THIRD EDITION

SIGNS OF LIFE IN THE U.S.A.

Readings on Popular Culture for Writers

SONIA MAASIK
University of California, Los Angeles

JACK SOLOMON
California State University, Northridge

The Semiotic Method

To find this meaning—to interpret and write effectively about the signs of popular culture—you need a method, and it is part of the purpose of this book to introduce such a method to you. Without a
methodology for interpreting signs, writing about them could become little more than descriptive reviews or opinion pieces. There is nothing wrong with writing descriptions and opinions, but one of your tasks in your writing class is to learn how to write academic essays—that is, analytical essays that present theses or arguments that are well supported by evidence. The method we draw on in this book—a method that is known as semiotics—is especially well suited for analyzing popular culture. Whether or not you’re familiar with this word, you are already practicing sophisticated semiotic analyses every day of your life. Reading this page is an act of semiotic decoding (words and even letters are signs that must be interpreted), but so is figuring out just what your classmate means by wearing a particular shirt or dress. For a semiotician (one who practices semiotic analysis), a shirt, a haircut, a television image—anything at all—can be taken as a sign, as a message to be decoded and analyzed to discover its meaning. Every cultural activity for the semiotician leaves a trace of meaning, a kind of blip on the semiotic Richter scale, that remains for us to read, just as a geologist reads the earth for signs of earthquakes, volcanos, and other geological phenomena.

Many who hear the word semiotics for the first time assume that it is the name of a new, and forbidding, subject. But in truth, the study of signs is neither very new nor forbidding. Its modern form took shape in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century through the writings and lectures of two men. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) was an American philosopher and physicist who first coined the word semiotics, while Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was a Swiss linguist whose lectures became the foundation for what he called semiology. Without knowing of each other’s work, Peirce and Saussure established the fundamental principles that modern semioticians or semiotologists—the terms are essentially interchangeable—have developed into the contemporary study of semiotics.

The application of semiotics to the interpretation of popular culture was pioneered in the 1950s by the French semiotologist Roland Barthes (1915–1980) in a book entitled Mythologies. The basic principles of semiotics had already been explored by linguists and anthropologists, but Barthes took the matter to the heart of his own contemporary France, analyzing the cultural significance of everything from professional wrestling to strip tease, from toys to plastics.

It was Barthes, too, who established the political dimensions of semiotic analysis. Often, the subject of a semiotic analysis—a movie, say, or a TV program—doesn’t look political at all; it simply looks like entertainment. In our society (especially in the aftermath of the Watergate and Monicagate scandals), politics has become something of a dirty word, and to politicize something seems somehow to contaminate it. So you shouldn’t feel alarmed if at first it feels a little odd to search for a political meaning in an apparently neutral topic. You may even think that to do so is to “read too much” into that topic. But Barthes’s point—and the point of semiotics in general—is that all social behavior is political in the sense that it reflects some personal or group interest. Such interests are encoded in what are called ideologies, or worldviews that express the values and opinions of those who hold them. Politics, then, is just another name for the clash of ideologies that takes place in any complex society where the interests of all those who belong to it constantly compete with one another.

Sometimes the political values of a popular entertainment or entertainer are quite clear—no one is in any doubt about Charlton Heston’s politics—but sometimes they are concealed behind images that don’t look political at all. Consider, for example, the depiction of the “typical” American family in the classic TV sitcoms of the fifties and sixties, particularly all those images of happy, docile housewives. To most contemporary viewers, those images looked “normal” or natural at the time that they were first broadcast—the way families and women were supposed to be. The shows didn’t seem at all ideological. To the contrary, they seemed a retreat from political rancor to domestic harmony. But to a feminist semiotician, the old sitcoms were in fact highly political because the happy housewives they presented were really images designed to convince women that their place is in the home, not in the workplace competing with men. Such images—or signs—did not reflect reality; they reflected, rather, the interests of a patriarchal, male-centered society. If you think not, then ask yourself why there were shows called Father Knows Best, Bachelor Father, and My Three Sons, but no My Three Daughters? And why did few of the women in the shows have jobs or ever seem to leave the house? Of course, there was always I Love Lucy, but wasn’t Lucy the screwball character that her husband Ricky had to rescue from one crisis after another?

