THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO SEMIOTICS

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INTRODUCTION

The overarching aim of semiotics is to study semiosis (the production and comprehension of signs) as it manifests itself in human and non-human spheres. The general study of semiosis comes today under the rubric of biosemiotics, whereas the study of human semiosis, in specific cultural contexts, comes instead under the rubric of cultural semiotics (Posner et al. 1997–2004). As a cultural science, the latter discipline has proven itself to be particularly well suited as a framework for analysing the signs, texts, and signifying practices used by the contemporary mass media.

The semiotic purview envisions human cultures as networks of intertwining sign systems. Cumulatively, these comprise the semiosphere – a concept originating in the work of the late Estonian-based Russian semiotician Jurij Lotman (1922–1993). The semiosphere regulates and enhances human cognition in tandem (Lotman 2000). In this theoretical framework, specific cultures are seen to be both cognitively constraining, in that they impose upon individuals born into them already-fixed sign systems, which will largely determine how they come to understand the world around them; and liberating, because they also provide the signifying resources by which individuals can construct new signs and systems at will. Particularly interesting is the role of mass communications media in the semiosphere. There is, in fact, a general ‘semiotic law of media’, so to speak, implicit in the Lotmanian approach to the study of culture – namely, as the media change, so too do the sign systems of culture. Studying the implications of this ‘law’ is a primary aim of media semiotics, one of the contemporary offshoots of cultural semiotics. Although the analysis of media and contemporary culture goes back at least to the late 1930s, a full-fledged media semiotics did not surface until the mid-1950s, becoming a major discipline in the 1990s (Jensen 1995; Bignell 1997; Nöth 1997; Danesi 2002). Media semiotics interweaves insights and findings from other disciplines in order to gain understanding of all aspects of ‘mediated signification’, as the use and interpretation of media-based signs and texts is called.

THE EMERGENCE OF MEDIA STUDIES

The academic study of the media and their effects on individuals and cultures was motivated by a media event that became itself a headline story – the 1938 radio
broadcast of the *War of the Worlds* in the United States. The programme’s creator, actor and director Orson Welles, had simply recast H. G. Wells’ novel about inter-planetary invasion as a radio drama simulating the style of a news broadcast, with a series of ‘on-the-spot’ news reports describing the landing of Martian spaceships in the New Jersey area. An announcer would remind the radio audience, from time to time, that the show was fictional. Even so, many listeners became panicky, believing Martians had actually invaded the Earth. The police and the army were notified by concerned citizens. The reaction took Welles by surprise, since he did not expect that people would take the show seriously. In retrospect, the event perfectly exemplified what French philosopher Jean *Baudrillard* (1983) called, years later, the *simulacrum* effect, whereby the media representations and reality evolve into simulacra of each other, thus blurring the distinction between the two.

The radio broadcast motivated the first psychological study of the media by Hadley Cantril of Princeton University. Cantril (2005) wanted to ascertain why some listeners believed the fake reports and others not. After interviewing 135 subjects, Cantril’s research team came to the conclusion that the key element was level of education – better-educated listeners were more capable of recognizing the broadcast as fiction than less-educated ones. The study opened the door to a host of similar studies, leading to what is now called Hypodermic Needle Theory (HNT). The main contention of the theory is that media directly affect mental processes in a way that is analogous to how the contents of an injecting hypodermic needle affect bodily processes. Starting in the late 1940s, a new set of findings showed, however, that media had little or no direct impact on people, but rather, that people got out of media content what they were already inclined to get. In a 1948 study, titled *The People’s Choice*, American sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld (1901–1976) and his co-researchers found, for instance, that the media had virtually no ability to change people’s minds about how they would vote in an election. People simply extracted from newspapers or radio broadcasts only the views that fitted their preconceptions, ignoring the others. In 1956, Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz (b. 1926) found, moreover, that media audiences constituted interpretive communities guided by opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1956). So, in contrast to HNT, which portrays media textuality as a one-step flow reaching a homogeneous audience directly, Lazarsfeld and Katz portray it instead as a two-step flow, in which the first step is through the opinion leader, who takes in media content, interprets it, and then passes it on to group members (the second step):

\[
\text{One-step flow:}\quad \text{media} \rightarrow \text{mass audience}
\]

\[
\text{Two-step flow:}\quad \text{media} \rightarrow \text{leader} \rightarrow \text{specific group}
\]

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Flow Theory cannot explain, however, the power of visual media to affect people directly. This was brought out dramatically by another well-known media episode – the Kennedy–Nixon TV debate, which turned the 1960 election around in favour of Kennedy. People who heard the debate on radio maintained that Nixon had won it, coming across as the better candidate; those who watched it on television claimed the opposite. Nixon looked dishevelled and apprehensive on television; Kennedy looked self-assured, idealistic, and vibrant, a veritable ‘president of the future’. Kennedy went on to win the election and a society-wide debate emerged on the persuasive effects of media images.

