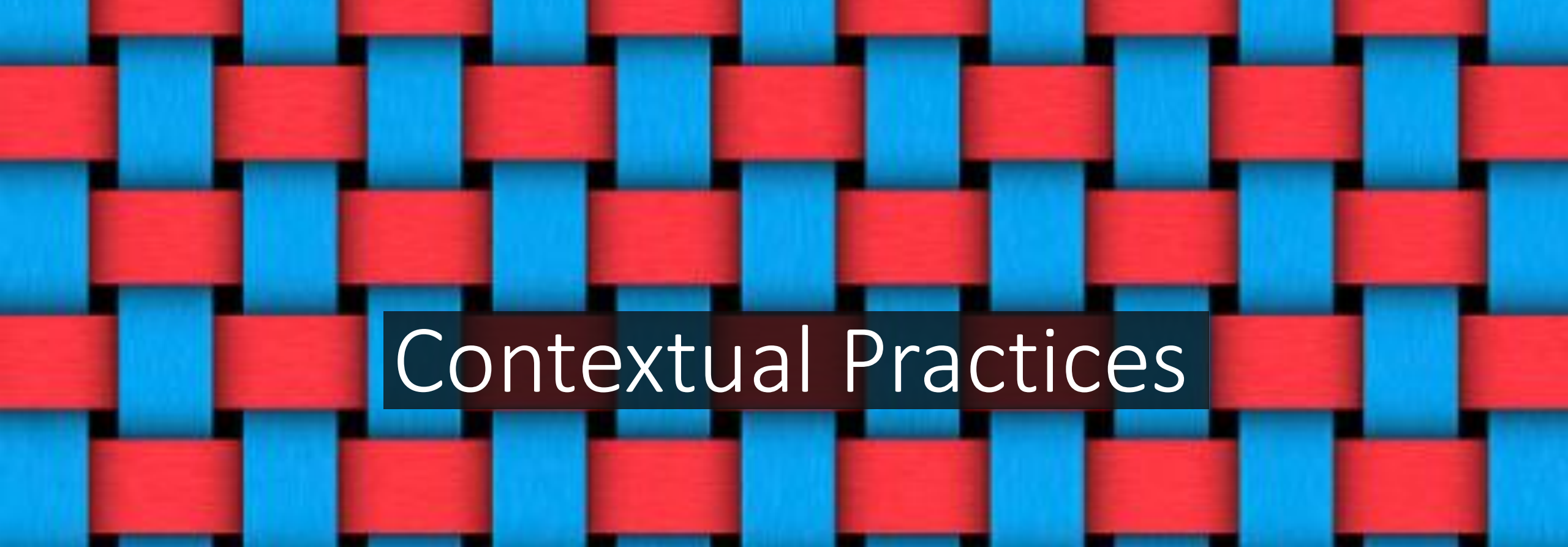




Contextual Practices

TASK 2: Writing your Analysis of an Image

Lecture 7: Discussion week

Dr Julia Lockheart

Swansea College of Art, UWTSD

Deconstruction

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2022)

a) The action of undoing the construction of a thing.

b) Within Philosophy and Literary Theory. A strategy of critical analysis associated with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), directed towards exposing unquestioned metaphysical assumptions and internal contradictions in philosophical and literary language.
Also transferred.

Deconstruction

- a procedure of poststructuralism, often used as a label for this trend in thinking. It is a method of textual analysis that works to establish the instability of textual meanings and to show that there are no authoritative interpretations of texts. The method was founded by **Jacques Derrida** (1930–2004), who used it to mount a radically sceptical critique of the assumption, supposedly prevalent in Western culture, that meanings are fixed and determinate. In particular, deconstruction opposed structuralist claims that discourse has underlying structures that furnish and support its meanings. In place of such a view, it invited both critic and reader to operate imaginatively, engaging in ‘active interpretation’ of a text regarded as a free-floating network of words. Puns and wordplay abounded in deconstruction and were used by its exponents to illustrate the drifting indeterminacies and transformations of meanings they take to be characteristic of discourse.
- Derrida's own approach to the visual arts was circumspect: his *The Truth in Painting* (1978) deconstructs what Cézanne wrote, rather than what he painted. Nonetheless his critical practice not only influenced much academic writing on art during the 1980s and 1990s, but also provided a model for conceptual artists.



IN AN ABSOLUT WORLD



TBWA Paris, 2007

This advertisement design wholly relies on **visual information** to communicate core messages for the Absolut Vodka brand. This helps it transcend language and cultural boundaries.

It is promoting an alcoholic drink and is aimed at a very specific target audience with some very clear objectives.

It wants to communicate market domination, by suggesting that without question it is the 'absolut' best.

