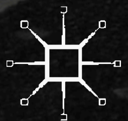
MARCEL DANESI

Of Cigarettes, High Heels, & Other Interesting Things

An Introduction to Semiotics

Third Edition



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An Introduction to Semiotics

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Preface to the Third Edition

Among species, human beings seem to be a peculiar lot. Why is it, for example, that certain members of the species routinely put their survival at risk by puffing on a small stick of nicotine? Why is it that some females of the species make locomotion difficult for themselves by donning high-heel footwear? Are there hidden or unconscious reasons behind such strange behaviors that seem to be so utterly counter-instinctual, so to speak?

For no manifest biological reason, humanity has always searched, and continues to search, for a purpose to its life. Is it this search that has led it to engage in such bizarre behaviors as smoking and wearing high heels? And is it the reason behind humanity's invention of myths, art, rituals, languages, mathematics, science, and all the other truly remarkable things that set it apart from all other species? Clearly, *Homo sapiens* appears to be unique in the fact that many of its behaviors are shaped by forces other than the instincts. The discipline that endeavors to understand these forces is known as *semiotics*. Relatively unknown in comparison to, say, philosophy or psychology, semiotics probes the human condition in its own peculiar way, by unraveling the meanings of the signs that undergird not only the wearing of high-heel shoes, but also the construction of words, paintings, sculptures, and the like.

This is not a comprehensive textbook on semiotic theory and practice. My aim is to present the basic notions of semiotics that help us probe how humans "produce meanings" and how these constitute small-scale versions of the larger-scale need to unravel the "meaning of life." Studying the *raison d'être* of the latter has always been—and continues to be—the aim of philosophy, theology, and various other disciplines; studying the *raison d'être* of the former is the specific goal of *semiotics*, which can be defined simply as the "study of produced meaning." I have left out many of the technical details of sign theory

and I have not gone into any in-depth discussion of the pivotal contributions made by theorists, since these belong to a more comprehensive treatment. My hope is that this book will engender in the reader the same kind of inquisitive frame of mind with which a semiotician would closely examine people and cultures and why they search for meaning. Perhaps the greatest mental skill possessed by *Homo sapiens,* literally the "knowing animal," is the ability to know itself. Semiotics helps sharpen that skill considerably.

The first edition of this book came out in 1999. To my pleasant surprise, it struck a chord among many readers. One of the reasons may have been that, in it, I decided to contrive my presentation of semiotics around a seemingly trivial scene, but one that nonetheless appears to reveal a lot about the human need for meaning. The scene was a fashionable modern-day restaurant—an urban courtship setting where wooing rituals are performed in a "sign-based" manner. The fictional actions in that scene allowed me to tell the semiotic version of the human condition in concrete terms. A second edition was published in 2009. Much has changed in the world since that edition. Therefore, in this updated third edition I have retained that scene as a framework for describing semiotic ideas, although even there some radical changes have taken place such as, for instance, the virtual elimination of smoking from public venues due to changes in social attitudes towards cigarettes and their meanings. The world has also become much more digitalized and technologically sophisticated since then, with the Internet practically replacing all other media systems for the routine transmission and recording of information. Such changes have informed the revision of this book.

Similar to the previous editions, however, I have taken nothing for granted. I have defined in clear language and illustrated with common examples any concept that is basic to semiotic theory. I have also avoided making constant references to the technical literature. The works that have informed my commentaries, descriptions, and analyses are found in the endnotes. I have tried to cast as wide a net as possible, attempting to exemplify within two covers how semiotics can be used effectively to probe human nature in specific ways. As in previous editions, I wish to assure the reader that I have made every possible attempt to emphasize method of analysis, rather than my personal views. Whether one agrees or disagrees with any or all of my commentaries is, in fact, beside the real purpose of this book, which is to spur readers to identify and reflect upon the unconscious meanings that flow through the system of everyday life in which they take part on a daily basis.

The first edition of this book was the idea of the late Professor Roberta Kevelson of Penn State University, a leading semiotician. She will be missed greatly. It was Michael Flamini of St. Martin's Press who brought it to fruition

as editor. The invitation to put together a second edition comes from Farideh Koohi-Kamali, also of the Press. This edition is made possible by Shaun Vigil, my editor at Palgrave. I cannot thank them all enough for their support and enthusiasm. I am also deeply grateful to Victoria College of the University of Toronto for granting me the privilege of teaching semiotics for many years. This has allowed me to learn a great deal about human nature from the enthusiastic students I have taught. I have learned more from them than they have from me. Finally, a heartfelt thanks goes out to my family, Lucy, Alexander, Sarah, Danila, Chris, and Charlotte, for all the patience they have had with me over the years. I would like to dedicate this book to my late father, Danilo. He was a simple and kind soul who inspired generosity and benevolence in all those around him.

Toronto, ON, Canada Marcel Danesi

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1

Cigarettes and High Heels: The Universe of Signs

A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?
—Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

It's eight o'clock on a Saturday night. Two cool-looking people, both in their late twenties, are sitting across from each other at an elegantly set table in a trendy restaurant, located in the downtown area of a North American city. For convenience, let's call them Cheryl and Ted. Other couples are seated at tables in other parts of the eatery. The lights are turned down low. The atmosphere is unmistakably romantic, sustained by the soft, mellifluous sounds of a three-piece jazz band playing in the background. Cheryl and Ted are sipping drinks, making small talk, looking coyly into each other's eyes. At a certain point, they decide to step outside for a few moments and engage in a shared activity—smoking cigarettes in a secluded area outside the restaurant, set aside for smokers. Smoking is a tradition that this particular restaurant has decided to preserve, despite great opposition to it from city legislators, not to mention society. The scene overall is distinctly reminiscent of a classic Hollywood romantic movie.

What Cheryl and Ted do not know is that nearby is a semiotician, whom we shall call Martha, quietly and unobtrusively capturing their actions and conversations on a smartphone both inside and outside the restaurant. Martha is our research assistant, assigned to record our couple's words, facial expressions, body language, and other behaviors on her mobile device, so that we can dissect them semiotically. Her device transmits the images and sounds simultaneously to a remote monitoring computer to which we have access.

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Let's start by first examining the smoking gestures that our two subjects made. As the video starts, we see Cheryl taking her cigarette out of its package in a slow, deliberate manner, inserting it coquettishly into the middle of her mouth, then bringing the flame of a match towards it in a leisurely, drawn-out fashion. Next to Cheryl, we see Ted also taking his cigarette from its package, but, in contrast, he employs a terse movement, inserting it into the side of his mouth, and then lighting it with a swift hand action. As the two puff away, we see Cheryl keeping the cigarette between her index and third fingers, periodically flicking the ashes into an outside ashtray provided by the restaurant for smokers, inserting and removing the cigarette from her mouth, always with graceful, circular, slightly swooping motions of the hand. Occasionally, she tosses her long, flowing hair back, away from her face. Ted is leaning against a nearby wall, keeping his head taut, looking straight, holding his cigarette between the thumb and middle finger, guiding it to the side of his mouth with sharp, pointed movements. Cheryl draws in smoke slowly, retaining it in her mouth for a relatively longer period than Ted, exhaling the smoke in an upwards direction with her head tilted slightly to the side, and, finally, extinguishing her cigarette in the ashtray. Ted inhales smoke abruptly, keeping the cigarette in his mouth for a relatively shorter period of time, blowing the smoke in a downward direction (with his head slightly aslant), and then extinguishing the cigarette by pressing down on the butt with his thumb, almost as if he were effacing or destroying evidence.

Cigarettes and Courtship

Welcome to the world of the semiotician who is, above all else, a "people-watcher," observing how individuals and groups behave in everyday situations, always asking: What does this or that *mean*? Meaning is the sum and substance of what semioticians study, no matter in what form it comes, small or large, so to speak. So, let's start our excursion into the fascinating world of semiotics by unraveling what the various gestures and movements recorded by Martha might mean. But before starting, it might be useful to check whether there is some historically based link between smoking, sex, and romance.

Tobacco is native to the Western Hemisphere and was part of rituals of the Maya and other Native peoples, believing that it had medicinal and powerful mystical properties. As Jason Hughes has aptly put it, "Tobacco was used to appease the spiritual hunger, thereby gaining favors and good fortune."[1] The Arawak society of the Caribbean, as observed by none other than Christopher Columbus in 1492, smoked tobacco with a tube they called a *tobago*, from

which the word *tobacco* is derived. Brought to Spain in 1556, tobacco was introduced to France in the same year by the French diplomat Jean Nicot, from whose name we get the term *nicotine*. In 1585 the English navigator, Sir Francis Drake, took tobacco to England, where the practice of pipe smoking became popular almost immediately, especially among Elizabethan courtiers. From there, tobacco use spread throughout Europe and the rest of the world. By the seventeenth century it had reached China, Japan, the west coast of Africa, and other regions.

By the early twentieth century cigarette smoking became a routine activity in many societies. In America alone more than one thousand cigarettes per person each year were being consumed. American society at the time believed that smoking was not only highly fashionable, but that it also relieved tensions and produced physical health benefits. During World War II, physicians encouraged sending soldiers cigarettes in ration kits. However, epidemiologists started noticing around 1930 that lung cancer—rare before the twentieth century—had been increasing dramatically. The rise in lung cancer rates among the returning soldiers eventually raised a red flag. The American Cancer Society and other organizations initiated studies comparing deaths among smokers and nonsmokers, finding significant differential rates of cancer between the two. In 1964 the U.S. Surgeon General's report affirmed that cigarette smoking was a health hazard of sufficient importance to warrant the inclusion of a warning on cigarette packages. Cigarette advertising was banned from radio and television, starting in 1971. In the 1970s and 1980s several cities and states passed laws requiring nonsmoking sections in enclosed public and work places. In February 1990 federal law banned smoking on all domestic airline flights of less than six hours. Today, there are laws throughout North America that prohibit smoking in public places, buildings, and vehicles. The goal of society over the last decades has been to achieve a smoke-free world.

Yet in spite of the health dangers and all the legislative and practical obstacles, a sizeable portion of the population continues to smoke. Although there has been a dramatic shift in how tobacco is perceived across the world, many still desire to smoke.[2] Why do people smoke, despite the harm that smoking poses and despite its prohibition virtually everywhere? People smoke, or at least start smoking, because it is socially meaningful (or at least fashionable). To the semiotician, this comes as no surprise, since cigarettes have, throughout their history, been perceived as signs of something desirable or attractive. Let's consider what these might be.

The smoking scene that Martha captured on video is identifiable essentially as an ersatz courtship display, a recurrent, largely unconscious, pre-mating ritual rooted in gesture, body poses, and physical actions that keep the two

sexes differentiated and highly interested in each other. As Margaret Leroy has suggested, such actions are performed because sexual traditions dictate it.[3] Let's scrutinize Cheryl's smoking gestures more closely. The way in which she held the cigarette invitingly between her index and middle fingers, fondling it gently, and then inserting it into the middle of her mouth, slowly and deliberately, constitutes a sequence of unconscious movements that convey sexual interest in her partner. At the same time, she exhibits her fingers and wrist to her suitor, areas of the body that have erotic overtones. Finally, her hair-tossing movements, as she simultaneously raises a shoulder, constitute powerful erotic signals as well.

Ted's gestures form a sequential counterpart to Cheryl's, emphasizing masculinity. Her movements are slow, his movements are abrupt; she puffs the smoke upwards, he blows it downwards; she holds the cigarette in a tantalizing dangling manner between her index and middle fingers, he holds it in a sturdy way between his thumb and middle finger; she puts out the cigarette with a lingering hand movement, he crushes it forcefully. Overall, her gestures convey smooth sensuality, voluptuousness, sultriness; his gestures suggest toughness, determination, and control. She is playing the female role and he the male one in this unconscious courtship display—roles determined largely by culture, and especially by the images of smoking that come out of classic Hollywood movies, which can be analyzed in exactly the same way.

Smoking in contexts such as this one is essentially romantic fun and games. Moreover, because it is now socially proscribed, it is probably even more fun to do (at least for some people). The history of smoking shows that tobacco has, in fact, been perceived at times as a desirable activity and at others as a forbidden one.[4] But in almost every era, as Richard Klein[5] has argued, cigarettes have had some connection to something that is erotically, socially, or intellectually appealing—musicians smoke; intellectuals smoke; artists smoke; and to this day romantic partners smoke (despite all the warnings). Movies have always told us that cigarettes are meaningful props in sex and romance, as do advertisements for cigarettes. Smoking is, in a word, a sexual language, which, as Michael Starr puts it, is designed to convey "certain qualities of the smoker."[6]

Ever since it fell out of the social mainstream, smoking has entered the alluring world of the *verboten*. Anytime something becomes taboo it takes on powerful symbolism—the more forbidden and the more dangerous, the sexier and more alluring it is. Smoking communicates rebellion, defiance, and sexuality all wrapped into one. No wonder then that regulations aimed at curbing the marketing and sale of tobacco products to young people have failed miserably in deterring them from smoking. As Tara Parker-Pope has aptly put it:

"For 500 years, smokers and tobacco makers have risked torture and even death at the hands of tobacco's enemies, so it's unlikely that a bunch of lawyers and politicians and the looming threat of deadly disease will fell either the industry or the habit."[7]

The smoking gestures that Martha recorded are performed in parallel situations throughout many secular societies as part of urban courtship rituals; they form what semioticians call a *code*. Codes are systems of *signs*—gestures, movements, words, glances—that allow people to make and send out meaningful messages in specific situations. Codes mediate relationships between people and are, therefore, effective shapers of how we think of others and of ourselves. The smoking routines caught on Martha's video are part of a courtship code that unconsciously dictates not only smoking styles, but also how individuals act, move, dress, and the like, in order to present an appropriate romantic persona.

The particular enactment of the code will vary in detail from situation to situation, from person to person, but its basic structure will remain the same. The code provides a script for social performances. No wonder, then, that teenagers tend to take up smoking, early on in their tentative ventures into adulthood.[8] In several research projects that I undertook in the 1990s and early 2000s, I noticed that adolescents put on the same type of smoking performances that our fictional restaurant protagonists did, using cigarettes essentially as "cool props," albeit in different situations (in school yards, in malls, at parties).[9] Cigarette smoking in adolescence is, in a phrase, a coming-of-age rite, a ritualized performance designed to send out signals of maturity and attractiveness to peers.

Smoking performances raise key questions about ritualistic behaviors. In biology, the word *sex* alludes to the physical and behavioral differences that distinguish most organisms according to their role in the reproductive process. Through these differences, termed *male* and *female,* the individual members of a species assume distinct sexual roles. Therefore, sensing the other person's sex is an innate or instinctual biological *mechanism*, as it is called. This mechanism is sensitive to mating signals emitted during estrus (going into heat). However, at some point in its evolutionary history the human species developed a capacity and need to engage in sex independently of estrus. Other animals experience chemical and physical changes in the body during estrus, which stimulate desire. Humans, however, often experience desire first, which then produces changes in the body.

The biologist Charles Darwin (1809–82) called courtship displays "submissive," because they are designed to send out the message, *Notice me, I am attractive and harmless*. In effect, Cheryl's coy glances are opening gambits in

courtship. Her shoulder shrug and her head-tilting are examples of submissive gestures. However, human courtship is not controlled exclusively by biological mechanisms. Smoking has nothing to do with biology. A cigarette is an imaginary prop, not a biological mechanism. Smoking unfolds as a *text*—literally, a "weaving together" of the signs taken from a specific code. Together with the gestures, bodily postures, and other actions shown on Martha's video, smoking constitutes a *courtship text*—an unconscious script that is performed at locales such as restaurants.

Therefore, the human story of courtship has many more chapters in it than a purely biological version of it would reveal. Nature creates sex; culture creates gender roles. This is why there are no gender universals. Traditionally, in Western society, men have been expected to be the sex seekers, to initiate courtship, and to show an aggressive interest in sex; but among the Zuñi peoples of New Mexico, these very same actions and passions, are expected of the women. Recently a society-wide process that can be called "degendering," or the tendency to blur and even eliminate traditional gender roles, has been occurring in many contemporary cultures. Moreover, today transgendered individuals, that is, those who identify with a gender other than the biological one, have made it obvious that gender, rather than sex, is indeed a human construct.

The views people develop of gender shape feelings and guide their attempts to make sense of a kiss, a touch, a look, and the like. These are products of a culture's history. This is why there is so much variable opinion across the world, and even within a single society, as to what is sexually appropriate behavior and what body areas are erotic. The people of one culture may regard legs, earlobes, and the back of the neck as sexually attractive. But those of another may find nothing at all sexual about these body parts. What is considered sexual or appropriate sexual behavior in some cultures is considered nonsense or sinfulness in others.

Enter the Semiotician

Now that we have identified the smoking gestures made by Cheryl and Ted as signs in a courtship code, our next task is to unravel how this code came about. The association of smoking with sexual attractiveness can probably be traced back to the jazz night club scene of the first decades of the twentieth century. The word *jazz* originally had sexual connotations; and to this day the verb form, *to jazz*, suggests such connotations. The jazz clubs, known as "speakeasies," were locales where young people went to socialize and to smoke, away from the eyes of social elders during Prohibition. The latter was intended

to curtail sexual and obscene behaviors, in addition to prohibiting alcohol consumption. As mentioned, anything that is forbidden becomes attractive. And this is what happened in the 1920s, when speakeasies became the rage at night. The cigarette-smoking courtship code was forged then and there. Although smoking is diminishing in the face of a society-wide onslaught on it, it still goes on because, as in the 1920s, it is part of a code that is perceived to be enjoyable, sexy, and subversive against systems that want to prohibit it.

Certainly, the movies and advertisers have always known this to their great advantage. Director Gjon Mili, for instance, captured the night club allure of smoking memorably in his 1945 movie, *Jammin' the Blues*. In the opening segment, there is a close-up of the great saxophonist Lester Young inserting a cigarette gingerly into his mouth, then dangling it between his index and middle fingers as he plays a slow, soft, style of jazz for his late-night audience. The makers of Camel cigarettes strategically revived this scene in their advertising campaigns of the early 1990s, with ads showing images of a camel, dressed in an evening jacket, playing the piano in a club setting, a cigarette dangling suggestively from the side of his mouth. Those ads were clearly designed to evoke the cool smoothness and finesse embodied by jazz musicians of a bygone and now mythical era.

The sexual subtleties of the jazz club scene were captured as well by Michael Curtiz in his 1942 movie, *Casablanca*. Cigarettes are the dominant props in Rick's café. There is a particularly memorable scene at the start of the movie. Swaggering imperiously in his realm, with cigarette in hand, Rick (Humphrey Bogart) goes up to Ingrid Bergman, expressing concern over the fact that she had had too much to drink. Dressed in white, like a knight in shining armor, Bogart comes to the aid of a "damsel in distress," sending her home to sober up. As he admonishes her, Bogart takes out another cigarette from its package, inserting it into his mouth. He lights it, letting it dangle from the side of his mouth. So captivating was this image of coolness to cinema-goers, that it became an instant paradigm of masculinity imitated by hordes of young men throughout society. In a scene in Jean Luc Godard's 1959 movie, *Breathless*, Jean-Paul Belmondo stares at a poster of Bogart in a movie window display. He takes out a cigarette and starts smoking it, imitating Bogart in *Casablanca*. With the cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth, the tough-looking Belmondo approaches his female mate with a blunt, "Sleep with me tonight?"

The "Bogartian cigarette image," as it can be called, has found its way into the scripts of many movies. For instance, in the car chicken scene of Nicholas Ray's 1955 movie, *Rebel without a Cause*, James Dean, one of two combatants, can be seen behind the wheel of his car, getting ready for battle, with a cigarette dangling in Bogartian style from the side of his mouth. In Michelangelo

Antonioni's 1966 movie, *Blow Up*, Vanessa Redgrave swerves her head excitedly to the jazz rock music that David Hemmings, her paramour, has put on his record player. He then gives her the cigarette he had in his own mouth. She takes it quickly, eager to insert it into her own mouth. But, no, Hemmings instructs her, she must slow the whole performance down; she must go "against the beat," as he puts it. Leaning forward, Redgrave takes the cigarette and inserts it slowly and seductively into the middle of her mouth. She lies back salaciously, blowing the smoke upwards. She gives Hemmings back the cigarette, giggling suggestively. He takes it and inserts it into his own mouth, slightly to the side, in Bogartian style, visibly overcome by the erotic power of her smoking performance.

Such images have become emblazoned in the collective memory of our culture, even though starting in the mid-1990s, Hollywood became politically correct, producing fewer and fewer movies with cigarettes in them. Nevertheless, the "history of smoking," as captured by the movies, explains why, in situations that call for romance, a skillful use of the cigarette as a prop continues to be perceived as enhancing romance. All this reveals something truly extraordinary about the human species. People will do something, even if it puts their lives at risk, for no other reason than it is *interesting.* Smoking in modern-day societies makes courtship interesting. A colleague of mine once quipped that semiotics can be defined as the study of "anything that is interesting."

Cigarettes Are Signs

As the foregoing discussion was meant to suggest, cigarettes are hardly just cigarettes (nicotine sticks). As mentioned, the cigarette is a *sign* that conjures up images and meanings of sexual cool. It also has (or has had) other meanings. When females started smoking in the early part of the twentieth century, the cigarette was perceived as a threatening symbol of equality and independence to the patriarchal culture at the time. A particular brand of cigarettes, *Virginia Slims*, has always played precisely on this meaning, equating cigarette smoking with female power and women's liberation. From the outset, the brand has emphasized that smoking, once considered a "male thing," has empowered females, providing them with a symbolic prop through which they can tacitly communicate their independence from social patriarchy. For women to smoke "their own brand" of cigarette has, in fact, been promoted by the company as a subversive social act. It is relevant to note, however, that

women in previous centuries smoked things such as cigars and pipes, not cigarettes. As Hughes puts it, cigarette smoking was likely the result of male smokers' attempts "to distance their forms of tobacco use from that of women."[10]

The basic goal of semiotics is to identify what constitutes a sign and to infer, document, or ascertain what its meanings are. First, a sign must have distinctive physical structure. The shape of a cigarette, for example, allows us to differentiate it from other smoking materials such as cigars and pipes. This is called vicariously the *signifier*, the *representamen*, or even just the *sign*. The term *signifier* will be used in this book simply for the sake of convenience. Second, a sign must refer to something. In the case of the cigarette, it can be sexual cool, jazz clubs, Humphrey Bogart, and the like. This is designated the *referent*, *object*, or *signified*. The term *signified* will be used in this book. This is more precise than the term "meaning," because it entails an inextricable psychological connection between the form (signifier) and what it encodes (signified). Finally, a sign evokes particular thoughts, ideas, feelings, and perceptions differentially in people. This is called, alternately, *signification*, *interpretation*, or simply *meaning*. All three terms will be used in this book. Cigarettes are clearly signs because they have all three aspects—they have physical structure, they refer to specific ideas, and, of course, they evoke different interpretations in different people.

A sign carries within it a slice of a culture's history. Take Salem cigarettes as a case in point. In the late 1990s the makers of the cigarettes created an abstractly designed package, imitative of symbolist or expressionist style. The company mailed out a sample package along with four gift packages—a box of peppermint tea, a container of Chinese fortune cookies, a bottle of mint-scented massage gel, and finally a candle—throughout the country. Each package came with a coupon for a free pack of cigarettes. The package's new design, along with the occult nature of the gifts, were designed to impart a mystical aura to the cigarettes. It is no coincidence that the name of the brand itself is suggestive of the occult. The Salem witchcraft trials—the result of the largest witch hunt in American history—were held in 1692 in Salem, a town in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The cigarette's name is, in effect, a signifier that suggests an emotionally charged period in American history (the signified), no matter what interpretation we assign to the cigarette and its eponymous historical event.