Such are the kinds of questions that semiotics invites us to ask. They may be put more generally. When analyzing any popular cultural phenomenon, always ask yourself questions like these: “Why does this thing look the way it does? Why are they saying this? Why am I doing this? What are they really saying? What am I really doing?” In short, take nothing for granted when analyzing any image or activity.

Take, for instance, the reason you may have joined a health club (or decided not to). Did you happen to respond to a photo ad that showed you a gorgeous girl or guy (with a nice-looking guy or girl in the background)? On the surface of the ad, you simply see an image showing—or denoting—a patron of the club. You may think: “I want to look like that.” But there’s probably another dimension to the ad’s appeal. The ad may show you someone with a nice body, but what it is suggesting—or conneting—is that this club is a good place to pick up a hot date. That’s why that other figure appears in the background. That’s supposed to be you. The one in the foreground is the sort of person you’re being
promised you'll find at the club. The ad doesn't say this, of course, but that's what it wants you to think because that's a more effective way of getting you to join. Suggestion, or connotation, is a much more powerful stimulant than denotation, but it is often deliberately masked in the signs you are presented with every day. Semiotics, one might say, reveals all the denotative smoke screens around you.

Health club membership drives, you may think, aren't especially political (though actually they are when you think of the kinds of bodies that they are telling you are desirable to have), but the powerful effect of a concealed suggestion is used all the time in actual political campaigns. The now infamous Willie Horton episode during the 1988 presidential campaign provides a classic instance. What happened was that some Republican supporters of George Bush's candidacy ran a series of TV ads featuring the photographic image of one Willie Horton, a convicted rapist from Massachusetts who murdered someone while on parole. On the surface, the ads simply showed, or denoted, this fact. But they connoted racial hatred and fear (Willie Horton is black) and were very effective in prompting white voters to mistrust Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis and to vote instead for George Bush.

Signs, in short, often conceal some interest or other, whether political, or commercial, or whatever. And the proliferation of signs and images in an era of electronic technology has simply made it all the more important that we learn to decode the interests behind them.

Semiotics, accordingly, is not just about signs and symbols: it is equally about ideology and power. This makes semiotics sound rather serious, and often the seriousness of a semiotic analysis is quite real. But reading the text of modern life can also be fun, for it is a text that is at once popular and accessible, a "book" that is intimately in touch with the pulse of American life. As such, it is constantly changing. The same sign can change meaning if something else comes along to change the environment in which it originally appeared. Take all those extraterrestrials.

Interpreting Popular Signs

Let's say that you want to analyze America's popular fascination with aliens. How would you go about it? What you first need to do is to set aside any personal opinions you have concerning the existence or nonexistence of extraterrestrials. That isn't your subject: your subject is the place of extraterrestrials in the popular imagination. To put this another way, your task is to analyze the current social significance of the widespread popularity of books, movies, and TV shows that feature "close encounters of the third kind."

The first step in drafting your analysis is to sketch the overall context within which "aliens" appear in American popular culture—that is, the interrelated network of books (fiction and nonfiction), magazine articles, movies, TV shows, and even Internet websites that feature extraterrestrial topics. This is one of the key elements of a semiotic interpretation: the establishing of a set of associated phenomena. For from a semiotic perspective, the meaning of a sign largely lies in its relations to other signs, both in its similarities to them and in its differences. In other words, when looking at a popular cultural sign, you will want to ask "What is this thing like?" and "How is it different from some of the things that it resembles?" By asking such questions, you are identifying the system in which a sign works, and it is in the context of such a system that you may pursue your interpretation.

Let's return to extraterrestrials to see what this means in practice. Taken alone, any given TV show or movie featuring aliens doesn't mean very much. Consider E.T. In one sense, it was just an entertaining flick that made a few people a lot of money. But seen in relation to other alien-featured entertainments, E.T. becomes a cultural sign. To see how, let's build up the system within which it functions. Our first question in building this system is "What does E.T. resemble?" And the first answer that occurs to us, given that the starring role was played by an alien being, is that the film resembles many other products of science fiction, for science fiction has been the traditional genre in which aliens appear. So let's consider for a moment the history of science fiction to see what clues it might give us to the current ways in which aliens are featured in popular entertainment.