Useful key semiotic terms

- Sign The sum of the signifier plus signified
- Signifier The physical thing.
(Works with signified to combine into a sign)
- Signified The meaning that is intended from a sign
- Iconic sign Looks like what it represents (falling rocks)
- Indexical sign Where there is a relationship between the signifier and signified (smoke and fire)
- Polysemic A sign that has more than one meaning
- Arbitrary or symbolic sign A sign where the meaning of it is culturally acquired
- Anchorage The combination of elements within a sign that fit together and fix the meaning (i.e. word and image)

Useful key semiotic terms

- Denotation The literal meaning of a sign or code
- Connotation The symbolic/abstract meaning or intention created by a sign
- Code A system used to create meaning
- Decoding When audiences interpret a text
- Encoding The intended meaning in a text
- Myth The way in which certain signs contribute to ideologies in our society
- Paradigm A distinct set of theories, models or class of objects or concepts (exemplar)



Very little written information is provided in this advert. Most of the information presented is visual. This aids communication, especially through language barriers. The text is encoded and weighted with semiotic meaning.

Anchorage text is used to establish and fix meaning. The headline is a representation of a culturally shared idea. 'Absolut' replaces the word 'perfect', therefore fixing the meaning for the audience. The product is now aligned with perfection. The spelling in the headline matches the brand name on the bottle. This emphasizes that the product is Russian, providing authenticity and pre-eminence for this vodka brand. It also, once again, re-establishes the brand name with perfection.



The only other appearance of anchorage text is on the box from which the elements have been removed. Alongside is a symbol. The symbol is a culturally learned signifier that represents male: ♂. It is a pictogram and also the symbol for Mars, the Roman God of War. Therefore, the symbol denotes *maleness*, but the connotations are *power*, *strength* and *conflict*.



The box itself is symbolic of an object that can be selected, purchased and delivered remotely. It removes dialogue and suggests relationships/partners can be manufactured and obtained as part of a consumer choice. It objectifies the 'man' into a commodity.

The representation of the male figure itself denotes ideals of *masculine perfection*, whereas the bespectacled appearance is a signifier that has connotations of *intelligence*. The facial expression is also happy which denotes male compliance in this paradigm, i.e. that a perfect man can be purchased and built. Also note the packaging foam which has connotations of protection suggesting the contents are valuable.



Red roses are polysemic, being an icon for flowers, but also a signifier of romance. This further promotes the paradigm of the 'perfect man'. In doing so it perpetuates the myth of an idealised and traditional heterosexual relationship.



The 'ripped' six pack torso signifies *vitality, fertility, strength, health* and *sexual dominance*. This social coding perpetuates the myth of the 'perfect' man in this advertisement.

The body parts also look simple to fit together suggesting the ease that one can find the 'perfect man' in the 'Absolut' world. The fixing parts also signify childhood toys like dolls and play figures. This also has a discriminatory and disparaging connotation that anyone can do this, hence the symbolic representation that has connotations of childhood toys.



The tattoos or 'sleeve' is a sign of interest and participation in contemporary cultural traditions and social behavior. It is a code that adds to the myth of the perfect man, as well as displaying a level of (non) gender conformity.

The male figure is perceived as culturally relevant, and accepted by wider his cultural 'tribe', which is a desirable attribute for the male figure, and also for heterosexual females.



The guitar denotes *musicality*. In turn it connotes *skill, talent* and *dexterity*. Playing a musical instrument also takes time and effort to learn so this has connotations of *commitment* and *perseverance*. These attributes also align with the myth of the ‘perfect man’.

The choice of instrument adds credibility to these conservative qualities as this fits closely with the ‘rock and roll’ myth which balances the previous attributes with an element of risk, fun-loving, passion and openness.





In contradiction of many of the previous signs we have analysed, the arbitrary smart, black, polished, formal shoes firmly re-establish traditional professional/managerial stature that aligns with the paradigm of career success. This is part of a code to denote conventional and traditional professionalism and conformity in the business world. It could balance high culture with the low culture of the rock star arm. This indicator of success also aligns with the myth of the 'perfect man'.

As a binary contrast the advertisement uses the female model to signify a gender aligned, traditional representation of idealised female beauty.

The polysemic red cheeks suggest the character is flustered by the model-building operation but may also denote heightened stimuli similar to sexual arousal.



The red discarded stilettos are an indexical sign of abandon, even though they are carefully positioned, so this may be an affectual or intentional symbol. In a similar way to the male characters black polished formal shoes the red stilettos are an arbitrary or symbolic sign of gender and sexuality.



The instructions are also anchorage text in that they help to fix meaning even though they are illegible. They function as an iconic sign of knowledge, know-how and procedure. The female characters' reliance shows obedience, trust and convention. This supports the myth of the subservient female who has less of a tendency for independent thinking and a willingness to follow set rules, structures and constructs.





A pile of books/papers are denoted on the storage unit and the connotation of this is intelligence and knowledge. The creators of the advertisement wish to ensure their paradigm is one that follows contemporary attitudes, and the audience decodes their symbolic value as being aligned with intellect. There is an intention to dispel the myth that beauty and brains are not at odds.



The framed photographs are icon signs in that they physically resemble what they signify. Carefully selected, collected and presented imagery are polysemic and can function to signify many things such as sentimentality, memory and an appreciation of artistic endeavor. This semiotic reading depends on the actual visual content.

The contemporary furnishings stylistically fit with the subtle colour-coded accents of the female characters' clothing. It signifies order as well as sophistication which in turn is used to signify the traits of the female character.