The scholar who coined the terms *signifier* and *signified* was the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). For Saussure, the meanings of a sign were fixed socially by convention. Moreover, he believed that the choice of a particular sign to stand for something was largely an arbitrary process; that is, he did not think that it was motivated by any attempt to make it

replicate, simulate, or imitate any perceivable feature of the entity to which it referred. For Saussure, onomatopoeic words—words that imitate the sound of the concept to which they refer (*chirp*, *drip*, *boom*, *zap*, and so on)—were the exception, not the rule, in how language signs are constructed. Moreover, the highly variable nature of onomatopoeia across languages suggested to him that even this phenomenon was subject to arbitrary social conventions. For instance, the sounds made by a rooster are rendered by *cock-a-doodle-do* in English, but by *chicchirichì* (pronounced "keekeereekee") in Italian; similarly, the barking of a dog is conveyed by *bow-wow* in English but by *ouaoua* (pronounced "wawa") in French. Saussure argued that such signs were only approximate, and more or less conventional, imitations of perceived sounds.

However, Saussure, a brilliant historical linguist, appears to have ignored the historical nature of sign-making processes. While the relation of a word to its referent can be argued logically to be arbitrary, the historical record often reveals a different story. It seems that the inventors of many words have, in fact, attempted to capture the sounds of the things to which they referred. Thus, even a word such as *flow*, which means "to run like water or to move in a current or stream," has phonic qualities that clearly suggest the movement of water. It is unlikely that a hypothetical word such as *plock* would have been coined in its stead, for the simple reason that it is counterintuitive in referential terms.

Similarly, the phallic form of a cigarette and its association with sexuality is hardly an arbitrary matter—at least to human perception. It is what stands out in Rick's Café, in which it clearly suggests masculinity, and in *Virginia Slim* ads, where it subverts this meaning. The view that signs are forged initially to simulate something noticeable about a referent was, in fact, the one put forward by the American philosopher Charles Peirce (1839–1914), who argued that signs are attempts to resemble reality, but are no longer perceived as such because time and use have made people forget how they came about. For example, the cross in Christian religions is now perceived largely as a symbolic, conventional sign standing for "Christianity" as a whole. However, the cross sign was obviously created as an attempt to resemble the actual shape of the cross on which Christ was crucified.[11]

Most people, whether or not they speak English or Italian, will notice an attempt in both the words described earlier, *cock-a-doodle-do* and *chicchirichì*, to imitate rooster sounds. The reason why the outcomes are different is, in part, because of differences in the respective sound systems of the two languages. Such attempts, as Peirce suggested, can be easily recognized in many words, even though people no longer consciously experience them as imitative forms.

Binary Versus Triadic Models of the Sign

There is one more technical matter to discuss here before proceeding. Saussure's model of the sign is called *binary*, because it involves two dimensions—form and meaning. And, as discussed, the connection between the two is seen as arbitrary. Nevertheless, it is a theory of mind, since it suggests that the particular thoughts that come to mind are evoked by the particular forms we have created to encode them and, vice versa, if a specific thought comes to mind then we instantly search for the appropriate word that encodes it. So, if we see a particular plant in our line of vision and we have the word *tree* in our mental lexicon, the image in our mind and the word form a blend. Vice versa, when we use the word *tree* the image is also evoked simultaneously.

Although this seems to be a simple model of cognition today, it is still interesting and useful on several counts. First, it does make a connection between form and meaning in a concrete way. A signifier cannot exist without a signified, and vice versa. Plants are perceived as indistinct impressions. They cone into mental focus when we have a word that makes a selection among these impressions. This is what happens when we use the word *tree.* It selects from among an infinite set of possibilities and thus allows us to focus specifically on a particular domain of reference. Putting aside the fact that the connection may not be arbitrary, as Saussure maintained, it is still a remarkable yet simple theory of cognition. Binary structure is manifest in many artificial systems as well, such as alarm systems with their "on-off" structure, binary digits, digital computers, and others.

Peirce's model of the sign is called *triadic* because, essentially, it adds a third component to the binary model—interpretation. As we shall see, there is much more to the Peircean model. For the present purpose, suffice it to say that it suggests an inherent connection between form and reference—the two interact dynamically with each other, as we saw with the word *flow*. So, rather than being called arbitrary, the model is called motivated. This means essentially that when we create signs we are attempting to reproduce some sensory aspect of their referent (which Peirce called *object*) into their structure. The word *flow* is an attempt to simulate the sound that moving water makes to our ears. Because of this, interpretations of the sign will vary considerably, as we shall also see. Peirce called these *interpretants*, which are the meanings that a sign accrues in some context, at some point in time. Although the distinction between binary and triadic may seem somewhat irrelevant at this point, it is really critical, especially today within disciplines such as cognitive science. The triadic model suggests that we come up with signs not arbitrarily, but by

amalgamating the body and the mind; in the binary model we can easily separate the two (given the arbitrary nature of the connection). The triadic one describes human intelligence rather nicely; the binary one describes artificial intelligence much better instead.

High Heels Are Signs Too

Martha's video of the restaurant scene has captured many more interesting things for us to examine semiotically. At one point, Martha zeroed in with her device on Cheryl's shoes. As you might have guessed, Cheryl was wearing high heel shoes. Why? In prehistoric times people went barefoot. The first foot coverings were probably made of animal skins, which the peoples of the Bronze Age (approximately 3000 BCE) in northern Europe and Asia tied around their ankles in cold weather. Such footwear was the likely ancestor of the European and native North American skin moccasin and the leather and felt boots still worn by many throughout the world. The original purpose of such footwear was, no doubt, to protect the feet and to allow people to walk comfortably, or at least painlessly, on rough terrain. Now, consider high heel shoes. They are uncomfortable and awkward to wear, yet millions of women wear them. Obviously, the semiotic story of such shoes has parts to it that have little to do with protection and locomotion. Similar to cigarettes, they are signs, as are all kinds of shoes—the strength of the Roman army was built practically and symbolically on the walking power symbolized by the soldier's boots; many children's stories revolve around shoes or boots that magically enable some hero to cover great distances at great speed; Hermes, the Greek god, traveled in winged sandals; and the list could go on and on.

High heel shoes are elegant, stylish, and sexy. The perception of high heels as stylish footwear dates back to fourteenth-century Venice when aristocratic women donned them to set themselves apart socially from peasant and servant women. In the sixteenth century, Caterina de' Medici (1519–89), the Florentine-born queen of France, donned a pair of high heel shoes for her marriage to Henry II in Paris in 1533. The event engendered a fashion craze among the French aristocracy (male and female), encouraged by Louis XIV of France, who apparently wore them to increase his modest height. The high heel shoe was, semiotically speaking, a signifier of nobility, and the higher the heel the higher the rank of the wearer. It was in the mid-nineteenth century that heeled shoes—low-cut, laced or buttoned to the ankle—became the fashion craze among all classes of females, who wore them to keep up their dresses from dragging along the ground. During that period, known as the Victorian

era, the shoes became, for the first time in their history, gendered signs of female beauty and sexuality. The reason for this is obvious to this day—high heels force the body to tilt, raising the buttocks and giving prominence to the breasts. They also give glimpses of the woman's feet in a tantalizing manner, thus accentuating the role of female feet in the history of sexuality, as the social historian William Rossi has documented.[12] In fairy tales, the "lure of the shoe" is found in stories such as *Cinderella* and *The Golden Slipper*.

This history would explain why high heels are often perceived to be *fetishes*—signs that evoke devotion to themselves, rather than what they stand for. In some cultures, this devotion results from the belief that the shoes have magical or metaphysical attributes, as is evidenced by cross-cultural narratives in which shoes are portrayed as magical objects. In psychology, the term *fetish* refers instead to objects or body parts through which sexual fantasies are played out. Common fetishes are feet, shoes, stockings, and articles of intimate female apparel. Psychologists believe that fetishism serves to alleviate feelings of sexual inadequacy, usually among males. However, in a fascinating book, Valerie Steele[13] has argued that we are all fetishists to an extent, and that the line between the "normal" and the "abnormal" in sexual preferences and behaviors is a blurry one indeed. Fashion designers, for instance, steal regularly from the fetishist's closet, promoting ultra-high heels, frilly underwear, latex suits, and the like. The appropriation has been so complete that people wearing such footwear, garments, and apparel are generally unaware of their fetishist origins.

The high heels worn by Cheryl in our fictitious scene allowed her to send out various interpretants connected to their semiotic history—stylishness, fetishness, and eroticism—all meanings that are reinforced in media and pop culture representations of various kinds, from movies to ads. It would appear that the human mind is fundamentally a historical sensor of meanings, even when these are buried somewhere deeply within it. High heel shoes are part of fantasy. Claire Underwood, as the ruthless political wife in *House of Cards*, would be perceived as less alluring and thus dangerous without her killer heels. On the screen and in ads, high heels can make a woman look more powerful.

The System of Everyday Life

Cigarettes and high heel shoes provide human beings with unique kinds of tools to act out their constantly varying roles on the stage of everyday life. The sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–82) drew attention to the idea that everyday

life is very much like the theater,[14] because it involves a skillful staging of character according to social context. The two protagonists in our imaginary scene are indeed "character actors" who employ gestures, props, and conversation to impress each other for a specific reason—romance. The Latin term for "cast of characters" is *dramatis personae*, literally, "the persons of the drama," a term betraying the theatrical origin of our concept of personhood.[15] We seem, in a phrase, to perceive life as a stage.

The question of how this perception came about in the first place is an intriguing one. The scientific record suggests that life in early hominid groups revolved around duties associated with hunting, crop-gathering, and cooking. These were shared by individuals to enhance the overall efficiency of the group. As the brain of these early hominids developed, their ability to communicate their thoughts increased proportionately. Plaster casts of skulls dating back approximately one hundred thousand years, which allow scientists to reconstruct ancient brains, reveal that brain size was not much different from current brain size. Cave art starts appearing shortly after, and linguists speculate that human speech had also emerged. About ten thousand years ago, plants were domesticated, followed shortly after by the domestication of animals. This agricultural revolution set the stage for the advent of civilization.

The first human groups with language developed an early form of culture, to which archeological scientists refer as the *tribe*, a fully functional system of group life to which even modern humans seem instinctively to relate. The basis of such cultures was ritual—a set of actions accompanied by words intended to bring about certain events or to signify such critical events as birth, the coming-of-age, matrimony, and death. Ritual is the predecessor of theater. In complex societies, where various cultures, subcultures, countercultures, and parallel cultures are in constant competition with each other, and where the shared territory is too large to allow for members of the society to come together for salient ritualistic purposes, the tendency for individuals is to relate instinctively to smaller tribal-type groups (communities, clubs, and so on) and their peculiar rituals. This inclination towards *tribalism*, as the communications theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911–80) emphasized, reverberates constantly within humans, and its diminution in modern urban societies may be the source of the sense of alienation that many people who live in complex and impersonal social settings experience.

Archaeological evidence suggests that as the members of the early tribes became more culturally sophisticated, that is, as their expressive capacities and technological systems grew in complexity, they sought larger and larger territories in order to accommodate their new and growing social needs. The tribes thus grew in population and diversity, cooperating or amalgamating with other tribes in their new settings. The anthropologist Desmond Morris has

called the complex tribal systems that came into existence *super-tribes*, because of expansion and amalgamation.[16] The first super-tribes date back only around five thousand or so years, when the first city-states emerged.

A modern society is a super-tribe, a collectivity of individuals who do not necessarily trace their ancestral roots to the founding tribe, but who nevertheless participate in the cultural rituals of that tribe as it has evolved over time. Such participation allows individuals to interact in both spontaneous and patterned ways that are perceived as "normal." Unlike tribes, however, the mode of interaction does not unfold on a personal level because it is impossible to know, or know about, everyone living in the same super-tribe. Moreover, a society often encompasses more than one cultural system. Consider what people living in the society known as the United States call loosely "American culture." This culture traces its origins to an amalgam of the cultural systems of the founding tribes of European societies who settled in the U.S. American society has also accommodated aboriginal and other parallel cultural systems, with different ways of life, different languages, and different rituals. Unlike their tribal ancestors, Americans can therefore live apart from the dominant cultural system, in a parallel one, or become members of a subculture; they can also learn and utilize different semiotic codes, each leading to the adoption of different communication and lifestyle systems.

The Science of Signs

Semiotics has never really caught on widely as an autonomous discipline in academia (or in society at large), as have other sciences of human nature, such as anthropology and psychology. There are various reasons for this, but perhaps the most understandable one is that it is difficult to define semiotics and to locate it within the traditional academic landscape. Yet, to a large extent, everybody is a semiotician, whether they know it or not. As we have seen earlier, semiotic method is something we engage in all the time. When we instinctively pose the question of what something means, in effect, we are engaging in basic semiotic thinking. In addition, as mentioned, we find this *interesting*. Semiotics constitutes a "questioning form" of investigation into the nature of things that is not unlike the type of reasoning used by detectives, fictional or real-life. In fact, detective stories are really semiotic investigations in disguise. This is probably what makes them so popular. In 2003, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* became a runaway international bestseller and pop culture phenomenon in large part because it was based on semiotic method, and certainly not on historical fact. The hero, a Harvard professor named

Robert Langdon, attempts to solve a historical mystery connecting Jesus and Mary Magdalene by using his knowledge of "symbology," which the novel defines as the study of signs and symbols. A large part of the allure of that novel comes, arguably, from the hero's ability to interpret the signs of the mystery in the same tradition of other fictional detective "symbologists," from C. Auguste Dupin to Sherlock Holmes and Poirot. "Symbology" is Dan Brown's rendering of "semiotics."

The term *semiotics* was applied for the first time to the study of the symptoms produced by the body. Hippocrates (c. 460–c. 377 BCE), the founder of Western medical science, defined a symptom as a *semeion* ("sign" or "mark" in Greek) of changes in normal bodily functions and processes. He argued that the visible features of the semeion help a physician identify a disease, malady, or ailment, calling the technique of diagnosis *semeiotike*. The basic analytical concept implicit in *semeiotike* was extended by philosophers to include human-made signs (such as words). The Greek philosopher Plato (c. 427–c. 347 BCE), for instance, was intrigued by the fact that a single word had the capacity to refer not to specific objects, but to objects that resemble each other in some identifiable way. For example, the word *circle* does not refer to a unique thing (although it can if need be), but to anything that has the property "circularity"—a particular circle can be altered in size, but it will still be called a *circle* because it possesses this property. Plato's illustrious pupil Aristotle (384–322 BCE) argued that words start out as practical strategies for naming singular things, not properties. It is only after we discover that certain things have similar properties that we start classifying them into categories (such as "circularity"). At such points of discovery, Aristotle argued, we create abstract words that allow us to bring together things that have the similar properties: *plants*, *animals*, *objects*, and so on.

It was St. Augustine (354–430 CE), the early Christian church father and philosopher, who provided the first detailed "theory of the sign." St. Augustine argued that are three types of signs. First, there are natural signs, which include not only bodily symptoms such as those discussed by Hippocrates, but also the rustling of leaves, the colors of plants, the signals that animals emit, and so on. Then there are conventional signs, which are the product of human ingenuity; these include not only words, but also gestures and the symbols that humans invent to serve their psychological, social, and communicative needs. Finally, St. Augustine considered miracles to be messages from God and, thus, sacred signs. These can only be understood on faith, although such understanding is partly based on specific cultural interpretations of them.

Interest in linking human understanding with sign-production waned after the death of St. Augustine. It was only in the eleventh century that such

interest was rekindled, mainly because of the translation of the works of the ancient philosophers. The outcome was the movement known as Scholasticism. The Scholastics asserted that conventional signs captured practical truths and, thus, allowed people to understand reality directly. But within this movement there were some—called nominalists—who argued that "truth" was itself a matter of subjective opinion and that signs captured, at best, only illusory and highly variable human versions of it—a perspective that is strikingly akin to some modern theories of the sign. At about the same time, the English philosopher and scientist Roger Bacon (c. 1214–1292) developed one of the first comprehensive typologies of signs, claiming that, without a firm understanding of the role of signs in human understanding, discussing what truth is or is not would end up being a trivial matter.

For some reason, Bacon's proposal to study signs separately elicited little or no interest until 1690, when British philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) revived it in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke was, in fact, the first ever to put forward the idea of an autonomous mode of philosophical inquiry called *semeiotics*, which he defined as the "doctrine of signs." However, his proposal too garnered little interest, until the nineteenth century when Saussure used the term *semiology*, instead, to suggest that such a doctrine or science was needed.[17] Today, Locke's term, spelled *semiotics*, is the preferred one—the term that Peirce used and put into broad circulation. Modern practices, theories, and techniques are based on one, the other, or both of the writings of Saussure and Peirce—that is, on binary or triadic semiotic methods. Following on their coattails, a number of key intellectuals developed semiotics in the twentieth century into the sophisticated discipline that it has become today. Only a few will be mentioned in passing here. The monumental treatise on the development of sign theory by John Deely, *The Four Ages*, is recommended as a resource for filling in the gaps.[18]

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) suggested that signs were pictures of reality, presenting it as if it were a series of images. This view continues to inform a large part of semiotic theory and practice today. The American semiotician Charles Morris (1901–79) divided semiotic method into the study of sign assemblages (which he called *syntax*), the study of the relations between signs and their meanings (*semantics*), and the study of the relations between signs and their users (*pragmatics*). The Russian-born American semiotician Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) studied various facets of sign construction, but is probably best known for his model of communication, which suggests that sign exchanges are hardly ever neutral but involve subjectivity and goal-attainment of some kind. The French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915–80) illustrated the power of using semiotics for

decoding the hidden meanings in pop culture spectacles such as wrestling matches and Hollywood blockbuster movies. French semiotician Algirdas J. Greimas (1917–92) developed the branch of semiotics known as *narratology*, which studies how human beings in different cultures invent similar kinds of narratives (myths, tales, and so on) with virtually the same stock of characters, motifs, themes, and plots. The late Hungarian-born American semiotician Thomas A. Sebeok (1920–2001) was influential in expanding the semiotic paradigm to include the comparative study of animal signaling systems, which he termed *zoosemiotics*, and the study of *semiosis* in all living things, which has come to be called *biosemiotics*. Semiosis is the innate ability to produce and comprehend signs in a species-specific way. The interweaving and blending of ideas, findings, and scientific discourses from different disciplinary domains was, Sebeok claimed, the distinguishing feature of biosemiotics. Finally, Italian semiotician Umberto Eco (1932–2016) contributed significantly to our understanding of how we interpret signs. He also singlehandedly put the term semiotics on the map, so to speak, with his best-selling novel, *The Name of the Rose* published in the early 1980s.

An interesting definition of semiotics has, actually, been provided by Eco himself, in his 1976 book, *A Theory of Semiotics*. He defined it as "the discipline studying everything that can be used in order to lie," because if "something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot, in fact, be used to tell at all."[19] Despite its apparent facetiousness, this is a rather insightful definition. It implies that signs do not tell the whole story, or the whole "truth," as the nominalists claimed. Humans, in fact, talk convincingly all the time about things that are entirely fictitious or imaginary. In a sense, culture is itself a big lie—a break from our biological heritage that has forced us to live mainly by our wits. As Prometheus proclaimed prophetically in Aeschylus' (525–456 BCE) drama *Prometheus Bound*, one day "rulers would conquer and control not by strength, nor by violence, but by cunning." In a similar vein, the ancient Chinese sage Confucius (c. 551–479 BCE) wrote: "Signs and symbols rule the world, not words or laws."

Semiotic method has been defined as *structuralist*, because of its focus on recurring patterns of form and meaning that are captured and expressed by recurring structures in sign systems (as will be discussed in the next chapter). In the 1960s, however, the late influential French semiotician Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) rejected this structuralist premise, proposing a counter-approach that came to be known widely as *post-structuralism*, by which he denounced the search for universal structures in human sign systems. According to Derrida all such 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 Derrida's radical stance as ignoring veritable discoveries made by structuralism. It has nevertheless had a profound impact on many different fields of knowledge, not just semiotics, including the sciences. Today, semioticians continue to endorse structuralist principles exploring new domains of inquiry, such as cyberspace, artificial intelligence, and the Internet. Some of their ideas are discussed subsequently in this book.

The view of semiotics as a *science* is not the traditional one. Traditionally, this term has designated the objective knowledge of facts of the natural world, gained and verified by exact observation, experiment, and ordered thinking. However, the question as to whether or not human nature can be studied with the same objectivity has always been a problematic one. Indeed, many semioticians refuse to call their field a science, for they believe that any study of the human mind can never be totally objective, preferring instead to characterize it as a doctrine—a set of principles—or a method. In this book, semiotics will be considered a science in the broader sense of the term—namely, as the organized body of knowledge on a particular subject.

Principles of Semiotic Analysis

Three general principles underlie semiotic analysis. These will inform the discussion in the remainder of this book. The first is that all meaning-bearing behaviors and forms of expression have ancient roots, no matter how modern they may appear to be. The first task of the semiotician is, therefore, to unravel the history of signs, just as we did in the case of cigarettes and high heel shoes.

The second principle is that sign systems influence people's notions of what is "normal" in human behavior. The second task of the semiotician is, thus, to expose the sign-based processes behind perceptions of normalcy. In North America it is perceived as "normal" for women to wear high heels and put on lipstick, but "abnormal" for men to do so. In reality, the classification of a clothing item or a cosmetic technique in gender terms is a matter of historically based convention, not of naturalness or lack thereof. In the sixteenth century, high heels, as we saw earlier, were the fashion craze for both female and male aristocrats. This principle is, clearly, a corollary of the first.

The third principle is that the particular system of signs in which one has been reared influences worldview, which is yet another corollary of the first principle. Consider the case of health. In our culture we say that disease "slows us down," "destroys our bodies," or "impairs" body functions. Such expressions reflect a mechanistic view of the body. Tagalog, an indigenous language

of the Philippines, has no such equivalents. Instead, its expressions reveal a holistic view of the body as connected to spiritual forces, to social ambiance, and to nature. People reared in English-speaking cultures are inclined to evaluate disease as a localized phenomenon, within the body, separate from the larger social and ecological context. On the other hand, Tagalog people are inclined to evaluate disease as a response to that very context.

The foregoing discussion does not imply that there are no objectively determinable symptoms or diseases. Humans the world over possess an innate physiological warning system that alerts them to dangerous changes in body states. Many of the symptoms produced by this system have been documented by the modern medical sciences. However, in daily life the human being's evaluation of, and response to, the body's warning signals are mediated by culture. In a perceptive book, *Illness as Metaphor*, the late writer Susan Sontag (1933–2004) cogently argued that it is indeed culture that predisposes people to think of specific illnesses in certain ways. Using the example of cancer, Sontag argued that in the not-too-distant past the very word *cancer* was an emotionally unsettling disease, not just a dangerous physical one: "As long as a particular disease is treated as an evil, invincible predator, not just a disease, most people with cancer will indeed be demoralized by learning what disease they have."[20] In a similar vein, Jacalyn Duffin has argued that diseases are often pure cultural constructs.[21] "Lovesickness," for instance, was once considered a true disease, even though it originated in the poetry of antiquity. Its demise as a disease is due to twentieth-century skepticism. At any given point in time, concepts of disease crystallize from cultural factors, not just from any scientific study of disease. The ways in which a culture defines and represents health will largely determine how it views and treats disease, what life expectancy it sees as normal, and what features of body image it considers to be attractive, ugly, normal, or abnormal. Some cultures view a healthy body as being a lean and muscular one, others a plump and rotund one. Certain cultures perceive a healthy lifestyle as one that is based on rigorous physical activity, while others perceive it as one that is based on a more leisurely and sedentary style of living.

The third principle does not in any way exclude the role of nature in the makeup of humanity in any way. To semioticians, the nature-versus-culture debate is irrelevant, since they see both as partners in *semiosis*—the ability of the human brain to convert perceptions into signs. In other words, cultures are reflections of who we are, not forces constructing us *tabula rasa*. Differences in worldview are, thus, superficial differences in sign-based emphases. It is in exposing those differences that semiotics is best suited, allowing us to understand each other better in the process.

