<center>**Semiotic Analysis and Structuralism**</center>

Semiotics
<u>Definition</u>
Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation. In other words, it is the "study of everything that can be used for communication: words, images, traffic signs, flowers, music, medical symptoms, and much more. Semiotics studies the way such "signs" communication and the rules that govern their use." (Seiter 31)

        a. The term was coined by Charles S. Pierce (1839-1914) (Seiter 32)

        b. In media studies, semiotics refers to the field of *semiology* as developed by
          Ferdinand de Saussure in his 1959 *Course in General Linguistics* (Seiter 32)

Semiotics is connected to structuralism which studies the way that a cultural system produces a set of texts or signs—it characteristically proposes *binary oppositions* and argues that every element within the system derives its meaning from its relationship to these categories.

<u>What it is</u>
Semiotics breaks from traditional criticism in that the latter looks for the meaning contained in a cultural artifact. Semiotics, on the other hand, focuses instead on *how* meaning is created rather than on *what* that meaning is.

3. The vocabulary of semiotics is technical but precise. The key terms are:
        a. Sign: signifier, signified, referent, interpretant
        b. Three types of signs: iconic, indexical, symbolic
        c. Semiotic codes and conventions (see Fiske "Codes of Television")
        d. denotation and connotation: first and second orders of signification
        e. channel, code, synatgm, paradigm, langue, and parole
        f. synchronic and diachronic
        g. polysemy

Semiotics has three main areas of study:
1. The **sign** itself. This includes studying the varieties of signs; the different ways they have of conveying meaning; of the way they relate to the people who use them.
2. The **codes** or **systems** into which signs are organized in order to meet cultural or social needs.
3. The **culture** within which these codes and signs operate.

The smallest unit of study is the sign = signifier + signified
The **signifier** is the material sign itself
The **signified** is the concept the sign refers to.

There is also the **referent** which is the actual material object in the real word that the sign refers to.

There are three types of signs:
1. **Symbolic** signs: there is no natural or necessary connection between the signifier and signified. For example, words in a language.
2. **Iconic** signs: the signifier resembles the signified in some way, i.e. it looks or sounds like it. For example, a drawing of a dog.
3. **Indexical** sign: There is a material connection between the signifier and the signified. For example smoke is an indexical sign for fire; a photograph of a person is an indexical sign of that person)

Three key points about symbolic signs:
1. The arbitrariness of the signifier—relationship between the signifier and signified is purely conventional.
2. The sign has no inherent meaning; its meaning derives only from its difference from other signs in the sign system.
3. Only some differences are important/detectable in any given language out of the potentially infinite number of differences.

The usefulness of semiotics as an analytic tool
1. Semiotics focuses on **how meaning is created**. It does not say anything about how it will be received—not all readers/receivers will agree on the signifier/signified relationship or on the semiotic convention used.
2. Semiotics founded on a **static model** of the sign and language—it's a snapshot in time. Thus, it has a tendency to ignore change in semiotic systems and is ahistorical.
3. Semiotics also runs the danger of being **too neat and tidy**, of closing off stray meanings or potential interpretations because it looks for a structure. That is it shuts off the reality of possibly "unlimited semiosis." (35)

Overview:
"Semiotic and structuralist textual analysis…recognizes that the signifieds exist not within the text itself but extratextually, in the myths, countermyths, and ideologies of their culture. It recognizes that the distribution of power in society is paralleled by the distribution of meanings in texts, and that struggles for social power are paralleled by semiotic struggles for meanings. Every text and every reading has a social and therefore a political dimension, which is to be found partly in the structure of the text itself and partly in the relation of the reading subject to that text." (Fiske 305)

Structuralism

The field was founded by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1950s): "Structuralism stresses that each element within a cultural system derives its meaning from its relationship to every other element in the system: there are no independent meanings, but rather many meanings produced by their difference from other elements in the system." (Seiter 32)

That is, it looks at the system as a *whole* and takes a *synchronic* view of cultural systems

The key concepts and terms in the vocabulary of structuralism are:
  a. binary opposition
  b. discourse (see 61-62)
  c. norms and ideology
  d. polysemy and semiotic closure
  e. paradigm and syntagm

<u>Post</u>-structuralist thought grew out of a dissatisfaction with the limitations of structuralism. Its main critiques of structuralism and semiotics are:
  a. We have to pay attention to the processes of encoding/decoding of meaning
   which brings in:
    i. the necessity of a historical approach
    ii. the possibility of multiple, different meanings of the same text, i.e. of
    iii. polysemic texts and the role of the unconscious, of social institutions, and
     of ideology in closing down or opening up multiple meanings.
  b. the "negotiations" that take place at the level of the text, the industry, and
   audiences about both the possible and preferred meanings of the text.
  c. If signs and the codes and conventions around the usage of signs are *conventional*,
   then they can be *changed* which means that they aren't natural or fixed for all time.