The history of science fiction extends back into the nineteenth century with authors such as Jules Verne helping to invent the genre, but in many ways H. G. Wells's science fiction classic The War of the Worlds is a more useful place to begin. Not only did it establish a certain paradigm for the extraterrestrial imagination, but it earned a special place in American media history thanks to Orson Welles's notorious radio broadcast of the novel in the 1930s, a broadcast that panicked hundreds of listeners who didn't realize it was just a dramatization and not a news bulletin.

The War of the Worlds is the story of an alien invasion from Mars, an invasion that is nearly successful due to Martian technical superiority but that ultimately fails because the Martians are annihilated by an earthly illness against which they have no immunity. (Mars Attacks! made a joke of this by having the Martians succumb to the broadcasting of some really bad pop music.) The pattern that this story establishes—the hostile invasion of Earth by technologically superior aliens—has governed much of the science fiction of the twentieth century when it comes to imagining contacts between Earth and other planets.

But now consider what this pattern resembles—that is, with what it in turn might be associated. Are there any other ways in which human beings have imagined visitations to Earth by extraterrestrial beings who are superior to us but are not gods? Think about it a moment.
Here’s what we’ve come up with. Long before the invention of science fiction, extraterrestrial visitations have been described in the Western tradition in basically two ways: either as visits by angels or as invasions by devils. Like space aliens, angels and devils have powers beyond merely mortal power (for one thing, they can hover in the atmosphere, just like flying saucers), but they are not gods. Neither are they human. They are, rather, different kinds of beings who, also like space aliens, have their origins in a realm among the stars (devils, after all, are fallen angels and so originally come from the heavens as well).

In one of the classics of English literature, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, both kinds of visitation are imagined: the benign arrival of winged angels and the malignant invasion of Satan, shown literally flying to Earth to wreak as much havoc as he can on the newborn human race. As we consider these precedents to science fiction stories, it is useful to know that Arthur C. Clark, one of science fiction’s preeminent writers, made the link between angels, devils, and space invaders explicit in a novel called *Childhood’s End*. In that novel, extraterrestrial invaders who look just like our traditional image of the devil take over Earth, but, ironically, their visitation is actually angelic in purpose because it is intended to help human beings evolve to a higher state of existence. (We can also note how Ray Walston, an actor who gained fame by playing the Visitor from Hell in *Damn Yankees*, was later recast as a Martian in the 1960s TV series *My Favorite Martian*.)

By comparing such stories—Milton’s, Clark’s, Wells’s—we can lay down a foundation for our systematic interpretation: that contacts between humans and extraterrestrial beings historically have been imagined either as demonic invasions or as angelic visitations. At this point, we can do a little research to see whether anyone else has made a similar connection, and, sure enough, logging on to the UFO Popular Culture website ([http://www.ufomind.com/misc/1997/jul/d10-002.shtml](http://www.ufomind.com/misc/1997/jul/d10-002.shtml)) reveals that the connection has been made, and more than once. From a religious minister who declares that aliens are “fallen angels from another earthly dimension rather than another planet” to the author of a book entitled *Angels and Aliens*, interpreters of the extraterrestrials are drawing parallels between angels, demons, and aliens.

The next question to ask is “In what form do aliens appear in a given story: as angels or demons?” When we look at *The War of the Worlds*, the alien contact clearly takes a demonic form. Now, in pursuing a semiotic interpretation, we might ask “Why” demons and not angels? And to answer this question, we can look around at what else may have been going on when the novel was written as well as when it was later broadcast on American radio. One thing we can find is that, when *The War of the Worlds* was published in 1898, England was getting more and more worried about Germany (World War I broke out only sixteen years later), and when it was broadcast in America in the 1930s, World War II was only a few years away. At a time of concern about the alien “other” (in the latter case, the Germans), we hypothesize, the popular imaginations of English and American audiences were especially likely to envision alien contacts as dangerous and destructive. To put this another way, we can argue that science fiction can function as a substitute, or metaphor, for real-world worries and anxieties. As evidence for our hypothesis, we can point to the science fiction of the 1950s, a period when cold war
fears were at their height. The sci-fi of this period tended to feature demonic-invasion stories like Invasion of the Body Snatchers, a film that has been often interpreted as a metaphor for cold war fears of Soviet infiltration.

Whenever alien invasions assume a demonic form, we can also note how the authorities—the police, the military, and the government—are depicted as protectors, as the only barrier between us and the alien invaders. And once again we can find a real-world parallel for this popular sign, for in the 1950s the American government, military, and police enjoyed especially high levels of social esteem.

