

Media Theory and Semiotics: Key Terms and Concepts

Binary structures and semiotic square of oppositions

Many systems of meaning are based on binary structures (masculine/ feminine; black/white; natural/artificial), two contrary conceptual categories that also entail or presuppose each other. Semiotic interpretation involves exposing the culturally arbitrary nature of this binary opposition and describing the deeper consequences of this structure throughout a culture.

On the semiotic square and logical square of oppositions.

Code

A code is a learned rule for linking signs to their meanings. The term is used in various ways in media studies and semiotics. In communication studies, a message is often described as being "encoded" from the sender and then "decoded" by the receiver. The encoding process works on multiple levels. For semiotics, a code is the framework, a learned a shared conceptual connection at work in all uses of signs (language, visual). An easy example is seeing the kinds and levels of language use in anyone's language group. "English" is a convenient fiction for all the kinds of actual versions of the language. We have formal, edited, written English (which no one speaks), colloquial, everyday, regional English (regions in the US, UK, and around the world); social contexts for styles and specialized vocabularies (work, office, sports, home); ethnic group usage hybrids, and various kinds of slang (in-group, class-based, group-based, etc.). Moving among all these is called "code-switching." We know what they mean if we belong to the learned, rule-governed, shared-code group using one of these kinds and styles of language. Someone from rural Australia might at first be lost with kind of English spoken in south LA, a poor neighborhood in the Bronx, or rural Alabama.

But codes also function at the symbolic and ideological level. These interpretive frames or linking grids were termed "myths" by Roland Barthes in his seminal collection of essays called *Mythologies*. The nearly automatic and unconscious use of codes pervades all aspects of culture from basic verbal communication to mass media. We have codes for all kinds of popular culture genres, all the symbolic moves in advertising, political terms, race, and identity.

Culture

The term "culture" is, of course, a contested term with multiple meanings in various contexts and discourses. In the context of semiotics, culture can be viewed as the sum of rule-governed, shared, learned and learnable, transmittable, symbolic activity used by a group in any given place and time.

"Culture is the generator of structuredness... [and] the nonhereditary memory of the community" (Lotman). Meanings, values, significance circulate in second-order

languages (symbols, values, images, stories, myths) that use both ordinary language (one's native language) and other sign-systems like visual images, mass media, and information technology. All these ways of transmitting shared and stored meanings involve a mediated content. To be in a culture means to be in preexisting but constantly changing sign-systems.

In the "Cultural Studies" model, "culture" is a field of conflicting and competing forces resulting from structured asymmetries in power, capital, and value.

Cultural Studies as an academic field has been accused of dematerializing or leveling media content in order to objectify ideological and political messages for analysis. The approach is often further characterized as an "effects" model of analysis that focuses on capitalist and corporate mechanisms of control and usually omits the agency and activity of individuals, groups, and subcultures who are the receivers and users of media.

Stuart Hall's "cultural marxism" approach builds out a more complex model based on extending the theory of hegemony, the social-economic processes for "manufacturing consent" among the lower classes (the "have-nots" or "have-lesses") to buy-in to the view promoted by ownership classes ("the haves").

In this view of cultural studies, mass media and communications typically encode (implicitly presuppose as a context for meaning) a dominant ideology which finds mass acceptance. Media is thus ideologically encoded to maximize the willing consent of the consumer and "have-nots" to "keep with the program" and perpetuate the status quo of power and wealth distribution.

Hegemony of ideologies that protect the governing and ownership class is not a matter of force, coercion, or obvious deliberate manipulation. It functions so well because it relies on the willing consent of those with less power and wealth to accept a dominant ideology, to see the world and act according the view of those above.

Examples of mainstream ideologies that circulate in the media and protect hegemonic power:

- * Free speech (as a belief, when few have power in what they voice)
- * Individuality (great for marketing, since consumerism requires the simultaneous presentation of unique personal choices and identities and the need to look and buy like everyone else in an identity group)
- * Freedom of choice (part of our individuality beliefs, also the main assumption in consumer culture and marketing: the ideology of the shopping mall)

In this view of hegemony and culture, social behavior is overdetermined by multiple identity factors like race, social class, sex and gender, and nationality, which are encoded in hierarchies of power, significance, and economic value.