The modernist style and quality of furniture suggests financial stability, taste and also affirms her role as a homemaker.

The iconic red colour throughout suggests vitality, passion and sexuality, and also an element of danger albeit this seems pre-empted and intentional.





The physical context for this scene is the final code that supports the myth that has been created. From the view through the shrouded window, it is apparent that we are in a contemporary city apartment. When decoded it suggests a conventional young, single female professional who is financially secure, living an innercity lifestyle. Likely to be surrounded by like-minded individuals, it reinforces the paradigm set up by all the other signs. Every element has been encoded to provide relevance to the target audience who may consciously or unconsciously decode the advertisement.



IN AN ABSOLUT WORLD







Did you:

- Choose an image and think about how you could analyse it using semiotics.

Think about ...

- Denotation (what is there and obvious)
- Connotation (what is being communicated)
- The Iconic Sign
- The underlying myth
- Context
- Colour
- Any other factors you notice...

The next stage to writing a draft

Once you have deconstructed the semiotic messaging the next stage is to write a precis and **support your observations with references** from academic texts, peer reviewed journals/articles, books and credible websites.

- Once you get a grasp of deconstructing imagery, your next challenge is communicating your ideas in an academic piece of writing.
- The best way to do this is through practice. Most things that are difficult to begin are often the most rewarding.
- Upload your rough draft to TURNITIN on Friday 22nd November by 12:00 (noon). I will provide feedback the following week.
- Remember you need to delete the draft that is currently being stored.

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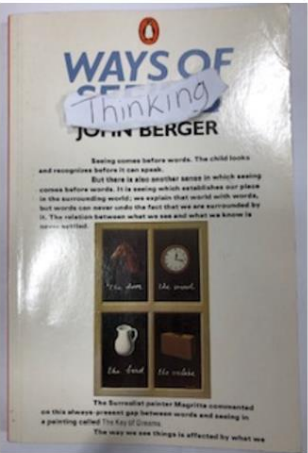
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Any questions?

Important figures in the study of semiotic theory

There are three significant figures to be aware of in the study of semiotics.

Charles Sanders Pierce (1839 -1914),

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913), and

Roland Barthes (1915 - 1980).

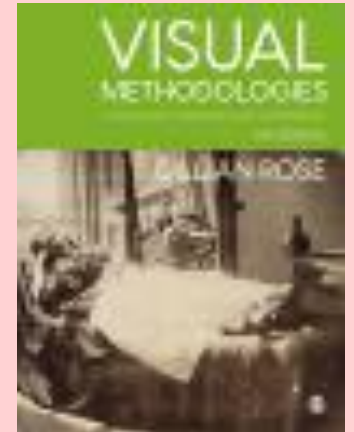
It would be extremely beneficial to direct your initial research around these thinkers.

Also useful are Gillian Rose, Visual Methodologies -Library permalink:

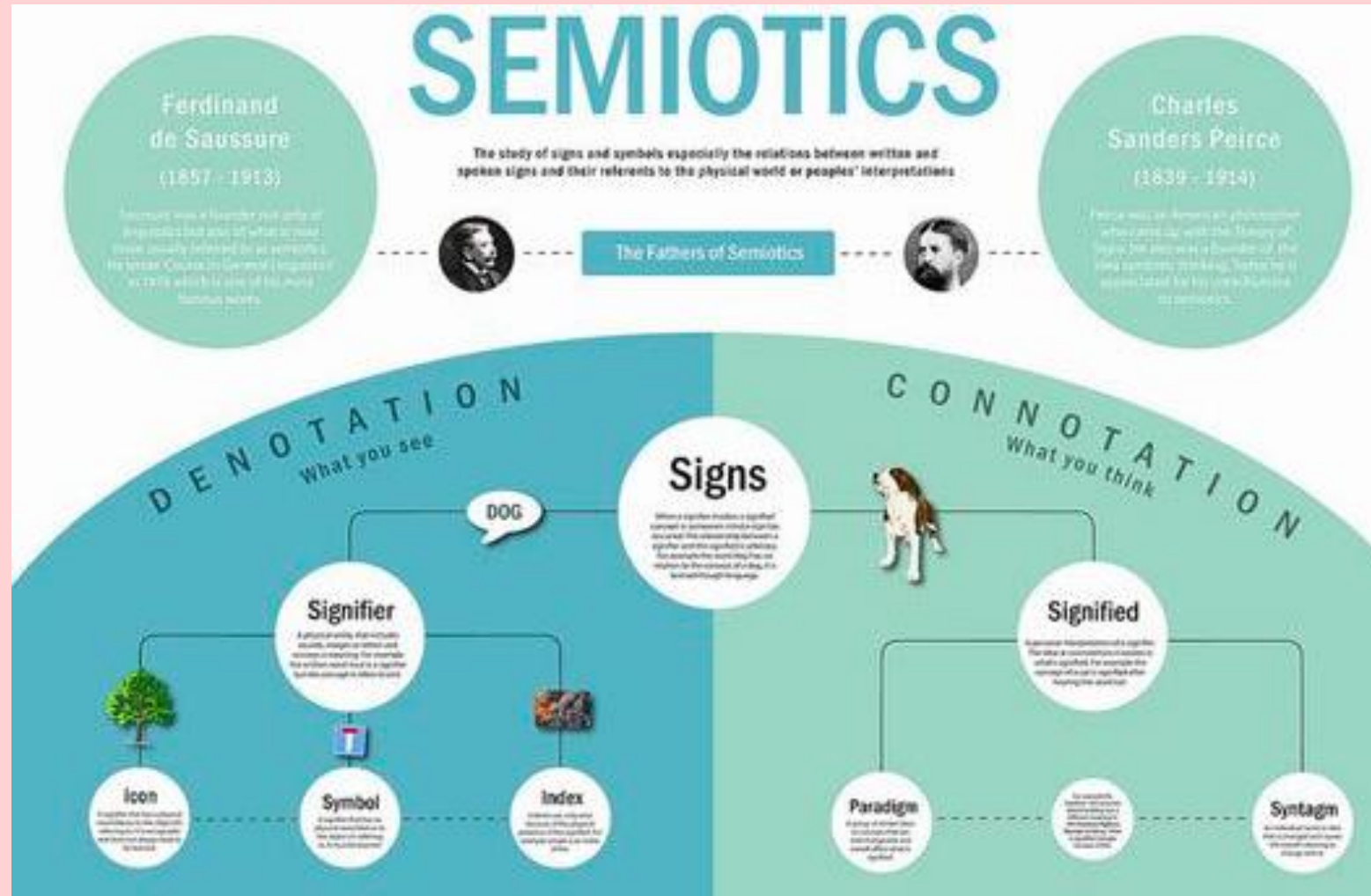
https://librarysearch.uwtsd.ac.uk/permalink/44WHELF_UWTSD/1pbrh66/alma99100479000902421