To the semiotician, subjects such as cigarettes and high heels, which might at first appear to be trivial, are highly useful in exposing differences in worldview. Semiotics allows us to filter the signs that swarm and flow through us every day, immunizing us against becoming passive victims of a situation. By understanding the signs, the situation is changed, and we become active interpreters of that situation.

Notes

1. Jason Hughes, *Learning to smoke: Tobacco use in the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 19.
2. Source: *World tobacco market report*, Euromonitor International (Chicago, 2017).
3. Margaret Leroy, *Some girls do: Why women do and don't make the first move* (London: Harper Collins, 1997).
4. Jordan Goodman, *Tobacco in history: The cultures of dependence* (London: Routledge, 1993).
5. Richard Klein, *Cigarettes are sublime* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
6. Michael E. Starr, "The Marlboro man: Cigarette smoking and masculinity in America," *Journal of Popular Culture* 17 (1984): 45–56.
7. Tara Parker-Pope, *Cigarettes: Anatomy of an industry from seed to smoke* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 168.
8. According to the 1995 report of the Center for Tobacco Free Kids, nearly 35 percent of teenagers are smokers, many of whom started smoking around 13 years of age. Similar statistics were published in the late 1990s and the first part of the 2000s. The CDC (Centers for Disease Control) reported in 2002 that anti-smoking ads, for example, did little to deter smoking among teens, highlighting the fact that the anti-smoking media campaigns of governments and concerned citizen groups have little effect—1 in 3 still smoke, a percentage that has not changed much since adolescents started smoking *en masse* in the 1950s. The situation is bound to change, however, as the meanings of smoking will change. I have started to notice that teenagers themselves are now finding smoking to be less and less attractive socially.
9. The original research was published in *Cool: The signs and meanings of adolescence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994). In a follow-up project I discovered that not much had changed in virtually two decades after the original project. It would seem that in some matters of human behavior, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, as the French expression goes ("The more it changes, the more it is the same"). Those findings were published in *My son is an alien: A cultural portrait of today's youth* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).
10. Hughes, *Learning to Smoke*, p. 121.

11. Charles Peirce's main semiotic ideas can be found scattered in the *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vols. 1–8, C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (eds.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958).
12. William Rossi, *The sex lives of the foot and shoe* (New York: Dutton, 1976).
13. Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, sex, and power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
14. Erving Goffman, *The presentation of self in everyday life* (Garden City, Conn.: Doubleday, 1959).
15. Lillian Glass, *He says, she says* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1992), 46–8.
16. Desmond Morris, *The human zoo* (London: Cape, 1969).
17. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1916).
18. John Deely, *Four ages of understanding: The first postmodern survey of philosophy from ancient times to the turn of the twentieth century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).
19. Umberto Eco, *A theory of semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).
20. Susan Sontag, *Illness as metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), 7.
21. Jacalyn Duffin, *Disease concepts in history* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

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2

What Does It Mean?: How Humans Represent the World

The whole visible universe is but a storehouse of images and signs to which the imagination will give a relative place and value; it is a sort of pasture which the imagination must digest and transform.
—Charles Baudelaire (1821–67)

Martha's video of the restaurant scene contains many more interesting episodes for the semiotician to digest and ponder. In one segment, Ted's attention is caught by a pin that Cheryl has on her dress. Noticing its unconventional shape, he inquires: "What an interesting design. What does it mean?" Cheryl answers as follows: "It represents a water spirit in Chinese culture, which symbolizes the vitality of life."

Interest in objects and the design of things is common, even though we rarely give it much consideration, beyond the fact that we perceive it as part of natural curiosity. But human curiosity is a remarkable thing. The crux of semiotic analysis is, in effect, to satisfy our curiosity by unraveling what something means, or more accurately, *represents*. As discussed in the first chapter, notions such as *sign*, *code*, and *text* allow us to understand with much more accuracy how we extract meaning from the things that we come across routinely in our daily lives. Culture is really a system (or network) of signs, codes, and texts that inform people how to carry out their daily social interactions and what values to ascribe to objects.

Signs also are more than information-bearing devices. They are interpretations of the world. They are more than responses to stimuli. Moreover, they are highly variable devices. There really is no way to pin down what something

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truly means; all that can be said is that it is used to represent something in a specific way. In fact, a sign is defined as something that stands for something else in some way. The process of interpreting some sign form is not a completely open-ended process, however. It is constrained by social conventions, by communal experiences, and by many other contextual factors that put limits on the range of meanings or interpretations that are possible in a given situation. A task of semiotic analysis is to figure out what that range is. In itself, information is literally meaningless, unless it is connected to some code or system of interpretation, so that it can be utilized for some purpose, or else given an interpretation and meaning so that it can be connected to other forms of meaning. In other words, information without a semiotic key for interpreting and using it is mindless. It is, as its etymology suggests—from Latin *informatio* "a sketch, an outline"—nothing more than meaningless *form*. Deriving meaning from this form requires knowledge of how it has been represented and how it has been used, and what its signifying properties are.

The Meaning of Meaning

Let's consider one crucial word in Ted's question—namely the verb *mean* in "What does it mean?" This is a word we use often in everyday conversation without hardly ever reflecting on it. What does *meaning* mean? As it turns out, the word has many meanings itself. In 1923 two scholars, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, found sixteen common meanings for this word in English.[1] In the sentence "Does life have a meaning?" for instance, the term is equivalent to "purpose." In sentences such as "What does love mean to you?" or "A green light means go," the word has a more down-to-earth meaning. In such uses it designates "conveyance" or "indication." Clearly, the meaning of meaning is a problematic thing.

So, the term "meaning" is left undefined in semiotics. This is not a mere avoidance strategy. Similar to mathematics, certain notions are simply announced as such because they are self-evident. These are called axioms. To the semiotician there is no such thing as absolute meaning, for the simple reason that meaning cannot be separated from signs and their relations to each other. To grasp what this means (no pun intended), consider the world of plants and animals as food sources. In theory, human beings are capable of classifying them by simple trial and error into *edible* (non-perilous) and *inedible* (perilous)—that is, people living anywhere on earth are capable of separating any species of plant or animal by experimentation into two categories—those that are perilous and those that are not. However, that's not

the end of the story. People also classify non-perilous plants and animal meat as *inedible*. Rabbits, many kinds of flowers, and silkworms, for instance, would be classified (by and large) as "inedible" by people living in many modern urban societies, even though they cause no harm to health. On the other hand, many Europeans regularly consume rabbit meat and various types of flowers and Mexicans eat cooked silkworms with no adverse physical reactions whatsoever. These people obviously live in cultures that classify them as "edible." Classificatory disparities such as these exist because the cultural *meanings* of "rabbit" or "silkworm" are different. However, the fact that a particular culture predisposes its users to attend to certain meanings as necessary does not imply that members of other cultures are incapable of perceiving (or tasting) the world in similar ways. Although people from a certain culture might construe a cigarette differently from how cigarette-using cultures perceive it, they can easily understand what it means if we simply explain to them its social functions, as was done in the first chapter. They might react with surprise or consternation, but they will nevertheless be able to grasp the meaning. Practical knowledge of the world is culture-specific, built on the categories used to classify the world in a specific social context; but the *theoretical* capacity for knowing is limitless, and can easily transcend the very culture-specific categories that commonly guide it.

The act of classification entails a corresponding act of interpretation. Simply defined, this is the ability to extract an appropriate meaning from some sign or text. Although interpretation is subject to much individual variation, it is not an open-ended process; it involves familiarity with the meanings of signs in specific contexts, with the type of code to which they belong, and with the nature of their referents—concrete referents (such as *cat*, *dog*, *boy*, *girl*, and so on) are less subject to variation than are abstract ones (such as *justice*, *fairness*, *equality*, *patience*, and so on). Without such familiarity, communication and interpersonal interaction would be virtually impossible in common social settings. In essence, interpretation is a purposeful selection of specific meanings among the boundless ones of which the human mind is capable for some specific purpose or in some particular situation. In art and performance, one talks of interpretation as if it were less than the original creation of the work of art. But this is not correct. The interpreter is a creator of meanings as well. The late Canadian pianist Glen Gould (1932–82) was no less an artist for not having composed *The Goldberg Variations*, which he so masterfully played. He effaced himself the better to serve Bach's model. The more successful he was at his task, the more deeply involved did he become in Bach's art form. Every touch, every turn of phrase, became a mirror of his own creative imagination.

Types of Meaning

Now, let's take a closer look at meaning, the way a semiotician would. First, there are two levels of meaning in human sign systems—the *denotative* and the *connotative*. You already have a sense of what this involves when you use everyday words. Think of the word *red.* What does it mean? At one level, it refers to a specific kind of color different from, say, *blue* or *green*. But at another level, it refers to such things as an emotional state ("I'm *red* with embarrassment"), a financial predicament ("I'm in the *red*"), or a political ideology ("He's been a *red* ideologue all his life"). Virtually all words have these two levels of meaning. So, the discussion that follows will not be totally foreign to you. It is intended simply to formalize what you already know intuitively.

A sign encodes something observed, perceived, felt, or thought. This is what it *denotes*, or calls attention to at a primary level of interpretation. The word *house*, for example, calls attention to a "structure for human habitation." The kind of "structure" that it denotes is not specific, but rather, typical within a cultural context—*house* denotes something different to someone living in New York than it does to someone living in Calcutta or Namibia. The word *house* (and its equivalent in other languages) denotes many different types of structure—large, small, cubical, or spherical. In many societies today, this word will normally evoke the image of a cubical, rather than a spherical habitation structure, because that is the prototypical shape of most modern-day houses. But, in others, such as the Dogon society of the Sudan or the settlements of Zambian herders, the equivalent words will denote a spherical or conical structure.

Now, consider the use of the word *house* in sentences such as "The house is in session," "The house roared with laughter," and "They sleep in one of the houses at Harvard University." These meanings clearly function at a different level. That level is called *connotative*. In the three sentences, the word *house* connotes a "legislative quorum," an "audience," and a "dormitory" respectively. These extend the concept "structure for human habitation" to encompass other situations in which humans come together (as if they were in a house). These meanings allow people to use a manageable set of signs to represent a large array of potential meanings. Connotation thus reveals a particular principle of structure, which can be formulated simply as "doing a lot with a little." More technically, this is called the principle of economy.

Connotation has many functions. The word *yes* in English denotes "affirmation," but one can communicate doubt or incredulity through this same word by simply raising one's voice as in a question: *Yes?* Similarly, one can convey conviction or excitement by stressing it: *Yessss*! These are emotive

connotations that can always be added to signs of various types through intonation. Consider *house* again. In sentences such as "Are you sure that's a *house*? It looks more like a garage" incredulity and conviction are conveyed in a similar manner through a modulation in tone of voice.

Finally, the use of *house* in expressions such as "the house of God" and the "house of ill repute" reveals a different source of connotation. The meaning of *house* as a "church" or a "prostitution establishment" respectively manifests a specific kind of process that can be called, simply, historical connotation. Historically acquired meanings differ from other types of connotations, such as those produced by tone of voice, because they cannot be figured out solely in terms of extensions of denotative meaning, but must be gleaned from their use in social context. The meanings of cigarettes, high heels, perfumes, brand names of cars and clothes, and other such things, are all reflective of historically based connotative processes.

Consider again the color *red*. In cultures across the world, it is much more than a word denoting a specific hue of color. It is linked with life, magic, warmth, love, and fertility. The Anglo-Saxons painted trees and animals red, believing that this would protect them against evil, while warriors painted their hatchets and spears red believing that this would endow them with superhuman powers. In ancient Rome, brides wore a fiery red veil (the *flammeum*) to symbolize love and fertility—a custom also practiced in parts of China. In ancient Egypt, red was a sign of evil and wickedness, associated with the destructive god Set. Evil doings were called *red affairs* and scribes used red liquid to write about warnings—a practice that continues even in modern-day societies, revealing why we use such expressions as "being in the red." All such connotative meanings of *red* are historical.

In 1957 the psychologists C. E. Osgood, G. J. Suci, and P. H. Tannenbaum developed an interesting technique for fleshing out the social (historically based) connotations of words, known as the *semantic differential*.[2] By posing a series of questions to subjects about a specific concept—Is it good or bad? Weak or strong?—as seven-point scales, with the opposing adjectives at each end, they were able to sift out general patterns from them using statistical techniques. As an example, suppose you ask a group of people to evaluate the concept *United States President* in terms of opposite categories such as *young–old*, *practical–idealistic*, *modern–traditional*, *attractive–bland*, *friendly–stern*, each on a scale of 1 to 7. What will the result be?

Those who feel that the president should be *modern* would place a mark towards the corresponding end of that scale. Those who believe that the president should not be too *young* or too *old* would place a mark near the middle of the *young–old* scale. People who think that the president should be *bland-looking*,

would place a mark towards the corresponding end of the *attractive–bland* scale, and so on. If one were to ask larger and larger groups of people to rate the presidency in terms of such scales, one would then be able to draw a "connotative profile" of the presidency in terms of what this concept means to people. Remarkably, research utilizing the semantic differential has shown that, although the connotations of specific concepts are subject to personal interpretation and subjective perceptions, the range of variation is rarely random or haphazard. In other words, the experiments using the semantic differential have shown that connotation is 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 end points of the scales presented to them; whereas it is a fairly neutral concept for Americans who place it in the midrange of the same scales.

For the sake of accuracy, it should be mentioned that denotation and connotation go under various names in the technical literature. The former is also called *reference* and the latter *sense*, terms used by the German philosopher Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) who was among the first to point out the important role of connotation in theories of meaning. Frege's famous example was that of the "fourth smallest planet and the second planet from the Sun" as being named both *Venus* and the *Morning Star*. The two terms referred to the same thing, he observed, but they had different senses—*Venus* refers to the planet in a straightforward referential way (nevertheless with implicit references to the goddess of sexual love and physical beauty of Roman mythology), while *Morning Star* brings out the fact that the planet is visible in the east just before sunrise. Knowledge of signs, Frege maintained, clearly includes awareness of the senses that they bear culturally. The philosopher Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970) used the terms *intension* (= denotation) and *extension* (= connotation) instead. Although there are subtle differences among these terms, it is beyond the present purpose to compare them. Suffice it to say that in current semiotic practice they are virtually synonymous:

reference	=	denotation	=	intension
sense	=	connotation	=	extension

The use of the denotation-versus-connotation dichotomy is often credited to philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–73) but it can be traced back to the medieval Scholastics, and in particular to William of Ockham (1285–1347). This distinction was introduced into linguistics by the American linguist Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949) in his influential 1933 book called *Language*,[3] and into semiotics proper by the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965) a little later.

In a way, the semiotician is a "scientist of connotations." The aim of our analysis of Cheryl and Ted's smoking performance in the previous chapter was, in fact, to sift out the connotations that cigarettes and high heel shoes have in specific situations. Connotation is the operative meaning-making and meaning-extracting mode in the production and decipherment of most signs and texts. Connotation is not an option, as some traditional philosophical and linguistic theories of meaning continue to sustain to this day; it is something we are inclined to extract from a sign in specific contexts. What does this imply? Recall that it would not have been possible to decipher the meanings of cigarettes and high heels without taking into account the physical and social context of the scene in which they were recorded. If you came across a crumpled up and discarded cigarette butt on a sidewalk, you would probably interpret it as a piece of rubbish. But if you saw the very same cigarette encased in a picture frame, hanging on a wall in an art gallery, autographed by some artist, and given the title *Waste*, then you would hardly perceive it as garbage. You would interpret it in a markedly different way—as a symbol of a "throw-away society," as a metaphor for a "materialistic culture," or in some other connotative way. Clearly, the package's *context* of occurrence—its location on a sidewalk versus its insertion in a picture frame displayed in an art gallery—determines the kind of meaning you will extract from it. As this example shows, symbolism and connotation are really two sides of the same semiotic coin, figuratively speaking.

Types of Signs

Much work within semiotics has been devoted to identifying the main types of signs produced by humans. Charles Peirce identified sixty-six species of signs—the most comprehensive ever. However, for practical applications of semiotic theory, only a handful of these are used regularly. The late Thomas A. Sebeok actually collated the sixty-six signs into six generic types—*symptom*, *signal*, *index*, *icon*, *symbol*, and *name*—that now form a kind of basic semiotic taxonomy for analytical purposes.[4] Although some semioticians would exclude the first two from the purview of their discipline, Sebeok correctly insisted that their inclusion would force semioticians to consider the relation of biological factors to cultural ones more seriously in their investigation of semiosis (the ability to produce and comprehend signs).

Let's consider Sebeok's typology concretely. Symptoms are bodily signs that are indicative of physical states or conditions. However, their interpretation is influenced by culture. Facial acne, for example, is recognized as a chronic dis-

ease of the skin afflicting adolescents and young adults, linked in large part to lifestyle factors (diet, stress, and so on). The symptoms associated with this condition are pimples (furuncles) on the face, back, and chest. But pimples are not perceived as symptoms of disease in some cultures, as attested by the lack of words equivalent to *acne* in many of the world's languages. Analogously, the native societies of northern Manitoba do not have a word for *rickets*—a softening and, often, bending of the bones usually caused by a lack of vitamin D and insufficient exposure to sunlight. Traditionally, the people living in those societies did not perceive this pattern of bone formation as indicative of an abnormality of the skeletal system. They realized it by learning the word *rickets.* This is analogous to our lack of recognition of the syndrome that Malaysian, Japanese, Indonesian, and Thai peoples call *latah*, which results from sudden fright. Lacking an equivalent term for this state, we simply do not recognize it as a condition, although it clearly exists (as people living in these cultures avow). As such examples show, the whole process of diagnosing a disease is a semiotic one, since it involves deciphering and establishing what constitutes a symptom in both physical and cultural terms—that is, in terms of its physical signifiers and its cultural and medical signifieds. A symptom carries information that must be interpreted in order for it to make medical sense.

A *signal* is a bodily emission (sound, odor, and so on) or movement (head tilt, eye wink, and so on). In most species, signals have several primary functions of identifying the sex and species of an animal's potential mate. For example, a fish called the stickleback uses a system of interlocking releaser signals to orchestrate its mating. When its breeding season arrives, the underside of each male turns bright red. This color attracts females, but also provokes attacks by other males. Red objects of almost any description will trigger male stickleback aggression. A female responds to the male's red signal with a curious approach posture that displays her swollen belly full of eggs. This incites the male to perform a zigzag dance that leads the female to the tunnel-like nest he has built for her. The female snuggles into the nest, whereupon the male touches her tail with his nose and quivers. The ensuing vibration causes the female to release her eggs for the male to fertilize. If the male fails to perform the last part of the dance, the female will not lay her eggs. Vibrating the female with a pencil will work just as well, but the male in this case, not having gone through the last stage of the ritual, will refuse to fertilize the eggs, eating them instead.

Signaling has other functions, of course. Worker honey bees, for instance, are endowed with a sophisticated system for signaling the location of a cache of food to their hive members. Upon returning to the hive from foraging trips, these bees have the extraordinary capacity to inform the other bees in

the hive, through movement sequences, about the direction, distance, and quality of the food with amazing accuracy. This signaling system is known as a *dance* because its movements resemble the actions of human dancing. The remarkable thing about it is that it shares with human signs the feature of conveying information about something even though that something is absent from direct perception. Several kinds of dance patterns have been documented by zoologists. In the "round" dance, the bee moves in circles, alternating to the left and to the right. This dance is apparently used by the bees to signal that the cache of food is nearby. When the food source is farther away, the bee dances in a "wagging" fashion, moving in a straight line while wagging its abdomen from side to side and then returning to its starting point. The straight line in this dance points in the direction of the food source, the energy level of the dance indicates how rich the food source is, and the tempo provides information about its distance from the hive.

Despite their noteworthiness, such examples of signaling are not deliberate in the human sense of that word. They are instinctual, even though they sometimes do not appear to us to be so. A classic example of how easily we are duped by our own perceptions of animal signaling is the well-documented case of Clever Hans. Clever Hans was a world-famous German "talking horse" who lived at the turn of the twentieth century. He appeared to understand human language and communicate human answers to questions by tapping the alphabet with his front hoof—one tap for *A*, two taps for *B*, and so on. A panel of scientists ruled out deception by the horse's owner. The horse, it was claimed, could talk! Clever Hans was awarded honors and proclaimed an important scientific discovery. Eventually, however, an astute member of the committee of scientists who had examined the horse, the Dutch psychologist Oskar Pfungst, discovered that Clever Hans could not talk without *observing* his questioners. The horse decoded signals that humans transmit and over which they have no conscious control. Clever Hans sensed when to tap his hoof and when not to tap it in response to inadvertent cues from his human handler, who would visibly relax when the horse had tapped the proper number of times. To show this, Pfungst simply blindfolded Clever Hans who, as a consequence, ceased to be so clever. The "Clever Hans phenomenon," as it has come to be known in the annals of psychology, has been demonstrated with other animals—for instance, a dog will bark in response to inadvertent human signals.

Many human signals are also instinctual. Psychological studies have shown, for instance, that men are sexually attracted to women with large pupils, which signal strong sexual interest, and make a female look younger. This might explain the vogue in central Europe during the 1920s and 1930s of women using a pupil-dilating crystalline alkaloid eye-drop liquid derived

from the drug known popularly as *belladonna* ("beautiful woman" in Italian) as a cosmetic to enhance facial appearance. But human beings also have the ability to send out signals consciously and intentionally. A look or tilt of the head can be used to indicate to someone the presence in the room of a certain person; a wink of the eye can be used to communicate the need to maintain secrecy or sexual interest; and so on. Human signaling is a blend of the forces coming from nature and nurture, a kind of amalgamation of the brain's instinctual limbic system and its more reflective neocortex.

Indexes, Icons, and Symbols

The signs that humans make are essentially abstractions that allow them to carry the world "around in their heads," because they permit the recall of the things, beings, events, feelings to which they refer, even if these are displaced in space and time, that is, not physically present for people to observe and perceive. This "displacement property" of signs has endowed the human species with the remarkable capacity to think about the world beyond the realm of instinctual responses to stimuli to which most other species are constrained, and thus to reflect upon it at any time or in any context whatsoever.

Consider, for instance, the action of pointing a finger at an object such as, say, a ball. This action will invariably direct someone's eye to its location. The pointing index finger is an example of a remarkable type of sign known, logically enough, as an *index*. But there is more to *indexicality* than just finger-pointing. Words such as *here*, *there*, *up*, *down* are also indexical signs. When someone says "I am *here*, you are *there*," they are referring to the relative position of persons to each other. Personal pronouns such as *I*, *you*, *he*, *she*, and *they* are also indexes because they refer to different people in relation to where they are located in the line of sight.

Indexicality can also have highly abstract, imaginary functions. Consider the English expressions *think up*, *think over*, and *think out:* "When did you *think up* that preposterous idea?" "You should *think over* carefully what you just said;" "They must *think out* the entire problem together." Even though these refer to abstract ideas, they do so in ways that suggest imaginary physical location and movement: *think up* elicits a mental image of upward movement, portraying thinking as an object being extracted physically from an imaginary mental terrain; *think over* evokes the image of an internal eye scanning the mind; *think out* suggests the action of taking a deeply buried thought out of the mind so that it can be held up, presumably, for examination. The presence of such expressions in languages across the world suggests something rather intriguing about the

origins of language. The indexical extension of the laws of physical perception to abstract referents suggests an evolutionary link between language and the senses. In Sanskrit the word *maya* ("perceiving form in thought") contains the particle *ma* ("to measure or lay out"); in Italian, the verb *pensarci* ("to think about something, to think over"), is constructed with the indexical particle *ci* ("here, there"); in English, *perceive* derives from Latin *cipio* ("to seize") and *per* ("through"), *examine* from *agmen* ("to pull out from a row") and *ex* ("from"), and *prospect* from Latin *spectus* ("looking") and *pro* ("forward, ahead").