By the early 1950s, the academic study of media started to branch out in several new directions. One of these involved the analysis of the relation among three spheres – mass communications technologies, media content, and cultural evolution. The leader in this field was the Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) who claimed that the three were interconnected (McLuhan 1951, 1962, 1964). McLuhan never really coined a term for his theory. However, the term Convergence Theory, as used today to refer to the integration of technologies with cultural forms and evolutionary tendencies (Negroponte 1995), would seem to be an appropriate one to characterize McLuhan’s overall perspective retrospectively. Also originating in McLuhan’s work is the idea of mediation, or the notion that media influence text construction and interpretation. Mediation is the likely reason why the MediaSphere (as it is called in McLuhan studies) has largely replaced the traditional religious sphere in shaping signification. It is relevant to note in this regard that, as John Morrish (1999: 83) points out, the term icon has been used to describe visually impressive celebrities such as Madonna: ‘At first, people probably were aware of the sacrilegious irony of this use given her name. But that soon faded and is now used broadly.’ The term has been applied retrospectively to describe past celebrities who have become virtually akin to religious figures – Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and so on.

McLuhan was also among the first to realize that changes in media (like changes in signs) leads to changes in social structure and in knowledge systems. For example, the move away from pictographic to alphabetic writing around 1000 BCE was, he suggested, the first great cultural paradigm shift of human history. Ancient cuneiform writing, for instance, allowed the Sumerians to develop a great civilization; papyrus and hieroglyphics transformed Egyptian society into an advanced culture; the alphabet spurred the ancient Greeks on to make extraordinary advances in science, technology, and the arts; the alphabet also made it possible for the Romans to develop an effective system of government; the printing press facilitated the dissemination of knowledge broadly and widely, paving the way for the European Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the Enlightenment; radio, movies, and television brought about the rise of a global pop culture in the twentieth century; and the Internet and the World Wide Web ushered in McLuhan’s ‘global village’ as the twentieth century came to a close (McLuhan 1962, 1964).
**PROTO-SEMIOTIC APPROACHES**

In summary, McLuhan’s approach to media analysis can be characterized as ‘proto-semiotic’, since it was based on two essentially semiotic notions, even though he never directly used the term semiotics (or even alluded to it) in his work:

1. the notion that mass communications technologies allow humans to extend themselves cognitively and socially; and
2. the notion that the dominant media used to communicate in a society in a specific historical epoch affect the content of the messages communicated (mediation).

The claim that media are extensions of human beings is a concept that parallels Charles Peirce’s contention that signs are extensions of sensory and intellectual processes. In effect, signs are tools – things (real or imaginary) that extend some sensory, physical, or intellectual capacity. An axe extends the power of the human hand to break wood; the wheel of the human foot to cover great distances; the computer of the human brain to organize and process information; and so on. Media are also tools, extending the ability of humans to communicate with each other better (and further) than they can with the voice or hands.

The intrinsic interconnection between mass communications technologies and cultural evolution became, in the 1950s, a fertile area of study, as a consequence of McLuhan’s crucial insights. The American communication theorist Wilbur Schramm (1907–1987) provided a common terminology for studying this connection, elaborating on previous work by the telecommunications engineer Claude Shannon (1948) – a terminology that continues to be used today. The notions of encoder and decoder are central to Schramm’s overall conception – the encoder is the component (human or electronic) converting a message into a form that can be transmitted through an appropriate channel; the decoder reverses the encoding process so that the message can be received and understood successfully. Schramm’s model came to be called, logically, the Sender–Message–Channel–Receiver model, or SMCR for short (Schramm 1954; cf. Berlo 1960).