Judith Williamson, Decoding Advertisements- Library permalink:

https://librarysearch.uwtsd.ac.uk/permalink/44WHELF_UWTSD/11c0l68/alma992550502421



Charles Sanders Pierce (1839 -1914),
Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913), and



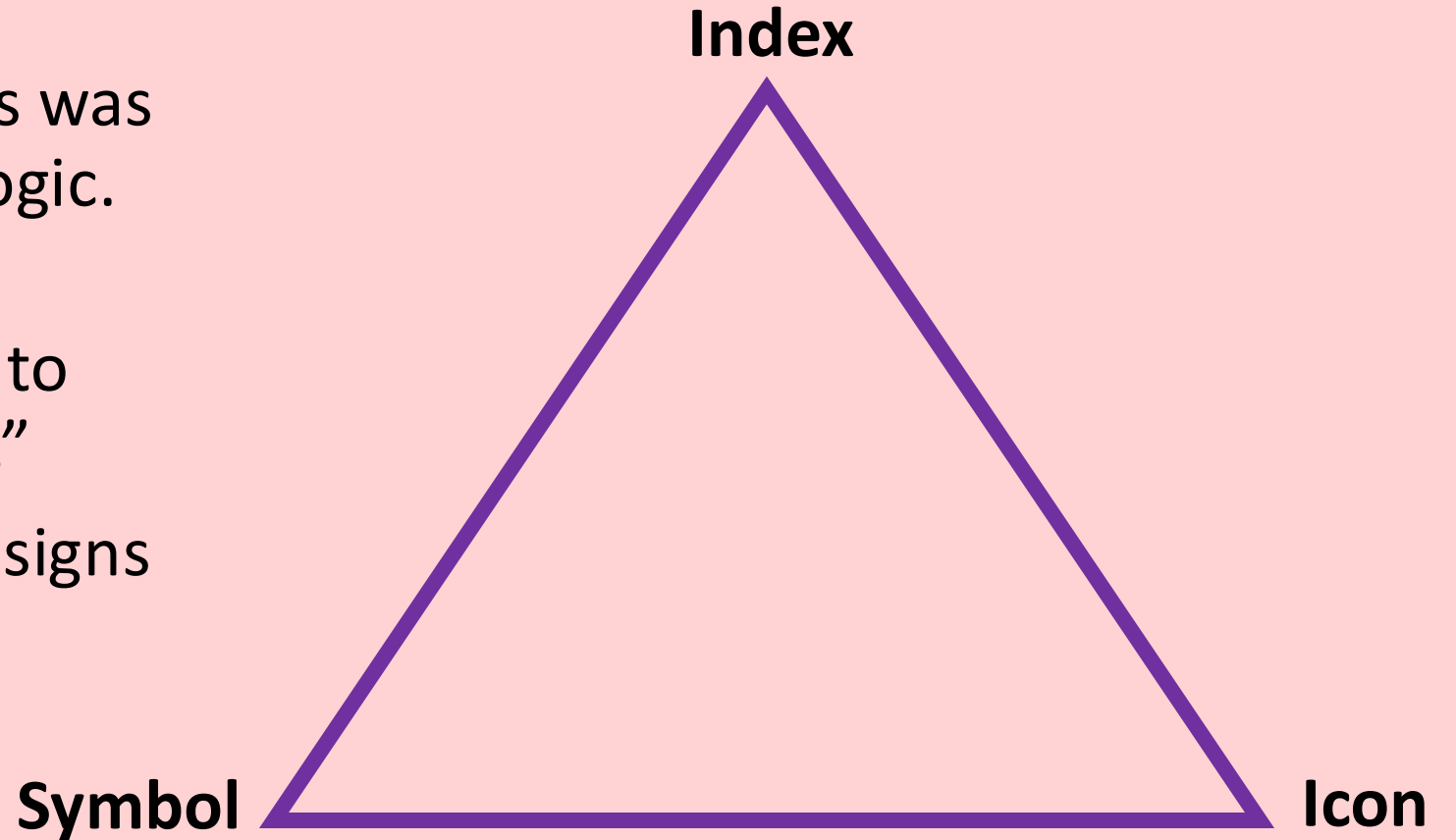
Charles Sanders Pierce

American philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce established the **symbol/index/icon** triad as a core principal in the understanding of semiotics in communication.

Peirce defines a symbol as 'being reliant on conventional usage to determine meaning' (Drew, 2006). It is a culturally or societally agreed metaphor that provides shared understanding based on our prior knowledge of what it represents. For example, we all agree that a piece of metal with an engine on four wheels is a vehicle – car/bus.



Peirce's study of semiotics was anchored in reason and logic. He defined a sign as "something which stands to somebody for something," and he categorized these signs as follows:



