depictions – still or moving – are the most obvious of signs that have an iconic relationship with the objects they depict.
Some forms of brand identity are indicative of symbolic relations – the Nike swish, Adidas’s three stripes or Orange’s orange block would be good examples.

Organisation of signs in texts – media rhetoric and signification

Thus far we have concentrated on the singularity of signs without fully exploring the fact that texts are more than just a container for a series of signs. As media rhetoric teaches us, the way in which signs are organised and presented in texts is of vital importance to meaning.

When we learn to speak, read or write words, we do not just acquire vocabulary, we also learn a set of grammatical rules. These rules govern the way word signs are combined in a text so that they make sense. When we analyse texts, we don’t just engage in a sign-spotting activity – this would result in banal lists and offer little insight into meaning. The contribution of signs to the meaning of a text is more than a matter of their individuality: how they are combined and relate to each other is important to the total meaning or meanings, ordering it, limiting it, sometimes opening the text up to multiple interpretations.

When signs are combined, their structural relationship is changed. Different signs combined in different ways are likely to create different readings. Combination has its greatest effect on the connotations of a text and can have a range of effects on the interpretation of signs. On the one hand, a certain combination may inflect the nature of the way that we read signs and the associations that are invited. On the other hand, signs may reinforce each other to support a particular reading, repeating associations through a variety of signifiers. Repetition (over space or time) encourages a reader’s confidence in understanding something in a particular way. Sometimes the combination of signs can create a complete transformation in the associations we make. The reading of the signs combined might therefore be completely different from that of each sign presented separately. Because the meaning of signs is conventional, it is never fixed and absolutely certain. First, societies contain a range of people who have differing values and experiences in proportion to those they might share. Likewise, societies are dynamic – some values are always subject to change, even as others endure. Thus, meanings are forever subject to challenge and we can understand this through concepts of polysemia and multi-accentuality.

Another theorist who was concerned with trying to construct a theory of semiology that understands the use of signs in the act of communication is helpful here: Valentin Volosinov. This theorist was important in expanding upon the rather structure-centred approach of de Saussure, whose synchronic and structural approach to language function, as we’ve seen, tended to suggest that, despite the lived aspect of language, meaning resided in the relationship of words to each other. Thus a word such as dog signifies through virtue of not being hog, log or frog for instance.

Multi-accentuality refers to the concept that a sign has a central nucleus of meaning but that around this there are a range of other, close but distinct, possible meanings that can be identified. Volosinov’s approach led him to argue that meaning was not simply a function of the system of signification and its operation. He saw that different aspects of the social relationship of the communicators was just as important as the system of available vocabulary and grammar. He proposed that we should not think of a sign as having a meaning determined by and fixed within the language system. He argued that in use, signs have a slightly different meaning for different ‘readers’, or those at the receiving end of communication. He saw these differences as related to the differences in power between those involved in the act of communication. We could now see those differences in the connotation-level meaning of signs. Each sign has its own nucleus of meaning but slight differences or accents of meaning would be brought to bear depending upon the individual’s position in the social relationship of power in society.

The concept of multi-accentuality is sometimes linked to a related concept – that of polysemy. A literal translation of the word would give its meaning as many (poly) meanings (semia). However, it is important to distinguish between the multiplicity of readings possible because a text is ambiguous or abstruse (deliberately or otherwise), and those possible due to its polysemic nature. It is perhaps more productive to use the phrase ‘many readings’, to emphasise that the multiplicity of meanings come from different readings being made, rather than because the text lacks clarity as a construction or because its creator intended to be unclear about meaning.

Usually a text can be seen as polysemic because a range of different readers made different readings, rather than because one reader made a range of different readings. The latter case is only likely to happen if the text is ambiguous – or the reader is a difficult media student. To understand the difference, we need to examine some of the ideas of yet another influential semiologist, Umberto Eco.

Codes: textual encoding and decoding

Eco enlists the idea of a code in order to explore the way that different readers are able to make different readings of a text. A code is a means for converting information into a special format to communicate it. We are all familiar with code as a device for spies and secret agents, as an aid for subterfuge or, more innocuously, in Morse code. Each code contains within it a limited number of elements to choose from in communicating. Morse code uses dots and dashes – the signs in its signifying system.

