

Semiotics

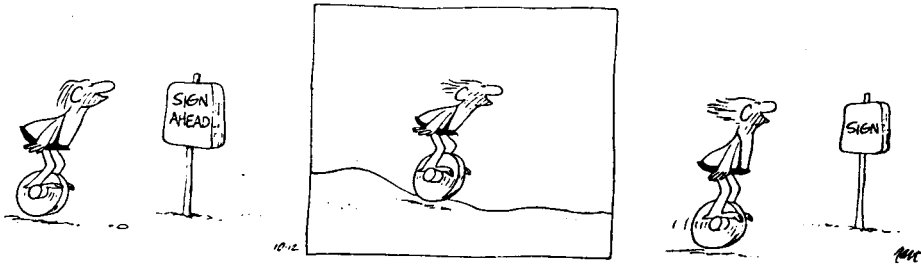
of Roland Barthes

During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when the United States launched Operation Desert Storm against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, students at a Texas liberal arts college competed in a strange outdoor decorating contest. It began when members of a service organization tied large yellow ribbons on virtually every tree on campus. Shortly before the cease-fire, another student group responded by placing black ribbons on many of the same trees. The combined symbolic activity of the students stirred up feelings of bewilderment, frustration, and amusement within the campus community.

How should a communication scholar view these carefully placed, dueling strips of cloth? According to French literary critic and semiologist Roland Barthes (rhymes with "smart"), these public objects are sophisticated, multifaceted signs waiting to be read. Interpreting signs is the goal of semiology; Barthes held the Chair of Literary Semiology at the College of France when he was struck and killed by a laundry truck in 1980. In his highly regarded book *Mythologies*, Barthes sought to decipher the cultural meaning of a wide variety of visual signs—from sweat on the faces of actors in the film *Julius Caesar*, to a magazine photograph of a young African soldier saluting the French flag.

Although semiology (or semiotics, as it is better known in America) is concerned with *anything that can stand for something else*, Barthes was interested in seemingly straightforward signs that communicate ideological or connotative meaning and perpetuate the dominant values of society. Unlike most intellectuals, he frequently wrote for the popular press and occasionally appeared on television to comment on the foibles of the French middle class. His academic colleagues found his statements witty, disturbing, flashy, overstated, or profound in turn—but never dull. He obviously made them think. With the exception of Aristotle, the four-volume *International Encyclopedia of Communication* refers to Barthes more than any other theorist in this book.¹

Barthes was a mercurial thinker who changed his mind about the way signs worked many times over the course of his career. Yet most current practitioners of semiotics follow the basic analytical concepts of his original theory.



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His approach provides great insight into the use of signs, particularly those channeled through the mass media.

WRESTLING WITH SIGNS

Barthes initially described his semiotic theory as an explanation of "myth." He later substituted the term *connotation* to label the ideological baggage that signs carry wherever they go, and most students of Barthes' work regard connotation as a better word choice to convey his true concern.

Barthes' theory of connotative meaning won't make sense to us, however, unless we first understand the way he views the structure of signs. His thinking was strongly influenced by the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who coined the term *semiology* and advocated its study.² To illustrate Barthes' core principles I'll feature portions of his essay on pro wrestling à la Hulk Hogan. We'll then have the semiotic resources to interpret the provocative power of ribbons on trees during Desert Storm.

1. A Sign Is the Combination of Its Signifier and Signified

The distinction between signifier and signified can be seen in Barthes' graphic description of the body of a wrestler who was selected by the promoter because he typified the repulsive slob:

As soon as the adversaries are in the ring, the public is overwhelmed with the obviousness of the roles. As in the theatre, each physical type expresses to excess the part which has been assigned to the contestant. Thauvin, a fifty-year-old with an obese and sagging body . . . displays in his flesh the characters of baseness. . . . I know from the start that all of Thauvin's actions, his treacheries, cruelties and acts of cowardice, will not fail to measure up to the first image of ignobility he gave me. . . . The physique of the wrestlers therefore constitutes a basic sign, which like a seed contains the whole fight.³

According to Barthes, the image of the wrestler's physique is the *signifier*. The concept of ignobility or injustice is the *signified*. The combination of the two—the villainous body—is the *sign*.