Now, consider the object known as a *ball*. We might wish to communicate what it looks like. To do this, we could use the simple gesture of cupping our hands and moving them as if we were "drawing" the ball in space: that is, moving the left hand in a counterclockwise circular motion and the right one in a clockwise motion at the same time. We could do the same thing on a piece of paper with a pencil in each hand. In both cases, the sign that results is a circular figure resembling the outline of a ball. The figure-sign is known as an *icon.* An icon is a sign that simulates, replicates, reproduces, imitates, or resembles properties of its referent in some way. A portrait, for instance, is contrived as a reproduction of the actual face of a person from the perspective of the artist; a perfume scent is made chemically to simulate a natural aroma or fragrance; words such as *drip*, *bang*, and *screech* are obvious attempts to imitate certain sounds. *Iconicity* (the capacity for iconic representation) is defined as the transformation of perception into representation. If you have a computer, you will see icons displayed on a screen, representing available functions or resources in a visual way. On the doors of public toilets, you will see figures representing males and females also in a visual way. If you send text messages with emoji figures, you are using a new form of iconic language (as we shall see) to convey feelings such as friendliness or criticism. If you listen carefully to Beethoven's *Pastoral* symphony or Rossini's *William Tell Overture*, for instance, you will hear musical icons that are evocative of the sounds found in nature (bird calls, thunder, wind).

Charles Peirce saw iconicity as the primary, or default, way of representing the objects of the world and the thoughts of the mind, precisely because it is tied to sensory perception. This is why its handiwork shows up in prehistoric etchings, small sculptures, and relief carvings of animals and female figures found in caves throughout Europe that go back some thirty thousand years. The appearance of such art is probably the end result of something that is not much different from the kind of hand gesture made to represent the ball described previously. With some cutting, sculpting, or drawing instrument in one's hands, it would be a fairly straightforward task to transfer the imaginary picture of the ball made through gesture onto some surface, using the same

kinds of movements. Indeed, this is arguably what may have happened in human prehistory. The hand movements used to make those early works of art became more abbreviated later. At that point, figures became more condensed and abstract, leading to the invention of picture writing. Archaeological research suggests, in fact, that the origins of writing lie in elemental shapes that were used in our prehistory—much like the molds that figurine and coin-makers use today. Only later did they take on more abstract meanings.[5]

The persistence of gesture in human communication is a residue of what can be called an "ancient iconicity"—the use of the hands to draw, make manual signs, and so on. Although vocal language is a primary mode of communication, the evolutionary link between speech and gesture is still clearly noticeable. The linguist David McNeill has shown that when people speak they gesture unconsciously, literally "drawing" the concepts they are conveying orally.[6] For instance, when people talk of "large" things, they typically cup their hands moving them outward in imitation of a swelling motion. When they talk of "small" things, they typically cup their hands moving them inward, mimicking a shrinking motion. McNeill's research suggests that, although vocal language has become a dominant form of communication in humans, the use of the hands has not vanished, but remains a functional semiotic subsystem. However, the story of gesture as a servant of vocal communication is incomplete. Indeed, gesture persists today as the default form of communication when an interaction is otherwise impossible. This happens typically when two people speak different languages. Of course, in individuals with impaired vocal and hearing organs, gesture constitutes the primary mode of communication.

The innate propensity for iconicity is evident in children. The ability to draw the outlines of rudimentary figures emerges approximately at the same time as the first words. If a drawing instrument is put in a child's hand at this point in life, they will instinctively make random scribbles on a surface. As time passes, the scribbling becomes more and more controlled; shapes become suggestive of undeveloped figures that, with adult prompting, are soon labeled in some way (as "suns," "faces," and so on). At first, children do not appear to draw anything in particular, but instead spontaneously produce forms, which become refined through practice into precise, repeatable shapes. They draw for the pleasure of it, without larger or more explicit associations of meaning. Drawing in early childhood is, in effect, an example of "art for art's sake."

In a generic sense, all signs are *symbols*. Consider the ball again. The easiest and most efficient way to refer to the object in question is to use the word *ball*. But this can be done only if one knows the English language. The word *ball* is, in fact, a symbol that stands for a referent in a conventional way and which,

therefore, must be learned in context. Words, in general, are symbols. But any signifier—an object, a sound, a figure—can be used symbolically. A cross can symbolize the concept "Christianity," a "V" configuration made with the index and middle fingers can symbolize the concept "peace," and so on. Symbolism may also be the end product of a previous semiotic process (indexical or iconic). Take, for instance, a word such as *flow* (mentioned in the previous chapter). It probably was coined iconically, because the sounds that comprise it suggest an attempt to represent the sound made by moving water. Indeed, a word made with other kinds of sounds would seem, intuitively, to be inappropriate for referring to moving water (as we saw)—*klop*, *twing*, *yoot,* for example, do not seem suitable; *flow* does. Over time, the word has become detached from its sonority.

As Peirce argued, signs are typically amalgams of iconic, indexical, and symbolic modes of thinking. Take, as an example, the common traffic sign for a crossroads. The cross figure on this sign is simultaneously iconic, symbolic, and indexical. It is iconic because its form visually mirrors the outline of a crossing. However, since the cross figure could be used to represent a church in other contexts (with minor changes to its shape), it is also conventional insofar as we need to know that it has been chosen to refer specifically to a crossing. Finally, the sign is an index because when it is placed near a railway crossing it indicates that we are about to reach it. In parallel ways, most signs are amalgams, and will be interpreted as more or less iconic, indexical, or symbolic, depending on their uses, their forms, and their purposes.

Nowhere has the use of symbols borne more remarkable fruits than in mathematics and science. Mathematical symbols have given us a unique opportunity to represent the physical world in abstract (displaced) ways, and then experiment with the world in a purely intellectual and imaginary fashion. The results of this mental experimentation can then be redirected to the real world to see what they yield. Often, this leads to real discoveries about that world. Symbolic reasoning in such areas of human thought carries the burden over trial and error. One of the early impressive examples of what this type of reasoning can achieve is the calculation of the earth's circumference by the Greek astronomer Eratosthenes (275–194 BCE). Standing during the summer solstice at Alexandria, and knowing that it was due north of the city of Syene, with the distance between the two cities being five hundred miles, Eratosthenes used an ingenious method for measuring the earth's circumference—without having physically to do so. At the summer solstice he knew, as an astronomer, that the noon sun was directly overhead at Syene, shining directly down upon it. Thus, he drew a diagram, showing the earth as a circle, labeling the center of the equator and the cities of Alexandria and Syene with other letters and the sun's

rays on it. From this he could use his knowledge of triangles and circles advantageously. Without going into the geometrical details here, Eratosthenes calculated the circumference as 24,000 miles. His calculation of 24,000 miles was, in fact, in close agreement with the modern value of 24,901 miles.

This classic episode in the history of science shows how powerful symbolic representation is. Symbolic texts such as diagrams can replace physical intervention, allowing humans to model the world in abstract ways and then discover real properties of that world. But it must not be forgotten that the reason why diagrams such as the one by Eratosthenes produce the results that they do is because they are extrapolations of experiences and observations. The original meaning of the term *geometry* is "measuring the earth," and this is, in fact, an accurate description of what the early geometers did: they measured the size of fields and laid out accurate right angles for the corners of buildings. This type of empirical geometry, which flourished in ancient Egypt, Sumer, and Babylon, was refined and systematized by the Greeks. It was in the sixth century BCE that the Greek mathematician Pythagoras (c. 580–c. 500 BCE) laid the cornerstone of scientific reasoning by showing that the various measurements made by geometers held a hidden pattern in them. When he tied three pieces of string or rope together to form a right-angled triangle the square on the hypotenuse of the triangle was always equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides. Pythagoras' great achievement was essentially to demonstrate logically that this pattern could be symbolized in a generic way.

Names

There is one kind of sign that merits particular consideration, as Sebeok also argued—the *name*, a sign that stands for a person, place, or by connotative extension, a brand, an animal, a tropical storm, and so on. Names are identity signs. In fact, it is impossible to think of a human being without a name—if an individual is not given a name by their family, then society steps in to do so. Names define the human person in more ways than one. This is why children tend to become rather upset when someone calls them by a name other than their birth name, or else makes fun of that name.

The personal name, known technically as an *anthroponym*, constitutes a truly significant part of being human. Throughout the world newly born children are not considered *persons* until they are given a name. In Inuit cultures a person is perceived as having a body, a soul, and a name; and is not seen to be complete without all three. This is true, to varying degrees, in all cultures. A few decades ago, a British television program, *The Prisoner*, played on this theme. It portrayed a totalitarian world in which people were assigned

numbers instead of names—Number 1, Number 2, and so on—so that they could be made to conform more submissively and to become more controllable. The use of numbers to identify prisoners and slaves throughout history has constituted an act designed to negate the humanity or the existence of certain people. *The Prisoner* was, in essence, a portrayal of the struggle that humans feel to discover the meaning of self.

Some names are derived from religious traditions (*John*, *Mary*, *Abraham*, *Sarah*); others from the names of the months (*April*, *June*), precious stones (*Ruby*, *Pearl*), popular personalities (*Elvis*, *Britney*), flowers (*Rose*, *Violet*), places (*Georgia*), and legendary figures (*Diana*, *Alexander*). American society permits all kinds of names, but in some countries there are approved lists of names that must be given to children if they are to be legally recognized. In some religious cultures, children must be given an appropriate religious name before they will be issued a birth certificate.

One name is not sufficient to identify and keep individuals distinct. Historically, *surnames*—literally "names on top of names"—became necessary when name duplications in expanding urbanized societies made it difficult to differentiate among individuals. Surnaming accomplished this typically by representing individuals with reference to their place of origin, occupation, or descendancy. In England, for example, a person living near or at a place where apple trees grew could easily have been described, say, as *John* "where-the-apples-grow," hence, *John Appleby* (for short). Regional or habitation surnames, such as *Wood*, *Moore*, *Church*, or *Hill* are products of the same kind of naming process. Surnames denoting an occupation are *Chapman* (merchant or trader), *Miller*, and *Baker*. Parentage surnames in Scotland or Ireland are often indicated by prefixes such as *Mac*, *Mc*—*McTavish*, *McManus*, and so on—or in England by suffixes such as *son*—*Johnson*, *Harrison*, and *Maryson* (son of John, son of Harry, son of Mary). Compound surnames are also used in some countries where retaining both family names is the custom. Thus, in Spain, *Juan* the son of *Manuel Chávez* and *Juanita Fernández* would be named *Juan Chávez (y) Fernández*. The surname is also an index of ethnicity, since it reveals to which family, society, or culture the individual probably belongs—the surname *Smith* indicates that the person is likely of Anglo-American heritage, *Bellini* Italian, *Lamontaigne* French, and so on.

Mafia Nicknames

The story of naming does not stop at surnames. People invent *nicknames*, for instance, to emphasize a physical characteristic (*Lefty*) or a personality trait (*Cranky*), and *pseudonyms* (false names) to conceal sex (*George Sand,* pseudonym

of Amandine Aurore Lucie Dupin), the past (*O. Henry*, pseudonym of William Sydney Porter), or simply a personal whim (*Mark Twain*, a Mississippi River phrase meaning "two fathoms deep," pseudonym of Samuel Clemens). Some pseudonyms have become better known than the real names, as in the case of *Mark Twain* or *Lewis Carroll*, whose real name was Charles Dodgson.

Nicknames are especially powerful personal brands in organized criminal gangs. They are part of how gangsters define themselves, alluding to something in a gangster's character, appearance, or background that is considered important. Lucky Luciano, born Salvatore Lucania, was called "Lucky" because of the large scars around his neck that permanently recorded his fortunate escape from death after being slashed and left dead by criminal rivals. "Scarface" was the nickname given to Al Capone because he too was involved in a fight that left him with three noticeable scars on his face. Mafiosi have been long aware of the brand value of names. Frank Costello, known as the "Prime Minister" of Cosa Nostra in the 1930s and 1940s in the United States, was quoted by *Time* magazine as confirming this as follows[7]:

> I'm like Coca-Cola. There are lots of drinks as good as Coca-Cola. Pepsi-Cola is a good drink. But Pepsi-Cola never got the advertising Coca-Cola got. I'm not Pepsi-Cola. I'm Coca-Cola because I got so much advertising.

A gangster is semiotically a nobody until he is given a nickname. As Nicaso and Lemothe aptly observe, all gangsters worth their criminal salt have nicknames[8]:

> Those who are brought into the formal underworld may have had nicknames in their former lives; however, when initiated they're given new names or allowed to choose one. Some names describe a physical characteristic—Vyacheslav Ivankov, for example, was called Yaponchik because of the Asiatic cast to his eyes. Others might be for a thief's attitude: Tank or Dashing. A home invader might be called Madhouse because of his single-minded wrecking of a victim's house.

Many Mafia nicknames are essentially character profiles, constituting a form of antonomasia, or the substitution of an epithet or title for a proper name. Because of its connotative power, in some cases it is a signifier of self-importance and braggadocio. Many criminals try to live up to their names, perhaps fulfilling the omen present in them. An example is the Sicilian Michele "The Cobra" Cavataio, a brutal killer who got his nickname from his deceitfulness and the fact the he carried a Colt Cobra revolver. He acted and lived his life as a snake might, sneakily yet viciously. Other nicknames of famous Mafiosi that show how they are intended to bring out some feature of the Mafioso's character, appearance, or personality are as follows[9]:

- Vincent “Chin” Gigante (who had a prominent chin)
- Richard “Shellackhead” Cantarella (from his hair pomade)
- Vincent “Vinny Gorgeous” Basciano (who always dressed in dapper clothes and slicked his hair in style)
- Earl “Squint” Coralluzzo (because he squinted a lot)
- Anthony “Fat Tony” Salerno (for his corpulent body)
- Thomas “Tough Tommy” Contaldo (because of his brutality)
- Salvatore “Sammy the Bull” Gravano (who had a neck like a bull and was a capable fighter)
- Ettore “Killer” Coco (for his ruthlessness)
- Thomas “Tommy Karate” Pitera (because he used martial arts in his vicious killing sprees)

Interestingly, some names have an ironic tinge to them, describing some weakness, such as Earl “Squint” Coralluzzo (mentioned previously) and Carmine “Papa Smurf” Franco. It is not clear how Franco got his nickname. But photographs show a grandfatherly looking man and seemingly wise like the cartoon character Papa Smurf. Forensic linguists and other crime experts have found that the nickname is given early in a criminal’s career. Interestingly, in 2011 as more than one hundred mobsters were rounded up by American authorities, nicknames such as Vinny “Carwash,” Tony “Bagels,” and Junior “Lollipops” stood out ludicrously.

Culture and Names

People create anthroponyms for things other than human beings. Throughout the world, they give names to deities, vehicles (ships, boats), and geographical spaces and formations—countries, states, islands, rivers, streets, houses, fields, mountains, valleys—known technically as *toponyms*. Toponyms may have historical significance (*Washington*, a city named after the first president of the United States), religious significance (*Santa Cruz* means “holy cross”), or some other symbolic value. Some are simply descriptive: *Honolulu* means “safe harbor,” *Dover* “water,” *Doncaster* “camp on the Don.” A rough estimate is that 3.5 million place names exist in the United States alone, one for each square mile. Many of these reflect Native American influence (*Niagara*, *Potomac*, *Tennessee*). Others are of various origins: Spanish (*Florida*, *Santa Fe*), French (*Lake Champlain*, *Baton Rouge*), Dutch (*Brooklyn*, *Harlem*), Russian (*Kotzebu*e, *Tolstoi Point*), and so on. Nations typically have regulatory agencies that supervise geographical naming. In the United States, the agency is the Board on Geographic Names of the Department of the Interior.

Naming has also been applied to identify products (*brand names*), to characterize teams (*New York Yankees*, *Dallas Cowboys*), to refer to tropical storms (*Hazel*, *Harry*, *Katrina*, *Irma*, *Maria*), and so on. Aware that a product with a name has a more personal quality to it, marketing and advertising people pay close attention to the choice of a brand name. The intentional creation of a name for a product engenders a personality for that product that is meant to appeal to specific consumers. Sometimes the brand name becomes so well known that it is used to represent the whole category of products: examples are *Scotch tape* for adhesive tape, *Skidoo* for snowmobile, and *Kleenex* for facial tissue. The names given to cosmetics and beauty products are typically created to elicit desirable connotations such as natural beauty (*Moondrops*, *Natural Wonder*, *Rainflower*, *Sunsilk*, *Skin Dew*), scientific authority (*Eterna 27*, *Clinique*, *Endocil*, *Equalia*), gender qualities (*Brut*, *Cossak*, *Denim*, *Aramis*, *Devin*), and many more.[10]

Traditionally, names given to children are part of sacred culture—giving a child the name of an ancestor is thought to bestow upon that child the ancestor's spirit, protection, and thus guarantee familial continuity and tradition. This spiritual dimension is the reason why name-giving ceremonies are found throughout the world, many of which are linked to religious rites. The Ancient Egyptians believed that if an individual's name was forgotten on earth, the deceased would have to undergo a second death. To avoid this danger, names were written multiple times on walls, tombs, and papyri. Political rulers would often erase the names of previous monarchs as a means of rewriting history in their favor. In Hebrew culture, the ancient art of *gematria* was based on the belief that the letters of any name could be interpreted as digits and rearranged to form a number that contained secret messages encoded in it. The Romans, too, thought that names were prophetic, claiming in one of their proverbs that *nomen est omen*—a "name is an omen." Would the Roman view explain names such as Cecil Fielder who was a fielder in baseball, Rollie Fingers who was a pitcher, William Wordsworth who was a poet, Francine Prose who was a novelist, and Mickey Bass who was a musician? Perhaps such occurrences simply indicate that some people are inspired subliminally by their names to gravitate towards occupations suggested by them. The Puritans also believed that one's name was a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is why they commonly chose a name like *Obedience*, hoping that the child would exemplify the virtue of obedience. In a 2002 study, Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones found that individuals were more likely to choose jobs, careers, and professions with names that were similar to their own names.[11] Similarly, in 2010, Abel and Kruger found that doctors and lawyers were more likely to have surnames that referred to their professions: people with the surname *Doctor* were more likely to be doctors than lawyers, and those with the surname *Lawyer* were

more likely to be actual lawyers.[12] Frank Nuessel, a professor of linguistics at the University of Louisville, has coined the tongue-in-cheek term *aptonym* to refer to names that mirror the name-holder's profession, although he claims that aptonyms are more coincidental than psychologically motivated.[13]

We cannot help but wonder, at an intuitive level, whether we would have turned out differently if our names had been different. I understand that my mother wanted to name me *Raul*. Why would an Italian mother want to give her only child (as it turned out) such an exotic sounding name? Precisely for that reason. She used to read what are now called Harlequin romances and one of the characters in them was a dashing, debonair, intelligent, and charming "Lawrence of Arabia" personage named Raul. I suppose she wanted to pass on those characteristics to me through the name.

Fortunately or not, I ended up being named *Marcello*. My mother must have had a last-minute qualm of conscience, getting the idea to call me Marcello from the name of the hospital in which I was born. I grew up in Toronto. I knew very little English because that was the era before television, the great teacher of colloquial real-life language. Interaction with English-speaking childhood peers was also very limited. It was in elementary school in the early 1950s that I first received full exposure to English. I remember being completely lost at first, since I simply could not follow what was being said in the classroom. It was in school that my peers started calling me *Marshmallow*. It was not an offensive nickname, at least not in my perception. First, my name Marcello was not as easy to pronounce. Except for a few who knew Italian, most of the children in the class were English-speaking. Second, I had very blond hair and, I guess, the name fit rather nicely with my appearance. I believe it was a teacher who started calling me Marcel. As I became accustomed to this name at school, I started to like it, for it separated me from my home persona and brought me closer linguistically to the other children. I had developed, in effect, a dual identity—one for the home and extended Italian community consisting of Italian-speaking aunts, uncles, cousins, and the like, and one for the outside English-speaking world of school and peers. My new name mirrored the dualism of immigrant life in that era perfectly. To this day, people ask me whether I am French. And I continue to think that it is socially powerful to be able to portray different personas through the name.

Given their association with cultural identity, naming trends tend to be remarkably stable in most societies. According to the United States' Social Security Administration, in 2015 the top ten names for boys and for girls are essentially the same ones given in the 1800s: boys (*Noah*, *Liam*, *Mason*, *Jacob*, *William*, *Ethan*, *James*, *Alexander*, *Michael*, *Benjamin*); girls (*Emma*, *Olivia*, *Sophia*, *Ava*, *Isabella*, *Mia*, *Abigail*, *Emily*, *Charlotte*, *Harper*).

Structure, Codes, and Perception

Recall Ted's question at the beginning of this chapter regarding the meaning of the design of the pin Cheryl was wearing (a Chinese water spirit). Ted's question was motivated by lack of knowledge of the design's physical form or *structure*. For any sign to bear meaning, it must have some recognizable differential physical feature that individuals recognize as part of the sign's meaning. Consider words such as *pin*, *bin*, *fun*, *run*, *duck*, and *luck*. As a speaker of English, you will instantly recognize these as separate, meaning-bearing words because you perceive the initial sounds of successive pairs (*p* versus *b* in *pin-bin*, *f* versus *r* in *fun-run*, *d* versus *l* in *duck-luck*) as differential. In technical terms, this feature in the makeup of these words is known as *paradigmatic structure*. We are intuitively aware of paradigmatic structure, even though we may never have consciously reflected upon it. It is the reason why, for example, we can easily recognize the signs {a, b, c, d, e, …} and {1, 2, 3, 4, 5, …} as pertaining to separate codes (the Roman alphabet code, the positive integer code) and as distinct elements of each code.

Words such as *pin* and *bin* are not only recognizable as distinct words through their different initial sounds, but also by the way in which their constituent sounds have been put together. In technical terms, this combination feature in the makeup of signs is called *syntagmatic structure*. For any sign to bear meaning, it must not only have some physical feature in its make-up that keeps it distinct, but also be constructed according to some recognizable pattern. The word *pin* is a legitimate English word because of the way in which its sounds, $p + i + n$, have been linked. On the other hand, the form *pfin* is not recognizable as an English word because the sequence $p + f + i + n$ violates English combinatory (*syntagmatic*) structure. So, too, the integers {1, 2, 3, 4, 5,…} can be combined to form numerals larger than nine according to specified rules of horizontal combination—for example, 12, 345, 9870; but they cannot be put one under the other *vertically*, because we do not form numerals in that way (at least commonly). Overall, paradigmatic structure involves differentiation and selection, syntagmatic structure combination and arrangement.

The notion of *structure* is a crucial one. So, it is worth mulling it over with an analogy to solitaire. Solitaire is a card game played by one person. In all versions, the cards are dealt to the table according to a plan or pattern, known as a *tableau*. The game develops out of the undealt portion of the deck, known as the *hand*, which is turned up one card or more at a time. The object of most solitaire games is to build columns of cards in ascending or descending order.

The rules of play may require that these be built up in one suit or color, in alternating suits or colors, in some number-value arrangement, or in some other way. Playing solitaire, therefore, entails both the ability to recognize the distinctive features of cards (suit and number value) and knowledge of how to put the individual cards together in vertical columns. In other words, solitaire is a code in which the various cards (signs) are distinguishable paradigmatically from each other by suit, color, and number, and placeable syntagmatically into columns in certain specified ways.

The psychological importance of differential structure was noticed first by the psychologists Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) and Edward B. Titchener (1867–1927). Saussure too saw it as the psychological basis of how we recognize signs. He called it *différence*. A little later it came to be called *opposition*. Traditionally, the technique of opposition has been carried out in a binary fashion—that is, it is performed on two forms (for example, *cat* versus *rat*) at a time. Because binary opposition was used extensively and unreflectively both within semiotics and linguistics in the first part of the twentieth century, to the virtual exclusion of any other kind of analytical technique, it was bound to come under criticism. The late French semiotician Greimas (mentioned in the previous chapter) introduced the notion of the "semiotic square" that, he claimed, was more suitable as an opposition technique because it involved two sets of oppositions forming a square arrangement. Given a sign (for example, the word *rich*), we determine its overall meaning by opposing it to its contradictory (*not rich)*, its contrary (*poor*), and its contradictory (*not poor*).

