SEMIOTICS AND TELEVISION

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Semiotics is the study of everything that can be used for communication: words, images, traffic signs, flowers, music, medical symptoms, and much more. Semiotics studies the way such *signs communicate* and the rules that govern their use. As a tool for the study of culture, semiotics represents a radical break from traditional criticism, where the first order of business is interpretation of an aesthetic object or text in terms of its immanent meaning. Semiotics first asks *how* meaning is created, rather than *what* the meaning is. In order to do this, semiotics invented a specialized vocabulary to describe signs and how they function. Often this vocabulary smacks of scientism to the newcomer and clashes with our assumptions about what criticism and the humanities are. But the special terminology of semiotics and its attempt to compare the production of meaning in a diverse set of mediums—aesthetic signs being only one of many objects of study—have allowed us to describe the workings of cultural communication with greater accuracy and enlarged our recognition of the conventions that characterize our culture.

The term semiotics was coined by Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914), an American philosopher interested in pragmatism; his work on semiotics did not become widely known until the 1930s. The field was also "invented" by a Swiss linguist named Ferdinand de Saussure. The term he used to describe the new science he advocated in *Course in General Linguistics*, published posthumously in 1959, was semiology. Beginning in the 1960s, some leading European intellectuals devoted themselves to the study of semiotics and applied it to many different sign systems. Roland Barthes carefully analyzed fashion, French popular culture, and a novella by Balzac. Umberto Eco turned his attention to Superman comic strips and James Bond novels. (In 1983, Eco published an international best seller, a peculiarly semiotic detective novel entitled *The Name of the Rose*.) Christian Metz set out to describe the Hollywood cinema as a semiotic system. At its best, semiotics super-

sedes some of the apparently arbitrary divisions between fields of study that we are familiar with as academic departments in the university; it draws ideas from many different disciplines, and this makes it specially suited to the study of television.

THE SIGN

The smallest unit of meaning in semiotics is called the sign. Semiotics begins with this smallest unit and builds to rules for the combination of signs and the connotative meanings produced from them. Ferdinand de Saussure conceptualized the sign as composed of two distinct parts, although these parts are not separable in actual communication, only in theory. Every sign is composed of a *signifier*, that is, the image, object, or sound itself—the part of the sign which has a material form—and the *signified*, that is, the concept it represents. In written language the sign *rain* is composed of the four letters on this page (the signifier) and the definition of rain (the signified), that is, drops of water that fall from the sky. Saussure argued that the relationship between the signifier and the signified in language was entirely conventional, completely arbitrary. Words have no positive value, no meaning in and of themselves. Instead, a word's meaning derives from its difference from other words in the sign system of language. On the level of signifier, *rain* derives its meaning from its distinguishability from brain or sprain or rail or Braille or roan or reign. The signified is meaningful because of its difference from *sprinkle, drizzle, downpour, monsoon.* Each language marks off a set of meaningful differences: we can imagine an infinite number of possibilities for signifiers and signifieds, but each language makes only some differences important and detectable. Learning a second language is difficult because each language consists of a set of signs whose meanings derive from differences we might not be sensitive to, such as phonetic distinctions, grammar rules, and words that are untranslatable into our first language.

Saussure's ideas are more difficult to apply to sign systems like television, in which language is only one component. When the word *rain* is used on a television weather forecast, for example, we are faced with a much more complex signification. The signifier is made up of many different components of the image and the soundtrack. The two-dimensional, luminous image is rectangular, with a fixed aspect ratio of 3 : 4. The focal length of the camera lens, lighting, angle, color, and composition are characteristics of the signifier as well. The signified can be thought of as everything that this television image and soundtrack represent: the newscaster, his voice, speech pattern, dress, hair style, make-up, as well as the meaning of any words that may appear on the screen, such as the weather forecast. When watching television, we often forget about the signifier and treat television's signs as pure signified.

Semiotics allows us to recognize the conventional and arbitrary relationship of signifier to signified in a whole range of signs that we take for granted in our everyday life as natural, even necessary. It also allows us to describe the relationships among signs within a single system, such as television. Umberto Eco defines the sign this way: "A sign is everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else."[1] Eco means to include in this definition natural signs as well as cultural ones: it is through social convention that we learn to interpret a dark, cloudy sky as signifying the approach of a rainstorm.

Eco's conception of the sign is adapted from the work of Charles S. Peirce, who did not limit himself to linguistics, as Saussure did, but attempted to account for every type of sign. For Peirce, the sign could be broken down into three parts, rather than Saussure's two. These were the representament (roughly equivalent to the signifier), the object (or signified) and the interpretant (the sign that we use to translate the first sign). The interpretant is what we use to describe the sign, and in our description we inevitably turn to another sign. When we say that an image on the television news is "Winnie Mandela," we have translated the sign system of television images into another sign system—that of proper nouns. This interpretant is another sign that translates, explains, stands for the first sign. Peirce saw this as an unending chain of sign production, what Eco has dubbed "unlimited semiosis." The sign "Winnie Mandela" may require a further interpretant for some, such as "South African leader in the fight against apartheid." This may lead to more signs if we attempt to describe "Winnie Mandela": more words, more images, and so on.