Thus, we can find two relevant patterns in the past as we attempt to unravel the meaning of today's depictions of alien invasions. The first is that in times of international anxiety, the sci-fi imagination tends to cast the alien as a demon; and the second is that when aliens are demonized, the local authorities are heroized. So when a story comes along that contradicts this dual pattern, that itself is significant, drawing our attention to an entirely different set of interpretive possibilities. Which brings us back to E.T.

The most popular movie of its time (it took Jurassic Park and Titanic to break its box office records), E.T., like so many other science fiction ploths, featured an alien who comes to Earth. But now let's ask another question: "How was E.T. different from other science fiction stories featuring alien encounters?" The answer is pretty clear, for unlike stories like The War of the Worlds or even the more benign Childhood's End, the extraterrestrial in E.T. is not an invader. He is not threatening. In fact, he is rather cute and cuddly, angelic even, albeit in an unconventional way. At the same time, in this story it is the earthly authorities—the police and the military—who are dangerous and threatening, even evil. Rather than protecting us, the authorities are out to hide the truth from us by capturing E.T. and removing him from view.

The background story for E.T. is the real-world controversy over what did, or did not, happen near Roswell, New Mexico, on July 4, 1947. For those who believe that something did happen, the story runs that a group of extraterrestrials (who look a lot like E.T.) crash-landed on Earth and were captured by U.S. Air Force personnel (or at least their bodies were collected by them). The story holds that the United States still has these bodies but that a Pentagon conspiracy is covering up the whole incident. (Recall how in the introductory sequence to The X-Files a flying saucer appears and then the words "government denies knowledge.")

It is not gerrimea to a semiotic analysis to debate what did or did not happen at Roswell. What matters is the way the story reverses the pattern established by The War of the Worlds, a reversal that officially entered popular culture in a big way with Spielberg's E.T. This is our crucial difference that can lead us to an interpretation of the current place of extraterrestrials in the popular imagination.

The difference is that these days, when close encounters of the third

kind are imagined, the aliens are often viewed as innocent, or angelic, while it is the official authorities who are demonic (even when the aliens are also demonic, as in Mists Attacks, the authorities appear as either villainous hypocrites or complete idiots). Can we associate this phenomenon—that is, the demonization of authority and the benign depiction of aliens—with anything else going on in American culture? The answer is yes—because if you think about it, there are a lot of other indications in contemporary American culture that governmental authority (or any kind of authority, for that matter) is no longer as widely trusted or respected as it once was and that anyone who feels oppressed by that authority is an innocent victim of it in one way or another. From the populist anti-Washington appeal of Jesse Ventura to far-right beliefs that the U.S. government is part of a conspiratorial "New World Order," American society is sending plenty of signals about its mistrust of official authority. The stubborn belief that the government is covering up a conspiracy behind the John F. Kennedy assassination (consider Oliver Stone's JFK, or The X-Files episode that suggests, albeit ambiguously, that the character known as the Cigarette Smoking Man had a hand in Kennedy's death) is another such sign, as is the continuing controversy over military exposure to chemical agents in the Gulf War. This mistrust is also reflected in declining voter participation rates (you know the attitude: "Since they're all crooks, why vote?") and in the rise of such antigovernment political parties as the Libertarians. And nowhere is this disaffection from authority more widespread than among the young, who tend to see themselves as authority's victims. It is no accident, then, that E.T. features a group of children who rescue the childlike alien from brutal growups.

When you consider this cultural tendency to mistrust authority in relation to our current extraterrestrial imagination, an interpretation begins to emerge. In short, the shift from a sci-fi imagination in which aliens are seen as dangerous invaders and governments as protectors to one in which governments are conspiratorial tyrannies and aliens innocent victims reflects a cultural shift in which all forms of authority are coming into question, especially among the youthful audiences of such entertainments. Television shows like The X-Files, which want to attract young viewers (with its sky reference to Generation X, it isn't called The X-Files for nothing), accordingly exploit this distrust of official authority and so maintain their popularity—and profitability.

