

The Theory Drop
The Theory Drop
The Theory Drop
The Theory Drop
The Theory Drop
The Theory Drop
The Theory Drop
The Theory Drop

Semiotics

Semiotics might sound like a complicated 'theory' but the practice of making meanings and reading meanings is a media student's bread and butter. Claire Pollard explains how it's a fancy way of describing something we all do every day.

Semiotics is about meaning. Words, although just a collection of letters, carry specific meanings and ideas. When I teach semiotics, I begin by getting students to draw the following things: drum, tree, death. Usually the images they draw are very similar – a child's toy drum, a standard oak-shaped tree and, for death, usually a skull with or without crossbones. These words immediately conjure up images which we have in our heads when we hear them. This is semiotics.

There is nothing about the assemblage of the letters t-a-b-l-e that suggests a flat surface on four legs but that's the meaning that has been assigned to that word and we have all agreed upon it, so a 'table' becomes a table. This is semiotics.

Signifier and Signified

Ferdinand de Saussure said that anything can be interpreted as a sign and signs are made up of two parts – the signifier and the signified.

Three years ago, you could only have guessed what a 'Brexit' might be. And presumably at some point an aubergine emoji could be used to mean 'fancy moussaka for dinner?' Now it has taken on an entirely different meaning.



What does it all mean?

Courtesy of Netflix

This is where it can start to sound slightly complicated but in the example I have just given you, the signifier is the word 'table' and the signified is the surface with four legs. Saussure was a linguist, dealing with language - but what does this mean for students of film and media?

Most media students, certainly at A level are adept at taking meanings that step further – into connotations. When you're writing about denotation, for example, if we see a character in close-up followed by a cut to an image of an ice cream, you are reading and understanding the sign (signifier and signified). When we start thinking about the possible implied meanings - the character wants to eat the ice cream, this is a greedy person or someone who deserves a treat, they are being punished somehow, these are the connotations, the deeper meanings that might be attached to the sign.

Often these deeper meanings have also been agreed upon over time. Here's another example: a girl with multiple piercings swaggers into the school playground as the bell goes with a graffitied bag and chunky boots while everyone turns to look. The multiple signs (her walk, her piercings, her bag, her boots, her arrival just as the bell

goes) connote that this is an outsider or a new girl who might go on to be a disruptive force in the narrative. We know this because we've seen this kind of thing before in other narratives and we use that understanding to help us read this set of images. Texts communicate their meaning (bad girl in town) through a process of signification – in this case the combinations of elements of mise-en-scène, costume, casting, camera and editing.

Making Meanings

Saussure also said that anything that can be interpreted as a sign IS a sign. New signs get made all the time. In my first lessons on semiotics, I always get my class to come up with a random word (last year it was "fastac") and then I DO something random, like wagging a ruler like a lunatic and we decide as a class that this is what fastac is – the act of wagging a ruler. Together we have made a sign – we've agreed on a meaning for a word, we've created a signifier and a signified and enacted the process of signification. In short, we made meaning.

You probably do this all the time in your friendship groups, where

certain words or references will have taken on a meaning (beyond the dictionary definition meanings) that only you and your friends understand. Together you've arrived at and agreed upon that meaning. You've made a sign; you're doing semiotics.

It happens all the time in written and visual language. Three years ago, you could only have guessed what a 'Brexit' might be. And presumably at some point an aubergine emoji could be used to mean 'fancy moussaka for dinner?' Now it has taken on an entirely different meaning. And for all sorts of reasons, the same signifier can have multiple signified meanings, which is what polysemy is all about and why for one person (your dad) the full-stop might signify an almost meaningless grammatical sentence break in a written message, but for another (your younger sister) it 'means' a harsh end to a social media conversation that leaves her feeling upset. Signified meanings shift over time and aren't always anchored to the original meanings they might have had, which is why people argue over words like 'literally' and 'gay' and what they mean, and why others interpret visual icons in very different ways.