An **index** is a referent through a factual connection. It does not rely on interpretation or symbolism. It has an actual relation to the object to which it refers, eg. smoke to fire.

An **icon** was 'originally called "likeness" by Peirce. Icons have a "topological similarity" to their object' (Drew, 2006). Common examples are photographs, portraits, landscape paintings or road signs depicting information like falling rocks.

A **symbol** which is a communication device or element used to represent a person, group, object or idea through shared agreement of meaning or learned meaning, such as the meaning of words or physical objects like traffic signals.

A symbol – a sign with a conventional or arbitrary relation to the signified –
a learned sign =

Cow

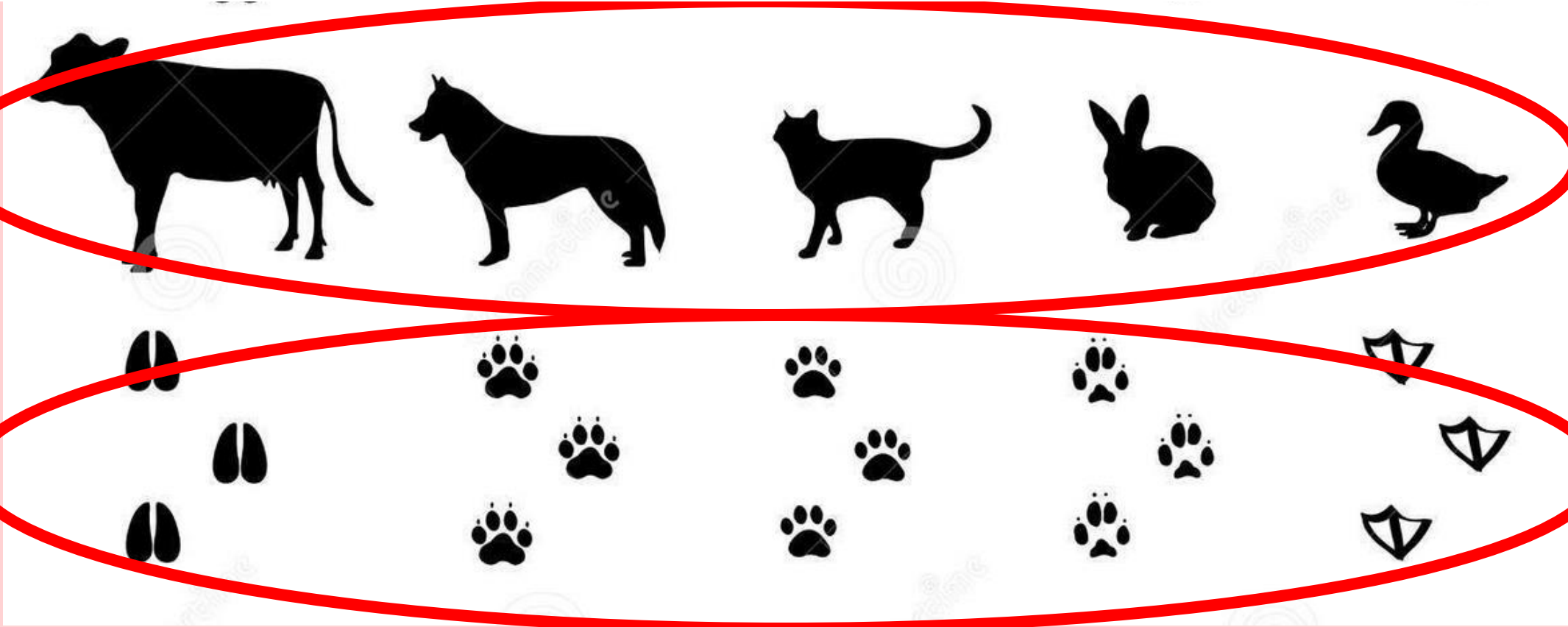
Dog

Cat

Bunny

Duck

An icon -
a sign
that
physically
resembles
what it
stands for



An **index** - a sign which implies some other object or event

They become signs when we invest
them with meaning

Pierce's argument

Every thought is a sign and every act of reasoning consist of the interpretation of signs.