There is yet another angle to consider as we examine the system in which the extraterrestrial imagination functions today. Briefly put, we live in an era in which science enjoys a great deal of social prestige. At the same time, large numbers of people who no longer subscribe to traditional (and authoritative) religious faiths find themselves searching for spiritual alternatives. The extraterrestrial provides the perfect resolution for such a cultural contradiction. Belonging at once to the realm of sci-
"not believing" in the existence of extraterrestrials), the alien appeals to
two cultural trends simultaneously, blending the prestige of scientific in-
quiry with the spiritual appeal of the supernatural in a tidily popular
culture. (We find support for this interpretation on the Web in the
complaint by the religious pastor of Roswell's Calvary Chapel that
"People are looking to UFOs as a replacement for God.")
Our analysis could continue (and indeed, conducting a semiotic analysis is a bit like peeling an onion: there is always another layer one
might consider), but we'll stop here. The point simply is that entertain-
ments featuring extraterrestrials aren't just entertainments. They are signs,
indicators of the larger social and cultural forces and trends behind them.
The task of a semiotic analysis is to uncover those forces to find the
meaning behind the everyday things we do and say.

The Classroom Connection

The interpretive analysis we have sketched out is, in essence, no dif-
ferent from the more conventional interpretive analyses you will be
asked to perform in your college writing career. It is in the nature of all
interpretations to make connections and mark differences to go beyond
the surface of a text or issue toward a meaning. The skills you already
have as an interpreter of the popular signs around you—of images, ob-
jects, and forms of behavior—are the same skills that you develop as a
writer of critical essays that present a point of view and an argument to
support it.

Because most of us tend to identify closely with our favorite popular culture phenomena and have strong opinions about them, it can be
more difficult to adopt the same sort of analytic perspective toward popu-
lar culture than we do toward, say, texts assigned in a literature class.
Still, that is what you should do in a semiotic interpretation: you need to
set your opinions aside to pursue an interpretive argument with evidence
to support it. Note how in our interpretation of E.T. we didn't say
whether we like the movie; our concern was what it might mean within
a larger cultural context. It is not difficult to express an opinion, but that's
not the goal of analytic writing. Analytic writing requires the marshaling
of supporting evidence, just like a lawyer needs evidence to argue a case.
So by learning to write analyses of our culture, by searching for sup-
porting evidence to underpin your interpretive take on modern life, you are
also learning to write critical arguments.

"But how," you (and perhaps your teacher) may ask, "can I know
that a semiotic interpretation is right?" Good question: it is commonly
asked by those who fear that a semiotic analysis might "read too much
into" a subject. But then, it can be asked of the writer of any interpretive
essay, and the answer in each case is the same. No one can ever ab-
solutely prove the truth of any argument in the social sciences; what you
do is persuade your audience through the use of pertinent evidence. In
writing analyses about popular culture, that evidence comes from your
knowledge of the system to which the object you are interpreting be-
longs. The more you know about the system, the more convincing your
interpretations will be. And that is true whether you are writing about
The X-Files or about more traditional academic subjects.

But often our interpretations of popular culture involve issues that
are larger than those involved in music or entertainment. How, for in-
stance, are we to analyze fully the widespread belief—as reflected in the
classic sitcoms mentioned earlier—that it is more natural for women to
stay at home and take care of the kids than it is for men to do so? Why,
in other words, is the concept of "housewife" so easy to accept, while
the idea of a "househusband" may seem odd? How, in short, can we inter-
pret some of our most basic values semiotically? To see how, we need to
look at those value systems that semioticians call cultural mythologies.

Of Myths and Men

As we have seen, in a semiotic analysis we do not search for the
meanings of things in the things themselves. Rather, we find meaning in
the way we can relate things together, either through association or dif-
ferentiation. We've done this with the place of aliens in popular culture,
but what about doing it with beliefs? This book asks you to explore the
implications of social issues like gender norms that involve a great many
personal beliefs and values that we do not always recognize as beliefs and
values. Rather, we think of them as truths (one might think, "Of course
it's odd for a man to stay home and take care of the house"). But from a
semiotic perspective, our values too belong to systems from which they
take their meaning. Semioticians call these systems of belief cultural
mythologies.