Peirce's model does not require the *intention* to communicate: signs may be produced by nonhuman agencies, for example, or by unconscious senders. Peirce's model does not necessarily require a human receiver of the sign, or any receiver at all, though, as Eco explains, "the

interpretation by an interpreter, which would seem to characterize a sign, must be understood as the possible interpretation by a possible interpreter. . . . The human addressee is the methodological (if not the empirical) guarantee of the existence of signification."[2]

A mechanical failure at my local television station may send the sign "technical breakdown" to my television set, whether I am in the room watching it or not; in this case there is a nonhuman sender and no receiver at all. Peirce's concept of the sign is important because it forces the realization that no communication takes place outside of sign systems—we are always translating signs into other signs. The conventions of the sign system control the ways we are able to make meanings (that is, produce signifiers) and limit the range of meanings available to us (that is, what signifieds we produce).

Peirce described signs as falling into three categories: symbolic, iconic, or indexical. Language uses symbolic signs, in which the relationship between signifier and signified is an arbitrary one. But language can fool us into feeling as though the sign is somehow motivated by a natural connection to what it stands for. When we study a second language, the discovery of "cognates" (words which remain substantially the same from one language to another) may reinforce our feeling of the necessary associations between certain words (or signifiers) and certain signifieds. But many words bear no similarity whatsoever to our first language, even if they are from the same language family; and in each language some things are said in ways that are impossible in other sign systems. Even onomatopoeia—the use of words that seem to imitate the sound they signify—turns out to be conventional after all. For speakers of English the rooster goes "cock-a-doodle-doo"; for Germans he goes "Kikeriki."

Language is a very important sign system used by television, but words are not the only symbolic signs that television uses. Objects may become symbolic signs, as when roses signify love; champagne signifies celebration; a rainbow symbolizes hope; a flag symbolizes a nation. Symbolic signs may be invested with so much feeling that the conventionality of the connection between the signifier (for example, a cloth patterned in red, white and blue) and the signified (United States of America) is no longer easy to grasp. The mistreatment of certain signifiers, such as a cross, may be understood as a direct attack on the signified (Christianity). Other symbolic signs, such as red lights, may be invested with less emotion, but may also feel more or less

"natural" to us: we *feel* as though red and only red could be used to tell us to stop.

Television incorporates many symbolic signs into its images; we then have a sign (the image) that stands for the symbolic sign (the object). Some aspects of the image that we think of as nonrepresentational function as symbolic signs as well, such as colors (pink for femaleness, white for goodness); music (minor chords and slow tempos to signify melancholy, solo instrumentals to signify loneliness); photographic technique (soft focus to signify romance, hand-held camera to signify on-the-spot documentary). These signs are all established through convention, through repeated use. Semiotic analysis of television has as one of its goals making us conscious of the use of symbolic signs on television, so that we realize how much of what appears "naturally" meaningful on TV is actually historical and changeable.

The second kind of sign which Peirce described is the iconic sign, in which the signifier structurally resembles its signified. We must *learn* to recognize this resemblance, as when we learn to read maps or to draw. The correspondence between a drawing of a cat, for example, and the signified "cat" (which might be a particular specimen of cat or the concept of cat in general) could take many different forms. The drawing could be skeletal or anatomical, in which case it might take the training of a veterinarian or a zoologist to recognize any structural similarity between the drawing and the signified "cat." The iconic sign could be a child's drawing, in which another kind of expert decoder, such as the child's parent or teacher, might be required to detect the structural resemblance. Most drawings rely on rules that dictate point of view and scale; an "aerial view" of a cat, a head-on angle, or a drawing done twenty times scale would be much harder for most of us to recognize than the conventional side-angle view where two legs, a tail, a pointed ear and whiskers will do the job, even if no attempt is made to render coloration and the entire drawing appears only as an outline in black. Most of these admonitions about the conventionality of drawings hold true for video images as well, even though we think of television as much more lifelike. By violating conventions of scale, perspective, camera angle, color, lighting, lens focal length, and subject-to-camera distance of focus, we could easily obtain a video image of a cat that would defy recognition—no one would guess that the object in front of the camera had been a cat. Even iconic signs that we treat as particularly unique because they have as their signified an individual

living creature may be dictated by convention. The feline celebrity Morris, from the Nine Lives cat food commercials, died, but his fans did not have to suffer the loss of his image. The iconic sign "Morris" lives on, thanks to the skills of the production crew and the animal trainer who found a stand-in cat to make the commercials. It may be a blow to our faith in physiognomy, but we can be fooled by pictures of persons almost as easily.

The structural resemblances involved in iconic signs must be learned, and with TV images this involves learning to recognize many conventions of representation. One of the characteristics of such representational codes is that we tend not to recognize their use; they become as "natural" to us as the symbolic signs of language, and we think of iconic signs as the most logical—sometimes as the only possible—way to signify aspects of our world.

Indexical signs, the third type of sign defined by Peirce, involve an existential link between signifier and signified: the sign relies on their co-presence at some point in time. Drawings do not qualify as indexical signs because we can make a drawing of something we have never seen. Maps are iconic, rather than indexical, because a cartographer can create a map solely on the basis of other iconic signs, such as diagrams and geological surveys; she may never have been to the place the map will "signify." Indexical signs are different from iconic ones because they rely on a material connection between signifier and signified: smoke means fire; pawprints mean the presence of a cat; a particular set of fingerprints signifies "Richard Nixon"; red spots signify "measles." Most images produced by cameras belong to the class of "indexical signs" because they require the physical presence of the signified before the camera lens at some point in time for their production. This fact about an image is difficult to verify, however, and images—like those of Morris—can lie. Many images produced by cameras do not meet such qualifications, such as trick photographs, special effects, computer-generated graphics, multiple exposures, and animated images.