Signs function as mediators between the external world of objects and the internal world of ideas.

Semiosis is the process of co-operation between signs, their objects and interpretants.

Ferdinand de Saussure

Swiss linguist, often referred to as the 'father of semiotics', Ferdinand de Saussure described semiotics as "the life of signs within society."

Saussure treated language as a sign system. This is because linguistics (the scientific study of language and its structure, including grammar, syntax, and phonetics) are significant as they are arguably our primary ubiquitous mode of communication i.e. through written and spoken words.

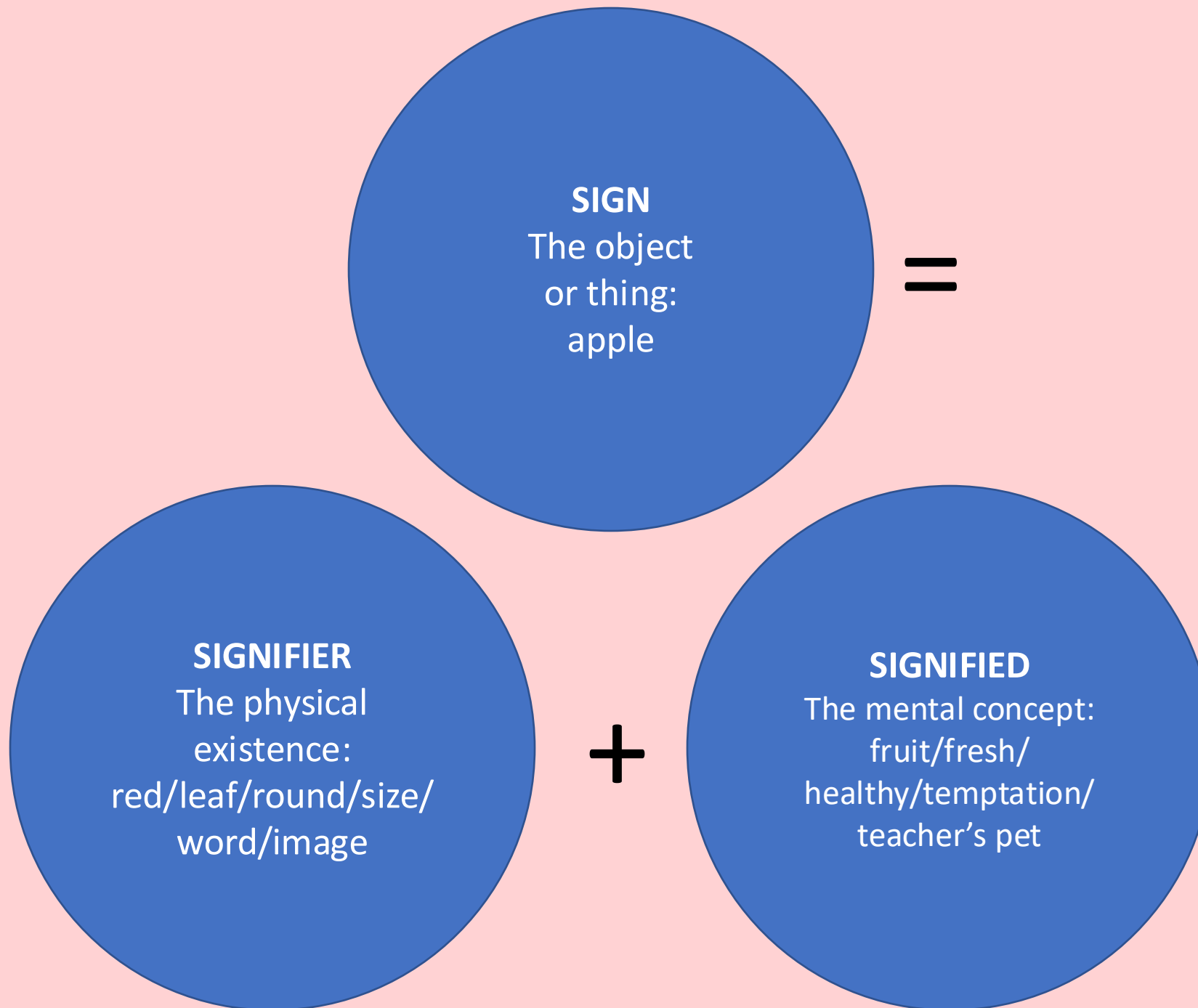
Ferdinand de Saussure

Saussure's approach was somewhat revolutionary. He defined the linguistic sign as being a two-sided entity (a dyad) which was made up of the signifier (the material aspect of the sign) and the signified (the mental concept). To illustrate this:

dog (is the sign)

is made up of the letters 'd' 'o' 'g' (is the signifier)

and conveys the idea of a dog (is the signified)



Ferdinand de Saussure

Saussure clearly identified that communicating through language relies on the transfer of ideas from one's mind. The notion of 'dog' is only understood as a concept as long as each individual shares the same idea. This is what is known as a **code**.