A cultural mythology, or myth for short, is not some fanciful story
from the past. Indeed, if you find this word confusing because of its tra-
ditional association with such stories, you may prefer to use the phrase
value system. Consider the value system that governs our traditional
thinking about gender roles. Have you ever noticed how our society
presumes that it is primarily the role of women—adult daughters—to
take care of aging and infirm parents? If you want to look at the matter
from a physiological perspective, it might seem that men would be better
suited to the task: in a state of nature, men are physically stronger and so
would seem to be the natural protectors of the aged. And yet, though
our cultural mythology holds that men should protect the nuclear family,
it tends to assign to women the care of extended families. It is culture
that decides here, not nature.
But while cultural myths guide our behavior, they are subject to change. You yourself may have already experienced a transitional phase in the myths surrounding courtship behavior. In the past, the gender myths that formed the rules of the American dating game held that it is the role of the male to initiate proceedings (he calls) and for the female to react (she waits by the phone). Similarly, the rules once held that it is invariably the responsibility of the male to plan the evening and pay the tab. These rules are changing, aren’t they? Can you describe the rules that now govern courtship behavior?

A cultural mythology, or value system, then, is a kind of lens that governs the way we view our world. Think of it this way: say that you were born with rose-tinted eyeglasses permanently attached over your eyes but you didn’t know they were there. Because the world would look rose-colored to you, you would presume that it is rose-colored. You wouldn’t wonder whether the world might look otherwise through different lenses. But in the world there are other kinds of eyeglasses with different lenses, and reality does look different to those who wear them. Those lenses are cultural mythologies, and no culture can claim to have the one set of glasses that sees things as they really are.

The profound effect our cultural mythologies have on the way we view reality, on our most basic values, is especially apparent today when the myths of European culture are being challenged by the worldviews of the many other cultures that have taken root in American soil. Where, for example, European American culture upholds a profoundly individualistic social mythology, valuing individual rights before those of the group, traditional Chinese culture believes in the primacy of the family and the community over the individual. Maxine Hong Kingston’s short story “No Name Woman” poignantly demonstrates how such opposing ideologies can collide with painful results in its tale of a Chinese woman who is more or less sacrificed to preserve the interests of her village. The story, from The Woman Warrior, tells of a young woman who gives birth to a baby too many months after her husband’s departure to America for it to be her husband’s child. Her husband and most of the village’s other young men had left for America to earn the money that keeps the impoverished villagers from starving. They may be away for years and so need to be assured that their wives will remain faithful to them in their absence lest they refuse to go at all. The unfortunate heroine of the tale—who, to sharpen the agony, had probably been more the victim of rape than the instigator of adultery—is horribly punished by the entire village as an example to any other wives who might disturb the system and end in a tragic suicide.

That Kingston wrote “No Name Woman” as a self-consciously “hyphenated” Asian-American, as one whose identity fuses both Chinese and Euro-American values, reveals the fault lines between conflicting mythologies. On the one hand, as an Asian, Kingston understands the communal values behind the horrific sacrifice of her aunt, and her story makes sure that her Euro-American readers understand this too. But on the other hand, as an American and as a feminist, she is outraged by the violation of an individual woman’s rights on behalf of the group (or mob, which is what the village becomes in the story). Kingston’s own sense of personal conflict in this clash of mythologies—Asian, American, and feminist—offers a striking example of the inevitable conflicts that America itself will face as it changes from a monocultural to a multicultural society.

To put this another way, from the semiotic perspective, how you interpret something is very much a product of who you are; for culture is just another name for the frames that shape our values and perceptions. Traditionally, American education has presumed a monocultural perspective, a “melting pot” view that no matter what one’s cultural background, truth is culture-blind. Langston Hughes took on this assumption many years ago in his classic poem “Theme for English B,” where he writes, “I guess I’m what/I feel and see and hear,” and wonders whether “my page will be colored” when he writes. “Being me, it will not be white,” the poet suggests, but while he struggles to find what he holds in common with his white instructor, he can’t suppress the differences. In essence, that is the challenge of multicultural education itself: to identify the different cultural codes that inform the mythic frameworks of the many cultures that share America while searching for what holds the whole thing together.

That meaning is not culture-blind, that it is conditioned by systems of ideology and belief that are codified differently by different cultures, is a foundational semiotic judgment. Human beings, in other words, construct their own social realities, and so who gets to do the constructing becomes very important. Every contest over a cultural code is, accordingly, a contest for power, but the contest is usually masked because the winner generally defines its mythology as the “truth,” as what is most “natural” or “reasonable.” Losers in the contest become objects of scorn and are quickly marginalized, declared “unnatural,” or “deviant,” or even “insane.” The stakes are high as myth battles myth, with “truth” itself as the highest prize.