Whether oppositions are binary, four-part, or n-part, the fact remains that we seem to respond to them instinctually. They surface, in fact, in philosophical, religious, and narrative systems across the world. Some of these are:

Masculine	versus	Feminine
Light	versus	Dark
Good	versus	Evil
Self	versus	Other
Subject	versus	Object
Sacred	versus	Profane
Body	versus	Mind
Nature	versus	History/Nurture
Positive	versus	Negative
Heaven	versus	Hell
Beginning	versus	End
Love	versus	Hate
Pleasure	versus	Pain
Existence	versus	Nothingness
Left	versus	Right

The oppositional view of human representational systems assumes that meaning is something that cannot be determined in the absolute, but only by opposing concepts to each other.

To conclude this rudimentary discussion on sign theory, it is relevant to emphasize that signs are both restrictive and liberating. They are restrictive in that they impose upon individuals born and reared in a specific culture an already-fixed system of meanings; that system will largely determine how they will come to understand and even perceive the world around them.

Paradoxically, the very same perception-structuring system of signs in which we are reared is also liberating because it provides the means by which we can seek new meanings. The enduring artistic, religious, mathematical, scientific, and philosophical texts to which people are exposed in different cultural contexts open up the mind, stimulate creativity, and engender freedom of thought. As a result, human beings tend to become restless for new meanings, new messages. For this reason, sign systems and their meanings are constantly being modified by new generations of artists, scientists, philosophers, thinkers, and others to meet new demands, new ideas, and new challenges. Therein lies the semiotic essence of the human condition.

Notes

1. C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The meaning of meaning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1923).
2. C. E. Osgood, G. J. Suci, and P. H. Tannenbaum, *The measurement of meaning* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1957).
3. Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1933).
4. Thomas A. Sebeok, *Signs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).
5. See D. Schmandt-Besserat, "The earliest precursor of writing," *Scientific American* 238 (1978): 50–9.
6. David McNeill, *Hand and mind: What gestures reveal about thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). In his follow-up book, *Gesture & thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), McNeill argues convincingly that gesturing is not a mere accessory to speech, but rather often a source of speech and thought.
7. Cited in *Time*, November 28, 1949, p. 16.
8. Antonio Nicaso and Lee Lamothe, *Angels, mobsters & narco-terrorists: The rising menace of global criminal empires* (Mississauga: John Wiley Canada, 2005), 140.
9. From Marcel Danesi, *Signs of crime: Introducing forensic semiotics* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2013).

10. The interested reader can find a detailed treatment of the history of brand naming in Marcel Danesi, *Brands* (London: Routledge, 2006).
11. B. W. Pelham, M. C. Mirenberg, and J. T. Jones, "Why Susie sells seashells by the seashore: Implicit egotism and major life decisions," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82 (2002): 469–87.
12. E. L. Abel, and M. L. Kruger, "Athletes, doctors, and lawyers with first names beginning with 'D' die sooner," *Death Studies* 34 (2012): 71–81.
13. Cited in R. E. Silverman and J. Light, "Dr. Chopp, meet congressman Weiner: What's in a name?" *The Wall Street Journal* (2011): http://online.wsj.com/article.

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3

Makeup: Why Do We Put It On?

God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another.
—William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

As the onerous job of introducing the more technical matters of semiotics is behind us, it is time to get back to other interesting parts of Martha's recording. Incidentally, the smoking ritual, which was the focus of the first chapter, is just one of many examples of coded behaviors, known as *nonverbal*. Anthropological and psychological research has established that we transmit most of our messages, not through words, but through the body. We have the capacity to produce up to seven hundred thousand distinct physical (nonverbal) signs, of which one thousand are different bodily postures, five thousand are hand gestures, and two hundred and fifty thousand are facial expressions.[1] Psychologist Paul Ekman has even linked particular emotions to specific facial signals and expressions—eyebrow position, eye shape, mouth shape, nostril size, and so on.[2] When someone is telling a lie, for instance, the pupils tend to contract, one eyebrow may lift, and the corner of the mouth may twitch. To cover up the lie, the person might use strategies such as smiling, nodding, and winking, which seem to be incongruent with the other facial patterns.[3] Given such instinctive signaling, Ekman has claimed that it is possible to write a "grammar of the face" that shows less cross-cultural variation than do the grammars of verbal languages.

Ekman has classified basic facial expressions into thousands of microexpressions in what he calls the Facial Action Coding System (FACS). He claims that FACS can help people detect deception with up to 76 percent accuracy. FACS has been adopted as a screening tool in various airports and as a

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M. Danesi, *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other* Interesting *Things*,
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detection device in some police interrogations. However, the use of FACS raises ethical problems. Lie detection is not a precise science, for the simple reason that people can fool the lie detection technology with good old human cleverness. As Ken Adler has shown in his fascinating book, *The Lie Detectors*, throughout history people have employed all kinds of strategies to help them detect liars, from the ancient Chinese practice of making a suspect chew rice (a dry mouth supposedly exposing a liar) to the belief in India that lying makes the toes curl up.[4] In effect, Adler argues, knowledge of detecting lying scientifically remains elusive.

Conveying emotional states through ear, mouth, lip and other bodily movements is a trait that cuts across species. Dogs prick up their ears during an alert mode; lynxes twitch them in conflicted or agitated states; cats flatten them when they are in a protective mode. Many animals constrict their mouths and bare their teeth to convey hostility. Following intense sexual sniffing, various primates expose their upper teeth, making themselves appear to be overwhelmed by their sexual urges. Many of our own emotional states are conveyed in similar ways: when we bare our teeth, for instance, we invariably signal aggressiveness and hostility.

However, in the human species, the face is not only a source for the display of emotions, but also a source for defining and presenting the self in social situations. Making up the face with cosmetics, removing (or growing) facial hair, and wearing decorative trinkets such as earrings and nose rings is, in fact, designed to do something that is entirely alien to other species—to communicate who we are to others or what we want them to think we are. Facial decoration and specific kinds of clothing can announce social class or status, as is the case in India where a caste mark on a person's face lets others know their place in society; it can mark the coming-of-age; it can function to enhance attractiveness in courtship; and the list could go on and on. Makeup is clear evidence that we have cut the link to our purely instinctive past, and transformed the face into something more than a carrier and conveyor of spontaneous emotional states.

Does Martha's video reveal anything pertinent to the theme of makeup? It shows that Ted, our male protagonist, has shaved himself and has slicked down his hair with lotion for the occasion. It also shows that Cheryl, our female protagonist, has put on red lipstick, mascara, facial powder, and long pendant earrings. Martha has also made some interesting notes for us, which are relevant to the matter at hand. Her notes inform us that Ted had doused himself with musk cologne and Cheryl had done the same with sweet lavender perfume. Given our previous analysis of the restaurant scene as a courtship display, it should come as no surprise that the semiotician would see

cosmetics, lotions, and perfumes as elements of a grooming code, which, like the smoking code, is gender-specific and, thus, designed to enhance the sexual attractiveness of the actors in the performance. To the semiotician, the signs that comprise the grooming code provide further insights into human courtship, and more generally, into human meaning-making.

Making Up the Face

Psychologists have found that, at puberty, an individual will respond sexually or amorously only to particular kinds of faces. The source of this response is hardly biologically programmed, but appears to be based on the kinds of experiences the individual had during childhood. At puberty, these generate an unconscious image of what the ideal love-mate's appearance should be like, becoming quite specific as to details of physiognomy, facial shape, eye structure, and so on. This finding (if really true) only confirms what people have known intuitively since time immemorial. This is why tribal cultures have always marked the coming-of-age with elaborate rites involving cosmetic decorations designed to highlight the face as the primary focus of romantic attention. For instance, the pubescent males of the Secoya people who live along the Río Santa Naría in Peru insert a sprig of grass through their nasal septum for the traditional coming-of-age rite. This allows them to keep their faces "poised" to exude confidence and masculinity. This "sexualizing" of the face has parallels in all cultures. Even in contemporary urban cultures, where formal society-wide puberty rites are lacking, adolescent females, for example, sexualize their look, typically, by putting on lipstick, mascara, and earrings. Males sexualize it in analogous ways, by growing a mustache or beard, letting their hair grow long, and sometimes putting on earrings.

As the archaeological record confirms, cosmetics have a long and unbroken connection with maturation and courtship customs that goes back considerably in time. As anthropologist Helen Fisher has shown, even in the prehistoric Cro-Magnon era, during the last glacial age, humans spent hours decorating themselves, plaiting their hair, donning garlands of flowers, wearing bracelets and pendants, and decorating their tunics and leggings with multi-colored fur, feathers, and beads.[5] Our contemporary cosmetic and fashion accouterments are really no more than modern versions of such ancient forms of bodily decorations intended for romance. The colors used in lipsticks and eye decorations, as well as the rings people put on their ears, nose, lips, eyebrows, and even tongue are signifiers in a *grooming code* that has ancient origins.

Unguent jars, some of which were scented, have been found in Egyptian tombs of the First Dynasty (c. 3100–2907 BCE). These were probably used by both men and women to keep their skin supple and unwrinkled in the dry heat of Egypt. The women also developed the art of eye beautification by applying dark-green color to the under lid and by blackening the lashes and the upper lid with *kohl*, a preparation made from antimony and soot. In the first century CE, kohl came to be widely used by the Romans for darkening eyelashes and eyelids. They also employed rouge, depilatories, chalk for whitening the complexion, and pumice for cleaning the teeth. Similar practices are found across the world and across time. In effect, there has never been a culture without cosmetics used in rituals of courtship and maturation.

The reason why Cheryl wore red lipstick can now be connected to some of the connotations of this color sign (previous chapter). Red has a long and fascinating cross-cultural history of symbolic meanings—for example, to the Pawnees of North America, painting one's body red is the symbolic embodiment of life associated with the color of blood; in languages of the Slavic family red signifies "living, beautiful"; and so on.[6] Red is also highly suggestive of female fertility across many cultures. This is the reason why in advertising (and in erotic pictures and movies) close-ups of female lips, painted red, slightly parted, have a powerful erotic effect on viewers.

Hairstyle

Now, let's consider another aspect of appearance caught on Martha's video—Cheryl's long hair, which contrasts with Ted's short-cut style. Hairstyle has always had social significance. Since prehistoric times, people have cut, braided, and dyed their hair and changed it in various ways as part of grooming and fashion.[7] Members of the Mesopotamian and Persian nobility, for instance, curled, dyed, and plaited their long hair and beards, sometimes adding gold dust or gold and silver ornaments for embellishment. Egyptian men and women shaved their heads to combat the Egyptian heat. Therefore, baldness became a fashion style in its own right. Hebrew men were prohibited by biblical law from cutting their hair or beard, but orthodox women, upon marriage, were expected to crop their hair and wear a wig.

The way people have worn their hair has, in a phrase, always been a sign of beauty, personality, membership in a certain social class, and even physical power. The biblical story of Samson who lost his superhuman strength after having his hair cut by Delilah is repeated in other ancient stories, in which strong heroic men wore long hair, while slaves were forced to shave their heads

to indicate submission and humiliation. A shaved head can also indicate sacrifice and submission of a spiritual nature—Buddhist monks shave their heads for this very reason. In addition, it can convey group allegiance, as exemplified by the shaved heads of punks and other subcultures today. In the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the Christian Church dictated that married women had to cover their heads in public for modesty. Only husbands were allowed to see their wives' hair. Women who had natural red hair tried to color it because they would otherwise be seen as witches. Curling the hair was reserved for the aristocracy. Most noblemen had long, flowing curls. Such hairstyles became despised among the bourgeoisie and the lower classes and groups. The chief opponents of King Charles I during the civil war in England (1642–49) were the Puritans, who were called Roundheads because they cut their hair short, frowning upon the long hairstyles and cosmetic fashions of the aristocracy, which they saw as elements in a degenerate lifestyle.

In the 1920s hairstyle became a form of rebellion against staid puritanical lifestyles and a declaration of sexual independence. Young women wore short hair as part of the so-called Flapper look; young men slicked down their hair with oil in the manner of the movie star Rudolph Valentino. During the 1950s, some teenagers wore a crew cut, a very short hairstyle combed upward to resemble a brush. Others wore their hair long on the sides, and swept back, so that it looked somewhat like a duck's tail. During the 1960s young males copied the haircuts of the Beatles, a British rock music group, who wore long hair that covered the forehead. Long hair was also the style of adolescent females in that era. A number of unisex styles, which were fashionable for both sexes, appeared during the 1960s. The subsequent decades saw hairstyles vary according to emerging forms of fashion and lifestyle, ranging from the bizarre Mohawk hairstyles of punks to the cropped hairstyles of movie stars.

All this comes as no surprise to the semiotician, since hairstyles and cosmetics are sign systems or codes and, thus, interpretable in specific ways according to culture and era. They are part of the material means through which the body is transformed into a language. This is why some people today adopt bizarre nonconformist grooming styles. Aware of their subversive value, they adopt them to make ideological statements, shock others, look tough, or mock the styles of others. Similar to the Puritans, some today condemn the use of cosmetics and the wearing of extravagant hairstyles as symptoms of a narcissistic disease spread by the beauty industry, pop culture, celebrities, and the media working in tandem. Others instead praise them. Kathy Peiss, for instance, has argued that cosmetics have actually been instrumental in liberating women to express themselves sexually on their own terms.[8] The founders of modern-day cosmetic trends were simple women—Elizabeth Arden

(1884–1966), a Canadian, was the daughter of poor tenant farmers; Helena Rubinstein (1870–1965) was born of poor Jewish parents in Poland; and Madam C. J. Walker (1867–1919) was born to former slaves in Louisiana. Although it is true that our media culture often preys on social fears associated with "bad complexions," "aging," and the like, it has at the same time allowed us to assert our right to be openly attractive, not conceal it.

Given the long history of cosmetic makeup and hairstyles, it is now a straightforward matter to understand in semiotic terms why Cheryl wore her hair long (which was the "in" style for women at the time of Martha's recording), put on red lipstick, mascara, and facial powder, while Ted wore short hair (the "in" style for men), shaved himself cleanly, and put on styling lotion to keep his hair in place. Makeup and hairstyling allow prospective romantic partners to highlight their attractiveness through the deployment of the appropriate grooming signifiers. Perfume is part of the grooming code too. This is why Cheryl sprayed on a sweet lavender perfume and Ted a musk cologne. Although the sense of sight has largely replaced the sense of smell for sexual arousal—modern humans are more inclined to respond to erotic images than to bodily scents—the need for olfactory-based fantasizing has not disappeared completely from our evolution. Similar to other animals, humans continue to respond sexually to odors and scents that are emitted by prospective mates. Artificial scents have always been used as effective surrogates for biological scents.

Portraiture

The perception of the face as a signifier of selfhood is borne out by the art of portraiture. Portraits are probes of character and personality. The first ones date from Egypt around 3100 BCE. They were mainly funereal masks, etchings, or sculptures of pharaohs and nobles. The subjects are portrayed in rigid, staring poses, communicating everlasting authority. The ancient Romans also made death masks of ancestors (worn by survivors in funeral processions) that were remarkable in how they captured the uniqueness of their subjects. Early Christian portrait artists had three subjects—Jesus, the Madonna, and the saints. Medieval gospel books included portraits of the gospel authors, shown writing at their desks. During the same era, the portraits of donors became a means of verifying patronage, power, and virtue. The Renaissance marked a turning point in the history of portraiture. In that era artists started to become fascinated by the face of the common person as a sign of human character in all its variable manifestations. Among the portraitists of that period were some

of the greatest visual artists of all time—Sandro Botticelli, Leonardo Da Vinci, Raphael, and Titian. Their portraits explored the "poetry" of the face, seeking to extract the meaning of individual human life from its expressions of sadness, humor, joy, and tragedy.

The focus on individuality that the Renaissance spawned was not a unique historical development of Western culture. In China, murals depicting portraits of common people go back to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). They convey the subject's character not only through facial features, but also through clothing, pose, and gesture. The stone heads made by the Maya peoples, the "laughing clay sculptures" of the Veracruz region in Mexico, the effigy vessels and funerary vases of the Mohican culture, and many other examples of Native American portraiture also display powerful images of individuality.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries photography entered the domain of portraiture. Among the first photographic portraitists, the names of Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813–75), Henry Peach Robinson (1834–1901), Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) and Diane Arbus (1923–71) are often mentioned. Like canvas portraitists, these early photo artists used the camera to capture the poignancy of the faces of common people. Photography is one of the primary ways in which we now create memories. The photographs that adorn our tables, walls, and our mobile phones are, in effect, visual mementos and testimonials of who we are. Photographs capture a fleeting and irretrievable moment in time, extracting it from the flux of change that characterizes human life. Such captured moments have strong appeal because they provide eyewitness evidence, so to speak, that we do indeed exist in some enduring form, at least in the photographic space.

The Selfie and the Simulacrum

The next section of Martha's video reveals something that has become emblematic of the contemporary world in which we all live. In it, we see Cheryl and Ted take a Selfie of themselves and then post it on their Instagram sites. They are engaging in a new self-styled form of portraiture made possible by new technologies—a form that also reveals how perceptions of selfhood, persona, representation, and other semiotic modalities are morphing in the age of the Internet.

Instagram is an online mobile photo- and video-sharing social network founded in 2010, which allows anyone to take pictures and videos and share them on other social media sites and platforms, ever since it was acquired by

Facebook in 2012. The popularity of Instagram is a symptom of living in the world of the "matrix," where the constant barrage of images has taken precedence over reflective words. French scholar Jean Baudrillard put forth the idea of the *simulacrum* in 1983 to describe the effects of modern media on the mind, whereby what is on the other side of a screen (TV or computer) seems more real than real to those who have become accustomed to viewing screens for information and delectation.[9] The 1999 movie, *The Matrix*, treated this theme in an insightful way, before the advent of Web 2.0 technologies. The main protagonist of that movie, Neo, lives "on" and "through" the computer screen. The technical name of the screen is the *matrix*, describing the network of circuits on it. But the same word also meant "womb" in Latin. The movie's transparent subtext is that, with the advent of the digital universe, new generations are now being born through two kinds of wombs—the biological and the technological. The difference between the two has become indistinguishable—it has become a simulacrum.

The Selfie is, in effect, a modern-day form of self-portraiture. Its impact on society has been acknowledged by various sources, including the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, which produced a film series titled *Thinkfluencer* in 2013 that explored the implications of Selfie culture. There was even a short-lived sitcom in 2014 on ABC, titled *Selfie*, which revolved around a woman who was obsessed with gaining fame through the Selfies she posted on Instagram. She ends up discovering, in true cautionary tale tradition, that this whole new trend is meaningless and alienating.

The self-construction of selfhood extends to all new media. Online sites such as Facebook and Twitter, among many others, are virtual locales where users share common interests and interact in a regular way. Entry to a site generally involves constructing a "public profile" of oneself (a summary of one's autobiography and interests) and interacting with individuals, called "Friends," using the online site. Ning has even launched a new kind of hosting service that encourages users to create their own networking sites. The socio-philosophical implications of social networking have been studied from many angles, since they are immense. Some of these will be discussed subsequently. Suffice it to say here that Web 2.0 technologies may have even rewired the brain. Living in a social media universe, we may indeed feel that it is the only option available to us for interacting with others. The triumph of social media lies in the promise to allow human needs to be expressed individualistically, yet connect them communally—hence the paradox. As social media communities become part of larger pathways of a global connected intelligence, a new form of consciousness has emerged, called by Peter Russell a "global brain" already in 1983 and thus long before the advent of social media.[10]

The Internet does indeed seem to function as if it were a nervous system connecting the entire planet. Intelligence in this system is collective, not centralized in any particular person or institution. This means that no one individual can control it; the system organizes itself from the networks and processes of interaction among the components. In other words, we have created the Internet to mirror our brain structure. The hyperlinks among webpages resemble synaptic connections, forming a huge associative network along which information is distributed. The Internet is one huge mirror metaphor, so to speak, connecting domains of all kinds, including social ones allowing for interpersonal information distribution much like the neural networks in the brain, which distribute information in a parallel fashion, along different pathways. There is a danger here, as will be discussed in more detail later on. We might become controlled by the whole system of bots, autonomous programs on a network that can interact with computer systems or users, which may dupe us, like Baudrillard feared, to believe that intelligence and consciousness are independent of the body. This is a warning sign or symptom, which we ignore at our own risk.

Kissing

Another section of Martha's video reveals something rather bizarre, at least as seen from the view of other cultures and children of any culture. In it we see Cheryl and Ted making oscular contact—a form of nonverbal communication we commonly call "kissing." Kissing is one of those things that a semiotician would find highly interesting and relevant to understanding human nature.[11] The particular type of kissing that occurred on the video is called "French kissing"—an erotic form of osculation reserved for intimate amorous relationships. Osculation is not limited to courtship situations. It has other functions and meanings that are found throughout the world, being more important in some cultures and less so in others. The German language has words for thirty kinds of kissing actions, including *nachküssen*, which means "making up for kisses that have not been given." Some languages, on the other hand, have no words whatsoever for such actions.

According to some culture theorists, the erotic kiss may have crystallized in India in 1500 BCE, which is the period when Vedic writings start mentioning people "sniffing" with their mouths and lovers "setting mouth to mouth." In early Christian times the lip kiss was regarded as something spiritual, rather than sexual, representing the exchange of breath between two people, which was thought to contain the soul of a person. This idea was extended to marriage

ceremonies, with the nuptial kiss symbolizing the spiritual union of the bride and groom. In Celtic legend too, the kiss is seen as an exchange of the breath of life.

Archaeological findings suggest that erotic kissing is ancient and widespread. Representations of kissing have been found, for instance, on two thousand-year-old Peruvian pots and vases. Some psychologists argue that the origin of such kissing lies in the need to transfer *sebum*, the substance that lubricates our skin and hair, so that mating partners can achieve a form of chemical bonding. Others believe that we kiss because the lips, tongue, and interior of the mouth are highly sensitive erogenous zones connected to the limbic system, the oldest part of the brain and the source of sexual pleasure. Whatever the case, it is clear that kissing, similar to smoking and grooming, is now part of a code that allows the partners in courtship performances to communicate romantic feelings. Romantic kissing is widespread, but it is not universal. It is not common in many parts of Asia, and is completely unknown in some African societies. In Inuit and Laplander cultures romantic partners are more inclined to rub noses than to kiss (probably to smell each other's skin). Obviously, what is normal osculation behavior in one system of everyday life is seen as bizarre in another.[12]

Humans kiss not just for romance, as mentioned. They do so for a variety of reasons: to greet each other, to show love and affection, and so on. Hand kissing, especially the man kissing the hand of a woman, was once thought to be chivalrous and important in greeting a woman. Athletes kiss trophies, pious people kiss religious books, artifacts and statues, a gambler kisses the dice for luck, and wanderers kiss the soil upon reaching safe ground. The point is that kissing is an important semiotic activity that invariably elicits reactions and interpretations of various kinds. Some kisses have become famous, ranging from Judas' kiss of betrayal to Madonna's provocative kiss of Britney Spears on television. The fabled kisses of star-crossed lovers are part of cultural lore—Sleeping Beauty and the Prince, Snow White, Paolo and Francesca, Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, and so on. Many movies are memorable because of a particular kiss exchanged between two lovers—for example, *Gone with the Wind* (Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh), *From Here to Eternity* (Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr), *Rear Window* (James Stewart and Grace Kelly), *An Officer and a Gentleman* (Richard Gere and Debra Winger), and *Titanic* (Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet), to mention a few. Kissing is also a basic theme in pop love songs—for example, *Kiss Me Big* (Tennessee Ernie Ford), *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* (Jimmie Rodgers), *It's in His Kiss* (Betty Everett). *Kisses of Fire* (ABBA), *Suck My Kiss* (The Red Hot Chili Peppers), and *Kiss from a Rose* (Seal), again among many others.