A code also has a set of rules which determine how each element may be used and combined with other elements.
Preferred reading is where the text is created and under-'preferred' and 'aberrant' to refer to readings in this manner. Eco uses the terms used to create the text, then a reading other than that which is utilised by the reader is a different once from that communication. In essence his idea is a simple one. If the code semiologists by returning to the processual idea of commun- decoding, Eco goes against the prevailing approach of most using the idea of a code and the concepts of encoding and the way in which that combination inflects, reinforces or made from, we can then read it based upon a recognition their combination. When we recognise the code a text is provides a range of possible signs and the rules that govern the use of different codes. Media texts, being the complex things they are, offer many opportunities for polysemia, by drawing upon a wide range of signifying systems (think of an average website) and rhetorical strategies.

Polysemia and the media producer

Producers of media texts aim to ensure that polysemia is kept to a minimum. On one level polysemia could be viewed as a breakdown in communication and, in something as determined as an advert, something of a disaster. For this reason, media workers need to be skilled manipulators of media language and this is why media production is guided by so many professional rhetorical conventions, reinforced though institutional imperatives and resulting in relatively fixed codes when compared to contemporary art or literature. Of course, the relative rigidity of the codes and the control on the individual creativity of media workers is often seen as resulting in aesthetically inferior texts.

The main thing to think about here is how rhetorical techniques are deployed in order to direct and anchor meaning. Obvious examples would include the captioning of photographs and so on.

Uses and limits of semiology

So far, we have collated a set of analytical tools to allow us to undertake a comprehensive semiological analysis, ‘deconstructing’ texts in order to examine the way that they make meaning. We use these tools in total in a textual analysis in subsequent pages (p. 00). The one thing that we need to address, however, is whether or not we can be sure that our interpretations are convincing – shared by other readers or analysts – and not based simply upon a very personal and aberrant reading of the text.

Now, semiologists make no claim to objectivity, although there was once a ‘dream of scientificity’ to the enterprise. It is not possible, therefore, to present a reading as ‘fact’ or, for most of us, to draw upon our reputation as great thinkers or established academics in its support (and even then we should be prepared to express any disagree-ment with analyses). One approach is to draw on evidence that supports the general aspects of our interpretation rather than any personalised perspective. There are two ways in which we can do this – by demonstrating the

Morse code derives many of its rules from those of written grammar, which it attempts to stand in for. Of course, written language is a code too. There are a limited number of words that are available when we are writing and rules determine how they are combined (if we wish to make meaning). When you learn a language, you learn vocabulary and grammar. This is most apparent when you look at language other than your own!

A signifying code is a specific language system. The code provides a range of possible signs and the rules that govern their combination. When we recognise the code a text is made from, we can then read it based upon a recognition and understanding of the relational nature of the signs and the way in which that combination inflects, reinforces or transforms the way that signs should be read in that code. In using the idea of a code and the concepts of encoding and decoding, Eco goes against the prevailing approach of most semiologists by returning to the processual idea of commun-ication. In essence his idea is a simple one. If the code which is utilised by the reader is a different once from that used to create the text, then a reading other than that intended by the creators will result. Eco uses the terms ‘preferred’ and ‘aberrant’ to refer to readings in this manner. Preferred reading is where the text is created and under-stood using the same code. An aberrant reading is where one code is used in production but the text is read using another.

It is important to emphasise that Eco does not see aberrant readings as ‘wrong’ and in this he differs greatly from those who model communication as a simple linear process. The notion of an aberrant reading then allows us to see that a range of different readings might be made of a particular text. It allows us to make connections to other concepts that we have introduced. Thus polysemia in a text is the result of different aberrant readings, made possible by the use of different codes. Media texts, being the complex things they are, offer many opportunities for polysemia, by drawing upon a wide range of signifying systems (think of an average website) and rhetorical strategies.
examining the functions of elements of the text and at the same time providing a range of evidence and explanation for our interpretation. If we make arguments for which are the most significant elements in a text, we can then consider how they work together to anchor and direct meanings.

There is no guarantee that an analysis is not partial, but the greater the accuracy with which we employ analytical tools, the more weight the reading has. In the end, the objective of an analysis is being persuasive – in academic study being persuasive depends upon the systematic and thorough nature of your approach.

inter-subjective nature of our reading (not relying upon what we think or feel alone), and by providing detailed structural support for our analysis.