An elaboration of the model, based on the notion of code, was put forward by George Gerbner (1919–2005) in 1956, bringing media studies more and more into the semiotic domain. For Gerbner a code is anything that is used to create messages in a socially meaningful way. The relations between the sexes in, say, a television sitcom, or the features that make a hero superhuman in adventure movies, are based on codes that have a socio-historical origin. Codes are sign systems – collections of signs that cohere with each other in historically determined ways. There are three general features that define codes and their relation to media (Danesi 2007). The first one can be called *representationality*. This implies simply that codes are used to stand for – represent – something, wittingly or unwittingly. The representation, moreover, will vary according to medium. The news on television will be represented in a more visual and condensed fashion (given the visual nature of the television medium) than it will.
in print, which is less condensed, allowing for more reflection on content. The second feature is interpretability. This implies that messages can be understood successfully only by anyone who is familiar with the codes used to construct them (or which underlie them). The third is contextualization. This implies that message interpretation is affected by the context in which it occurs.

The concept of code entered media and culture studies in the early 1950s, finding many applications. It was used, early on, by the late social critic Raymond Williams (1921–1988), who argued that mediated spectacles are self-perpetuating because of their ability to adapt to changes in social codes (Williams 1950). In Williams’ writings it is often impossible to distinguish between code and culture. Williams called the mainstream form of culture in place at any given time a dominant interpretive code. He saw in this code residual tendencies from previous codes, including non-dominant ones, and emergent tendencies, which point to the future. It is in tapping into the latter that media industries beget their power to change and thus perpetuate themselves.

ROLAND BARThES

The French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915–1980) became (to the best of my knowledge) the first one to apply semiotic theory directly to media and culture in his now classic 1957 book Mythologies (Lavers 1982; Culler 1983; Moriarty 1991; Cobley 2006b). Like the early theorists of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (founded at the University of Frankfurt in 1922 to study the impact of modern technology and capitalism on modern societies), Barthes came to view mediated culture as a ‘bastard form of mass culture’ beset by ‘humiliated repetition’ and thus by a constant mania for ‘new books, new programmes, new films, news items, but always the same meaning’ (Barthes 1975a: 24). His main contention was, in fact, that the subtexts in media spectacles were invariably recyclings of previous texts and especially mythological ones. This is presumably what he meant by a ‘bastard form of culture’. His 1957 book escaped the attention of the Anglo-American world of academia at first, perhaps due to the time-lag in getting the book translated and to the perception at the time that its purview may have been restricted to the semiotic analysis of French media culture or, at the very least, to a French-based interpretation of media. But since the mid-1960s, it has become a point of reference for any meaningful study of the modern media and their relation to pop culture.

Mythologies signals, in effect, the start of media semiotics proper, bringing out the importance of studying media texts (spectacles, movies, consumer products, etc.) in terms of how they recycle mythological or second-order (connotative) meanings. A photograph in a newspaper, for example, does not simply capture a fact or event directly. It takes on social connotation through the way it is shown, where it is placed in the newspaper layout, and how captions annotate its subtextual meaning. The photograph of a cat on a stool, when viewed without a caption, lends itself to many interpretive possibilities. However, if the caption Looking for a Companion were added to it, then the
primary interpretation that the photo would elicit is that of an appeal for pet adoption. Barthes’ book also demonstrated clearly how media and pop culture texts are assembled, namely through a technique that can be designated *textual pastiche*. The idea is to mix things together, borrowing especially from other texts. Pastiche seems, in fact, to characterize everything in pop culture, from early vaudeville performances to *The Simpsons*. The former was literally made up of a hodgepodge of acts, ranging from skits to acrobatic acts; the latter uses diverse themes and personages from different levels of culture in the same episode, creating an overall effect similar to the collage in painting.

Barthes claimed that a large part of the emotional allure of media culture spectacles is due to the fact that they are based on a pastiche of unconscious mythic texts and meanings. To distinguish between the original myths and their contemporary versions, Barthes designated the latter *mythologies*. In early Hollywood westerns, for instance, the heroes and villains were contemporary reconstructions of the ancient mythic heroes and their opponents. Because of the unconscious power of myth, it is little wonder to find that early Hollywood cowboys such as Roy Rogers, John Wayne, Hopalong Cassidy, and the Lone Ranger have become cultural icons, symbolizing virtue, heroism, and righteousness above and beyond the movie scripts. Hollywood has broken away from this mythology in recent times, but the tradition of the maverick cowboy loner hero fighting for justice remains a central mythic image even in contemporary cowboy narratives.