Indexical signs are established through social convention. Animals have left pawprints as long as they have roamed the earth, but their pawprints became a sign only when people began to use them for tracking. As Umberto Eco explains:

> The first doctor who discovered a sort of constant relationship between an array of red spots on the patient's face and a given disease (measles) made an inference: but insofar as this relationship has been made conventional and has been registered as such in medical treatises a *semiotic convention* has been established. There is a sign every time a human group decides to use and recognize something as the vehicle for something else.[3]

Indexical signs are no less tainted by human intervention than symbolic or iconic ones; they require the same accumulation of convention, the same reinforcement and perpetuation within a society to be understood as signs in the first place. These categories are not mutually exclusive. Television constantly uses all three types of signs, and after one has understood the distinctions among them it may be useful to think of television functioning as two or three different kinds of signs simultaneously—for example, as symbolic *and* indexical.

"The camera never lies" is a statement that tells us a lot about the way we accept television images as real because they involve indexical signs, even if, from a semiotic point of view, the statement is a falsehood. Many television images are produced in such a way that we are encouraged to understand them only as indexical signs. Stand-up shots of reporters on location is one example of this; we may not be able to decipher from the image itself whether Andrea Mitchell is really standing on the White House lawn or not, but TV places an enormous stress on the *connection* between the image and this location as it exists in real time and space.[4] So much has been made of the objectivity of the camera as a recording instrument since its invention that we often fail to recognize the extent to which camera images are produced according to rules just as drawings are. Semiotics reminds us that the signifiers produced by TV are related to the signifieds by convention, even if, when we watch something like the news, we tend not to think of the active production of signs involved in TV, but receive the news rather as pure information, pure signified.

It is important to remember that TV is a sign system, and, therefore, can be used to lie. To engage in fantasy for a moment, consider producing a newsbreak about an event of pure imagination for broadcast on network TV. If we gave some careful thought to the way newsbreaks are written and the topics usually covered in them, we could script and storyboard a newsbreak on our own. If we had access to the facilities, technicians, equipment, supplies, and personnel of one of the networks, and if we could coerce an anchor to violate his professional ethics (or find a convincing impostor) to read our script, we could produce

a newsbreak, complete with "live action" reports, that would be indistinguishable from the authentic item. No viewer could detect the difference from the TV sign alone.

Umberto Eco criticizes Peirce's distinction among symbolic, iconic, and indexical because it tends to overlook the historical and social production of all signs. Instead, Eco offers a definition that casts all signs in terms of this context: "Semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all."[5]

COMBINATION AND CONNOTATION

A semiotics of television provides us with a set of problems different from those encountered when studying written or spoken language. What is television's smallest unit of meaning? Is there a grammar of TV, a set of rules governing the combination of sounds and images? Where does signification begin and end? How does television as a sign system change? To answer these questions it will be necessary to introduce several more terms from the special vocabulary of semiotics: *channel, code, paradigmatic, syntagmatic, connotation, denotation, synchronic, diachronic.* The late Paddy Whannel used to joke, "Semiotics tells us things we already know in a language we will never understand." Learning the vocabulary of semiotics is certainly one of its most trying aspects. This vocabulary makes it possible, however, to identify and describe what makes TV distinctive as a communication medium, as well as how it relies on other sign systems to communicate. Both questions are vital to the practice of television criticism.

Unlike language, television does not conveniently break down into phonemes, morphemes, or letters of the alphabet. A technological definition of the smallest unit of meaning is the frame: "A complete scanning cycle of the electron beam, which occurs every 1/30 second. It represents the smallest complete television picture unit."[6] If we use the frame as the "smallest unit of meaning," however, we ignore the soundtrack, where 1/30 second would not necessarily capture a meaningful sound. When Christian Metz wrote his semiotics of the cinema he identified five channels of communication: image, written language, voice, music, and sound effects.[7] In borrowing these categories, I substitute the term graphics for written materials, so as to include the logos, borders, frames, diagrams and computer-animated images that appear so often on our television screen, and because this is the production term for such images. In *Cinema and Language,* Metz concluded that television and cinema were "two neighboring language systems" that were characterized by an unusual degree of closeness, but he never analyzed television in the same meticulous way he did the cinema. Before returning to the question of TV's smallest unit of meaning, it will be useful to review some recent theoretical work on how TV uses these five channels and how this usage compares to that of the cinema.

It is a commonplace that TV is nothing but talking heads—which tells us that facial close ups and speech are singularly important to it. Television production textbooks warn students about the need for simplicity in the image and explain how to achieve it through visual *codes* such as symmetrical compositions, color compatibility, and high key lighting. These conventions of TV production represent an *interpretation* of video technology and its limitations, but they are not a necessary consequence of it. As John Ellis has explained the logic of these visual codes: "Being small, low definition, subject to attention that will not be sustained, the TV image becomes jealous of its meaning. It is unwilling to waste it on details and inessentials."[8] In part, these codes dictate both how the images are produced and what is represented: we see more shots of actors, emcees, newscasters, politicians—and commodities—than anything else.

