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ADAD5003

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From the series of IMAGINED WORLDS research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

Word count: 2926 words

This is an exploration of semiology within the field of album covers. The aim is to investigate whether semiology can give audiences an objective reading of an image without requiring context, or if semiology without context leads to misreading, and is therefore a limited or potentially inaccurate way of reading texts. In the study of semiotics, we examine signs, symbols and their use or meanings. Signs are ubiquitous and can include images, words and gestures. Upon reading a sign, an audience will assign it with a signified meaning. According to theorist Roland Barthes, texts are “a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds,” and audiences “gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one” (1974, p. 5). There is no objective meaning to a sign and its reading lies with the audience. Any perceptions the viewer may have and the conclusions they may come to upon reading a sign is dependent on a variety of contributing factors. Some of these factors include their age, gender and cultural or socioeconomic background. John Berger explains this in his book “Ways of Seeing.” He suggests that “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.” (1972, p. 8)

Regarding album artwork, whilst the artwork may be considered art in its own right, it cannot exist independently. It is a marketing tool for promotion. The artwork will include signs, however the artwork is a sign in itself that signifies an album. Album artwork is representative of a collection of songs, and therefore any signs within the album artwork function as representational to something beyond the image. When put in context of being denotive to a body of work, the album artwork is not simply its own independent imagined world but another set of signs. Put simply, it doesn’t stand alone as a piece of art and therefore can’t be considered as such. We will be attempting to gain meaning from three examples of album artwork with varying levels of background knowledge pertaining to the artist or album.



Figure One

“Pray For Paris” is an album by rap artist Westside Gunn and was released on April 17th 2020 under Griselda Records, with its artwork designed by Virgil Abloh and artist Caravaggio. My knowledge of this album is intentionally very limited. I have not listened to the album and I am completely unfamiliar with Westside Gunn. According to German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, “the experience of art is an experience of meaning, and as such this experience is something that is brought about by understanding” (Palmer 2001, 70). On account of this, I will explore if the application of semiotics can aid my experience of meaning when reading the image with very little prior context.

On first reading, the artwork depicts a young white male holding a sword behind his head and a decapitated head in his other hand. He appears in front of a plain black backdrop. Chains appear to have been added to the painting, one of which is a medallion featuring a photograph of a young child.

When observing any image, we begin to determine meaning before we are given any explanation for what we see (Berger, 1972, p. 7). In this example, we see signs of three different people in this image and ask ourselves “Who are these people? What does their presence infer?” A common convention of album artwork is for the artist themselves to appear on the cover. Subsequently, the audience may question if any of these signs act a metaphor for Westside Gunn.

As we have established, album covers usually act as a public marketing tool and audiences may potentially be unfamiliar with the artist or their music. This begs the question of why there is no branding on the artwork. If someone completely misread the existing signs in this image, without even the names of the artist or album to go by, the artist may potentially miss an opportunity to attract new audiences. However, this may be an intentional choice to exclude outsiders and create artwork for a niche pre-existing fan base. I also question how

useful including any branding would be in my reading due to my lack of knowledge about the artist, and the uncertainty of how the phrase "*Pray for Paris*" relate to the artwork.

As previously mentioned, there is a photograph of a child around the protagonist's neck. The photograph is in a sepia tone, which is indicative of film photography from earlier decades. This sign may connote ideas of timelessness, perhaps signifying to the audience that this is an album of great weight or legacy. This is reinforced by the main image appearing to be a 15th-16th century painting. Consequently, there is an element of ambiguity of an era to place the album. It may be fair to suggest that "what we know or what we believe," (Berger 1972, p. 8) as a 21st century audience may distinguish how we perceive the artwork from that of a previous era. If the artwork was shown to an audience from a previous century - perhaps a 15th-16th century audience - they may have a deep understanding of the context of the painting, and as a result, their reading may differ from a contemporary audience. To a modern audience without prior understanding, however, there is confusion. Again, this highlights the limitations of semiotics in gathering meaning.