In art, perhaps no other portrait of a kiss is as famous as the one painted by the Austrian nouveau style artist Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) in 1908 that seems to bring out the delicate romantic and passionate qualities of the kiss at once. As seen through the eyes of a great artist, the kiss becomes a symbol of humanity in all its idiosyncrasies. The kissers blend into each other, becoming a singular body. Kissing is more than sex; it is an expression of intimacy and a sign of how the body and the emotions form an unbroken harmony. Other famous paintings of the kiss are found among the works of Titian, Rubens, Canova, Munch, Schiele, Chagall, Matisse, Toulouse-Lautrec, Rodin, and Hayez. The kiss has become part and parcel of the language of love because it has behind it such a long history of meanings—a history in which it speaks volumes for itself as a sign—perhaps *the* sign—of romantic love.

Eye Contact

In the next segment of her video, Martha has taken a close-up of the faces of our two protagonists, showing them gazing intently and steadily at each other, as if they were in a state of wonder or expectancy. Making eye contact is part of a vast repertoire of facial signals and signs that humans deploy to send out various messages: for example, staring suggests challenge, making eyes flirtation, eyebrow constriction thoughtfulness, and eyebrow elevation surprise. The presence of numerous words to describe the ways we look at each other—*glower*, *gawk*, *glance*, *watch*, *gaze*, *scan*, *peep*, *wink*, *observe*, *peek*, *peer*, *inspect*, *scrutinize*, *ogle*, *gape*, *sneer*, *grimace*, *scowl*, and so on—bears testimony to the fact that we perceive eye contact as extremely meaningful. Looking and being looked at are courtship strategies that depend not only on the directness of the eyeline, but also upon head tilting and facial expression, on the orientation of the body, and on the sex of the gazer.[13] Traditionally, in many cultures it has been the expectation that men are the lookers and women the "looked at." Changes in gender roles since the late 1960s have altered this pattern. Today, the lookers are equally males and females.

Across cultures the length of time involved in making eye contact along with the pattern of contact (looking into the eyes, looking down or up, and so on) convey what kinds of social relationship people have to each other, among other things. Some patterns appear to cut across cultures: for example, staring is typically interpreted as a challenge throughout the world; "making eyes" at someone is normally interpreted as flirtation; narrow eyelids communicate pensiveness, and making the eyebrows come nearer together communicates thoughtfulness; raising the eyebrows conveys surprise. However, even in these

there is culture-specific variation. Southern Europeans will tend to look more into each other's eyes during conversation than will North Americans; in some cultures, males do not look into female eyes unless they are married or are members of the same family. In all cultures, eyes themselves are part of the symbolic order. In some traditions, including the Hindu and Taoist ones, the eyes are identified with the sun (the right eye) and the moon (the left eye). In ancient Greece the eye was perceived to be a symbol with magical powers. This is why the Greeks painted it on the prows of their warships, believing that it had the power to guide them to victory. In ancient Egypt the Eye of Horus was thought to have healing and protective powers. In many cultures there exists the concept of an "evil eye," which is perceived to be a certain kind of stare that is purported to have the power to harm or bewitch someone. The list of symbolic connotations associated with the eye is an infinite one.

In the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* (directed by Stanley Kubrick) the computer named Hal scrutinizes the environment around itself through a menacing "eye lens"; and in *Blade Runner* (directed by Ridley Scott), the eye is presented as the symbol of humanity. The replicants (robots) in the movie are icons of the human form. However, there is one feature that differentiates human anatomy from artificially made anatomies—the eye. Replicants use their mechanical eyes exclusively to see; humans use them as well to show feeling and to understand the world. Aware of the mysterious power of the human eye, the replicants kill their maker by poking out his eyes.

Body Language

The details of skeletal structure distinguishing *Homo sapiens* from its nearest primate relatives—the gorilla, chimpanzee, and orangutan—stem largely from a very early adaptation to a completely erect posture and bipedal (two-legged) striding walk. The uniquely S-shaped spinal column places the center of gravity of the human body directly over the area of support provided by the feet, thus giving stability and balance in the upright position. This biological development is the physical source of signifying postures and poses, and of other bodily schemas of which human beings are capable, all of which come under the rubric of "body language."

In human affairs, the body has always been an issue of high moral, social, and aesthetic significance. In ancient Greece it was glorified as a source of pleasure, while in Rome as the root of moral corruption. Since ancient times, philosophers have debated the nature of the relation of the body to the soul and the mind. The French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes

(1596–1650) even went so far as to suggest that God had created two classes of substance that make up the whole of reality: one was thinking substances, or *minds*, and the other was extended substances, or *bodies*.

Martha's video is replete with instances and displays based on a strategic deployment of body language. Because these are coded culturally, they may appear comical to outsiders. To those who know the code, on the other hand, body language is sensed as crucial in courtship and romance. The study of body language is known technically as *kinesics*, the term used by American researcher Ray L. Birdwhistell (1918–94), who became interested in analyzing the way people interacted by watching films (just like we have been doing in an imaginary way in this book). He noticed that people seemed to transmit information unconsciously through their eye movements, facial expressions, and postures. For this reason, he came to view body language as a critical component of human interaction. His first book on the topic, *Introduction to Kinesics*, was published in 1952.[14] In it, he discussed the role of body schemas and gesture in human communication, claiming that it is possible to write a "kinesic grammar" in the same way that linguists write a verbal grammar. As he put it: "The first premise in developing a notational system for body language is to assume that all movements of the body have meaning. None are accidental."[15] Messages made with body language can give a look and feel to a conversation remembered long after spoken words fade away.

A kinesic analysis of Martha's video shows that the postures and poses that Ted and Cheryl assumed as they were smoking away and looking into each other's eyes are clearly reminiscent of those used by performers and actors. Their body language was part of a courtship display. So, too, are the decorations that are put on the body to enhance interest in it. Not surprisingly, we see a rose tattoo on Cheryl's right shoulder.

Tattooing is one of the most ancient forms of creative body decoration. Cave paintings date it to at least approximately 8000 BCE, but it may go back even farther in time to the Upper Paleolithic era (38,000–10,000 BCE).[16] Almost every culture has practiced tattooing. As early as 2000 BCE, the Egyptians used it to indicate social rank, affiliation, or allegiance. The ancient Greeks and Romans, on the other hand, used tattoos to brand slaves and criminals. Tattoos are a sign of honor in the Marquesas Islands, a group of islands in the South Pacific Ocean; the young women of eastern New Guinea (like Cheryl) see tattoos as signs of beauty; and the list could go on and on. Sailors introduced into Europe the practice of tattooing during the Age of Exploration; it remained a rarely used body art until the middle part of the twentieth century when it gained popularity among disparate groups, including fashion models, youth gangs, and prison inmates. It was propelled into mainstream American culture

in 1981 by the album *Tattoo You* by the Rolling Stones. In contemporary urban culture, tattooing has become mainly fashion statement, used by media icons and common folk alike, with no distinction as to age, gender, or social class. In reaction to its spread, some subcultures, such as goths and punks, have resorted to tattooing in a more extreme and, thus, exclusive form. Goth tattoos extol the occult and the macabre; those of the punks, the bizarre and the weird. They are the equivalents of the body decorations worn by the mockers in ancient carnivals—decorations designed to shock moralistic society.

Objects

Decorating the body to present an appropriate persona involves putting on trinkets and jewelry. Rings, for instance, convey specific types of messages that can be interpreted only in cultural contexts. In some cultures, they are worn to convey things such as educational status (graduation ring), institutional affiliation, marital status, athletic prowess, social status (diamond rings), group affiliation, personal interests, and so on. Some ornaments, such as cross chains, beads, and amulets are worn to convey meanings of a superstitious or occult nature. However, more often than not, the wearing of jewelry has a courtship objective. Traditionally, when a Zulu woman falls in love, she is expected to make a beaded necklace resembling a close-fitting collar with a flat panel attached, which she then gives to her suitor. Depending on the combination of colors and bead pattern, the necklace will convey a specific type of romantic message: a combination of pink and white beads in a certain pattern would convey the message "You are poor, but I love you just the same."[17]

All cultures share the belief that certain objects possess mysterious powers. This belief is the basis of the ancient craft of alchemy, defined as the art of transmuting materials that lasted well into the medieval ages and continues to have some adherents to this day. The principal activity of the alchemists was the search for the "philosopher's stone"—brought back into popularity by the Harry Potter movies of the 2000s—and the production of gold by artificial means. Gold meant (and continues to mean) power, deification, and immortality. The belief in the mystique or "hidden life" of objects has not disappeared from the modern world. In the 1970s, for example, the pet rock craze beset American society. Many considered the fad a ploy foisted upon a gullible public spoiled by consumerism by a clever manufacturer, and thus simply a quick way to make money. However, that craze could not have been perpetrated in the first place, unless some latent (or unconscious) semiotic force was at work—and that force was *animism* or the intuitive belief that objects are imbued with spiritual energy. The same animistic tendencies can be seen in

the common view held by people that some objects are unexplainably magical. This is why, if some objects are lost, then impending danger is feared. If, however, they are found serendipitously—as for instance when one finds a "lucky penny"—then it is believed that the gods or Fortune will look auspiciously upon the finder.

Objects are clearly signs. This is why many are preserved and kept in museums. Similar to works of art, they are felt to be reflections of human attempts to shape the world on their own terms and to, literally, "make" it conform to human expectations. As McLuhan (Chap. 1) suggested, objects extend human bodily structure. The automobile, for instance, is experienced by many of us as an extension of our bodily armor. In the public world of traffic, it creates a space around the physical body that is as inviolable as the body itself. Interestingly, but not unexpectedly, this perception is not confined to modern urban cultures. The anthropologist Basso found that the Western Apache of east-central Arizona also perceive the car as a body, even going so far as to use the names of body parts to refer to analogous automobile parts: for example, the hood is called a "nose," the headlights "eyes," the windshield "forehead," the area from the top of the windshield to the front bumper a "face," the front wheels "hands and arms," the rear wheels "feet," the items under the hood "innards," the battery a "liver," the electrical wiring "veins," the gas tank a "stomach," the distributor a "heart," the radiator a "lung," and the radiator hoses "intestines."[18]

Animism is certainly obvious as a latent form of semiosis in childhood. Children have always played with objects as signs standing for suggestive referents—broom handles can be imagined to be enemies to be vanquished, rocks can be imagined to be animate things, and so on. However, a toy is different, semiotically speaking. It is an adult-made object given to children according to social traditions. Dolls are particularly interesting in this regard because they are icons of the human figure and associated with female childhood. As early as 600 BCE dolls were made with movable limbs and removable garments, to reinforce their resemblance to human anatomy. Dolls have been found in the tombs of ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman children. Evidently, the objective was to provide the children with a lifelike human form, so that they could play with someone in the afterlife. Analogous sacred meanings are found throughout the world. In the aboriginal Hopi culture of the United States, kachina dolls are given to female children as part of fertility rites. In many Christian traditions, dolls have been used since the Middle Ages to represent the Holy Family in the Nativity scene, as part of Christmas observations. In Mexico, dolls representing Our Lady of Guadeloupe are ceremonially paraded every year. In some cultures of the Caribbean, it is believed that one can cause physical or psychological damage to another person by doing something injurious to a doll constructed in effigy to resemble that person.

The modern-day perception of dolls as toys for female children can be traced to Germany in the early fifteenth century, when doll figures were made on purpose to show new clothing styles to German women. Shortly thereafter, manufacturers in England, France, Holland, and Italy began to manufacture dolls dressed in fashions typical of their respective locales. The more ornate ones were often used by rulers and courtiers as gifts. By the seventeenth century, however, simpler dolls, made of cloth or leather, were manufactured mainly as toys for female children.

Twentieth century technology made it possible to make dolls look so lifelike that they were often used to illustrate clothing style trends and were sent from one country to another to display the latest fashions in miniature form. Noteworthy design innovations in dolls manufactured between 1925 and World War II included sleeping eyes with lashes, dimples, open mouths with tiny teeth, fingers with nails, and latex-rubber dolls that could drink water and wet themselves. Since the 1950s, the association of lifelike dolls with female childhood has been entrenched further by both the quantity of doll types produced and their promotion in the marketplace. Of particular semiotic interest in this regard is the Barbie doll, launched in 1959 and which evolved into an icon of female childhood for many years, adapting its identity to changing social views of femininity. Barbie has been portrayed as an astronaut, an athlete, a ballerina, a businesswoman, a dancer, a dentist, a doctor, a fire-fighter, a paleontologist, a police officer, a rock star, and so on. She has also been involved in a romantic relationship with the Ken doll, which appeared in 1961. The two dolls split up in 2006, a period when break-ups among celebrities were common. Barbie has also been friends with minority dolls, including African American and Hispanic dolls. Books, apparel, cosmetics, and video games are now branded Barbie goods, and she has appeared in films such as *Toy Story 2* and *3*. Barbie has also been parodied on *Saturday Night Live*. Acknowledging her pop culture status, Andy Warhol made a painting of the doll in 1985. In a phrase, Barbie is an emblematic sign of American culture. Its spread to other countries is thus limited, because it is culturally meaningless. Some countries have even banned sales of the doll, claiming that it does not conform to the ideals and values of their societies.

Dancing

There is another segment on Martha's video that requires some semiotic commentary in this chapter; namely, the segment in which Cheryl and Ted can be seen engaged in a bodily embrace called a *dance*, moving in rhythmic unity to

the musical beats made by the jazz band in the restaurant. Why do humans dance? Bodily locomotion has a biological source. This is probably why it is virtually impossible to remain motionless for any protracted period of time. Indeed, when we are forced to do so, our body reacts against it. During the performance of a lengthy, slow movement of a classical symphony, it is almost impossible to keep perfectly still or not to cough, even though one might be enraptured by the music. The need for almost constant movement during our waking hours is probably a remnant of an ancient survival mechanism designed to keep us moving, so as not to be easy prey for enemies. At some point in human history, however, our instinctual survival movements gave way to something vastly different—the dance, a set of organized rhythmic bodily movements that are designed to evoke some meaning or communicate some message.

Dancing involves spatial gesture (the shapes made by the moving body and the designs in space made by the limbs), tempo (patterned rhythm), and bodily schemas (heavy limp, tense, restrained, or bound movements). These may allow dancers to express emotions, moods, ideas, tell a story, or simply experience movement that is pleasurable or exciting in itself. In some situations, dancing may lead to trance or some other altered state of awareness. The latter is sometimes interpreted as possession by spirits. In tribal societies, for instance, shamans dance in trance in order to heal others physically or emotionally.

It is not known when people began to dance. Prehistoric cave paintings from more than twenty thousand years ago depict figures in animal costumes who seem to be dancing, possibly in hunting or fertility rituals, or perhaps merely for entertainment. Written as well as visual evidence of dance has survived from the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean region and the Middle East. Egyptian tombs depict people who seem to be dancing, often in acrobatic positions. These figures probably represented professional slave entertainers. Dancing was an integral component of agricultural and religious festivals in Egypt, such as the one enacting the cyclic death and rebirth of the god Osiris (symbolizing the seasonal cycle of the Nile). Ritual dances, especially those honoring Dionysus, the god of wine, are believed to be the motivation for including dancing in Greek drama, accompanying the spoken or sung verse. In ancient Rome, professional dancers, pantomimists, jugglers, and acrobats worked as traveling "sexual entertainers," so to speak, similar to the erotic dancers of today. This is perhaps why the Christian Church, which at first allowed dancing as a part of worship and religious celebrations, denounced dancing as immoral during the Middle Ages. Dancing continued among the peasants, however, both in communal festivals and as a form of entertainment. Variations of medieval peasant dances continue today as folk

dances. Some peasant dances, taken over and adapted by the aristocracy, became courtly dances that, in turn, evolved into the classical ballet. The latter originated in the courts of Italy and France during the Renaissance, becoming a professional art form by the late seventeenth century. Since that time, ballet has remained a major category of the performing arts. Its style and subject matter continue to evolve as modern-day dance artists experiment with new ways of expression through dance. Some forms of dance have developed around work activities, as in the Japanese rice-planting dances or in the Swedish weaving dances, which make working more pleasant.

Throughout the world, the significant stages of an individual's life, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death, are marked and celebrated by rituals that often involve dancing. Weddings, for instance, provide one of the most common occasions for dancing. The bride and the groom may dance together to show bonding, or else they may perform separate dances—the bride's reel of northern England, for example, is danced by the bride and her attendants. Dance is also perceived by many societies as part of their rites of passage. In some societies even today organized dances may be the only events at which young people of different sexes can meet and socialize without sanction or reprobation.

What Does It All Mean?

The semiotic study of nonverbal behavior is a study of how people experience and define themselves through their bodies and their objects. In most cultures, self-image is expressed and conveyed primarily as body image. In many contemporary societies the slim and lean look is a strategic sign of attractiveness for both males and females. The margin of deviation from any idealized thinness model is larger for males than it is for females; but males must frequently strive to develop a muscular look. This oversensitivity to idealized body prototypes is the reason why we tend to become discontented with our bodies.[19] From this discontent, a whole subculture based on physical exercises has become part of everyday life in many modern societies.

What the topics discussed in this chapter ultimately bring out is the importance of form in human life. A form is a "sign-in-the-making," so to speak, something that suggests something else, even though we cannot quite grasp what that something else is. The feminine form (as represented in paintings and other media) is a case-in-point of the inbuilt power of suggestion of forms. Whereas the masculine form has been represented throughout history (in sculpture and painting) to emphasize virility, the feminine form has been represented with a high degree of ambiguity to represent both motherhood

and sexuality in tandem.[20] Pop culture has projected the feminine form out in the open like never before. The Charleston, a dance craze that was introduced in 1923 by the Broadway musical *Runnin' Wild*, became one of the first vehicles for emphasizing the feminine form, becoming instantly emblematic of society's shift to a sexier, more carefree mood. Condemned by society's moral elders, it clearly signaled the advent and installation of a popular culture implanted in a sexual defiance of adult mores.

The representation of the body has always informed any meaningful reading of pop culture. The open sexuality of many modern performances has always challenged moralistic views of the body. Above all else, they bring questions of sex, sexuality, and gender to the forefront. Today, representations of the body and sexual persona are being altered by new technologies, as we have argued briefly here. From the Selfie to social media networks we are now living in a simulacrum that makes it difficult to distinguish between virtual bodies (bodies represented on screens) and real bodies. This has concrete implications for the semiotic study of the body, as we have seen. But perhaps the most salient one is that the three-part interaction between the senses, the world, and the mind, which is the source of semiosis, is becoming more and more an interaction that includes a fourth part—the virtual world. The implications of this development in human evolution will be broached in a later chapter.

Notes

1. Desmond Morris, Peter Collett, Peter Marsh, and Marie O'Shaugness, *Gestures: Their origins and distributions* (London: Cape, 1979).
2. The findings of Ekman and his research colleagues can be found in: Paul Ekman and Walter Friesen, *Unmasking the face* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975); Paul Ekman, *Telling lies* (New York: Norton, 1985); and Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed* (New York: Holt, 2003).
3. Paul Ekman, *Telling lies* (New York: Norton, 1985). An interesting cultural history of the smile is the one by Angus Trimble, *A brief history of the smile* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).
4. Ken Adler, *The lie detectors* (New York: The Free Press, 2006).
5. Helen E. Fisher, *Anatomy of love* (New York: Norton, 1992), 272–3.
6. Roger Wescott, *Sound and sense* (Lake Bluff, Ill.: Jupiter Press, 1980).
7. See the interesting study of hairstyles by Grant McCracken, *Big hair: A journey into the transformation of self* (Toronto: Penguin, 1995).
8. Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a jar: The making of America's beauty culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998). In *Inventing Beauty* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), Teresa Riordan argues that when it comes to beauty it seems that

human ingenuity has been at its most productive, especially in the modern era, with all kinds of inventions, from lipstick dispensers to corsets and Wonderbras.

9. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotexte, 1983).
10. Peter Russell, *The global brain* (New York: Tarcher, 1983).
11. See, for example, Marcel Danesi, *The history of the kiss: The origins of pop culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2013).
12. Michel Foucault, *The history of sexuality,* vol. 1 (London: Allen Lane. 1976).
13. Andrew Synnott, *The body social: Symbolism, self and society* (London: Routledge, 1993), 22.
14. Ray, L. Birdwhistell, *Introduction to kinesics* (Ann Arbor: University of Ann Arbor, 1952).
15. Ibid., p. 70.
16. Teresa Green, *The tattoo encyclopedia* (New York: Fireside, 2003), x–xi. In *Spiritual tattoo: A cultural history of tattooing, piercing, scarification, branding, and implants* (Berkeley: Frog, 2005), John A. Rush suggests that tattooing may go even further back in time to 200,000 BCE.
17. L. S. Dubin, *The history of beads* (New York: Abrams, 1987), 134.
18. Keith H. Basso, *Western Apache language and culture: Essays in linguistic anthropology* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990), 15–24.
19. Marcel Danesi, *My son is an alien: A cultural portrait of today's youth* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 56–57.
20. In *Striptease: The untold story of the girlie show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), Rachel Shteir shows convincingly how the feminine form has always made performances such as stripteases central elements in pop culture's history.

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4

Tell Me About Yourself: What Is Language?

Language is the mother of thought, not its handmaiden.
—Karl Kraus (1874–1936)

Martha's video contains much more material that is of interest to semioticians. For example, in an early segment Ted can be heard asking his partner, "Tell me about yourself," to which Cheryl replies, "There's not much to say. I was born here, and I've lived here all my life. I majored in math at college. I now work for Google." A semiotician never fails to be intrigued by such seemingly trivial forms of conversation because, in their essence, they reveal many interesting things about the vital functions that language plays in everyday life. In courtship, the function of conversation is clearly similar to that of theatrical discourse, complementing and reinforcing the nonverbal components of the ongoing performance. Similar to smoking, grooming, and gazing, speaking is part of a courtship ritual supplying the verbal resources for presenting an appropriate persona to a romantic partner. Whereas nonverbal communication and semiosis allow Cheryl and Ted to present an attractive face and body to each other, discourse allows them to present an "attractive intellect," so to speak.

Since the dawn of civilization, human beings have had an abiding fascination with language—the ability to use the tongue and other organs of the vocal tract to represent the world through meaning-bearing sounds. Language has served humanity well. All the world's cultures have myths and legends to explain their roots. Knowledge and skill are passed on through stories, oral explanations, and books. It is no exaggeration to say that the very survival of civilization depends on preserving language. If somehow all the knowledge

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captured and stored in verbal texts were to be irretrievably destroyed overnight, the next morning people the world over would have to start anew, bringing together storytellers, writers, scientists, educators, law-makers, and others to literally "retell" and "rewrite" knowledge; otherwise civilization as we know it would soon disappear. Those texts constitute humanity's collective memory.

No wonder, then, that across the world language is felt to constitute the faculty that, more than any other, sets humanity apart from all other species. There is a deeply embedded conviction within us that if we were ever able to solve the enigma of how language originated in our species, then we would possess a vital clue to the mystery of human existence itself. The ancient Greek philosophers defined it as *logos*, the faculty that they claimed had transformed the human being from an insentient brute into a rational animal. However, they also saw language as a potentially dangerous weapon for inflicting harm upon others. Even today, there is a widespread tendency to blame linguistically based misunderstandings for many of the world's ills, from conflicts between individuals to wars between nations. If we all spoke the same language, avoided insulting each other verbally, or employed speech constructively, so the story goes, then we would avoid many of our problems. If we were to purify all languages of the favoritisms and biases that they have acquired throughout their histories, we would be able to set the world right.