The first approach could utilise some form of audience research in order to investigate the range of readings individuals make of a text, as well as the commonalities in their comprehension. We examine the different approaches to media audiences taken by media studies academics in Chapter 00. The second approach is achieved through the use of the Peircean, de Saussurian and Barthesian concepts we have introduced thus far. By using the conceptual ideas as analytical tools, we ensure that we are examining the functions of elements of the text and at the same time providing a range of evidence and explanation for our interpretation. If we make arguments for which are the most significant elements in a text, we can then consider how they work together to anchor and direct meanings.

There is no guarantee that an analysis is not partial, but the greater the accuracy with which we employ analytical tools, the more weight the reading has. In the end, the objective of an analysis is being persuasive – in academic study being persuasive depends upon the systematic and thorough nature of your approach.

Are producers semioticians?

We’ve already suggested that media producers are experts in the manipulation of media rhetoric – they have to be to be effective. On the other hand, we would suggest that they are also effective semioticians in their use and deployment of signification. This is, in part, a result of being familiar with social conventions and being situated in the culture that they share with us as readers. Things tend to ‘mean’ or signify in particular ways as if they were just naturally so (see our discussion of mythology on pp. 00). When the team – as well as the artists – involved in the Destiny’s Child photo put it together, they did so with a degree of consciousness and apparent intuition, in order to get the image ‘right’.

Furthermore, those who might wonder at the utility of semiological ideas should note how related ideas and methods have escaped way beyond the academic world. Principles, stated or implied, are often at the core of much contemporary cultural criticism in the media itself. The work of companies such as Semiotic Solutions has sought to apply the approach to the commercial world: ‘to bring a radical new dimension of insight into traditional market research. Through semiotic analysis the critical element of cultural influence could be added to consumer psychology; suddenly we could see both halves (sic) of the consumption equation’ (www.semioticsolutions.com/home.php)

Semiology (as bio-semiology) has even attended to such diverse things as the colours and markings of species of birds, and the markings on insects such as bees and wasps, as systems of signification with functions within nature.
Summary

Conducting textual analyses

In this chapter we explored how media make meaning and how we might make sense of this process in scholarly and systematic ways. As a way of labelling the meaningful aspects of media products we introduced the idea of the media text, as distinct from the artefactual (physical) and commodity (economic) form of media products. We dwelt upon the idea of meaning as something obvious to us – we know what media texts mean already – but that we rarely stop to think about how they mean. We suggested that this is an important consideration for prompting us to step back from some of the habitual ways in which we often think of media forms and how they present the world to us.

We developed our discussion by introducing a range of analytical tools that allow us to precisely explore and outline how media texts are meaningful. We separated these for the benefit of understanding but insist that they must be combined in order to make analyses effective.

First, we introduced the concept of rhetoric or persuasive language here to explore the ways in which available media conventions (framing, design, acting styles and so on) are employed to organise and convey meaning. We drew upon some of the roots of this idea of persuasive language in order to think about how media rhetoric positions us as consumers of meaning and the kinds of affective responses media texts generate in us (attention, thrill, laughter, lust, etc.). In order to schematically detail media rhetoric we identified a series of rhetorical devices or labels to describe how media forms work. These were verbal rhetoric, presentational rhetoric, photographic devices and editorial rhetoric. Not all of these devices apply to all media forms, nor are they all present at all times when applicable – they are resources for us to draw upon. We sought to demonstrate these ideas and how they work in our support in a brief example of a rhetorical analysis of a magazine cover. This should give you a sense of how to perform this analysis and you will need to think about practising this approach against similar texts and other forms.