It is also important to consider the positioning of signs in a semiotic reading. The main figure is placed at the center of the image and we see him from a low angle. This may suggest that connotations of dominance or authority may be signified here. The weapon and decapitated head only seek to reinforce this idea. This could be a sign that dominance may a lyrical theme on the album. However, this reading may be inaccurate. An audience's appreciation of the rap genre plays a large part in their perception, and I have made the assumption that dominance may be a theme based on my limited knowledge of the conventions of rap. An audience may read the sign of a sword and decapitated head with an imagined link to gang violence. Again, this is perhaps an ignorant and generalised assumption to make for an audience with little awareness of the cultural nuances of rap culture. Perhaps a fan of rap music may read these signs to signify victory or triumph. Westside Gunn may even be highlighting the corruption of innocence through the main figure appearing to be fairly young yet holding something so vulgar. We simply do not know. This exemplifies the limitations of semiotics without context.

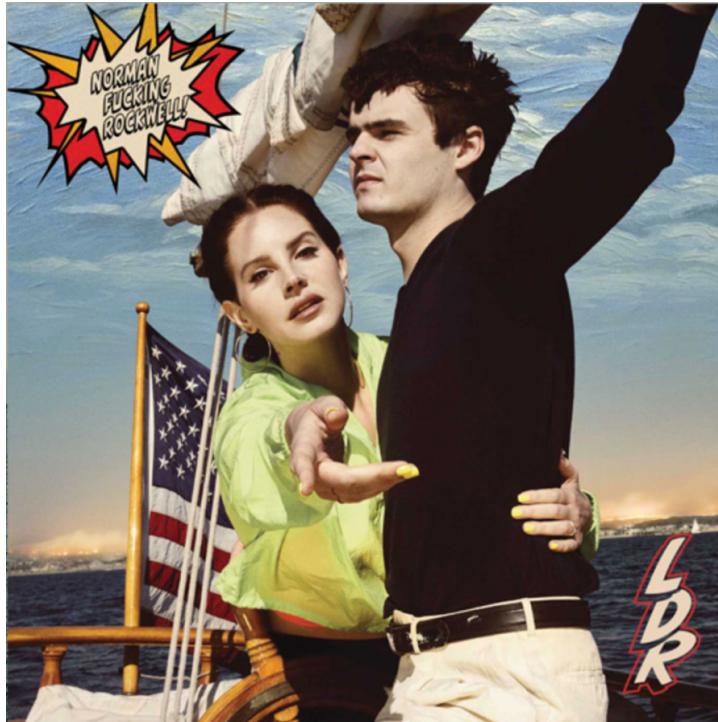


Figure Two



Figure Three

Unlike the first example, I have a much deeper understanding of the artist and can perhaps suggest with more assertiveness how the example was intended to be read. This artwork is for *"Norman Fucking Rockwell!"*, by American songwriter, Lana Del Rey, and was released under Interscope Records on 30th August 2019. It takes influence from psychedelic rock and 1970s classic rock, and has been described as an album that "retains her

fascination with pop-culture iconography and the rosey simplicity of a post-war America” (Monroe, 2019). Its cover artwork was shot by photographer Chuck Grant and features Lana Del Rey on board a yacht, holding onto a man with one hand, whilst reaching out to the audience with the other. Behind them, an American flag waves whilst the shoreline burns in flames.

Audiences familiar with Del Rey’s work know that whilst she is a very popular contemporary artist, much of her lyrical content references the past with a nostalgic fondness. She frequently makes reference to historical American icons throughout her discography, including Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, Walt Whitman and Sylvia Plath to name a few. The artwork for “*Norman Fucking Rockwell!*” includes signs that may potentially indicate this wavering sense of time and nostalgia. For example, the muted tones and shadows of the photography are akin to vintage film photography and the dress code of the man, particularly the bomber jacket on the back cover, may be indicative of the 1950s and 60s. However, Del Rey’s neon green blouse and nails make subtle reference to the present (Choir, 2019; Adhav, 2019). If an audience is unfamiliar with this context, there are perhaps no obvious signs to tell us that this is an album released in 2019. This is an image that is suspended in no fixed point in time.