Learning to Speak

Language has endowed humans with the extraordinary ability to refer to events that have not yet occurred, to formulate questions about existence, to propose answers to them, to make up fictitious worlds, and to frame important thoughts and actions. Just as remarkably, it comes naturally to humans in childhood. The only requirement for learning any language is adequate exposure to samples of it from birth to approximately two years of age. Noam Chomsky, perhaps the most influential linguist of the modern era, has even gone so far as to claim that there is an organ in the human brain that is especially designed to detect and reproduce language.[1] This would explain why humans acquire language without any training or effort during infancy, and why attempts to teach a human language to the higher primates, who do not have such an organ, have turned out to be unsuccessful.

Chomsky's view is actually ancient. Intrigued by the spontaneity with which infants acquire language, the Greek philosopher Plato asked the following question: How it is that children, whose contacts with the world are brief and limited, are able to know as much as they do about language and start to

speak spontaneously early in infancy? He concluded that this is so because much of what infants know is innate, coming from earlier existence and merely reawakened in childhood. But this explanation by itself does not capture the crucial importance and intricacy of the interplay between the environment in which the child is reared and the apparently instinctive knack for language. If nurturing is not present, then language simply does not emerge, as the study of "feral children"—children who have survived without normal nurturing conditions—clearly shows. Even after a century of studying language acquisition scientifically, linguists are still unsure as to how language is acquired. In the end, all arguments are based on specific inferences about the way humans learn.

To the semiotician, there is no reason to posit a special organ for language. Language is really no more than one of the many forms that semiosis (the ability to produce and understand signs) takes in the human species. The psychological record shows that verbal and nonverbal forms of semiosis emerge in tandem during childhood. So, Chomsky is partially correct. Language is undoubtedly a species-specific faculty; but so are the nonverbal abilities that set humanity apart from other species (art, music, and so on).

Before proceeding further with the discussion, it is essential to differentiate between *speech* and *language*. Speech is the ability to use the vocal organs (tongue, teeth, lungs) for producing phonic signs (oral speech) or other organs (such as the hands) for producing visual signs (gesture, writing). Language, on the other hand, is a mental faculty, guiding speech. Verbal messages can be conveyed as sound sequences (oral speech), but they can also be communicated in other ways, through writing or gesture. One can have language without speech (as do individuals with impaired vocal and hearing organs), but one cannot have speech without language because it is dependent on the categories of language.

The physiology of oral speech is made possible by the lowering of the larynx (the muscle and cartilage at the upper end of the throat containing the vocal cords). During their first few months of life, infants breathe, swallow, and vocalize in ways that are anatomically similar to gorillas and chimpanzees, because they are born with the larynx high in the neck. It is found in virtually the same position in the neck of other primates. Some time around the third month of life, the larynx starts to descend gradually, dramatically altering how the child will use the throat, the mouth, and the tongue from then on. The new low position means that the respiratory and digestive tracts will cross above the larynx. This entails a few risks: food can easily lodge in the entrance of the larynx; simultaneously drinking and breathing can lead to choking. In compensation, the lowered larynx permits speech by producing a chamber above the vocal folds that can modify sound.

How do children learn to speak? When infants come into contact with an unknown object, their first reaction is to explore it with their senses, that is, to handle it, taste it, smell it, listen to any sounds it makes, and visually observe its features. This exploratory phase of knowing, or *cognizing*, an object produces sensory models that allow children to *recognize* the same object the second time around without having to examine it again probingly with their sensory system. As infants grow, recognizing more and more objects, they start to engage in semiotic behavior that transcends the early sensory phase: they start pointing to the object they recognize, imitating the words they have heard in context. At this point in the child's development, the object starts to assume a new *cognitive* form of existence; it has, in effect, been transferred to the physical sign (manual gesture or word) used to refer to it. This is a quantum leap in development. The American psychologist-semiotician Charles Morris (1901–79) remarked, in fact, that from that point onward the sign will replace the object, cognitively speaking.[2] As rudimentary as they might seem, these early signs allow human infants to refer to virtually anything they notice or find interesting in their immediate world.

Soon after, children start using the words they have learned in context, repeating them as single syllables (*mu*, *ma*, *da*, *di*). These are not mindless imitations: they are early signifiers in search of complete structure, so to say. The Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky (1896–1934) called them "small works of art" because, like poetic images, they are attempts to make sense of things through phonemes and tones.[3] By the age of six months the child's repertoire of one-syllable words increases at a rapid rate. At eight months the child starts reduplicating words (*dada*, *mama*) and using elementary meaning-bearing intonation patterns. By the end of the first year the first true words emerge, as the child realizes that these are powerful tools for naming and remembering things, for expressing actions or a desire for some action, and for conveying emotional states. At that point in development, the child seems to become mesmerized by the fact that words evoke thoughts. By simply saying the right word, a thought appears "inside the head" as if by magic. The psychologist Julian Jaynes has suggested that this feeling of amazement is an ancient one, dating back to when the first sentient human beings must have become overwhelmed by the "magic" of articulated words to conjure up images in their minds.[4] Words make children aware that there is a dimension to life beyond the purely sensory—a dimension that connects the body, the mind, and the world seamlessly.

At around eighteen months of age children start using language creatively, often talking to themselves as they play. My grandson was barely fifteen months of age when I observed him use language creatively. I knew at the time that he

could refer to many objects in the house with the appropriate words, but he had not learned the words for colors. Remarkably, one day he referred to the orange color of our household cat in a way that can only be called "a small work of art," as Vygotsky put it. He pointed to the cat's hair, hesitating for an instant as he searched his mind for an appropriate word. Not finding one, he came up with his own—*juice*—a word he had been using to refer to the orange juice he drank at breakfast. Examples such as this one, which we take for granted, reveal the presence of a "creative fantasy" in children, which provides them with the means to make images and to move them about inside their heads in new forms and arrangements. My grandson had inferred that the word *juice* referred to the same property of orangeness in drinks and cats alike. It showed an inherent ability to make sense of things by connecting them ontologically, seeing in the world relations and connections. This ontological-imaginative capacity has allowed the human species to know from the inside, and thus beyond the instincts.

Language and Thought

Language provides perhaps the most significant clues for understanding how the *knowing animal* actually comes to *know* the world. The words a society uses are the semiotic building blocks of its "edifice of knowledge." One of the earliest efforts to link these blocks to knowledge can be traced back to approximately 400 BCE when the Indian scholar Pāṇini showed how words in the Sanskrit language were constructed systematically and what meanings each of their parts carried. Another early attempt to study language systematically was that by the Greek scholar Dionysius Thrax (late second century BCE) whose work, the *Art of Grammar*, became the model for many Greek, Latin, and (later) modern European grammars. Not only did he deal with the structure of words, their arrangement in phrases and sentences, but also with the rules for correct speech. Throughout the centuries, interest in grammar (the study of structural patterns in language) never waned. With the spread of Christianity and the translation of the Scriptures into the languages of the Christians, medieval scholars began thinking about how to compare different languages. Their comparisons, however, were haphazard, and it took many centuries for scholars to develop more systematic methods for studying the world's languages and for examining the nature of grammars scientifically. It was after the publication of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1916 and the work of the American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942), who documented and studied the native languages of North America in the 1920s, that *linguistics* emerged as a "science of language."

Since the 1930s linguists have studied and documented many fascinating things about language, describing with precise detail its basic structural properties. Perhaps the most remarkable finding is the intrinsic link that exists between words and the concepts that inform a culture's system of everyday life.[5] Words are not just convenient labels for already-existing concepts. Rather, they make specific kinds of concepts available to the members of a culture. Consider a "device for keeping track of time." Given that it is a human-made object, there really should be little or no variation in the ways different peoples refer to it. In English, for example, there are two basic words for this device, *clock* and *watch*. The difference lies in the fact that a watch is carried or worn (around a wrist, around the neck), whereas a clock is placeable in specific locations (on a table, on a wall) but is not normally carried. This double classification has a historical *raison d'être*. The word *watch* appeared in northern Europe several centuries ago when people started strapping timepieces around their wrists, so that they could literally "watch" time pass and thus maintain appointments with precision. The subsequent manufacturing of "watches" (portable timepieces) on a large scale in the nineteenth century signaled a radical change in the perception of time management. In Italy, on the other hand, the double classification was never introduced into the language. The single Italian word *orologio* still refers to any type of timepiece. This does not mean that, in Italian, there is no verbal way for signaling the distinction that English makes. After all, Italians also wear watches. It implies, rather, that Italian culture did not go through the same historical semiotic process that introduced the categorical distinction in English. The Italian language can also refer to a clock's location or portability, as does English, but it does so in a linguistically different way, namely, with the structure *da*: *orologio da polso* = wristwatch (watch for wrist), *orologio da tavolo* = table clock (clock for table), and so on. This allows Italian speakers to refer to a timepiece's location if the need should arise. In English, on the other hand, it is built into the double classification and is therefore something that speakers of English perceive as somehow necessary.

Differences such as these reflect differences in cultural thinking and, ultimately, in worldview. Indeed, Italians have a subtly different approach to time management than do North Americans, although differences between these two industrialized societies are becoming less marked as they assume more and more of a "global cultural structure" through media access, travel, and socioeconomic interaction. As the psychologist Robert Levine recently discovered in his travels, a fixation with being "precisely on time" is typical of cultures that distinguish between clocks and watches, but less so of others that do not.[6] Burmese monks, for instance, know more or less that it is time to get up in the morning when there is enough light to see the veins in their hands. They are not as compulsive about time-keeping as we are, thus avoiding many of the stress-related syndromes that afflict us in the West.

The intrinsic bond that exists between words and reality is fairly easy to discern, as the preceding example shows. It exists as well in a less obvious fashion at the level of sentence structure. Consider the difference between the active sentence, "Alexander ate the carrot," and its passive equivalent, "The carrot was eaten by Alexander." In traditional theories of grammar, the passive is considered to be a stylistic option of the active. Why, then, are there sentences that seem conceivable only (or primarily) in the passive form, such as, "The Bible was written at the dawn of time;" and "My work is still unfinished"? If we consider the sequence of the mental images that active and passive sentences elicit, we will soon realize that the two types are hardly just stylistic variants. Because the subject (Alexander) is first in an active sentence, it appears in the foreground of the mind's eye, whereas the object (the carrot) comes into view in its background. A change from active to passive reverses this mental view, so that the object (carrot) now becomes visible in the foreground of the mind's eye, and the subject (Alexander) in the background. Both sentences say the same thing, but the way in which they portray perspective is significantly different. The passive sentence emphasizes the object at the expense of the subject. This emphasis on the object is the reason why the passive form characterizes conventional scientific writing. The aim of science is *objectivity*. In language, this translates into an emphasis on the *object*, so as to deemphasize the *subjectivity* of the human scientist and all the undesirable connotations (error, unreliability, and so on) that this entails. This is why a passive sentence such as "The experiment was conducted in support of the theory," sounds much more objective, and thus more credible in scientific culture, than an active sentence such as, "I conducted the experiment in support of the theory."

Examples such as these suggest that language is a modeling system, that is, a system of representation that attempts to model the world through sense and perception. The active versus passive distinction demonstrates how syntactic structure (the organization of words in a sentence) provides a *perspectival* model of a specific type of scene.[7] This was the view of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), who argued that words in sentences show how things are related to each other, in ways that parallel physical vision. Modeling is not restricted to providing visual perspective; it can also be based on perceptions of the meanings of phonemes. In a classic study conducted by the American psychologist Roger Brown, native English speakers were asked to listen to pairs of opposites from a language unrelated to English and then to try guessing which foreign word translated into which English word.[8] The subjects were asked to guess the meaning of the foreign words by attending to their sounds. When Brown asked them, for example, to match the words *ch'ing* and *chung* to the English equivalents *light* and *heavy*, he found that

approximately 90 percent of English speakers correctly matched *ch'ing* to *light* and *chung* to *heavy*. He concluded that the degree of translation accuracy could only be explained as indicative of a primitive kind of *sound symbolism*, an instinctual tendency to link sounds and meanings. Sound symbolism is a perfect example of linguistic modeling based on sonority.

The view of language as a modeling system is not a contemporary one.[9] It goes back to ancient Greece, when some philosophers claimed that words were constructed on the basis of the way their referents looked or sounded (although others maintained that words were arbitrarily related to their referents). This perspective was championed in the nineteenth century by F. Max Müller who proposed that humanity's first words tended to be instinctive, expressive sounds uttered in response to an emotional state—anger, surprise, pain, pleasure, relief.[10] Remnants of this tendency, he claimed, can be found in all the world's languages. In English, interjections such as *Huh?*, *Ouch!*, *Wow!*, which are uttered in response to different emotionally charged situations, and words referring to sonorous referents, such as *dip*, *rip*, *sip*, *crack*, *click*, *creak*, *rub*, *jab*, *blob*, *rustle*, *bustle*, *trickle*, *ooze*, *wheeze*, *squeeze*, *puff*, *huff*, *cough* are obviously such remnants.

The German philologist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) went further than anyone before him in linking language to mental and emotional states. Indeed, von Humboldt claimed that the structure of a particular language constrains the thought and behavior of the people using it. In the twentieth century, von Humboldt's outlook was pursued first by Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and then by Sapir's pupil Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941). Sapir asserted that human ideas, concepts, feelings, and characteristic social behaviors were rooted (or at least mirrored) in the structures of language. Sapir never carried out an extensive research program to test his idea rigorously and systematically. That fell on the shoulders of his brilliant student Whorf, whose work on the language of the Hopi society, a native people occupying living abodes on reservation land in northeast Arizona, led him to believe that the language individuals learn in cultural context constitutes a mental filter through which they come to perceive and understand the world.

The Whorfian hypothesis raises some fundamental questions about the connection between social inequalities and the language that encodes them. Did terms like *chairman* or *spokesman* predispose speakers of English to view social roles as gender-specific in the not-too-distant past? Feminist social critics maintained that English grammar was organized from the perspective of those at the center of the society—the men. This is why, not long ago, we said that a woman *married into* a man's family; and why, at traditional wedding ceremonies expressions such as "I pronounce you man and wife" were common.

These defined women in relation to men. Others, such as *lady atheist* or *lesbian doctor*, are exclusionary of women, since they insinuate that atheists and doctors are not typically female or lesbian. In the Iroquois language the reverse is the norm—the language is structured from the female perspective.[11] This is because in Iroquois society the women are in charge: they hold the land, pass it on to their heirs in the female line, are responsible for agricultural production, control the wealth, arrange marriages, and so on.

The foregoing discussion in no way implies that language constrains or stifles the imagination. On the contrary, language is a malleable semiotic instrument that can be put to any use speakers desire. Should the need arise to create a new word category, all we have to do is be consistent with the structural requirements of our language's sound and grammatical systems. Imagine a concept roughly referring to "all preadolescent boys who have a missing front tooth." You certainly have seen such boys, but you have not thought of them as a distinct or necessary conceptual category. This is because there is no word in the English language that calls attention to them as such. However, by simply making up a word—say, *forbs*—we will *ipso facto* have created that category. If English-speaking people started using the word *forb* routinely, then after a while they would start "seeing" or "recognizing" *forbs* everywhere, eventually believing that the category must have some necessary purpose. This example shows exactly what Sapir meant when he said that language is both limiting and limitless.[12]

Nowhere is the intrinsic relation between language and thought more evident than in the area of color categorization. Color is a sensation produced through the excitation of the retina of the eye by rays of light. Physicists point out that, in theory, millions of color gradations can be discriminated by the human eye; but no more than twelve basic color terms have been found in any of the world's languages. The colors of the spectrum are produced by viewing a light beam refracted by passage through a prism, which breaks the light into its wavelengths. If one were to put a finger at any point on the spectrum, there would be only a negligible difference in gradation in the colors immediately adjacent to the finger at either side. The organization of so many potential gradations into a limited number of categories has an obvious purpose: without it, people would have to refer to all possible gradations by coining and memorizing millions of words. There is, however, a trade-off. Although a limited set of color terms makes it possible for people to refer to color gradations efficiently, those very terms also predispose them to recognize the categories that they entail as "normal." To put it in semiotic terms, people recognize only those color signifieds that the signifiers of their native languages have encoded.

English has six basic color categories, known as the primary colors: *purple*, *blue*, *green*, *yellow*, *orange*, and *red.* In color theory, *white* and *black* are not

considered colors. Other color terms are considered to be secondary (*brown*, *pink*, *gray*, and so on). The sensation of *black* is that of a complete lack of stimulation of the retina; that of *white* is of complete stimulation. English speakers might disagree on exactly where on the spectrum one category ends and another begins, but, by and large, the disputed range would be minimal. This is because the above terms have established the color categories for speakers of English; in effect, they have *classified* the content of the spectrum in specific ways. However, there is nothing inherently "natural" about this organizational scheme. The specific color categories that speakers of English have learned to recognize are part of the structure of English, not of nature.

By contrast, speakers of other languages are predisposed to see other or different color categories on the same spectrum. Speakers of the indigenous African language Shona, for instance, divide the spectrum into *cipswuka*, *citema*, *cicena*, and *cipswuka* (again), from left to right, and speakers of Bassa, a language of Liberia, dissect it into just two categories, *hui* and *ziza*, from left to right. When an English speaker refers to something as *blue*, a Shona speaker would refer to it as either *cipswuka* or *citema*, and a Bassa speaker as *hui*. The Bassa speaker would refer to *green* also with *hui*, while a Shona speaker would refer to it with *citema* or else with *cicena*.

In 1969, anthropologists Brent Berlin and Paul Kay conducted a study that has since become a point of reference in color semiotics. They found that differences in color terms are merely superficial matters that conceal general underlying principles of color perception.[13] Using the judgments of the native speakers of twenty widely divergent languages, Berlin and Kay concluded that there are "focal points" in basic (primary) color systems that cluster in certain predictable ways. They identified eleven universal focal points, which correspond to the English words *red*, *pink*, *orange*, *yellow*, *brown*, *green*, *blue*, *purple*, *black*, *white*, and *gray*. Not all the languages they investigated have separate words for each of these colors, but a pattern in their data suggested the existence of a fixed way of categorizing color across cultures. If a language has two color terms, then the focal points are equivalents of English *black* and *white*. If it has three color terms, then the third one corresponds to *red*. A four-term system adds either *green* or *yellow*, while a five-term system has both of these. A six-term system includes *blue*; a seven-term system adds *brown*. Finally, *purple*, *pink*, *orange*, and *gray*, in some combination, are found in languages with more than seven color terms. Berlin and Kay found that no language has a four-term system consisting of, say, *black*, *white*, *red*, and *brown*.

Their study, however, raises some questions. For one thing, the fact that the eleven focal points discovered by Berlin and Kay correspond to the color terms of their own language (English) raises a red theoretical flag. The linguist

McNeill noticed, for instance, that the eleven-term Japanese system posited by Berlin and Kay dated only from the time of Japanese contact with the West, beginning in the 1860s.[14] The traditional Japanese system had five focal points: *black*, *white*, *orange*, *turquoise*, and *yellow*, which does not fit in with Berlin and Kay's theory.[15]

Whatever the truth about color perception, the semiotician would point out that color terms constitute a code consisting of specific signifiers that, like any code, will condition its users to perceive the world in specific ways. However, as mentioned earlier, this does not imply that color schemes close the mind. The specific color categories acquired in cultural context in no way preclude people from discerning those established in other cultures, if they so desire. This is, indeed, what students of another language must learn to do when they study the color system of the new language. Moreover, in all languages there exist verbal resources for referring to more specific gradations on the spectrum if the situation should require it. In English the words *crimson*, *scarlet*, *vermilion*, for instance, make it possible to refer to gradations within the category *red*. However, these are still felt by speakers to be subcategories of red, not distinct color categories in themselves.

There is one more point to be made here about color. Although the research would lead one to surmise that color categories are established arbitrarily, the historical record tells another story. Color vocabularies originate out of specific needs and experiences. In Hittite (the language of an ancient people of Asia Minor and Syria), for instance, words for colors initially designated plant and tree names such as *poplar*, *elm*, *cherry*, and *oak*. Many English terms, too, were coined to indicate color perceptions metaphorically: *green* originally meant "to grow," *yellow* "to gleam," *purple* "a type of shellfish," and so on. Indeed, to this day, color terms are used in so many symbolic ways that one hardly ever thinks of them as denotative signifiers—that is, as actually referring to hues. In fact, one could make a fairly in-depth comparison of different cultural symbol systems by focusing on the differential meanings that these have: For example: What meanings do *white* and *red* have in China and America? In what ways are these similar or different? Why?

Writing

As mentioned earlier, language is expressed not only as vocal speech but also through *writing*, that is, through the use of visual signs, known as characters, transferred to some surface. The characters that we use to write English words have a more or less fixed correspondence to the sounds of the language. These

comprise a type of writing code known as an *alphabet*. Alphabets allow their users to write (represent visually) any concept that can be expressed in vocal speech. This is why in an alphabet-using culture a distinction between speech and writing is rarely made. History shows, however, that writing systems did not start out as a visual means of recording spoken language. Rather, they originated as systems of pictorial representation that were largely independent of vocal language.

Systems in which images represent word concepts are called *pictographic*. The combinations that result when several pictographs are used to represent ideas are called *ideographic*. In Chinese, for instance, the pictographs for *sun* and *tree* are combined to form the ideograph for *east*. The earliest systems of writing were pictographic. Among those of which we have preserved a record are the *cuneiform* system of the ancient Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians, the *hieroglyphic* systems of the Egyptians and the Mayans, and the pictographic systems still used by the Chinese and Japanese. The idea of using pictographs (or parts of pictographs) to represent consonant sounds probably originated with the Phoenicians in approximately 1000 BCE. Thus, a pictograph representing a *house*, for which the spoken word was *beth*, eventually came to symbolize the initial *b* sound of *beth*. This symbol, standing originally for the entire word *beth* and later for the sound of *b*, ultimately became the *b* of our alphabet. McLuhan often argued that the invention of the alphabet brought about the first cognitive revolution in the human species. In pre-alphabetic societies, words elicited sound images. Knowledge was processed and remembered in an auditory form. With the invention and spread of the alphabet, this gave way to a visual form of processing and remembering knowledge.

Societies tend to perceive some forms of writing as sacrosanct and inviolable. This is why attempts to reform spelling or eliminate inconsistencies in writing conventions meet with strong resistance. In early cultures, writing systems were often attributed to divine sources. In many societies religious principles and laws are preserved in the form of sacred written texts. The Ten Commandments were inscribed on two stone tablets directly by God. The principles of Hinduism were written down in four collections of hymns, detached poetic portions, and ceremonial formulas.

In effect, writing is considered to have a sacred (authoritative or official) status. Correct spelling, like correct speaking, is more than a sign of education. So, when spelling is altered it transmits social or cultural connotations. For example, a number of 1970s and 1980s rock groups spelled their names phonetically rather than traditionally: Guns N' Roses, Led Zeppelin, The Monkees, and so on, standing out from mainstream society. The same practice

was adopted by rap artists as part of a social discourse that exudes resistance to inequalities, as symbolized by standard spelling. Names such as Snoop Dogg, Sister Souljah, and Jay Z, among many others, bespeak of empowerment. In a way, such trends are not particularly subversive (or innovative). All one has to do is look at the writings of authors such as Chaucer and even Shakespeare to realize the extent to which spelling has changed over the years. It was Noah Webster who proposed in 1828 the elimination of *u* in words such as *colour*, *harbour*, *favour*, and *odour*. His proposal was accepted, becoming one of the features that distinguishes American from British English and thus, by implication, America from its British past. Changes of this kind have always come about to symbolize a break with tradition. American English is, itself, a language that was once considered to be subversive by the British ("not the King's or Queen's English"). So, although hip-hop style implies a break with white culture, it is, paradoxically, also a contemporary symptom of a larger tendency in America to constantly break from the past.