Broadcast TV uses graphics to clarify the meaning of its images, and it does so to a much greater extent than the motion picture. Diagrams are superimposed over news or sports images to invite a quasi-scientific scrutiny of the image. Borders and frames mask out the background of the already pared-down images. Words constantly appear on the screen to identify the program, the sponsoring corporation, the network, the product name, the person portrayed. Often the words on screen echo speech on the soundtrack, which goes on continually. In his analysis of other forms of mass communication, Roland Barthes described verbal language as always providing the definitive meaning for the image: "It is not very accurate to talk of a civilization of the image—we are still, and more than ever, a civilization of writing, writing and speech continuing to be the full terms of the informational structure."[9] For Barthes, verbal language is used to close down the

number of possible meanings the image might have. This "anchoring" of the image by the verbal text frequently supplies a bourgeois worldview: "The anchorage may be ideological and indeed this is its principal function; the text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others; by means of an often subtle *dispatching* it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance."[10]

John Ellis and Rick Altman have argued that the television soundtrack—speech, music, sound effects—entirely dominates the image by determining when we actually look at the screen. The soundtrack is so full, so unambiguous that we can understand television just by listening to it. Because television is a domestic appliance that we tend to have on while doing other things—cooking, eating, talking, caring for children, cleaning—our relationship to the television set is often that of auditor rather than viewer. Altman argues that sounds such as applause, program theme music, and the speech of announcers tend to precede the image they refer to and serve primarily to call the viewer back to the screen: "The sound serves a value-laden editing function, identifying better than the image itself the parts of the image that are sufficiently spectacular to merit closer attention by the intermittent viewer."[11] For Altman, the television soundtrack acts as a lure, continually calling to us: "Hey, you, come out of the kitchen and watch this!"

The television commercial, the football game, the made-for-TV movie, the talk show, and the situation comedy have their own distinctive ways of combining sounds and images. From a semiotic viewpoint, one of the most important characteristics of television in general (and one that is shared by many genres) might be its tendency to use all five channels simultaneously, as television commercials typically do. This might also explain television's low status as an aesthetic text; too much goes on at once on TV and there is too much redundancy among the different sound elements and the image for it to be "artistic." The primary function of the soundtrack violates conventional notions in cinema aesthetics about the necessity of subordinating sound to image. The high degree of repetition that exists between soundtrack and image track, and between segments, is mirrored at the generic level of the series, which is television's definitive form. As Umberto Eco explains about the debased aesthetic status of TV: "This excess of pleasurability, repetition, lack of innovation, was felt as a commercial trick

(the product had to meet the expectations of its audience), not as the provocative proposal of a new (and difficult to accept) world vision. The products of mass media were equated with the products of industry insofar as they were produced *in series*, and the 'serial' production was considered as alien to the artistic invention."[12] Because semiotics recognizes the role of convention in all verbal and visual sign production—including aesthetic production—it tends to take a less condemning view of television and therefore may have more to say about TV as a communication system than traditional criticism, which dismisses TV as a vulgarity.

Film semiotics has tended to scrutinize the image much more than the soundtrack. In television this separation is much more problematic, because sound bears an entirely different relationship to the image. To speak of the smallest unit of meaning on a soundtrack we must separate its three components—music, speech, sound effects. Each one has sound elements whose miminum unit is of different duration, and these do not correspond to single images, but overlap the images. A semiotics of TV sound calls for linguistics, audiology, and musical theory and is outside of the scope of this chapter, where we will have to confine discussion to the image.

Christian Metz concluded that the cinema is so different from language that we must be wary of applying linguistic theory. For Metz, no smallest units were discernible in the cinema. It must be analyzed at the level of the shot, which he called its "largest minimum segment." This resembles Eco's conclusion that iconic signs—images—are not reducible to smaller units; they are already "texts," that is, combinations of signs, and they are governed by a code that is weak compared to the grammar rules that govern language. Weak codes are flexible, changeable, and can produce an unforeseeable number of individual signs.[13]

Metz was able to explain a great deal about editing as a code of the classical Hollywood cinema using the shot as his "minimum segment" and the semiotic concepts *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic*.[14] A syntagm is an ordering of signs, a rule-governed combination of signs in sequence. A paradigm is a set of signs that are similar in that they may be substituted for one another according to the rules of combination. One paradigmatic category, based on subject-to-camera distance, consists of the class of signs we identify as close-ups. Another paradigm might be "all shots of Bill Cosby." When a syntagmatic chain is pro-

duced—for example, a sequence of shots on an episode of *The Cosby Show*—the shots defined in terms of these paradigms are inserted in their proper place in the sequence: long shot of Cosby, medium shot of Cosby, close-up of Cosby, close-up of Phylicia Rashād, close-up of Cosby.

The concepts paradigmatic and syntagmatic may be applied to a higher level of organization than the shot. We could define a paradigm as all television commercials. A syntagmatic chain that selects from this paradigm is: closing credits of *The Cosby Show;* cereal commercial; Armed Forces commercial; continued closing credits of *The Cosby Show;* NBC commercial (preview) for special; NBC commercial for Friday night programs; automobile commercial. Because television is often broadcast twenty-four hours a day, and because it is so discontinuous—combining many different segments of short duration—determining the beginning and end of these "syntagmatic chains" presents special problems for the TV critic. Paradigms are not easily determined either. Does it make sense to analyze an individual episode apart from its place in the entire series? Can we separate the program from the commercial breaks when we write television criticism?