But Hall and others like Dick Hebdige show that people have many strategies for dealing with media contents: operate in the dominant code, use a negotiable code (accepts but modifies the meaning based on the viewer's and viewer communities position), or substitute an oppositional code (using critical awareness, demystification, irony, subversion, play, parody, like DJ sampling). In this way, many subcultures are formed around group uses of media, images, and music that create identities and differentiations from mainstream or dominant culture.

Cultural Dictionary and Cultural Encyclopedia

Ideas developed by Umberto Eco. These terms describe how members of a culture participate in exchanges of meaning by greater or lesser access to and competence with a preexisting, constantly accruing, constantly reconfiguring body of words, terms, concepts, discourses, and actual artifacts maintained in a culture's memory. Our learned codes for associating signs and symbols with their meanings are a function of this macro-cultural Encyclopedia. The various vocabularies, discourses, dialects, and the whole lexicon of a language (like English) form a cultural dictionary, which preexists any individual user, who has varying levels of access to, and familiarity with, the whole Dictionary. Language, discourse, narratives, and visual images are the memory machines of culture. Infocom and media technologies are externalized memory machines for transmitting culture (Debray), and thus function as a physical or material disseminator of the larger cultural encyclopedia. Selectivity and privileging of certain contents is a function of ideology and processes of hegemony (ways in which everyone buys into a dominant view, those in power co-opting those with lesser power). Ideology privileges certain contents of the shared Encyclopedia, and selectivity or hierarchizing of cultural knowledge discloses the social function of the Encyclopedia as culturally constructed, not given or natural.

The important point about these ideas is their emphasis on process and historical continuity at the social and cultural level, independent of any individual member of a group, who is born into a culture that is always already happening.

Diachronic/Synchronic

The distinction between describing language and cultural systems as a complete system at one historical moment (synchronic), or the successive stages through time (diachronic). Cultural analysis of the contemporary moment often assumes a present-day slice of a system functioning with its own internal self-completeness (synchronic analysis), even though it arrives with a history and memory of earlier formations and changes over time (diachronic analysis).

Dialogic/Dialogical/Dialogism

Statements in communication always imply a receiver of the statement, and statements we make are often responses to prior statements made by someone else. In short, what we say and mean is part of an ongoing dialogue.

Mikhail Bakhtin, the famous Russian theorist and literary scholar, saw that literary texts were always dialogic in relation to readers and audiences, and that literary discourse proceeds only by referencing, quoting, assuming an other's speech or words. The reader/audience is therefore always already inscribed in the medium/message/text/visual sign. Discourses, texts, cultural message presuppose and embody a network of implicit references, gestures, an unmarked quotations from other works.

Bakhtin is also credited with first defining intertextual or structural dialogism (see Intertextuality). He saw literary discourse and individual literary texts as an intersection of multiple textual surfaces rather than as a fixed point or meaning; that is, as a dialogue among various texts, genres, and voices: the writer's, the character's, the historical cultural context, the readers'/audiences.

As Julia Kristeva explained Bakhtin's breakthrough theory, each statement in a discourse, each expression in a text, is an intersection of words or texts where at least one other word or text can be read. Discourse thus can be described as having a horizontal axis, composed of the writer, characters (in a novel), and genre being written, and the vertical axis, composed of the text and its context in a larger universe of discourses, texts, meanings, values. Any text, therefore, is always at least double, presupposing, incorporating, and transforming an other voice, text, discourse.

Ideology

A contested and slippery term in the variety of its ordinary and specialized uses. For our context, "ideology" does not refer to individually held "personal" beliefs, but to a set of mediated views of the world that circulate in a culture and provide self-replicating views of power and inclusion and exclusion. Operative senses of the term:

Ideology as the world framed in discourse (Foucault) mediating the structures of power and authority to individuals. Individual subjects are said to take up social positions--identity positions, subjectivity--already formed in discourse (for example, in laws, social class language, religious language, social institutions).