**Basic Concepts**

Following on Barthes’ coat-tails in the early 1970s was another French scholar, the sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), who came to be well known for his studies of media image-making and of the simulacrum effect (discussed briefly above). Among Baudrillard’s many other interesting ideas, perhaps the one most discussed is that in consumerist societies media representations are made not to fulfil a need, but to create it (Baudrillard 1973). Like many Marxist critics of American capitalist culture, Baudrillard saw media culture as a kind of ‘culture industry’, churning out popular texts for instant consumption, in the same way that factories churn out products. This portrayal of media culture actually took shape in the Frankfurt School (mentioned above), and continues to enjoy widespread popularity among various media schools. Essentially, culture industry theory sees media texts as being controlled by those in power in order to ensure consent by the masses, rather than using overt forms of coercion.

Today, this theory has morphed into so-called *hegemony* theory – a concept going back to Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Those who espouse this theory are generally highly pessimistic about the possibility of genuine culture under modern capitalism, condemning media culture as a form of propaganda designed to indoctrinate the masses and disguise social inequalities.

One of the more interesting contemporary versions of hegemony theory is the one associated with the writings of the American linguist Noam Chomsky.
Chomsky has always claimed that those who control the funding and ownership of the media, including the government in power, pressurize the media to select and present news coverage in ways that are favourable to them. In such a model, the contemporary mass media are seen as nothing more than a propaganda arm of the government and of capitalist interests. The mainstream media are thus seen as complicit in the ‘manufacturing of consent’, selecting the topics to be printed or broadcast, establishing the character of the concerns to be expressed, determining the ways in which issues are to be framed, and filtering out any information assessed to be contradictory (Chomsky and Herman 1988). Examples used to support this view include American TV coverage of recent wars, from the Vietnam War to the War on Terror (in Afghanistan and Iraq), in which it is transparently obvious that the government in power has the ability to influence how the media present stories. The end result is a media propaganda system that espouses an elemental form of patriotism and the benevolence of power brokers and the institutions that they head. Like the Frankfurt scholars, propaganda theorists do not seem to believe that common people can tell the difference between truth and manipulation. The solution they offer is to ensure that access to the public media is an open and democratic process. Such access is, in fact, becoming a reality because of the Internet, where basically anyone can post an opinion and garner an international audience for it.

The semiotic approach to media and pop culture has, since the 1970s, become a focal one, not only within cultural semiotics proper, but also across media disciplines. Take, for example, the notions of code and text. Already in the early period, scholars such as Gerbner and Lazarsfeld (above) argued that the whole array of spectacles delivered by the media was socially coded – that is, structured to support or reinforce existing norms. For example, the over-representation of deviancy and violence in movies and on TV crime programmes was designed, by and large, to warn people about the dangers these pose to the social order and, thus, to evoke their condemnation, not justification. The subtext in these programmes is respect for law and order. The textual representations themselves constitute divine justice dramas, so to speak, in which the criminals will ultimately pay for their sins. In the 1970s, British cultural theorist Stuart Hall (b. 1932) also approached the study of media from the standpoint of text theory. Hall argued that people do not absorb media texts passively, but rather read them in one of three ways (Hall 1977). A preferred reading is the one that the makers intended to convey with their text. A negotiated reading is the one that involves some negotiation or compromise with the text’s intended meaning. And an oppositional reading is one that is in opposition to what the makers of the text had intended. A simple way to understand the difference between the three types of readings is to consider a comedian who has just told a joke on stage. If the audience laughs unreservedly, then the joke has produced the preferred reading. If only some of the audience laughs, possibly with some reservation, while others chuckle or sneer, then the
A semiotic concept that has found special fertile ground in the study of media is that of opposition – a notion that goes right back to Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), a founder of modern semiotics (Saussure 1916). This implies that we do not perceive meaning-bearing differences in absolute ways, but rather in relational terms. For example, if we were to think of day, its opposite, night, would invariably crop up in our mind. Essentially, the notion of opposition allows media analysts to flesh out the hidden meanings built into texts. Take, for example, the differences that are associated with the white-versus-black opposition. The former connotes positive values, while the latter connotes negative ones. This opposition manifests itself symbolically in all kinds of media texts. In early Hollywood cowboy movies, many heroes wore white hats and villains black ones. Interestingly, the poles of an opposition, such as this one, can be turned around, so to speak, to bring out the same pattern of connotative nuances even more forcefully. This is why the Zorro character of television and movie fame wears black, as did several Hollywood western heroes of the past (such as Lash LaRue).