This does not mean that you must abandon your own beliefs when conducting a semiotic analysis, only that you cannot take them for granted and must be prepared to argue for them. We want to assure you that semiotics will not tell you what to think and believe. It does assume that what you believe reflects some cultural system or other and that no cultural system can claim absolute validity or superiority. The readings and chapter introductions in this book contain their own values and ideologies, and if you wish to challenge those values you can begin by exposing the myths that they may take for granted.

To put this another way, everything in this book reflects a political
point of view, and if you hold a different one it is not enough to simply presuppose the innate superiority of your own point of view—to claim that one writer is being "political" while you yourself are simply telling the truth. This may sound heretical precisely because human beings operate within value systems whose political invisibility is guaranteed by the system. No mythology, that is to say, begins by saying, "This is just a political construct or interpretation." Every myth begins, "This is the truth." It is very difficult to imagine, from within the myth, any alternatives. Indeed, as you read this book, you may find it upsetting to see that some traditional beliefs—such as the "proper" roles of men and women in society—are socially constructed and not absolute. But the outlines of the myth—the bounding (and binding) frame—best appear when challenged by another myth, and this challenge is probably nowhere more insistent than in America, where so many of us are really "hyphenated" Americans, citizens combining in our own persons two (or more) cultural traditions.

**Getting Started**

Mythology, like culture, is not static, however, and so the semiotician must always keep his or her eye on the clock, so to speak. History, time itself, is a constant factor in a constantly changing world. Since the first and second editions of this book, American popular culture has moved on. In this edition, we have tried to reflect those changes, but inevitably, further changes will occur in the time it takes for this book to appear on your class syllabus. That such changes occur is part of the excitement of the semiotic enterprise: there is always something new to consider and interpret. What does not change is the nature of semiotic interpretation: whatever you choose to analyze in the realm of American popular culture, the semiotic approach will help you understand it.

It's your turn now. Start asking questions, pushing, probing. That's what critical writing is all about, but this time you're part of the question. Arriving at answers, conclusions, is the fun part here, but answers aren't the basis of analytic thinking; questions are. You always begin with a question, a query, a hypothesis, something to explore. If you already knew the answer, there would be no point in conducting the analysis. We leave you to it to explore the almost infinite variety of questions that the readings in this book raise. Many come equipped with their own answers, but you may (indeed will and should) find such "answers" raise further questions. To help you ask those questions, keep in mind the two elemental principles of semiotics that we have explored so far:

1. The meaning of a sign can be found not in itself but in its relationships (both differences and similarities) with other signs

within a system. To interpret an individual sign, then, you must determine the general system in which it belongs.

2. What we call social reality is a human construct, the product of a cultural mythology or value system that intervenes between our minds and the world we experience. Such cultural myths reflect the values and ideological interests of its builders, not the laws of nature or logic.

Perhaps our first principle could be more succinctly phrased as "Everything is connected," and our second simply as, "Question authority." Think of them that way if it helps. Or just ask yourself whenever you are interpreting something, "What's going on here?" In short, question everything. And one more reminder: Signs are like weather vanes; they point in response to invisible historical winds. We invite you now to start looking at the weather.
Developing Strong Arguments about Popular Culture

We expect that students will write many different sorts of papers in response to the selections in this book. You may write personal experience narratives, opinion pieces, research papers, formal pro-con arguments, and many others. We’d like here to focus on writing analytic essays because the experience of analyzing popular culture may seem different than that of analyzing other subjects. Occasionally we’ve had students who feel reluctant to analyze popular culture because they think that analysis requires them to trash their subject, and they don’t want to write a “negative” essay about what may be their favorite film or TV program. Or a few students may feel uncertain because “It's all subjective.” Since most people have opinions about popular culture, they say, how can any one essay be stronger than another?