Syntagms and paradigms can be found in relationships between texts, as well as within a single text. A generic paradigm of "TV game show" might include *Wheel of Fortune, Let's Make a Deal, The $64,000 Question, Queen for a Day, What's My Line, Jeopardy,* and *Family Feud.* It would be necessary to describe the basis on which these shows can be grouped together, our criterion for associating them. A syntagmatic arrangement of game shows might be based on their sequence in programming, their place on the TV schedule with morning shows first and evening shows later. Another kind of syntagm might be based on their chronological appearance in the course of TV broadcast history, with an older show such as *Queen for a Day* preceding a more recent one such as *Wheel of Fortune.* Paradigmatic associations are *synchronic:* we group signs together as though they had no history or temporal order. Syntagmatic relationships tend to be *diachronic:* they unfold in time, whether it be a matter of seconds or of years. The meaning of every sign is influenced by syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships. *Wheel of Fortune* derives some of its meaning from its differences from and similarities to other TV game shows. It also derives meaning from its position on the daily TV schedule, and its place on the time line of broadcast history.

Saussurean linguistics is a synchronic model for the study of language. It insists that sign systems can only be understood as they exist at one point in time. Semiotics was founded, then, on a static model of the sign. Some of the gravest shortcomings of semiotics as a theory are a consequence of this: it inherits the tendency to ignore change, to divorce the sign from its referent, and to exclude the sender and receiver. These characteristics limit the usefulness of semiotics in the study of television. Because television is based on weaker codes than those that govern language, it is much more unstable as a system of meaning. Unlike language, television does not provide most of us with access to sign production. Terry Eagleton's critique of structuralism (which includes semiotics) in the study of literature must be remembered when studying television, as well:

> Structuralism, in a word, was hair-raisingly unhistorical. . . . Having characterized the underlying rule-systems of a literary text, all the structuralist could do was sit back and wonder what to do next. There was no question of relating the work to the realities of which it treated, or to the conditions which produced it, or to the actual readers who studied it, since the founding gesture of structuralism had been to bracket off such realities. In order to reveal the nature of language, Saussure . . . had first of all to repress or forget what it talked about: the referent, or real object which the sign denoted, was put in suspension so that the structure of the sign itself could be better examined.[15]

Semiotics is extremely useful in its attempt to describe precisely how television produces meaning, and in its insistence on the conventionality of all signs. For if signs are conventional they are also changeable. But semiotics remains silent on the question of how to change a sign system. Stubbornly restricting itself to the text, it cannot explain television economics, production, history, or the audience.

The problem with treating television as a synchronic system is best illustrated with the case of connotative meanings. Roland Barthes devoted much of his work to the distinction between *denotation* and *connotation* in aesthetic texts, including images. Denotation is the first order of signification: the signfier is the image itself and the signified is simply what was before the camera, what the signifier is a picture of. Connotation is a second order signifying system that uses the first sign, the denotation, as its signifier, and attaches another meaning to

it, another signified. Connotation tends to obscure the status of the picture itself as a sign, that is, the first order of signification. Barthes thought of connotation as fixing, or freezing, the meaning of the denotation; it impoverishes the first sign by ascribing a single and usually ideological signified to it.[16] This is why it takes many words to describe the signifier at the first level: we must include camera angle, color, size, lighting, composition, and so on. But connotations can be described in just a few words.

To begin with a simple denotation: the fade to black has as its signifier the gradual disappearance of the picture to black on the screen, and as its signified simply "black." This sign has been strongly conventionalized in the syntagmatic code of motion pictures and television so that it exists as the following connotative sign: the signifier is "fade to black" and the signified is "the end." Television production texts insist students must always fade to black at the end of every program and before any commercial breaks.[17] The fade to black has become part of a very stable connotation. But connotations have a way of multiplying and changing. On *Knot's Landing*, a CBS prime time soap opera that has cultivated an image as a "quality program," each segment ends with a fade to black that lasts several beats longer than on most programs. Here "fade to black" is part of the tone of *Knot's Landing;* it is used for the connotation "serious drama," "high class show." Connotations fix the meaning of a sign, but the denotation "fade to black" could take on other meanings, as well. A frequent use of fades to black could connote "rank amateur production," for example, or "experimental, modernist video."

Barthes argued that connotation is the primary way that the mass media communicate ideological meanings. A dramatic example of the operation of "myth," as Barthes called such connotations, and of television's rapid elaboration of new meanings is the space shuttle *Challenger.* The sign consisted of a signifier—the TV image itself—that was coded in certain ways (symmetrical composition, long short of shuttle on launching pad, daylight, blue sky background) for instant recognition, and the denoted meaning, or signified, "space shuttle." On the connotative level, the space shuttle was used as a signifier for a set of ideological signifieds such as scientific progress, manifest destiny in space, U.S. superiority over the U.S.S.R. On 28 January 1986, these connotations were radically displaced by the explosion of the *Challenger.* That day all three commercial networks broadcast videotape of the space shuttle repeatedly, obsessively. It was acccompanied first by a stunned silence, then by an abundance of speech by newscasters, by expert interviewees, by press agents, by President Reagan (who canceled his State of the Union address to speak about the explosion), much of which primarily expressed shock. The connotation of the sign "space shuttle" was destabilized; it became once again subject—as a denotation—to an unpredictable number of individual meanings or competing ideological interpretations. It was as if the explosion restored the sign's original signified, which could then lead to a series of questions and interpretations of the space shuttle that related to its status as a material object, its design, what it was made out of, who owned it, who had paid for it, what it was actually going to do on the mission, who had built it, how much control the crew or others at NASA had over it. At such a moment, the potential exists for the production of counterideological connotations. Rather than "scientific progress," the connotation "fallibility of scientific bureaucracy" might have been attached to the space shuttle; "manifest destiny in space" might have been replaced by "waste of human life"; and "U.S. superiority over the U.S.S.R." by "basic human needs sacrificed to technocracy."