Ideology as the socially constructed sense of identity and values, functioning to obscure the real sources of power, and to reproduce/perpetuate existing power structures (by gender, race, class, nationality, etc.) (an extension of the earlier Marxist notion of ideology as "false consciousness").

Ideology as the consciously held belief system of individual members of a social group, which may or may not reflect the underlying structures of power and authority.

Ideology and Discourse

Discourse constitutive of its objects; objects of knowledge do not preexist the discourse/discursive practices/disciplines which constitute them make them visible, "objectify" them as such. This is not to say that real-world material facts don't exist, but that they don't have any meaning to us, aren't knowable, aren't communicable, outside of a discursive-conceptual field. "History is only known to us in narrative form." (Jameson)

Interpretation and Semiosis

Interpretation is the main outcome of the semiotic process, or semiosis. Interpretation is the discursive result or output of positing meaning in any sign system. An extension of the theory of semiosis (Peirce, Eco)--the temporal sequences of sign relations in generating meaning--is the notion of the homology of form in sign systems: interpretations often take the same form as the set of signs being interpreted. For example, the interpretation of a text usually takes the form of another text; the interpretation of an art object can be found in subsequent art works or supplementary texts. The important point is to see acts of interpretation, making meaning, as occurring within a system of symbolic relationships. An interpretation is a supplement to a prior set of signs. An interpretation is not an opinion but an act of positing meaning in a culturally significant expression or work. In the terms of semiotics, nothing is prior to interpretation except intelligibility--something is presented as meaning something, it has the signature of significance, the grounds of intelligibility, language community recognition, interpretive community recognition, a sense that something is or isn't "in our language."

Intertextuality/Intermediality

The theory of intertextuality assumes that meaning and intelligibility in discourse and texts is based on a network prior and concurrent discourse and texts. Every text is a mosaic of references to other texts, genres, and discourses. Every text or set of signs presupposes a network of relationships to other signs like strings of quotations that have lost their exact references. The principle of intertextuality is a ground or precondition for meaning beyond "texts" in the strict sense of things written, and includes units of meaning in any media. Expanding the theory for cross-media symbolic activity, we could call this "intermediality" or "intersemiality" (the structures of meaning presupposed or embedded in any set of signs like nodes in a network). The notion of "intersemic" describes the interdependence and implied relation of any unit of signs (like a movie) to a network of other texts, genres, artifacts, documents, and symbolic works (images, artworks) in a culture. See also multimedia semiotics and Dialogic/Dialogism.

Mediation/Sign Structure

The most fundamental macro-question in communication, media theory, and cultural theory is the nature of mediation: we are always already in language, in symbolic systems, and we know our lived-in world by language, discourse, and signs, not by immediate access to "things in themselves" (Kant). To be always already in a world of symbolic mediations means that we're always in a world of socially constructed values, hierarchies, and ideologies. Much of contemporary media and communication theory assumes the primacy of mediation in any theoretical model: medium, milieu, structures/systems of mediation. Debray adds the dimension of cultural transmission over time (the diachronic, "through time" dimension) to simple mediation or communication (the synchronic or concurrent dimension) as a theoretical foundation for mediology. The "Prison House of Language" dilemma (Jameson): all forms of knowledge presuppose that

we are always already in language, and we cannot step outside language and signs to comprehend an unmediated or non-representable world.

The irreducible structure of any sign system consists in the separation of the signifier and the signified, something present and something absent, something appearing as a trace or mark (signifier) and something deferred (signified content or meaning). Derrida's early model of "differance" (differentiation in binary semantic structures and deferring/deferral of meaning in signifier/signified structure) has been influential.

An immediate/unmediated presence of meanings and things is unavailable to language users and thus to culture as a whole. Illusions of direct or immediate (unmediated) meanings/values/real things are behind ideologies, religions, systems of belief. Semiotics and post-Foucauldian discourse analysis does not deny the existence of real things or a world outside language and signs, nor of our need to describe a real world outside of language and mediation, but exposes our inability to give meaning to anything without the structuring preconditions of our systems of discourse and cultural sign systems.