This way of defining a sign differs from our customary usage of the word. We would probably say that the wrestler's body *is a sign* of his baseness—or whatever else comes to mind. But Barthes considers the wrestler's body to be just *part* of the overall sign; it's the signifier. The other part is the concept of hideous baseness. The signifier isn't a sign of the signified. Rather, they work together in an inseparable bond to form a unified sign.

Barthes' description of a sign as the correlation between the signifier and the signified came directly from Saussure. The Swiss linguist visualized a sign as a piece of paper with writing on both sides—the signifier on one side, the signified on the other. If you cut off part of one side, an equal amount of the other side automatically goes with it.

Is there any logical connection between the image of the signifier and the content of the signified? Saussure insisted that the relationship is arbitrary—one of correlation rather than of cause and effect. Barthes wasn't so sure. He was willing to grant the claim of Saussure (and I. A. Richards) that words have no inherent meaning. For example, there is nothing about *referee* as a verbal sign that makes it stand for the third party in the ring who is inept at making Thauvin follow the rules. But nonverbal signifiers seem to have a natural affinity with their signifieds. Barthes noted that Thauvin's body was so repugnant that it provoked nausea. He classified the relationship between signifiers and signifieds as "quasi-arbitrary." After all, Thauvin really did strike the crowd as vile—ness personified.

2. A Sign Does Not Stand on Its Own: It Is Part of a System

Barthes entitled his essay "The World of Wrestling," for like all other semiotic systems, wrestling creates its own separate world of interrelated signs:

Each moment in wrestling is therefore like an algebra which instantaneously unveils the relationship between a cause and its represented effect. Wrestling fans certainly experience a kind of intellectual pleasure in *seeing* the moral mechanism function so perfectly. . . . Wrestlers, who are very experienced, know perfectly how to direct the spontaneous episodes of the fight so as to make them conform to the image which the public has of the great legendary themes of its mythology. A wrestler can irritate or disgust, he never disappoints, for he always accomplishes completely, by a progressive solidification of signs, what the public expects of him.⁴

Barthes notes that the grapplers' roles are tightly drawn. There is little room for innovation; the men in the ring work within a closed system of signs. By responding to the unwavering expectation of the crowd, the wrestlers are as much spectators as the fans who cheer or jeer on cue.

Wrestling is just one of many semiotic systems. Barthes also explored the cultural meaning of designer clothes, French cooking, automobiles, Japanese gift giving, household furniture, urban layout, and public displays of sexuality.

He attempted to define and classify the features common to all semiotic systems. This kind of structural analysis is called *taxonomy*, and Barthes' book *Elements of Semiology* is a "veritable frenzy of classifications."⁵ Barthes later admitted that his taxonomy "risked being tedious," but the project strengthened his conviction that semiotic systems function the same way despite their apparent diversity.

Barthes believed that the significant semiotic systems of a culture lock in the status quo. The mythology that surrounds a society's crucial signs displays the world as it is today—however chaotic and unjust—as *natural*, *inevitable*, and *eternal*. The function of myth is to bless the mess. We now turn to Barthes' theory of connotation, or myth, which suggests how a seemingly neutral or inanimate sign can accomplish so much.

THE YELLOW RIBBON TRANSFORMATION: FROM FORGIVENESS OF STIGMA TO PRIDE IN VICTORY

According to Barthes, not all semiological systems are mythic. Not every sign carries ideological baggage. How is it that one sign can remain emotionally neutral while other signs acquire powerful inflections or connotations that suck people into a specific worldview? Barthes contends that a mythic or connotative system is a *second-order semiological system*—built off a preexisting sign system. The sign of the first system becomes the signifier of the second. A concrete example will help us understand Barthes' explanation.

In an *American Journal of Semiotics* article, Donald and Virginia Fry of Emerson College examined the widespread American practice of displaying yellow ribbons during the 1980 Iranian hostage crisis.⁶ They traced the transformation of this straightforward yellow symbol into an ideological sign. Americans' lavish display of yellow ribbons during Operation Desert Storm a decade later adds a new twist to the Frys' analysis. I'll update their yellow ribbon example to illustrate Barthes' semiotic theory.

"Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree" was the best-selling pop song of 1972 in the United States.⁷ Sung by Tony Orlando and Dawn, the lyrics express the thoughts of a convict in prison who is writing to the woman he loves. After three years in jail, the man is about to be released and will travel home by bus. Fearing her possible rejection, he devises a plan that will give her a way to signal her intentions without the potential embarrassment of a face-to-face confrontation.

Since he'll be able to see the huge oak planted in front of her house when the bus passes through town, he asks her to use the tree as a message board. If she still loves him, wants him back, and can overlook the past, she should tie a yellow ribbon around the trunk of the tree. He will know that all is forgiven and join her in rebuilding a life together. But if this bright sign of reconciliation isn't there, he'll stay on the bus, accept the blame for a failed relationship, and try to get on with his life without her.

The yellow ribbon is obviously a sign of acceptance, but one not casually offered. There's a taint on the relationship, hurts to be healed. Donald and Virginia Fry label the original meaning of the yellow ribbon in the song as "forgiveness of a stigma."

Yellow ribbons in 1991 continued to carry a "we want you back" message when U.S. armed forces fought in Operation Desert Storm. Whether tied to trees, worn in hair, or pinned to lapels, yellow ribbons still proclaimed, "Welcome home." But there was no longer any sense of shameful acts to be forgiven or disgrace to be overcome. Vietnam was ancient history and America was the leader of the "new world order." Hail the conquering heroes.

The mood surrounding the yellow ribbon had become one of triumph, pride, and even arrogance. After all, hadn't we intercepted Scud missiles in the air, guided "smart bombs" into air-conditioning shafts, and "kicked Saddam Hussein's butt across the desert"? People were swept up in a tide of "yellow fever." More than 90 percent of U.S. citizens approved of America's actions in the Persian Gulf. The simple yellow ribbon of personal reconciliation now served as a blatant sign of nationalism. What had originally signified forgiveness of a stigma now symbolized pride in victory.

THE MAKING OF MYTH: STRIPPING THE SIGN OF HISTORY

According to Barthes' theory, the shift from "forgiveness of stigma" to "pride in victory" followed a typical semiotic pattern. Figure 24.1 shows how it's done.

Barthes claimed that every ideological sign is the result of two interconnected sign systems. The first system is strictly descriptive—the signifier image and the signified concept combining to produce a denotative sign. The three elements of the sign system based on the "Tie a Yellow Ribbon . . ." lyrics are marked with Arabic numerals at the top left portion of the diagram. The three segments of the connotative system are marked with Roman numerals. Note that the sign of the first system does double duty as the signifier of the Gulf war connotative system. According to Barthes, this lateral shift, or connotative side-step, is the key to transforming a neutral sign into an ideological tool. Follow his thinking step-by-step through the diagram.

The signifier (1) of the denotative sign system is the image of a yellow ribbon that forms in the mind of the person who hears the 1972 song. The content of the signified (2) includes the stigma that comes from the conviction of a crime and a term in jail, the prisoner's willingness to take responsibility for the three-year separation, and the explosive release of tension when the Greyhound passengers cheer at the sight of the oak tree awash in yellow ribbons. The corresponding denotative sign (3) is "forgiveness of a stigma." For those who heard the song on the radio, the yellow ribbon sign spoke for itself. It was a sign rich in regret and relief.

Current usage takes over the sign of the denotative system and makes it the signifier (I) of a secondary (connotative) system. The "welcome home" yellow ribbon is paired with the mythic content of a signified (II) that shouts to the