Although the idea of opposition originated with Aristotle as a principle of logical structure (Hjelmslev 1939, 1959; Benveniste 1946), and even though it was used explicitly by Saussure, it became the basis of semiotic and linguistic method only after the Prague School linguists gave it a formal treatment in the 1930s (Trubetzkoy 1936, 1939; Jakobson 1939). Along with Gestalt psychologists (Ogden 1932), the Prague School linguists saw opposition as a pivotal technique for examining levels of language. Within linguistics and semiotics, the concept of opposition has always been seen essentially as an analytical tool for identifying minimal contrasts, such as phonemic ones. This implies, basically, that a sound such as /p/ can replace other consonants, such as /w/ or /b/, to make English words – pin-versus-win-versus-bin. Opposition allows us to identify the phonemes of a language through a derived technique called the commutation test, which consists in comparing sounds in minimal pairs (two words that are alike in all respects except one), in order to see if a difference in meaning results (sip-versus-zip, sing-versus-zing, etc.). If the commutation produces a difference in meaning, the two sounds can be assigned phonemic status. The commutation test has been used extensively in media studies. In the domain of advertising, for instance, it consists in changing an image or word in an ad, removing it and replacing it with another one, in order to see what kind of reaction it generates.

The Prague School linguists realized early on that extending opposition beyond the study of minimal contrasts within language was fraught with problems. In 1957, the psychologists Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum showed that the technique could be expanded. They called their version the semantic differential. It consists in posing a series of opposition-based questions to subjects about certain concepts – Is X good or bad? Should Y be weak or strong?
etc. Subjects are subsequently asked to rate a concept on a seven-point scale, with the two end points constituting the oppositional poles. The ratings are then collected and analysed statistically. Use of the semantic differential has shown that the range of interpretations of concepts is not a matter of subjectivity, but rather, a matter of culturally based interpretation. In other words, subject ratings are semiotically constrained by culture: for example, the word noise turns out to be a highly emotional concept for the Japanese, who rate it consistently at the ends of the oppositions presented to them; whereas it is a fairly neutral one for Americans, who tend to rate it in the mid-ranges of the same scales.

The semantic differential is not, clearly, a radical break from opposition theory. It simply indicates that interpretive gradations might exist in binary oppositions that are culture-specific. The semiotician Algirdas J. Greimas also entered the debate on opposition theory, introducing the notion of the semiotic square, which involves two sets of oppositions forming a square arrangement (Greimas 1987). Given a sign $s_1$ (for example, rich), Greimas claimed that we understand its meaning by opposing it to its contradictory $-s_1$ (not rich), its contrary $s_2$ (poor), and its contradictory $-s_2$ (not poor) in tandem. Greimas’ technique seems to have borne particularly useful results in the analysis of narrative media texts. It is beyond the purpose here to delve into the merits of the semiotic square. Suffice it to say that, along with the semantic differential, it suggests that there may be levels and scales of opposition that determine how we interpret signs and texts. In the same time frame, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1977a) showed that pairs of oppositions often cohere into sets. In analysing kinship systems, he found that the elementary unit of kinship was made up of a set of four oppositions: brother-versus-sister, husband-versus-wife, father-versus-son, and mother’s brother-versus-sister’s son. Lévi-Strauss suggested that similar sets characterized units in other cultural systems.

In sum, the opposition structure of media texts can be binary, as are phonemic oppositions in language (black-versus-white); it can be four-part, as are some semantic distinctions (rich–not rich–poor–not poor); it can be graduated, as the semantic differential technique has shown with respect to cultural concepts; or it can be set-based, as Lévi-Strauss discovered. These types of opposition are not mutually exclusive, as some have argued in the past. They are, in effect, complementary. The type of opposition that applies in any context of analysis, therefore, depends on what system (language, kinship, etc.) or subsystem (phonemic, semantic, etc.) is involved. Barthes had implicitly adopted the notion of opposition in his Mythologies, arguing that basic mythic oppositions (father-versus-son, good-versus-evil, male-versus-female, youth-versus-elder, etc.) are built into media texts and spectacles, from wrestling matches to blockbuster movies.

**POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND BEYOND**

The notion of opposition comes under the general methodological rubric of structuralism. In media studies, it was initially called the semiological method,
which is the term used by Saussure to designate the study of signs and the one used by Barthes in his groundbreaking work on media. The structuralists explained ‘non-oppositional’ meaning phenomena, from metaphor to irony, as substitutions or combinations of oppositional features. There is much merit in such an approach. However, it is beyond the scope of the present discussion. Suffice it to say that it raised some fundamental questions around the middle part of the twentieth century. Taking his cue from other scholars (such as Louis Hjelmslev and Emile Benveniste), Barthes was among the first to react to structuralism in its rigid dimensions, introducing the notion of second-order connotation and, thus, the idea that readers, not implicit textual structures, are the ones who determine what a text means.

A major problem with structuralism was the question of the psychic function of the two poles in a binary opposition. Which of the two is the cognitively more salient one? To answer this question, the Prague School linguists introduced the notion of markedness (Tiersma 1982; Eckman et al. 1983; Andrews 1990; Battistella 1990; Corbett 1991). To grasp what this means, consider a simple grammatical example. In Italian the masculine gender is classified as the unmarked one when referring to people, whereas the feminine one is marked specifically for the feminine sex. So, for example, the masculine plural form of a noun such as turisti (‘tourists’) refers (non-specifically) to any person, male or female; whereas the feminine plural form, turiste, is marked, referring only to females. Markedness theory raises some fundamental questions about the relation of oppositions, such as the masculine-versus-feminine one, and society. The fact that the unmarked form in Italian is the masculine gender, as it was (and often still is) in English, is a cue that, Italian society is historically male-centred, leading to speculation that, in societies (or communities) where the masculine gender is the unmarked form, it is the men who tend to be in charge of social processes (family lineage patterns, surnaming patterns in marriage, etc.); while in societies (or communities) where the feminine gender is the unmarked form, the women are typically the ones in charge. Research has tended to bear this out, suggesting that grammatical structure mirrors social structure. As King (1991: 2) aptly puts it, in societies where the masculine is the unmarked form in grammar, ‘men have traditionally been the political leaders, the most acclaimed writers, the grammarians, and the dictionary makers, and it is their world view that is encoded in language’.

In media semiotics, this notion initially provided a kind of useful discourse for explaining the content of various media texts. For example, in early 1950s TV sitcoms the fatherhood-versus-motherhood opposition clearly reflected the existing social view of fatherhood as unmarked and, thus, socially crucial. This was evident even in the titles of the sitcoms (for example, Father Knows Best). Motherhood was portrayed instead as complementary and even supplementary to fatherhood in the representation of the family. There were some exceptions to this (for instance, I Love Lucy), but by and large fatherhood was depicted as the primary pole in the opposition. As society changed, so too did the nature of the
opposition. It literally came to be ‘deconstructed’, as emerging semiotic models of the media emphasized as far back as the early 1970s (see Danesi 2002). Starting with All in the Family, the fatherhood-versus-motherhood opposition was being deconstructed and markedness relations altered. By the 1980s, the whole construct was parodied in sitcoms such as Married with Children and The Simpsons.

In effect, the early use of opposition theory in media analysis may have itself opened up the debate that ensued on structuralism. The problem was seen as being particularly pronounced in the case of conceptual oppositions such as male-versus-female and self-versus-other. Which of the two is the marked pole? Clearly, this question raises deep issues about structural analysis. Out of this frame of questioning, poststructuralism emerged in the 1960s, a movement associated at first with the late French philosophers Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), who bluntly refuted the classic notions of Saussurean structuralism (Foucault 1972; Derrida 1976). Arguably, the central idea that set off this movement was that oppositions do not encode reality, but rather construct it. According to Derrida all sign systems are self-referential – signs refer to other signs, which refer to still other signs, and so on ad infinitum. Thus, what appears stable and logical turns out to be illogical and paradoxical. Many semioticians have severely criticized this radical stance of poststructuralism. However, as Nesselroth (2007: 442) has remarked, Derrida’s perspective has nevertheless been useful to semiotics as a whole because it portrayed signification as ‘a process that constantly decenters fixed meanings and puts into question the ontological status of language (both written and spoken) and of communication in general’.