- * All communication entails, requires, presupposes mediation, not things as they are.
- * Four sense of "medium": media type, channel, mediation, environment.
- * The content and form of media present a socially constructed system of meaning, not "reality" outside representation.
- * "History is only accessible to us in narrative form." --Fredric Jameson
- * "Film gives us not the world as it is but the world as we desire it to be." --Fritz Lang, Director, in Godard's Contempt

Reference and Representation

Closely related to the question of mediation and the structure of signs is the problem of representation and referentiality in language. Philosophers of language in the 20th century have worked through the problem of how language can be said to refer to real things or to concepts outside specific statements. Logic and the truth-functions of scientific language were thought to depend on the ability to use language (in some formalized way) to refer to real things or states of affairs in the world. Statements of fact are known as "propositions" in logic (a statement which is either true or false). Statements are thus said to have "reference" or the property of "referentiality" in pointing to real things. But today, most philosophers have concluded that logic is mainly internally self-referential and that using language to refer to things outside language in "the real world" is only one of thousands of things we do with language. Wittgenstein at first held a "picture theory" of logical and scientific propositions that represent, in the way that language can, a world of facts, or, in his terms, "whatever is the case," in the world. He then exposed the problems in this view. Language and statements follow their own rules (language games), and allow us to do and say certain things, but the relationship between our statements and the world outside them is not rule-governed. We can't step outside of language and look at the world in some kind of unmediated, extra-linguistic or pre-verbal state. Referring to real things, or using language to construct a category we call "real"

about which statements can be made, is thus only one type of semiotic activity in the sign system of language. [See Stanford Encyclopedia entry on "reference."]

Semiology/Semiotics

The theory and description of sign systems. Foundational assumption: "All symbolic systems in a culture function like a second-order language or text." And like a language, any symbolic system is assumed to be complete and extensive at any given moment in history (the synchronic dimension). The description of sign systems from language to visual media and larger human constructions like cities allows an analysis of interpretation, the structure of social values, and the ideological uses of all kinds of information we are surrounded by in daily life. The important point is to see all this meaning-making and symbolic activity as rule-governed, learned, and constructed as opposed to natural or given in reality. Individual people in a culture may have greater or lesser knowledge or access to "the cultural encyclopedia" (Eco) of symbolic relationships and contents. The daily use of available signs and symbols in cultural encoding and decoding is an issue of a person's "competence," not a question about the sign system itself. If we think about cultural signs of all kinds as a second-order language, we can investigate a kind of semiotic deep structure, a grammar of meaning, a repertoire of codes, acquired by members of a culture in ways similar to, but distinct from, internalizing the grammar of one's own native language. (See Chomsky on deep structure and grammar; Peirce, de Saussure, Barthes, Lotman, and Eco on semiology or semiotics as a system.)

Multimedia Semiotics/Multimodal Semiotics/Social Semiotics

In the everyday use of languages and signs, we combine several kinds of physical media in communicating and making meaning--from voice and printed texts to mass media images, music, movies, computer Web content, and digital multimedia. The various material means of conveying meaning (sometimes called communication "modalities") often overlap and pass on or interpret meaning from other concurrent media in our culture. We can talk or write about a movie, watch TV news that interprets an event, watch a TV mass media genre like a sit-com that requires knowledge of the codes for this genre, and listen to music, write email, and read over multimedia Web pages all at the same time. We are constantly sending, receiving, and making meaning in various kinds of media, often conveying and interpreting meaning from one medium to another. This practice points to the existence of our larger contemporary and inherited semiotic system, or what some have termed a semiosphere, the whole universe of available and possible meanings in a cultural system. Social Semiotics takes the meaning-making process, "semiosis", to be more fundamental than the system of meaning-relations among signs themselves, which are considered only the resources to be deployed in making meaning. Social semiotics examines semiotic practices, specific to a culture and community, for the making of various kinds of texts and meanings in various situational contexts and contexts of culturally meaningful activity.

Martin Irvine, 2004-2005