Saussure described the relationship between the signifier and the signified as being arbitrary in nature. There is no definitive relationship between each other than we agree its' meaning unlike an icon (physical resemblance eg. a photograph) or index (something that exists with the presence of another, eg. smoke and fire).

Roland Barthes – Mythologies (1957)

- Myth, as used by Barthes, refers to a fictitious, unproven or illusory thing.
- We therefore inhabit a world of signs which support an existing power structure and system of values which at the same time claim to be natural.
- Signifier = what you see
- Signified = concept

Roland Barthes Mythologies

POINTS



ESSAIS



Roland Barthes

Barthes work is unusual in that although it has contributed to thoughts on semiotics (as well as structuralism and post structuralism) he created no theoretical model like other thinkers. He developed a theory that unveiled signs as a vehicle of deception for example, how the drinking of wine can be considered a bourgeois activity, whereas in reality there are also health implications. These stories have great implications and cast great insight into representations in contemporary advertising, design, film and photography.

Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes (1915 – 1980) was a literary theorist, critic and philosopher who has been hugely influential in the field of semiotics in popular Western culture.

His criticism has greatly contributed to the understanding representation of information and models of communication, including computers, photography, music, and literature. Two key texts for worth exploring for design and communication are *Mythologies* (1972) and *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981).

ROLAND BARTHES

The Fashion System

TRANSLATED BY
MATTHEW WARD AND RICHARD HOWARD

The Fashion System

‘The catwalk’



<https://www.vogue.com/article/women-designers-who-changed-the-way-we-dress>

The Fashion System

Real world clothing



Roland Barthes(1967)
The Fashion System

[first English translation, 1983]

which, for convenience' sake, we call the garment of Fashion. Each of these structures calls for an original analysis, and we must choose. The study of the garment "represented" (by image and text), i.e., the garment dealt with by the Fashion magazine, affords an immediate methodological advantage over the analysis of real clothing.¹⁰ Clothing "in print" provides the analyst what human languages deny the linguist: a pure synchrony; the synchrony of Fashion changes abruptly each year, but during the year it is absolutely stable; by studying the clothing in magazines, it is possible to study a state of Fashion without having to cut it artificially, as a linguist must cut the tangled continuum of messages. The choice remains between image-clothing and written (or, more precisely, described) clothing. Here again, from the methodological point of view, it is the structural "purity" of the object which influences the choice.¹¹ "Real" clothing is burdened with practical considerations (protection, modesty, adornment); these finalities disappear from "represented" clothing, which no longer serves to protect, to cover, or to adorn, but at most to signify protection, modesty, or adornment; but image-clothing retains one set of values which risks complicating its analysis considerably, i.e., its plastic quality; only written clothing has no

considerably, i.e., its plastic quality; only written clothing has no practical or aesthetic function: it is entirely constituted with a view to a signification: if the magazine describes a certain article of clothing verbally, it does so solely to convey a message whose content is: *Fashion*; we might say, then, that the being of the written garment resides completely in its meaning, it is there that we stand the greatest chance of discovering the semantic pertinence in all its purity; written clothing is unencumbered by any parasitic function and entails no vague temporality: for these reasons, we have chosen to explore the verbal structure. This does not mean that we will simply be analyzing the language of Fashion; it is true that the nomenclature under study is a specialized part of the main territory of (the French) language; this part, however, will not be studied from the point of view of language, but only from the point of view of the structure of the

¹⁰ Troubetskoy postulated the possibility of the semantic analysis of real clothing in his *Principles of Phonology*, 1949.

¹¹ These are reasons contingent upon operational method; the fundamental reasons, concerning the essentially *spoken* nature of Fashion, were given in the foreword.

Roland Barthes(1967) *The Fashion System*

[first English translation, 1983]

Written Clothing

/9

clothing it alludes to; it is not a part of a subcode of (the French) language which is the object of the analysis, but rather of the “supercode” which words impose on the real garment, for words, as we shall see,¹² take over an object, the garment, which itself is already a system of signification.

Ways of Seeing

John Berger's (1926 – 2017) hugely influential book, '*Ways of Seeing*' is an essential read in the study and interpretation of images. It was produced alongside a 1972 BBC television series (available on YouTube) of the same name. Berger sought to reveal hidden ideologies in visual images by deconstructing them through semiotic analysis.

WAYS OF SEEING JOHN BERGER

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.

But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.



The Surrealist painter Magritte commented on this always-present gap between words and seeing in a painting called *The Key of Dreams*.

The way we see things is affected by what we

John Berger

Berger attests that how we see things is largely determined by what we know. Meaning has been obscured by time, monetary value, academics, reproduction and photography.