From many points of view, poststructuralism is really nothing more than structuralism expanded to include a few radical ideas (at least for Saussurean theory). One of these is logocentrism – the view that all human knowledge is constructed by linguistic categories. It is also claimed by poststructuralists that this very same logocentrism characterizes semiotic practices themselves, rendering them virtually useless. Derrida maintained, in essence, that linguistic forms encode ‘ideologies’, not ‘realities’. And because written language is the fundamental condition of knowledge-producing enterprises, such as science, philosophy, and semiotics (of course), these end up reflecting nothing more than the writing practices used to articulate them (Nesselroth 2007). In actual fact, there is nothing particularly radical in the poststructuralist position, because the same kind of questions asked by poststructuralists were implicit within structuralism itself. Already in the 1920s, Jakobson and Trubetzkoy started probing the relativity of language oppositions in the light of their social and psychological functions. Basing their ideas in part on the work of German psychologist Karl Bühler (1879–1963), they posited three main functions of language – the cognitive, the expressive, and the conative (or instrumental). The cognitive function refers to the employment of language for the transmission of factual information; the expressive to the fact that language allows the speaker (or writer) to convey mood
or attitude; and the conative to the use of language to influence the persons being addressed or to bring about some practical effect via communication. A number of Prague School scholars even suggested that these three functions correlated in many languages, at least partly, with social categories.

Poststructuralism has had several interesting applications to the study of the media. One of these is its claim that all texts have rhetorical structure. Roland Barthes, as we saw, portrayed media texts as rhetorical, consisting of two levels: the linguistic and the mythical. The former implies that there is a denotative or referential meaning to a text that presents itself at first reading. But, at the mythical level, it invariably triggers a chain reaction of unconscious connotative (rhetorical) meanings. The meaning of a media text, thus, oscillates back and forth between the linguistic (denotative) and rhetorical (mythic) levels. As a simple example, consider the word Sonata as used to name a certain car model. At the linguistic level, it denotes the name of a specific automobile. However, at a rhetorical level it connotes classic aesthetic qualities associated with ‘sonata form’ in classical music. All media texts can be read in this way, as Barthes showed.

Another contribution of poststructuralism to media semiotics is its focus on the importance of agency in the whole process of interpretation, thus validating empirical work in media studies on the ability of audiences to select from texts what they expect to get from them. In a fundamental move, media semiotics and media studies generally have discovered, in a roundabout way, Charles Peirce’s notion of the interpretant, which is essentially a process of potentially infinite semiosis – that is, the process of deciphering what something ‘stands for’. The Peircean approach to semiosis has become a dominant one in current media semiotics, defining its current zeitgeist. It has been particularly useful in explaining the ways in which certain texts are designed to produce semiosis. A common technique in Peircean-based media semiotics is to identify how iconicity shapes the form and content of texts – iconicity being the primary force in semiosis. Iconic brand names and logos, for example, dominate the marketing scene – Splash (detergent) evokes what is done with the product through sound imitation (‘splashing’); the Polo logo, which represents the sport of polo visually with a horse and a rider dressed in polo garb; etc.

The above discussion is not meant to imply that structuralist techniques are no longer used in media semiotics. The technique of opposition, for example, continues to have widespread utilization, in a prima facie sense. Like archetype theory in Jungian psychology, which started rather simply as a way of understanding the recurrence of symbols and rituals in cultures across the world, opposition theory is still useful in showing how certain notions relate to each other throughout the human intellectual landscape. And, of course, the concept of mythic code is still a primary one. Consider the case of the Star Wars set of six movies (1977–2005), which recycle many elements of Greek myth. The set is divided into individual episodes, released in a sequence that starts in medias res with the fourth episode being the first one put out. Homer’s Iliad is structured in this manner. The unifying theme of all the episodes is the universal
struggle between Good (the Rebel Alliance) and Evil (the tyrannical Empire) – one of Lévi-Strauss’s basic mythic oppositions. The saga reverberates, in fact, with other ancient mythic oppositions and themes (Danesi 2007):

- youth-versus-old age
- nature-versus-technology (culture)
- democracy-versus-totalitarianism (Jedi-versus-the Sith)
- common folk-versus-autocracy (rebels-versus-the Empire)
- freedom-versus-tyranny
- father-versus-son

and so on.