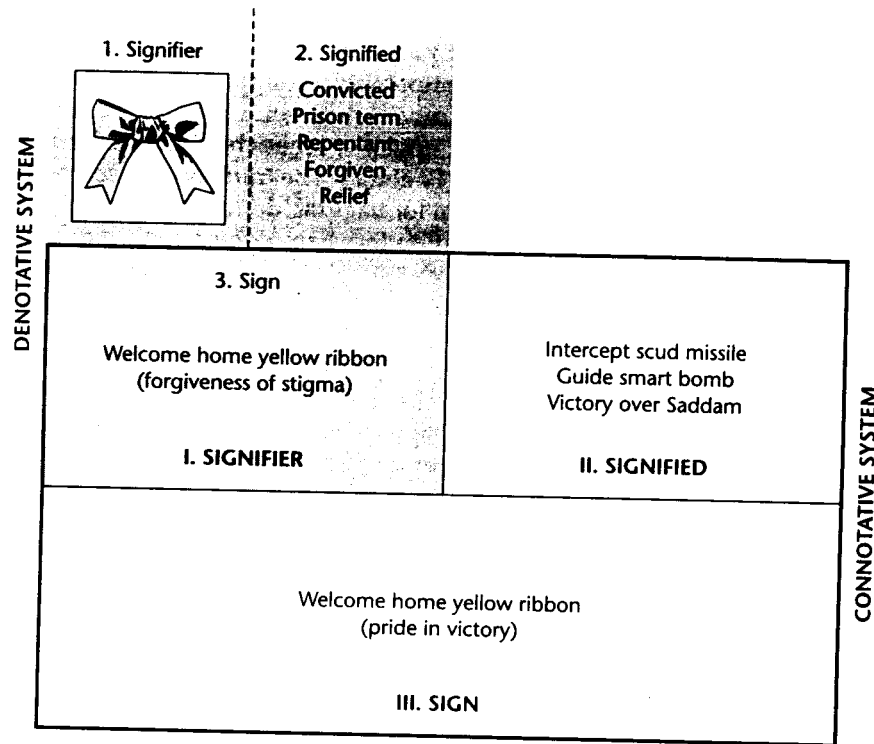


FIGURE 24.1 Connotation as a Second-Order Semiotic System
(Adapted from Barthes. "Myth Today")

world, "Our technology can beat up your technology." But as the symbol of the yellow ribbon is expropriated to support the myth of American nationalism, the sign loses its historical grounding.

As a mere signifier of the connotative system, the yellow ribbon is no longer rooted in the details of the song. It ceases to stand for three years of hard time in prison, repentance, wrongdoing, or forgiveness that gains meaning because there is so much to be forgiven. Now in the service of the mythic semiotic system, the yellow ribbon becomes empty, timeless, a form without substance. According to Barthes, that doesn't mean that the meaning of the original denotative sign is lost:

The essential point in all this is that the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal. One believes that the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which . . . the myth will draw its nourishment.⁸

In the connotative system, the generalized image of a yellow ribbon is now paired with the signified content of victory in the Persian Gulf War as seen on

CNN. But since the signifier can't recall a historical or cultural past, the mythic sign (III) of which it is a part carries the "crust of falsity."⁹ For example, there's no sense of American culpability in supplying arms to Saddam Hussein until the time he invaded Kuwait. And since mythic communication is unable to imagine anything alien, novel, or other, the sign sweeps away second thoughts about civilian deaths in Baghdad. The transformed yellow ribbon is now a lofty sign that allows no room for nagging doubts that love of oil may have been our country's prime motivation for championing the United Nation's "humanitarian" intervention.

UNMASKING THE MYTH OF A HOMOGENEOUS SOCIETY

Barthes was convinced that only those with semiotic savvy can spot the hollowness of connotative signs. For most Americans, the yellow ribbon will continue to elicit an unreflective "we're number one" feeling of national pride. Of course, it goes without saying that people will love their country. But that's precisely the problem with mythic signs. They go *without saying*. They don't explain, they don't defend, and they certainly don't raise questions. So it's up to the semiologist to expose or deconstruct the mythic system.

This same deconstructive urge inspired the left-leaning students of the anti-war student group to tie black ribbons on campus trees. In their view, the yellow ribbon signs placed by the student patriots merely perpetuated the destructive nationalism that gripped the country. Acting as fledgling semiologists, these social activists presented a competing sign to expose what they believed to be the jingoistic connotative system supported by the trees adorned with yellow ribbons.