Television played a powerful role in stabilizing the meaning of the space shuttle. The networks, following the lead of the White House, fixed on a connotation that was compatible with the state ideology almost immediately. This connotative meaning is readable in the graphic that was devised by the television production staffs and appeared in the frame with the newscasters when they introduced further reports on the Challenger: an image of the space shuttle with a U.S. flag at half-mast in the left foreground. Television fixed the connotation "tragic loss for a noble and patriotic cause" to the sign "space shuttle." Television produced this new connotation within hours of the historical event of the *Challenger*'s explosion. Some of its force comes from its association with cultural and ideological codes that already have wide circulation: the genre of war films, the TV news formula for reporting of military casualties, the history of national heroes and martyrs. Later interpretations of the *Challenger* explosion or the space shuttle program must compete with this one, which is in turn vulnerable to historical change.

The study of connotation indicates the importance of understanding television signs as a diachronic or historical system—one that is subject to change. Semiotics allows us to describe the process of connota-

tion, the relationship of signs within a system, and the nature of signs themselves. But the study of connotation also directs us outside the television text and beyond the discourse of semiotics. We cannot comprehend the space shuttle as a sign without studying the producers of messages (television networks, NASA, the White House press corps), the receivers of messages (the U.S. public), and the context in which signification takes place (the object of study in economics, sociology, political science, philosophy). Semiotics leads us to questions about these things, but it cannot help us to answer them.

SAMPLE CRITICAL ANALYSIS: ONE MINUTE OF THE COSBY SHOW

What follows is a semiotic analysis of the opening credit sequence for *The Cosby Show* during the 1985–86 television season. The sequence lasts only a minute, yet it has been difficult to limit the analysis to a few pages. This is typical of semiotics, which often produces a discourse about an individual text that is many times longer than the original; because of this semiotics has gained a reputation for being rather tedious. The *Cosby* credit sequence has been chosen because it is something that may have been seen repeatedly, not just by the semiotician, who must go over the text a huge number of times in order to analyze it, but also by the average viewer of *The Cosby Show*. (See chart 1-1 for a shot breakdown and description of the sequence.)

CHART 1-1
The Cosby Show: Opening Credits Sequence, 1985–86 Season

Image denotation	
SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
Computer graphic resembling theater marquee with neon lights: "Let's All Be There" fade to black fade up	NBC logo
Close-up; one shot; medium gray background; key light from left.	Bill Cosby looks straight into camera, grinning, then raises eyes as he rocks his head from side to side in time to music as he exits frame left. *(Music begins)*
Graphic White block letters on medium gray background. Bill Cosby The Cosby Show in in stereo where available *(Main melodic line of music played by brass instruments begins)*	
Close-up; one shot; medium gray backdrop; no camera movement.	Cosby enters frame right leading Phylicia Rashād (Claire Huxtable) by the hand. Cosby kisses her hand, exits frame left as Rashād enters frame right. She looks after him off screen, then looks at camera, smiling, as she wags her finger after Cosby.
Long shot; two shot; medium gray limbo backdrop. Strong key light on left casts shadows towards right edge of frame.	Rashād dances in front of Cosby, shaking her hips as she looks at him; then raises her arms and looks ahead. Cosby dances bent over, taking small steps, "clowning."
Rashād wears yellow blouse, black skirt, red shoes, earrings, belt. Cosby wears gray slacks, sweater with blue, red, green, black stripes.	
Graphic over image starring PHYLICIA RASHĀD *(Music continues)*	
Image denotation	
SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
Close-up; two shot.	Cosby and Sabrina LaBeauf (Sondra Huxtable) face camera, standing shoulder to shoulder; Cosby holds himself bolt upright. LeBeauf begins

CHART 1-1 (*Continued*)
The Cosby Show: Opening Credits Sequence, 1985–86 Season

	nodding her head in time to music, smiles. Cosby looks at her then back at the camera as he rolls his eyes, knits his brow.
Long shot; two shot.	LeBeauf dances in front of Cosby; Cosby dances bent over, takes tiny steps.

LeBeauf wears red shirt, black skirt, red boots.

Graphic over image
SABRINA LEBEAUF

Close-up; two shot.	Cosby and Lisa Bonet (Denise Huxtable) in profile; they look at each other, smiling, then at camera, then at each other as Bonet laughs.
Long shot; two shot.	Cosby and Bonet dance side by side; Bonet turns her back to him and "bumps" him off screen left.

Bonet wears wide red pants, gray jacket with epaulets; black shoes.