There is one more emerging and growing trend within media semiotics and media studies generally that requires some commentary. Known as Carnival Theory, and inspired by the work of the Russian social critic Mikhail Bakhtin, it asserts that media texts are emotionally powerful because they are part of profane symbolism – a transgressive symbolism that actually validates social norms (Bakhtin 1981, 1993). In effect, we come to understand the role of those norms through a mockery of them. This would explain why media texts and pop culture do not pose (and never have posed) any serious subversive political challenge to the moral and ethical status quo. Flappers, punks, goths, gangsta rappers, Alice Cooper, Kiss, Eminem, Marilyn Manson, strippers, porn stars, and all the other ‘usual transgression suspects’ are, according to this theory, modern-day carnival mockers who take it upon themselves to deride, confuse, and parody authority figures and sacred symbols, bringing everything down to an earthy, crude level of theatrical performance. They constitute the marked end of the sacred-versus-profane opposition.

Carnival Theory asserts that media mockery institutes a vital dialogue in society at large. It is an oppositional dialogue, pitting the sacred against the profane in a systematic gridlock, manifesting itself in the theatrical and narrative arts, from docudramas and sitcoms to rock concerts and social networking websites. Carnival is part of popular and folkloristic traditions that aim to critique traditional mores and idealized social rituals, bringing out the raw, unmediated links between domains of behaviour that are normally kept very separate. Carnivalesque genres satirize the lofty words of poets, scholars, and others. They are intended to fly in the face of the official, sacred world – the world of judges, lawyers, politicians, churchmen, and the like. Modern-day examples on television are *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. The ‘media carnival’, as it is now sometimes called, is the context in which distinct common voices can be heard, and where they will flourish through ‘polyphonic’ expression, as Bakhtin called it. People attending a carnival do not merely make up an anonymous crowd. Rather, they feel part of a communal body, sharing a unique sense of time and space. Through costumes and masks, individuals take on a new identity and, as a consequence, renew themselves spiritually in the process.
The transgressive antics of the latest pop musician, fashion model, movie star, or cult figure are, in this framework, manifestations of an unconscious profane instinct that seeks expression in symbolic-carnivalesque ways.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Perhaps in no other medium is the carnivalesque nature of the human psyche more manifest today than it is online. From YouTube sites that parody pop culture spectacles (a kind of parody of the parodies), to sites promoting ‘indie culture’, the Internet is fast becoming the primary platform for enacting the carnivalesque within us. It is thus little wonder that the focus of media semiotics, as Mazzali-Lurati (2007) has suggested, will be turning more and more to online culture. The Internet is leading to a redefinition of the roles of the author and the reader of a text. The ‘popular’ in pop culture is now taking on a literal meaning, as readers interact with authors, scholars, artists, and others in determining how they will ultimately be informed, engaged, or entertained. One area of particular interest is that of how the new technologies are shaping codes and traditional sign systems. One of the most conspicuous features of online communication is miniaturization, as evident in the constant production of compressed forms (abbreviations of words and phrases, acronyms, etc.) in the language used in chatrooms and other virtual linguistic communities. Is this a new linguistic phenomenon responding to new technologies? Is it spreading to language generally? What does this foretell for the future of writing, given that there are few, if any, corrective forces at work in cyberspace? Will media texts become reshaped as a consequence? As mentioned at the start of this discussion, media semiotics can provide relevant insights into the interconnection between technology and culture, perhaps like no other discipline can.

Many are concerned about cyberspace and its influence on true culture and on the human psyche. As a result, some are prepared to take interventionist action. There is nothing new here. As Stan Cohen (1972) observed in his study of mods and rockers, many new trends tend to be perceived with ‘moral panic’, that is, as indicative of a decline in morality and traditional values. As it turns out, however, as these lose their impact, blending silently into the larger cultural mainstream or disappearing altogether, the moral panic also evanesces. The idea that mass media culture is detrimental to human beings ignores not only history, but also the fact that people can discriminate between levels of culture. Moreover, history also teaches us that interventionism has never worked. Prohibition did not work. Censorship does not work and can even backfire. As Peter Blecha (2004) has documented, some of the most famous songs of Billie Holiday, Elvis Presley, Woody Guthrie, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa, The Sex Pistols, Patti Smith, Public Enemy, Ice-T, 2 Live Crew, Nirvana, Bruce Springsteen, Eminem, The Dixie Chicks, and many more, were either censored or stifled in some way at the start. But all this did was to make them even more popular than they otherwise would have been. Even if it...
were possible in a consumerist culture to control the contents of media texts, this would invariably prove to be counterproductive. The answer is to become aware of the meanings that are generated by pop culture representations. When the human mind is aware of these, it will be better able to fend off any undesirable effects that they may cause. That is where media semiotics has proved itself to be the most useful.

**FURTHER READING**