Throughout his life, Roland Barthes deciphered and labeled the ideologies foisted upon naïve consumers of images. Although the starting-point signifiers varied, Barthes concluded that society's connotative spin always ends up the same. *Mythic signs reinforce the dominant values of their culture.* For example, the wrestling match we examined earlier seems at first glance to be no more than a harmless Saturday night diversion. Under Barthes' watchful eye, however, it's the site of dangerous mythmaking. He explains that the honorable wrestler's eventual triumph over the rule-breaking villain signifies a make-believe ideology of pure "justice." The "good guys win" simplicity of the spectacle provides false comfort for an audience that lives in a world of dubious morality and inherent inequality:

What is portrayed in wrestling therefore is an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction.¹⁰

According to Barthes, ideological signs enlist support for the status quo by transforming history into nature—pretending that current conditions are the

natural order of things. As with the ribbons and the wrestling match, everything that is personal, conditional, cultural, and temporal disappears. We are left with a sign that makes the world seem inevitable and eternal. Barthes' analysis calls to mind the final words of the "Gloria Patria," a choral response that many Christians sing in worship:

As it was in the beginning,
Is now and ever shall be,
World without end. Amen. Amen.

For believers, singing these words about anything or anyone but God would be heresy. Without granting the exception, Barthes would concur. All his semiotic efforts were directed at unmasking what he considered the heresy of those who controlled the images of society—the naturalizing of history.

THE SEMIOTICS OF MASS COMMUNICATION: "I'D LIKE TO BE LIKE MIKE"

Like wrestlers and ribbons, most semiotic signs gain cultural prominence when broadcast through the electronic and print media. Because signs—as well as issues of power and dominance—are integral to mass communication, Barthes' semiotic analysis has become a seminal media theory. As Kyong Kim, author of a recent book on semiotics, concludes:

Information delivered by mass media is no longer information. It is a commodity saturated by fantasized themes. Mass audiences are nothing more than consumers of such commodities. One should not forget that, unlike nature, the media's reality is always political. The mass signification arising in response to signs pouring from the mass media is not a natural process. Rather it is an artificial effect calculated and induced by the mass media to achieve something else.¹¹

The advertisements that make commercial television so profitable also create layers of connotation that reaffirm the status quo. During the 1998 NBA playoffs, one of the most frequently aired spots featured Chicago Bulls' superstar Michael Jordan slam-dunking the basketball over a variety of helpless defenders. He then gulps down Gatorade while a host of celebrity and everyday admirers croon his praises. The most memorable of these adoring fans is a pre-school African American boy who stares up in awe at the towering Jordan. "Sometimes I dream," we hear him sing, "that he is me." He *really* wants to be like Mike!

Obviously, the commercial is designed to sell Gatorade by linking it to the virtually unlimited achievement of basketball's greatest player. To partake of this liquid is to reach for the stars. In that sense, the little boy, rather than MJ himself, becomes the spot's crucial sign. Within this denotative system, the youngster's rapt gaze is the signifier, and his dream of becoming a famous athlete is the signified. The resultant denotative sign—a look of yearning—has the potential to move cartons of Gatorade off the shelf. But as the signifier of a secondary connotative system, it has greater cultural impact.

At the connotative level, the original "look of yearning" suggests a new second-order signified—a more general kind of dreaming about one's future in which the ad's audience is invited to participate. Viewers are encouraged to wish for careers and goals that are virtually unobtainable, even in the best of circumstances. The CEO of Microsoft, the conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Hollywood's most glamorous talent, the President of the United States, and the world's leading AIDS researcher constitute the lofty heights surveyed by the gaze that the connotative shift implies. With its attractive visuals, uplifting soundtrack, and good-natured humor, the commercial functions as a glorification of *unfulfilled desire*, the very essence of its second-order sign. This is America after all, so think big, aim high, and don't be satisfied with anything but the top. Do what it takes—and purchase what is required—to be the very best. Ideologically speaking, it is this kind of naturalized longing that enslaves the average citizen and fuels the capitalist system. Although the commercial evokes a warm, fuzzy reaction from the viewer, it surreptitiously enforces our fundamental cultural myths about unlimited possibilities for success, myths that—according to Barthes—maintain the dominance of those who hold the reins of commerce and power.