Graphic over image
LISA BONET

Close-up; two shot.	Cosby enters frame right leading Malcolm-Jamal Warner (Theo Huxtable) through frame; they both move their hands in front of their faces to the music
Long shot; two shot.	Cosby watches Warner dance vigorously, waving arms, jumping, touching floor with his hands; Cosby taps foot gingerly.

Warner wears black jeans, black and blue patterned sweater.

Graphic over image
MALCOLM-JAMAL WARNER

	(Music continues)
Close-up; over-the-shoulder shot.	Tempestt Bledsoe (Vanessa Huxtable) tips her head from side to side in time with music, looks from the camera to Cosby as she stops smiling and moving. Cosby turns around to look over his shoulder at camera, glares, then turns again.
Long shot; two shot.	Bledsoe dances in front of Cosby. Cosby dances holding onto his pants as in a mock curtsy.

Bledsoe wears blue leather skirt, red shoes, gray, blue, red patterned sweater.

Graphic over image
TEMPESTT BLEDSOE

Close-up; one shot.	Keshia Knight Pulliam (Rudy Huxtable) dances, jumping so fast her image is blurred.
Long shot; two shot.	Cosby watches Pulliam dance, she jumps up and down rapidly, he takes tiny steps.

Pulliam wears red jumpsuit, red shoes, blue scarf tied at hips.

Graphic over image
KESHIA KNIGHT PULLIAM

Close-up; one shot.	Cosby nods head to music, smiles, eyes raised.
Long shot; one shot.	Cosby dancing, bent over, moving slowly, "clowning."

Graphics over image

Associate Producer
Caryn Sneider

Creative Consultant
Elliot Shoenman

Producer
Carmen Finestra

Co-Executive Producer
John Markus

Close-up; one shot.	Cosby as he turns head quickly towards camera smiling.
Fade to black.	*(Music ends in time with his turn to the camera.)*

The Paradigmatic

Semiotics argues that the meaning of every sign derives in part from its relationship to others with which it is associated in the same sign system. Some of the meaning of this sequence, then, derives from its *difference* from the credit sequences of other TV shows. In the *Cosby* credits no speech is used (spoken or sung); no graphics appear other than titles; no special effects of any kind, such as split screens, freeze frames, or mattes are used; the characters look directly into the camera lens; none of the shots consists of takes from episodes of the program; none of the shots depicts the program's setting. These characteristics form the basis of a connotative meaning, which stems from the paradigmatic association with other program's credit sequences: *The Cosby Show* is different from the rest of television. As its producers (who, surely greet the weekly ratings in 1986 with glee) probably recognize, the connotation, "different and *better* than the rest of television," seems to have firmly taken hold with the U.S. public.

Four kinds of shots are used: close-ups and long shots of Cosby; close-ups and long shots of Cosby with one other family member. The lighting, camera angle, focal length, and background remain the same throughout the sequence. Such simplicity is again atypical of credit sequences, which usually consist of a variety of shots edited together in montage style. The gray, "limbo lighting" backdrop is unusual for television, but appears frequently in fashion photography, where it is thought to "set off" the models and their clothes (and offers no competition for the consumer's visual attention). Fashion is associated with having money to spend and with an aesthetic sensibility. Thus, the use of the gray backdrop in the *Cosby* credit sequence produces the connotations "well off" and "aesthetically inclined" and links these to the Huxtable family.

The Syntagmatic

The credit sequence has a simple structure: it begins with Cosby alone, introduces the family members one by one in relation to him, and ends with Cosby alone. A variation in shot composition occurs with the introduction of each family member, just as each one's facial expression, gestures, dance, and dress are "unique." This syntagmatic chain

creates the sense of "a family of individuals," one of the show's principal themes. While Mrs. Huxtable and the children dance in a manner expressive of their personalities, that is, in character, Cosby/Dr. Huxtable clowns throughout the sequence—his dance is parody. The shots provide a vignette of Cosby/Huxtable's relationship with each family member: sexy-naughty, as he kisses Claire's hand and she wags her finger after him; mimicking adolescent seriousness with Sondra and Vanessa; enjoying Theo's exuberance and "cool." The sequence reinforces the sense of a family of individuals whom the father treats individually. Good-natured, thoughtful fatherhood and fun, playful family life are represented with great economy in the credit sequence.

Cosby's appearance throughout the sequence lends him a privileged status, which is reinforced by the use of Cosby's name throughout the credits and our knowledge of him as a "star." Mrs. Huxtable appears in the same syntagmatic relation to Cosby as do the family's children. The children also "belong" to Cosby in terms of the color code: he wears a sweater (the uniform of domesticity worn by all situation comedy fathers, but rendered particularly fashionable and expensive looking on Cosby, who never seems to wear the same clothes in two episodes) whose colors are precisely those worn, in different combinations, by the five children. The syntagmatic structure of the opening credits might be described as a theme and variations, where Cosby is the theme and each child—and his wife—appear as variations.

Generic Codes

Television situation comedy depends on a set of characters who live and work together, who are strongly differentiated in terms of "personality." Plots derive from absurd predicaments and good-natured power struggles that result from sharing quarters. Slapstick, pantomime, and verbal wit are its primary comic devices. As in other family situation comedies—*I Love Lucy, Leave it to Beaver, The Dick Van Dyke Show, My Three Sons, The Brady Bunch, All in the Family*—much of the humor on *The Cosby Show* derives from challenges to paternal authority or the "battle of the sexes." The opening credits sequence identifies Cosby as the central paternal figure, while it establishes him as the jokester, rather than the butt of jokes.