He considers how western art has objectified women through the tradition of the nude, and how this has been continued through photography. He also attributes how the ownership of art links with power, and further develops this link with consumerism, publicity and advertising.



Perspective makes the eye

Useful key semiotic terms

- Sign The sum of the signifier plus signified
- Signifier The physical thing.
(Works with signified to combine into a sign)
- Signified The meaning that is intended from a sign
- Iconic sign Looks like what it represents (falling rocks)
- Indexical sign Where there is a relationship between the signifier and signified (smoke and fire)
- Polysemic A sign that has more than one meaning
- Arbitrary or symbolic sign A sign where the meaning of it is culturally acquired
- Anchorage The combination of elements within a sign that fit together and fix the meaning (i.e. word and image)

Useful key semiotic terms

- Denotation The literal meaning of a sign or code
- Connotation The symbolic/abstract meaning or intention created by a sign
- Code A system used to create meaning
- Decoding When audiences interpret a text
- Encoding The intended meaning in a text
- Myth The way in which certain signs contribute to ideologies in our society
- Paradigm A distinct set of theories, models or class of objects or concepts (exemplar)

Judith Williamson, Understanding Advertising

Williamson suggests ways in which advertisements pull a spectator into their signifying effects:

The spatial organisation of an image offers a particular position to its spectators. Adverts contain or imply visual absences that the viewer is invited to fill.

The written text draws us in (many commentaries on Alfa Romeo's campaign for the Giulietta note that the phrase 'such stuff as dreams are made on' is from Shakespeare).

Many adverts rely on textual and visual puns or puzzles, which make us stop and look at them in order to work out 'what's going on'. Ads can show incongruity, or use no words at all, again to attract our attention and involvement.

Calligraphy is when the product is transformed into a word. The word then becomes a referent of a real object, the product.

Thus Williamson focuses on the compositional modality of the adverts themselves in her understanding of how they produce preferred meanings.

Finally, she suggests that we create ourselves in the advertisement itself. At this point in her argument she turns to certain ideas from psychoanalysis – including the imaginary – in order to explore the dynamics of precisely how we imagine adverts mirror our self.

SUMMARY: SEMIOLOGY (Rose, 2022)

Semiology, in its various forms, has been extremely influential across the whole range of disciplines currently interested in visual culture. Its approach has therefore been applied to many sorts of visual materials. Given its theoretical provenance, it is used as a form of critique of those materials.

Sites and modalities:

Mainstream semiology focuses on the site of the image and its compositional and social modalities. Social semiotics focuses more on the site of audiencing, in its compositional and social modalities.

Key terms:

The sign is the key term of semiology, which consists of a signifier and a signified; these are semiotic resources, which are often multimodal. The referent is what a sign refers to in the real world. The transfer of a sign's signifieds is structured through codes, which in turn give onto dominant codes. Codes and dominant codes encourage preferred readings of images by viewers.

SUMMARY: SEMIOLOGY (Rose, 2022)

Strengths and weakness for a critical visual methodology:

This method provides a precise and rich vocabulary for understanding how the structure of images produces cultural meaning. It permits reflexivity. It does not, however, demand reflexivity; its terminology can be difficult to understand, and in some versions it remains uninterested in how different viewers interpret images differently. It also has difficulty addressing the affective.

Further Reading

Gillian Rose: Visual Methodologies (2022)

David Chandler's Semiotics: The Basics (2007) is a good introduction to mainstream semiology.

Multimodality by Gunther Kress (2010) is a very useful introduction to social semiotics, with clearly explained analyses and lots of examples.

Doing Visual Analysis by Pere Ledin and David Machin (2018) is another helpful guide to undertaking social semiotic analysis.

Any questions?



A black and white advertisement for the Alfa Romeo Giulietta. The top half features a woman with blonde, curly hair and red lipstick, wearing a white off-the-shoulder top with a black shawl. She is looking directly at the camera. To her right, the text reads: "I AM GIULIETTA" and "AND I AM SUCH STUFF AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON". Below this, a silver Giulietta is shown from a rear three-quarter view, parked on a reflective surface. A red horizontal line separates the woman and car from the bottom section. The bottom section contains descriptive text, the Giulietta logo, the Alfa Romeo logo, and the website address.

I AM GIULIETTA
AND I AM SUCH STUFF
AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON

Introducing the new Giulietta from Alfa Romeo. Designed with Pre-Fill braking system and Alfa DNA, to make your drive even more dynamic. Developed to deliver lower CO₂ emissions* with superior fuel economy. Evolved Euro NCAP 5-star rated safety technology, making it best in its class.

WITHOUT HEART WE WOULD BE MERE MACHINES

Giulietta 

alfaromeo.co.uk

Official fuel consumption figures for the Alfa Giulietta range: Urban 26.2 – 51.4 mpg (10.8 – 5.5 l/100km); Extra Urban 48.7 – 76.4 mpg (5.8 – 3.7 l/100km); Combined 37.2 – 64.2 mpg (7.6 – 4.4 l/100km). CO₂ emissions 177 – 114 g/km.

*When compared to the Alfa 147 range.