In the second part of this chapter we introduced the concept of semiology – the study of signs. We set out some of the foundational ideas and thinkers in semiotics and the key concepts they provide us with. Core to the idea of semiotics is the sign and signifying systems which gives us an approach to consider further how meaning works and where meaning is derived from. As semiotics was formulated as an approach to linguistics, here we consider media conventions – visual, aural and so on – as akin to language (and of course media forms use written and spoken words too!). We suggested that media texts present us with combinations of complex signs and introduced a range of ‘jargon’ terms from semiotics such as denotation and connotation in order to locate how meaning works and the different ways in which it works. Drawing upon some contemporary cultural and media theorists our discussion and examples of how to use, and why we use, semiotics involved a consideration of the social contexts in which meaning is made. As meaning is formed out of the contextual and conventional understanding of signifying systems we therefore considered the ways in which meanings sometimes escape any intentions that media producers might have as well as the tactics they employ in order to anchor and direct the interpretations we make. Thus, ideas of polysemy and multi-accentuality serve to instruct us in some of the subjective aspects of our readings of media texts but that our tools, if employed properly and rigorously, serve to support any interpretations and arguments we wish to make about meaning.

You should now evaluate what you are able to do as a result of this chapter. If you have followed this chapter through, engaged with the activities and thought about the issues covered you should be able to:

- Distinguish between the artefactual, commodity and textual aspects of media outputs. If you are unsure about this distinction go back to the relevant discussion and examine a further range of media products in order to think through these ideas and how they help in making sense of media meanings.

- Define and identify the rhetorical devices involved in producing and organising meaning in media texts. Remember that different media forms employ different conventions. Our list of rhetorical devices gives us a resource to draw upon to make sense of different forms and how these devices might be combined. You can refine your understanding by paying attention to different types of media.

- Utilise tools of rhetorical and semiological analysis in support of the interpretation of the meaning of media texts. Do remember that these devices were introduced in order to make sense of how media texts use available conventions to make meanings. We use these tools in order to underline our arguments about how meaning is made and where it derives from. Don’t forget that our interpretations always begin with the text, not the tool.

- Conceptualise the relationship of media meanings to social contexts. Media texts are not produced in a vacuum. What they say and what we make of them
has something to do with the society we inhabit. Media texts are then about something, more than an assemblage of trite stories, thrills and so on – which are all important. You can get to grips with what we mean by the contexts for media meaning by examining some of the other chapters in this book but also by thinking critically about your own consumption.

Our aim in this chapter has not been to present a model approach to media textual analysis: there isn’t one! We have some tools but no simple means of making a reading that is reproducible on every occasion we wish to make sense of what the media ‘mean’. This is something you will have to do by being attuned and responsive to media products and confident in your use of these ideas.

It worth reiterating that analysis always starts with our own reading as consumers and we try to make sense of that reading in relation to the signifying system, or combination of systems, before us. Concepts of rhetoric and rhetorical devices, as well as all of the terms from semiotics, are tools to be employed as needed. They do not provide a list that needs to be consulted ‘in order’ every time we wish to understand the nature of texts. They will however fortify the arguments we wish to present to others about our interpretations of the value and social role of the media.

Further reading


An indispensable book for those who wish to further their understanding of semiotics. Bignell carefully takes the reader through the process of semiological analysis, introducing different techniques and providing numerous examples drawn from all manner of media. He offers in-depth analyses of men’s magazines, reality television shows and mobile phone text messaging.


Based on the BBC television series of the same name from the early 1970s, Berger’s Ways of Seeing might seem a little outdated but it is still an important resource for the media scholar who wishes to understand the lineage behind some of the cultural ideas represented in visual images. Though it is generally concerned with fine art, the final essay on publicity and advertising is of particular interest.


We used an extract from this highly influential work earlier in this chapter but the other articles are of great interest. The ‘Myth Today’ article introduces Barthes’ ideas and these are expanded further in his other essays as he looks at soap detergent advertisements and also wrestling, areas are still pertinent today. Also of interest is Barthes’ article ‘The Rhetoric of the Image’, taken from his 1977 work Image, Music, Text. This essay looks at myths in modern advertising, problems with the semiotics of images and the way in which an Italian pasta advertisement connotes a sense of ‘Italianicity’.


Offering numerous contemporary and historical examples, Defining Visual Rhetorics looks at the persuasive techniques employed in media texts. The book opens with a study of Thomas E. Franklin’s photograph from September 11, 2001, ‘Firefighters at Ground Zero’, and goes on to offer analyses of Hitchcock’s Vertigo, magazines and political rhetoric. Though the examples are mainly American, this work is still of great value for those understanding media rhetoric. Also, see Brummett (2006) Rhetoric in Popular Culture for a similar tome.