While these concerns are understandable, they needn’t be an obstacle in writing a strong analytic paper—whether on popular culture or any other topic. First, we often suggest that you set aside your own personal tastes when writing an analysis. We do so not because your preferences are not important; recall that we often ask you to explore your beliefs in your journal, and we want you to be aware of your own attitudes and observations about your topic. Rather, we do so because an analysis of, say, The Mummy is not the same as a paper that explains “why I like (or dislike) this movie.” Instead, an analysis would explain how it works, what cultural beliefs and viewpoints underlie it, what its significance is, and so forth. And such a paper would not necessarily be positive or negative; it would seek to explain how the elements of the film work together to have a particular effect on its audience. If your instructor asks you to write a critical analysis or a critical argument, he or she is requesting neither a hit job nor a celebration of your topic.

As a result, the second concern, about subjectivity, becomes less of a problem. That’s because your analysis should center around a clear argument about that movie. You’re not simply presenting a personal opinion about it; rather, you’re presenting a central insight about how the movie works, and you need to demonstrate it with logical, specific evidence. It’s that evidence that will take your essay out of the category of being “merely subjective.” You should start with your own opinion, but you
want to add to it lots of proof that shows the legitimacy of that opinion. Does that sound familiar? It should, because that’s what you need to do in any analytic essay, no matter what your subject matter happens to be.

When writing about popular culture, students sometimes wonder what sort of evidence they can use to support their points. Your instructor will probably give you guidelines for each assignment, but we’ll provide some general suggestions here. Start with your subject itself. You’ll find it useful to view your subject—whether it’s an ad, a film, or anything else—as a text that you can “read” closely. That’s what you would do if you were asked to analyze a poem: you would read it carefully, studying individual words, images, rhythm, and so forth, and those details would support whatever point you wanted to make about the poem. Read your pop culture subject with the same care. Let’s say your instructor asks you to analyze an advertisement. Look at the details: Who appears in the ad, and what is their expression? What props are used, and what is the “story” that the ad tells? Is there anything missing from this scene that you would expect to find? Your answers to such questions could form the basis of the evidence that you use in your essay.

If your instructor has asked you to write a semiotic analysis, you can develop evidence as well by locating your subject within a larger system. Recall that a system is the larger network of related signs to which your subject belongs and that identifying it helps to reveal the significance of your subject. This may sound hard to do, but it is through identifying a system that you can draw on your own vast knowledge of popular culture. And that may sound abstract, but it becomes very specific when applied to a particular example. If you were to analyze platform shoes, for instance, it would help to locate them within the larger fashion system—specifically, other choices of footwear. How do the signals sent by wearing a pair of platforms differ from those sent by wearing, say, a pair of Doc Martens? How does the history of platform shoes, specifically their popularity in the 1970s, affect their current appeal? Can you associate the retro look of platforms with any other fashion and popular cultural trends? Teasing out such differences and associations can help you explain the shoes’ social and cultural significance.

You can strengthen your argument as well if you know and use the history of your subject. That might sound like you have to do a lot of library research, but often you don’t have to: you may already be familiar with the social and cultural history of your subject. If you know, for instance, that the baggy pants so popular among teens in the mid-1990s were a few years before ubiquitous among street gang members, you know an important historical detail that goes a long way toward explaining their significance. Depending on your assignment, you might want to expand on your own historical knowledge and collect other data about your topic, perhaps through surveys and interviews. If you’re analyzing gendered patterns of courtship rituals, for instance, you could interview some people from different age groups, as well as both genders, to get a sense of how such patterns have evolved over time. The material you gather through such an interview will be raw data, and you’ll want to do more than just “dump” the information into your essay. See this material instead as an original body of evidence that you’ll sort through (you probably won’t use every scrap of information), study, and interpret in its own right.

Reading Essays about Popular Culture

In your writing course, it’s likely that your instructor will ask you to work in groups with other students, perhaps reviewing each other’s rough drafts. You’ll find many benefits to this activity. Not only will you receive more feedback on your own in-progress work, but you will see other students’ ideas and approaches to an assignment and develop an ability to evaluate academic writing. For the same reasons, we’re including three sample student essays that satisfy assignments about popular culture. You may agree or disagree with the authors’ views, and you might think you’d respond to the assigned topics differently: that’s fine. We’ve selected these essays because they differ in style, focus, and purpose and thus suggest different approaches to their assignments—approaches that might help you as you write your own essays about popular culture. We’ve annotated the essays to point out argumentative, organizational, and rhetorical strategies that we found effective. As you read the essays and the annotations, ask why the authors chose these strategies and how you might incorporate some of the same strategies in your own writing.