Nadia, played by Natasha Lyonne, producer and creator of *Russian Doll* (2018)



Courtesy of Netflix

Roland Barthes and 'Myths'

Roland Barthes built on Saussure's work in his collection of essays *Mythologies* (1957). The main takeaway for media and film students here is how socially constructed notions - that is, ideas that are created collectively in a society - become naturalised. This means that certain meanings, like the phallic emoji of the previous paragraph, are created or brought about in society and, over time, once enough people know about these newly constructed meanings, they are 'naturalised', accepted and agreed upon. Just like the scenario with the disruptive girl walking into high school. Making meaning is a process.

Barthes Narrative Codes

In another, later book, *S/Z* (1970) Barthes suggests that there are different types of signs or, as he called them 'codes' that help readers to understand narratives. These can be nicely applied to moving image analysis. You can use all five if you really want to be impressive (they're in the box-out) but the three you'll find most useful to develop your analysis of semiotics are enigma code, cultural code and symbolic

code, as they allow you to pinpoint the connotations quickly and using relevant theoretical vocabulary.

A Case Study in Narrative Codes

I've just finished watching *Russian Doll* on Netflix. It's a brilliant (female driven, female written and directed) narrative about two characters who are stuck in a loop, a glitch in the universe. Every day they die and their lives are reset to a particular moment the day before (similar to *Groundhog Day*). As they relive their last day on earth around 15 or 20 times over, things (fish, people, furniture) start disappearing. Each time their lives reset, or the universe in which they are moving reopens, it seems to shrink. When you open Russian matryoshka dolls, they too get smaller and smaller. So the title acts as a symbolic code here. The symbol of the Russian doll helps us (eventually) to make sense of the narrative.

At some point, fairly early on, the camera pans past and lingers on a close up of a bowl of fruit that is entirely rotten - only the most observant viewer (usually the student or teacher of film and media) sees this. This is an example of an enigma code. How come

the fruit seems to be moving through linear time when the characters are not? How come nobody has noticed or commented on these stinking heaps of mouldy produce? The main character Nadia stops to contemplate this question herself in a later episode when she realises all the flowers and produce in her local deli are rotting.

The thing about semiotics as a theory in media or film studies is that it refers to something you are probably already doing or already know. If you're talking about how meaning is created in an image or sequence of images, that's signified meaning. If you understand how, over time, certain things take on meaning (a slow zoom usually means we're meant to be considering that characters' dramatic thoughts or feelings) that's the 'process of signification'. If you're explaining how the use of violin music tells us this is an emotional scene, it's semiotics. When someone's telling a banal story and someone mimes playing a violin to make people laugh this is a 'naturalised' meaning, and, you guessed it, it's semiotics.

Claire Pollard is the editor of *MediaMagazine*.

Barthes' 5 Narrative Codes

- **Hermeneutic code or 'enigma code'** – this is anything in the text that is mysterious or unexplained, usually raising questions that the reader or viewer needs answered. Enigma code is a really useful bit of vocabulary for media and film students.
- **Proairetic code or 'action code'** – this refers to how sequential elements of action in the text can create meaning. Something happens (a character picks up their car keys), and it suggests what might happen next (they leave the house and go somewhere). In many ways this is simple but it's quite hard to pin down examples if you're not confident.
- **Semantic code** – this refers to elements of the text that carry deeper meaning. It's basically connotations so you might as well stick with connotations as a term if that's what you're used to.
- **Symbolic code** – you can use this term to describe anything that has a symbolic meaning. Colours in lighting, set design or costume for example (white for purity, red for danger or love) are examples of symbolic codes.
- **Cultural code** – this refers to anything in the text which refers to an external body of knowledge such as scientific, historical, and cultural knowledge. A Black Power salute would be an example of a cultural code – in a particular part of the world during a particular time it is loaded with meaning, in another place at another time it might mean nothing.



You probably do this all the time in your friendship groups, where certain words or references will have taken on a meaning that only you and your friends understand. Together you've arrived at and agreed upon that meaning. You've made a sign; you're doing semiotics.