Furthermore, Barthes would no doubt seek to expose the semiotic sleight of hand that subtly drains the second-order connotative system of the historical reality implicit in the original sign. At this denotative level, the African American boy's fixation with MJ is necessarily embedded in a long history of racial injustice and economic hardship. Michael Jordan's accomplishments, as well as the dream of his pint-sized fan, exist in a world in which African Americans must strive particularly hard to succeed. As the documentary *Hoop Dreams* brilliantly portrays, the desire-filled faces of the youngsters who populate the rough basketball courts of urban America also reflect the poverty, substance abuse, shattered families, and harsh, big-city surroundings that constantly threaten to engulf them. Nonetheless, the yearning connoted by the second-order system generated by the commercial is utterly stripped of this rather grim social reality. The boy, his life, and his dream are deftly co-opted by the system. Or so Barthes would argue.

CRITIQUE: DO MYTHIC SIGNS ALWAYS REAFFIRM THE STATUS QUO?

Barthes' interpretations of cultural signs are usually fascinating and frequently compelling. But are connotative systems always ideological, and do they inevitably uphold the values of the dominant class? Perhaps there are significant semiotic systems that suggest divergent perspectives or support alternative voices. To some students of signification, Barthes' monolithic Marxist approach to myth-making borders on a conspiracy theory. These interpreters are unwilling to accept the idea that all representation is a capitalistic plot, or that visual signs can't be used to promote resistance to dominant cultural values.

University of Pennsylvania political scientist Anne Norton expands Barthes' semiotic approach to account for other possibilities. For example, she argues

that Madonna's MTV persona signifies an autonomous, independent sexuality that inspires young girls to control—rather than to be controlled by—their environments. In effect, Madonna's "construction of herself as a 'material girl' subverts the hierarchies and practices evolved by its dense tissue of references."¹²

In much the same vein, University of Texas media scholar Douglas Kellner writes that through Madonna's deliberate manipulation of stereotypes and imagery, female "wanna-be's" are "empowered in their struggles for *individual identity*." Although her provocative outfits and unabashed eroticism may seem at first glance to reinforce traditionally patriarchal views of women, her onstage character refigures her body as "the means to her wealth" and recasts her sexuality as "a form of feminine power."¹³ In the same way, those black ribbons exemplified a counterculture connotative system that challenged the status quo. By hanging black crepe on trees, the protesters reminded a campus heavily supportive of Operation Desert Storm that war always means ghastly death for human beings on both sides. Stephen Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* offers the same gritty, connotative feel.

Perhaps the truth is somewhere in-between. In his book-length analysis of British working-class youth, sociologist Dick Hebdige studied the personal appearance and style of mods, punks, hipsters, teddy boys, and other counterculture groups. He argues that although their semiotic activity is eventually co-opted by mainline society, their deviant style often enjoys a brief time of subversive signification. For a while, the clothing, haircuts, and guitar riffs of the Sex Pistols signified that punk-rock group's stylistic challenge to the symbolic order of mainline society, but these signs of refusal soon became status quo clichés.¹⁴

Whether or not we accept Barthes' claim that all connotative signs reinforce dominant values, his semiotic approach to imagery remains a core theoretical perspective for a wide variety of communication scholars, particularly those who emphasize media and culture. For example, cultural studies guru Stuart Hall builds directly on Barthes' analysis of myth to establish his critique of the "hegemonic" effects of mass communication.¹⁵ Hall's innovative analysis, though, deserves a chapter all its own.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. What are the *signifier* and *signified* of a favorite item of clothing or jewelry? Can you think of a way that this sign has already *been stripped of history*?
2. Why did Barthes think it was crucial to *unmask* or *deconstruct* the original *denotation* of a sign?
3. Identify at least one similar nonverbal *signifier* popularized through the television dramas *ER* and *Friends*. How do their *signifieds* differ?
4. "It's not over 'til the fat lady sings." What are the denotative *signifier*, *signified*, and *sign* to which this statement refers? What *connotative shift* has altered the meaning of the original sign?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Annette Lavers (trans.), Hill and Wang, New York, 1972, especially "The World of Wrestling" and "Myth Today," pp. 15-25, 109-159.

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