Anchorage text is significant in achieving a more fixed meaning, as observed by its lack in the previous image. Barthes states that, “At the level of the literal message, the text replies ... to the question: *what is it?*” (1977, p. 39). However, the connotations of the initialised “LDR” relies on familiarity with Del Rey’s appearance.

Semiology is fairly limited in this instance, as “LDR” could mean potentially stand for anything.

Social conventions of gender can also contribute a signified meaning. Berger suggests that men are seen for what they can do, and women for what can or cannot be done to them (1972, p. 46). However, Del Rey’s extended hand and direct mode of address challenges this. The flames in the distance may signify danger or disaster and Del Rey’s motion to the audience place her as the saviour in this narrative, breaking the fourth wall and confronting the audience with what she can do for us rather than what can be done to her.

The subjectivity of semiology is quite noticeable when the American flag is present in any context. The American flag is polysemic in its meaning, particularly when we consider the political divisions and tensions of the USA in recent years. Some may read the American flag as a symbol of freedom whilst others read it as a symbol of oppression, when, in its most literal denotative sense it is simply a symbol to represent a country. It is only with familiarity with Del Rey that I can make the assumption that it features in this image with affection, and possibly even sympathy for America in its current state.

Intertextuality is the referencing of another text within a text, and relies on the associated connotations of that text to persuade specific responses from the audience (Kristeva, 1986, p. 36). Signs in this image rely heavily on intertextuality to create meaning, further exemplifying how semiotics are limited without context. Intertextual references that are alluded to include the Kennedy’s famous yacht photoshoots of the 1960s (GQ, 2011), and the 1950s Hollywood actor, Jack Nicholson, whose grandson appears beside Del Rey (Silver, 2019). The album title itself and its comic book style typography is an intertextual reference to 20th century American artist, Norman Rockwell. Without any research, the audience may not come to these conclusions on their own accord. Audiences may attach their own connotations and signified meanings, but without context these signs are confused and uncertain.



Figure Four

The final artwork to consider was designed by Steve Stacey for the album “*Moral Panic*” by alternative rock band Nothing but Thieves. It was released under Sony Music UK on 23rd October 2020 and features photography by Tom Andrew. It has been described as exploring “a fear, sometimes angry, sometimes despairing, of societal collapse or hysteria.” (Winter-Brownhill, 2020)

Here we are presented with what appear to be two figures against a backdrop of an orange and red gradient. The two figures are possibly male and female although this is unclear, and their colour has been inverted. The figures seem to be dressed in casual clothing and are in motion. Above them, the name of the band appears in a condensed white sans-serif typeface, while the title of the album appears in a white sans-serif typeface. Both texts have been distorted.

As we are presented with less obvious content here in comparison to the previous images, the audience must work harder to construct a narrative or attach any kind of meaning, as we are presented with less obvious content. However, we do our best to deconstruct the signs we are presented with despite their ambiguity. With its lack of clear time or location, we begin to imagine where the two figures are standing. Are they in a fiery furnace? Are they at the end of the world? Are they in hell itself? These are all questions the audience may consider when trying to construct meaning.

Most notable is the emphasised colour code of the image. To some, the colour red has connotations of danger, warning, alarm. However, it is important to remember in a semiotic analysis, that meaning is not objective. For

some, the colour red may be a signifier of passion, lust, or romance. The album title above therefore acts as anchorage text to enhance and guide our perspective. The term “panic” heightens anxieties and reinforces the connotations of danger and warning. “*Moral Panic*” is arguably more effective for the audience in establishing meaning than the previous titles. It is likely to evoke more obvious emotions or suggest clearer themes than the obscure “*Norman Fucking Rockwell!*” or “*Pray for Paris.*” The audience does not need to know any background of the band to draw conclusions on themes the album may allude to.