Perhaps most striking about the sequence is the fact that it is a

dance number and therefore accumulates for the situation comedy some of the connotations associated with another genre, the musical comedy. Individual episodes of *The Cosby Show* frequently include musical numbers—one of the ways the show references black culture—that employ generic codes associated with a utopian sensibility.[18] Musical numbers allow for a kind of perfect, transparent expression of emotion, where characters communicate feelings directly, better than they are able to do with words alone. *The Cosby Show* is itself a utopian representation of the family: money is no object; love and harmony is the rule; play abounds as a means of solving discipline problems; marriage is sexy; gender equality is the stated goal; parents and children enjoy stimulating, satisfying situations at work and in school; childcare and housework are either invisible or enjoyable. Like a musical, *The Cosby Show* presents the world not as it really is, but as it should be.

Beyond the Text

Semiotics frequently speaks of a text as though it were understood in precisely the same way by everyone. At worst, it operates as though all meanings were translatable and predictable through the work of a gifted semiotician. Such an approach is nowhere more deficient than in television criticism, where the text is ephemeral but the audience remains a central preoccupation. We cannot, for example, speak of *The Cosby Show* without asking how a black program gained record-breaking popularity with an audience that, as measured by the Nielsen ratings, is overwhelmingly white. Because our society is characterized by racial segregation, white racism, and staggering percentages of black unemployment and poverty, *The Cosby Show* must also be examined in terms of the extratextual (television representations of whites and blacks; publicity about Bill Cosby and the show; racist discourses in other mediums) and in terms of the differences among its viewers that are structurally reinforced (gender, class, and race).

Semiotics can most usefully be seen as a descriptive method. Other approaches—feminist, psychoanalytic, ideological—can employ semiotics as a tool to ask larger questions of the television text. A feminist analysis might ask why the adult woman occupies a similar structural position to the children in her relationship to the adult man in this opening credit sequence, or why Bill Cosby has become so much more famous than any black actresses or comediennes on television. A psychoanalytic reading might question the privileged status of the father as producer and controller of the family discourse on *The Cosby Show*. An ideological analysis might ask what makes the Huxtable family—upper-middle-class, urban, predominantly female, and young—so popular with and acceptable to a white audience, or how the utopianism of *The Cosby Show* and its celebration of black achievement in the arts relates to the political struggle for racial equality.

NOTES

1. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 16.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 17 (Eco's italics).
4. See the description of television coverage at the White House in Thomas Whiteside, "Standups," *The New Yorker*, 2 December 1985, pp. 81–113.
5. Eco, *Theory*, p. 7.
6. Herbert Zettl, *Television Production Handbook* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1984), p. 596.
7. Christian Metz, "On the Notion of Cinematographic Language," in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 586.
8. John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 130.
9. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 38.
10. Ibid., p. 40.
11. Rick Altman, "Television/Sound" (paper delivered at the Twenty-fourth Annual Meeting of the Society for Cinema Studies, Madison, Wis., 24 March 1984), p. 13.
12. Umberto Eco, "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics," *Daedalus* 114 (Fall 1985): 162.
13. Eco, *Theory*, p. 214.
14. Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 106.
15. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 109.
16. See Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *The Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 93–149.

17. Zettl, *Television Production Handbook*, p. 332.

18. See Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 175–89.

FOR FURTHER READING

A good place to start in the literature on semiotics is Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); or, for the more ambitious reader, Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). After that one might tackle some of the primary texts in the field: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966); Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); and Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968). Two other books by Roland Barthes that are particularly relevant are the essays collected in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977); and *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

Film has been scrutinized more carefully by semioticians than has television to date; some central works that may prove useful are: Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Metz, *Language and Cinema*, trans. Donna Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); Jurij Lotman, *Semiotics of Cinema*, Michigan Slavic Contributions no. 5 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976). For one perspective on the relationship of film semiotics to feminist criticism, see Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); for a discussion of semiotic issues in ideological analysis, see Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).

A good introduction to semiotics in television criticism may be found in John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978); the differences between film and broadcast television are provocatively laid out in John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982). Semiotics has been applied to many different kinds of television programs; the journals *Screen*, *Journal of Film and Video*, and *Jump Cut* are good sources of television criticism. Several important critical articles that use semiotics appear in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Regarding Television—Critical Approaches: An Anthology*, American Film Institute Monograph Series, vol. 2 (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1983). Phillip Drummond and Richard Paterson, eds., *Television in Transition* (London: British Film Institute, 1985) includes essays on television, from an international perspective, that evaluate the usefulness of semiotics for criticism and for understanding how audiences decode television.

Some other essays that raise interesting questions about the semiotic analysis of television include: Margaret Morse, "Talk, Talk, Talk—the Space of Discourse in Television," *Screen* 26, no. 2 (March/April 1985): 2–15; Janet Woollacott, "Messages and Meanings," in *Culture, Society and the Media*, ed. Michael Gurevitch et al. (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 91–111; Nick Browne, "The Political Economy of the Television (Super)Text," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9 (Summer 1984): 174–82; and Dennis Giles, "Television Reception," *Journal of Film and Video* 37 (Summer 1985): 12–25.