Furthermore, the distorted nature of the text may indicate to the audience that something is failing. Perhaps morality or the system in which we live. The sans-serif typeface of the album title - a style which in its normal state would typically look quite ordinary - has been turned upside down. This may be a reflection of western society in recent times. The fact that this album has been released during the 2020 pandemic could further encourage this reading. However, this again perhaps shows the limits of semiology, because if an audience saw this cover in the future without the context that it was released in 2020, they may attach their own experiences of panic or morality to it.

There is also subjectivity in the way the figures may be perceived. On one hand, they could be a romantic couple, signifying unity and togetherness - having a hand to hold onto amidst chaos. However, some may see a woman trying to escape a man’s clutch, evoking feelings of fear and trauma. Semiology is helpful here but not fully clear.

Barthes proposes that the acknowledgement of the author and their intent “imposes a limit on that text” and “closes the writing” for further interpretation (1977, p. 147). However, in my test of semiology, I approached Steve Stacey for a statement on his work to see if my reading of the image aligned with his original intentions. He stated that the band wanted to communicate, “tension...people on the edge,” and that the album “is much more outward looking about the state of the world” (2020). This partly confirmed my reading of the image, as I was able to discern the link between the current climate and tensions in society. I came to this conclusion without context. Stacey went on to state:

“My response to their brief was to create a series of visuals where the emotions conveyed within the images would be interpreted differently from viewer to viewer... Images which leave the viewer with a decision to make on what they feel is happening.” (2020)

Stacey confirms the intention for ambiguity that I read from his image. This highlights the power of semiology to empower people to make their own conclusions. Stacey states that some of the topics the band addressed include “tribalism, climate change, cancel culture ... loss of freedoms ... but [that] there is hope in the doom,” and that he tried to capture themes including, “panic, anxiety, love, togetherness” in the artwork (2020). With this in mind, perhaps my semiotic reading had limitations. For example, I was able to discern the tension, but I didn’t conclude that there is “hope in the doom.” I also understood Stacey’s idea of “togetherness” through the two figure, but I didn’t see “cancel culture” in the image.

Reading a sign system with context is relatively straight forward. We can piece together signs and our own background knowledge to construct meaning quite easily. Without context, however, it becomes slightly more

complicated and unstable. All we're able to do is create our own individual series of readings that perhaps point to a signified meaning, but may be completely different to their intended meaning.

When I refer back to "*Pray for Paris*," without context, my reading of this proved unstable and weak. I was missing context and understanding, and as a result, much of my analysis felt as though I was trying to claim a meaning that didn't seem fully true or safe. Moving to "*Norman Fucking Rockwell!*," despite the signs being open to interpretation, I was more comfortable in my reading as I understood Del Rey's background. On "*Moral Panic*," I tested the limitations of semiology and when compared to the artist's original intent, my reading was confirmed. I was able to read it without much context and still come to a solid conclusion.

In summary, I would conclude that whilst semiology is useful in giving audiences an objective reading of album artwork without context, it is fairly limited. Signs are so open to interpretation that a clear consistent system of reading is almost impossible. The best we can come up with is a reading that assumes our perception is correct. We may never gather a full understanding of artwork without either knowing the context of the artist or hearing their original intended meaning.

Figure 1: Westside Gunn (2020). *Pray for Paris*. [Image] Available at:

<https://www.thepostathens.com/article/2020/04/westside-gunn-pray-for-paris-griselda-records-review>
(Accessed 9 December 2020)

Figure 2: Lana Del Rey (2019). *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* [Image] Available at:

<https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/lana-del-rey-norman-fucking-rockwell/>
(Accessed 9 December 2020)

Figure 3: Lana Del Rey (2019). *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* tracklist. [Image] Available at:

<https://i.redd.it/qzclh9fnxnd31.jpg>
(Accessed 9 December 2020)

Figure 4: Nothing But Thieves (2020). *Moral Panic*. [Image] Available at:

<https://www.indieisnotagenre.com/nothing-but-thieves-moral-panic-review/>
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