Spelling changes are also characteristic of the writing trends in online communications. The term *netlingo* was coined by the linguist David Crystal to describe the spelling peculiarities in such communications.[16] The main characteristic of netlingo is its compactness, allowing interlocutors to increase the speed at which their messages can be inputted and received. So, a series of common abbreviations, acronyms, and other compressed structures have emerged to characterize netlingo.

b4	=	before
bf/gf	=	boyfriend/girlfriend
f2f	=	face-to-face
gr8	=	great
h2cus	=	hope to see you soon
idk	=	I don't know
j4f	=	just for fun
lol	=	laughing out loud
cm	=	call me
2dA	=	today
wan2	=	want to
ruok	=	Are you OK?
2moro	=	tomorrow
g2g	=	gotta go

Abbreviated writing was used by the Greeks as early as the fourth century BCE. Scholars and scientists have always used abbreviations of various kinds to facilitate technical communications among themselves, making them precise (*etc.*, *et al.*, *op. cit. N.B.*). In this case, abbreviation implies a high level of

literacy. Also, we abbreviate the names of friends and family members (*Alex* for *Alexander*), common phrases (*TGIF* for *Thank God it's Friday),* and anything else that refers to something common or familiar.

But what sets the abbreviation tendencies in netlingo apart from all economizing tendencies of the past is the speed and extent to which compressed forms are spreading and becoming part of communicative behavior throughout the Internet and also migrating to the offline world. Arguably, the rationale has a social basis. Writing takes time and effort. But there is an expectation in the Internet universe that responses to e-mails, text messages, and the like must be rapid. Logically, the compression of forms helps people meet this expectation by making it possible to "get back" to the sender more quickly and rapidly. In effect, the Internet is changing not only language, but also the rate of communication and our expectations of response patterns to communication. This is creating ever-emerging and ever-changing literacies and communicative practices that have become central to the articulation of shifting social beliefs and ritual practices through individual and collective engagement with digital technologies.

Emoji

An amazing event occurred in 2015 that bore rather profound implications for the future of writing, literacy, and even human communication itself. That was the year when the Oxford Dictionary chose, as its "Word of the Year," an emoji—the "Face with Tears of Joy" emoji.

Not only was it not a "word" in the traditional sense—it was a pictogram—but it also turned on its head the very definition that the dictionary itself had always adopted for the meaning of a written "word"—a representation of the individual sounds of the spoken word. It was not the only event in 2015 that brought out the growing communicative and social significance of emoji. Musicians, artists, politicians, and advertisers, among many others, started using them in their tweets, on their Facebook pages, on Instagram, on websites, and in other digital venues. Even a distinguished musical artist like Sir Paul McCartney was enlisted by Skype to create ten animated emoji, called "Love Mojis," for its new app. Since then, emoji writing has certainly entered the realm of pop culture, with emoji translations of popular songs, entire books, and even an emoji movie.

What is going on? With an ever-increasing repertory of emoji symbols currently available (including smileys with more skin tones), it has become obvious that the emoji phenomenon is not just a "cute" means of visually sprucing

up a written text, but rather a veritable "sign of the times." On its website, the Oxford Dictionary explained that it chose an emoji over a traditional phonetic word because it "captures the ethos, mood, and preoccupations" of the contemporary world. Is traditional writing on the wane since the arrival of Web 2.0 technologies? Is the kind of literacy that has served us so well since at least the sixteenth century lost its social value and prestige, as the Oxford Dictionary choice indirectly suggested? Unlike the Print Age, which encouraged, and even imposed, the exclusive use of alphabetic writing in most message-making media and domains of literacy, the current Internet Age encourages different modes (including visual and audio) to be utilized in tandem with alphabetic (and non-alphabetic) scripts in the composition of messages. This new kind of multimodal writing system harbors a broad range of implications within it, from the possible demise of the Print Age to an evolutionary shift in human communication systems and practices.[17]

Emoji are iconic signs, by and large, although there are also indexical (such as pointing arrows) and symbolic signs in the mix. They do not substitute traditional forms of writing in science, academia, journalism, and so on; rather, they reinforce, expand, and annotate the meaning of an informal written communication. It is relevant to note here that, although emoji surfaced as a means to enhance a broader comprehension of written texts in an age of instant communications across the globe, culturally stylized emoji have nonetheless emerged for various reasons. Even facial emoji (or smileys) have undergone modification based on culture-specific needs. The creators of smileys attempted to make them as culturally neutral as possible. The use of yellow to color the smiley was an obvious stylistic ploy to remove recognizable facial features associated with race or ethnicity. Roundness also seems to attenuate specific details of facial structure that would otherwise suggest personality or identity. But, almost right after their spread into common usage, new emoji were constructed that embedded culturally based meanings, either explicitly or unwittingly. So, different colors to represent the face have now become common. As emphasized throughout this book, connotation is a principle of human semiosis—it simply cannot be eradicated from sign systems. The smiley and face with tears emoji are found on virtually all mobile device keyboards, no matter what language is involved. They are stylized, almost comic-book-like, pictograms that can (and do) replace words and phrases. They are meaning-enhancing devices that are amalgamated with alphabetic writing in a hybrid fashion, although there are now texts that are composed entirely of emoji. It is not certain, however, that this "emoji-only" mode of writing is spreading broadly. The hybrid system continues to be the most prominent one in informal settings.

An analysis of common text messages shows that three speech functions are now part of systematic emoji usage[18]:

1. *Utterance opener.* The smiley is used in place of, or in tandem with, opening salutations such as "Hi!" allowing the sender to strengthen or maintain friendly bonds with the interlocutor even when a message may have some negativity in its contents.
2. *Utterance ending.* The smiley and similar sentiment emoji (such as hearts in the case of intimate messages) are used typically as the good-bye function in a message.
3. *Silence avoidance.* In written messages, silence gaps occur when the reader expects more information about something, whereas the writer wishes to avoid it. By putting emoji in such gaps, the intent is to counteract the uncomfortableness that may result from such gaps.

In addition to such common speech functions, emoji usage entails a considerable level of emotivity, portraying one's state of mind. In face-to-face communication, people use interjections, intonation, and other prosodic strategies, alongside specific keywords and phrases, to convey their feelings, explicitly or implicitly. In hybrid messages these are typically replaced by emoji forms. There are also other utterance functions with respect to emoji usage that need not concern us here. The main point is that emoji are hardly randomly used visual devices to embellish a written text. They now form a pictographic language that complements other ways in which language is written and expressed. The widespread use of emoji became practicable in 2010 when hundreds of characters were standardized by Unicode. The standardized emoji lexicon consisted of smileys, heart emoji, and a few other pictographic forms still found across keyboards and apps (with minor variations in detail), implying that people likely use these forms in similar ways. Additional characters are created on a daily basis, and these are accessed primarily on online dictionaries and inventories that allow for selection and, in some cases, even modification of emoji for personalized or specialized use.

In sum, emoji in themselves are not revolutionary—the technology behind them is. So, they will likely morph or disappear as the technology changes. In the meanwhile, there appears to be a very important subtext in them. They invariably seem to add a "sunny" cheerful tone to common everyday communications, standing out against the dark realities and conflicts of the contemporary world. They seem to say, implicitly, "Smile, life is short." It is no coincidence, in my view, that the most popular emoji bear the color of the sun.

Ritual and Language

Language and ritual are two sides of the same semiotic coin. The speakers in any dialogue must know how to start and end the conversation, how to make themselves understood, how to respond to statements, how to be sensitive, how to take turns, and how to listen. All this implies knowledge of the speech rituals connected with the appropriate *discourse code*. This informs people about what to say and how to say it in specific situations. There are several factors that will shape how discourse will unfold. First and foremost, there is the social situation itself. The utterance "Good-bye" is formalistic; "See ya" is, instead, much more casual. Discourse spans the whole range of formality, from highly formulaic to highly intimate, depending on situation. Second, there is the setting (time and place) in which discourse occurs. Greeting someone in the morning entails a "Good morning," while in the evening it requires a "Good evening." Third, there is the function or purpose of the discourse—making contact, greeting, gossiping, informing, praising, blaming, persuading, advising, congratulating, and so on. This entails not only level of formality, but also mode of delivery (voice tone, rate of speech). In a situation such as our imaginary restaurant scene, the appropriate tone of voice of the participants would be low and their rate of speech drawn out and deliberate. Fourth, there is the mood of the participants. This makes the discourse event construable as serious, jovial, ironic, and so on. Fifth, there is the relationship of the participants to each other (intimate, distant, and so on). Greeting a stranger entails a "Hello," while greeting a friend requires a "Hi" instead. Societies are held together because of these discourse rituals.

The link between language and ritual was forged at the origin of human culture when certain words were felt to have awesome magical powers. That same feeling of awe is still manifest in children's eyes when they listen to a magician's *abracadabra*, or when they read about the power of a magical spell or formula, such as the *Open Sesame* formula used by Ali Baba in *Arabian Nights* to open the door of the robbers' cave. Incidentally, the word *abracadabra* derives from the letters arranged in the inverted pyramid design of an amulet worn around the neck in centuries gone by. In each line of the pyramid there was a letter. Each letter was supposed to vanish magically until only the *A* remained to form the vertex of the triangle. As the letters disappeared, so purportedly did the disease or problem of its wearer.

In tribal societies, shamans are thought to possess knowledge of magical words that allow them to control objects, people, spirits, and natural events, and thus cure disease, ward off evil, bring good or harm to another person. In some cultures, knowing the name of God is thought to give the knower great

power. Such knowledge is often a closely guarded secret, if indeed it is allowed to be known by anyone but a select few. In ancient Egypt, the sorceress *Isis* tricked the sun god *Ra* into revealing his name, allowing her to gain power over him and all other gods. In Native American cultures, the given name is thought to bring with it all the spiritual qualities of the individuals who have shared that name. These are thought to cast a magical, protective spell on the child given the name. This is why many Inuit will refuse to say their name out loud, fearing that this "senseless" act could break the magical spell. The Inuit also believe that a newborn baby cries because it wants its name, and will not be complete until it gets it.

The feeling that certain words are sacred or magical has become largely unconscious in modern societies, but the residues of *word magic*, as it is called, can be found in everyday discourse. We take oaths to fulfill a pledge, calling on God as witness. Expressions such as "Oh, God" and "Thank Heaven" have become so common that we scarcely think of them any more as sacred formulas. We tell our children "Just say the *magic* word, and what you want will appear." When someone sneezes, we utter "Bless you," no longer realizing that the words are meant to ward off sickness.

The other side of sacredness is profanity. Most societies look down upon profane or vulgar language, viewing it in the same way that they would an immoral or criminal act; most societies have *taboos* against its use. The word *taboo* comes from the tribal Polynesian language, Tongan, in which it means "holy, untouchable." Verbal taboos exist in all cultures. For example, among the Zuñi of New Mexico, the word *takka* (frogs) is prohibited during religious ceremonies because of its vulgar connotations. In our own culture, so-called four-letter words are generally deemed to be obscene, and considered taboo in sacred places such as churches and sanctuaries. In common law it is a misdemeanor to speak or publish words that vilify or ridicule God or the Bible. The manner, rather than the content, of the utterance or publication renders it blasphemous. Thus, a statement of opinion, no matter how heretical it may be, is not punishable as blasphemy. Language that offends or provokes a public disturbance is also held to be in violation of the law.

Slang

The language spoken in a society is never homogeneous, especially in large societies. Certain people or groups within the society may use, frequently, a version of the language called *slang*, which implies the use of nonstandard words and phrases, generally shorter lived than the expressions of ordinary colloquial speech. However, slang is hardly an inconsequential form of

"vulgar" speech (note that originally *vulgar* meant "of the common people"); rather, it constitutes a powerful form of discourse because it bestows a recognizable identity on group members, embodying their attitudes and values as a group. Slang suggests that language is like make-up, smoking, and other codes; it is a code that provides the props (verbal in this case) for defining and presenting a persona to a specific social audience.

Although the larger society may find slang undesirable, it is not immune from it. If the slang-using group has enough contact with the mainstream culture, some of its figures of speech might become forms known to the whole society, usually because they may provide a name needed for an object or action (*chill out*). Sometimes, slang terms become accepted as standard speech with an altered, tamed meaning (*jazz*, as you might recall from Chap. 1, originally had sexual connotations). Slang also finds its way into the cultural mainstream through the work of writers who use it to convey character and ambiance. Shakespeare brought into acceptable usage such slang terms as *hubbub*, *to bump*, and *to dwindl*e. Television and cinema have been instrumental in spreading slang usage. The words *pot* and *marijuana*, which were part of a secret criminal jargon in the 1940s, became, through the media, common words in the 1960s when they were adopted by counterculture youths. Today, new slang items come and go quickly; they are memes in cyberspace that have a truly short lifespan.

Slang plays (and has always played) an important semiotic role in the experience of youth, no matter what era of time or society are involved. It provides the signs (slang forms) that young people equate with specific kinds of social meanings that have resonance among peers. Take the word *duh*, which surfaced in late 1990s youth slang, even though it is now a colloquialism in the speech of everyone. With its perfectly paired linguistic partner, *yeah-right*, it is, above all else, a means for conveying savvy and sarcasm. It is the equivalent of "Tell me something I don't know." *Duh* is assertive, a perfect tool for undercutting mindless chatter or insulting repetition. It is an example of how slang is used to cut directly to the chase.

The reason why a slang item becomes a common word or colloquialism is fairly straightforward. If many people start using it, it enters the common lexicon, becoming indistinguishable from other forms of speech. The slang that is transmitted by and through the media is actually much more than slang. It is what journalist Leslie Savan labeled *pop language* in 2005.[19] Pop phrases such as "That is so last year," "I hate it when that happens," "It's so yesterday," "Don't go there," and "I don't think so" constitute the lexicon of pop language, which has a "sitcomish" flavor to it. Pop language is light, self-conscious, and replete with put-downs and exaggerated inflections. Savan compares the 1953 Disney cartoon *Peter Pan* with the 2002 sequel *Return to*

Never Land showing how remarkably free the former one was of packaged phrases and slang. The sequel on the other hand speaks in pop language, including such phrases as "In your dreams, Hook," "Put a cork in it," "Tell me about it," "You've got *that* right," and "Don't even *think* about it."

Pop language is hip language for a mass audience, having precedents in previous eras of pop culture. In the 1920s, jazz introduced a whole series of slang expressions, including *hip*, *stylin'*, *cool*, and *groovy* into pop language, which have since migrated to standard vocabulary. Savan describes the abuse of slang phrases in common conversations. Her point seems to be that in the past, the primary conduits of new vocabulary were writers. However, not before the second half of the twentieth century did it become routine for the conduit to be popular media recycling, essentially, teen-created words. As mentioned, the words *pot* and *marijuana* became common words in the 1960s after they were adopted by the counterculture youth of the era. These were spread by TV sitcoms and other programs of the era to society at large. The number of such words that have entered the communal lexicon since the 1960s is truly mind-boggling, constituting strong evidence that the media have become a major social force, as Savan suggests. The way actors speak on screen seems to constitute a model of how to speak on the streets. *Animal House* (1978) introduced slang terms still used today, such as *wimp*, which is now a common term for someone who is scared or has no courage, and *brew*, which means a beer. *Clueless* introduced pop language mannerisms such as *as if*, an exclamation of disbelief, and *whatever* to convey that one does not care what another person is saying. In 2004, the film *Mean Girls* introduced *plastic,* meaning fake girls who look like Barbie dolls, and *fetch*, which is an abbreviation of *fetching* to describe something cool and trendy. Movies, TV, and the Internet inform people *how* to say things. The reason why pop language has become so dominant is because people gain insights into the events of their everyday worlds through the media and the Internet. Where once it took decades for a change to penetrate the language, now it seems to take only days. And the reason for this is that electronic media are accessible to one and all. The greatest influence on the development of language today does come not from the pen, but from the screen.

Gesture

As we saw in the opening chapter, the smoking performance put on by Cheryl and Ted was grounded on the strategic deployment of gesture. However, *gesture* has many more functions than courtship-based communication. It is nonverbal communication involving hand, arm, and head movements that can be used

independently of, or in tandem with, oral speech. *Gesture languages* include the sign languages used by hearing-impaired individuals, the alternate sign languages used by religious groups during periods of imposed silence or during ritualistic practices, the hand signals used by police officers to control traffic, and the hand and arm movements used by conductors to lead an orchestra.

The ability to use the hands—the dominant limbs in the human species, given their physiological structure that make grasping and pointing simple—was achieved by the first hominids who had the capacity to walk upright. The liberation of the hands from the requirements of locomotion not only allowed these early humans to make tools and to use fire deliberately, but also to use their hands for signaling. The capacity to point out and locate beings, objects, and events in the immediate environment, and to convey their existence and location to others, conferred upon the human species a new and powerful control over the environment. Manual communication coincides with the emergence of self-awareness and consciousness. As already discussed, the first inscriptions and cave etchings were, no doubt, realized through hand gestures, which were probably transferred to a wall or some other surface with some tool. These "gesture-to-drawing" portrayals were humanity's first visual representations. Children, too, pass through an initial stage of gesture before they develop vocal language, constantly pointing to things they recognize. Although oral speech eventually becomes the dominant form of communication around the age of two years, gesture does not vanish. It remains a functional subsystem of communication that can always be enlisted as an alternate and more understandable form of message transmission.

When people do not speak the language of the country they are visiting, they resort instinctively to gesture to get a message across or to negotiate a meaning. For example, to describe an automobile, a person might use the hands to portray a steering wheel and the motion used to steer a car, accompanying this gesture perhaps with an imitative sound of a motor. The iconic nature of gesture is what makes it a more universal, and less culture-dependent, mode of communication, even though studies show that the type and form of gesture used will vary from culture to culture, suggesting that while there are more common elements in gesture than there are in vocal languages, it is likely that the two—a specific language and the gestures that accompany it—form a structural partnership. As Adam Kendon aptly writes, "grammatical and lexical differences between languages may play a role in structuring the way a speaker organizes associated gestures."[20]

The intriguing work of linguist David McNeill (as we saw in Chap. 2) has revealed, in fact, that oral discourse is typically accompanied by gestures that depict the imagery implicit in the content of a message.[21] For example, when someone says, "Where did you get that idea?" they tend to use an accompanying

gesture of the hand curved, up high in front of the face, with the fingers and thumb forward and apart, giving the appearance of holding onto something. With sentences such as "I gave him that idea," and "It's hard to get that idea across," the accompanying gesture is both hands extended, moving downward, making the speaker appear to be presenting an object to the other person along a conduit. With utterances such as "Your words are full of meaning" and "I can't get these ideas into words," the accompanying gesture is both hands forming a cup, with the fingers curled and palms up, to show two containers. Such gestures suggest a semiotic link between hand movements and vocal speech.

In the case of hearing-impaired individuals, needless to say, the primary means of communication is through *sign language*, that is, language based on hand signs. These signs are word-like units with both concrete and abstract meanings, made by either one or both hands, which assume distinctive shapes and movements. Spatial relations, directions, and orientation of the hand movements, as well as facial expressions and bodily movements, make up the grammar of sign languages. As Goldin-Meadow aptly puts it, "sign languages assume the structural properties characteristic of spoken languages."[22]

The Plains peoples of North America employ sign language as a means of communication between tribes that do not share the same oral language. The gesture signs represent things in nature, ideas, emotions, and sensations. The sign for a *white person*, for instance, is made by drawing the fingers across the forehead, indicating a hat. The sensation of *cold* is indicated by a shivering motion of the hands in front of the body. The same sign is used for *winter* and for *year*, because Native Americans traditionally count years in terms of winters. Slowly turning the hand, relaxed at the wrist, means indecision, doubt, or possibility; a modification of this sign, with quicker movement, is the question sign. Special signs also exist for each tribe to represent the rivers, mountains, and other natural features within their particular habitats.

The possibility that gesture is a kind of "prelude" to oral speech, and thus full language, led some twentieth-century animal psychologists to teach gesture to primates, who lack the requisite anatomical organs for vocal speech, to determine whether they are capable of human language. When the female chimpanzee named Washoe was almost one year of age, she was taught American Sign Language by the Gardner husband-and-wife team in 1966.[23] Remarkably, Washoe learned to use 132 signs in just over four years. What appeared to be even more remarkable was that she began to put signs together to express a small set of concepts resembling the early sentences of children. Actually, the Premack husband-and-wife team, whose work began back in 1954, went further than the Gardners, teaching a five-year-old chimpanzee, who they called Sarah, a form of written language.[24] They instructed Sarah to

arrange and respond to vertical sequences of plastic tokens that represented individual words: a small pink square = banana; a small blue triangle = apple; and so on. Sarah eventually developed the ability to respond to combinations of such symbols that included references to abstract notions.

In another highly publicized primate experiment, yet another husband-and-wife team, Duane and Sue Rumbaugh, taught common chimpanzees and bonobos to associate symbols with a variety of things, people, and places in and around a laboratory. In one study, they had taught two chimps to engage in a conversation. One was allowed to observe a trainer hide an item of food in a container. The chimp knew through previous training how to press a key on a computer keyboard with the symbol for the food item in question, which could be seen by a second chimp. The second chimp was then able, on the basis of the first chimp's keyboard signal, to locate the food item. This result might seem to be truly remarkable. However, Epstein, Lanza, and Skinner were able to get the same kind of behavior from two pigeons, named Jack and Jill.[25] The pigeons were put in adjoining cages with a transparent wall between them. Jack was in a position to peck a key labeled "What color?" as a cue for Jill to look behind a curtain with three lights—red, green, and yellow—that were not visible to Jack. After ascertaining which light was illuminated, Jill pecked one of three keys—R, G, or Y—which Jack could see. Jack then responded by pecking a key labeled "Thank you," whereupon Jill was given a food reward.

Amazingly, Keith and Cathy Hayes were apparently successful in teaching a chimp named Viki how to utter a few words.[26] They treated Viki like a child with a human upbringing. Viki was able to actually articulate the words "Mama," "Papa," "cut," and "up." Other experimenters, such as Mary Lee Jensvold and Allan Gardner, have tried to find out if chimpanzees can apply what they learn from humans to new situations.[27] A researcher would bring up a specific topic, and then ask a chimpanzee a relevant question on the topic. Jensvold and Gardner claim that the chimps were able to understand and expand upon simple questions, in ways that are similar to how children respond to such questions.

Despite all the enthusiasm and all the truly extraordinary claims, what seems to be happening in most cases is not unlike classical conditioning, which cannot be ruled out as a factor in the primate language experiments. This in no way implies that animals do not possess sophisticated communication systems or intelligence. They do, but they are different from language, which is based on connotation structure and nuances that delve into human history. The primate trainers may have read much more in the linguistic behaviors of their primates than was really there. The Gardners had hired a hearing-impaired ASL user to help train Washoe. Later on, he made the following revealing comment[28]:

> Every time the chimp made a sign, we were supposed to write it down in the log. They [the Gardners] were always complaining because my log didn't show enough signs. I watched really carefully. The chimp's hands were moving constantly. Maybe I missed something, but I don't think so. The hearing people were logging every movement the chimp made as a sign. Every time the chimp put his hand in his mouth, they'd say "Oh, he's making the sign for drink," and they'd give him some milk. When the chimp scratched himself, they'd record it as the sign for scratch. Sometimes the trainers would say, "Oh, amazing, look at that, it's exactly like the ASL sign for give!" It wasn't.

There really has emerged no impartial evidence to suggest that chimpanzees and gorillas are capable of language *in the same way* that humans are, or of having the ability or desire to pass on to their offspring what they have learned from their human mentors, despite claims to the contrary.

Notes

1. See, for example, Noam Chomsky, *On nature and language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
2. Charles W. Morris, *Foundations of the theory of signs* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1938).
3. See, Lev S. Vygotsky, *Thought and language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962).
4. Julian Jaynes, *The origin of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975).
5. An in-depth synthesis of this line of work in linguistics, known more technically as *cognitive linguistics*, can be found in Gary B. Palmer, *Toward a theory of cultural linguistics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).
6. Robert Levine, *A geography of time: The temporal misadventures of a social psychologist or how every culture keeps time just a little bit differently* (New York: Basic, 1997).
7. Ronald W. Langacker has studied this aspect of language rather profoundly in *Concept, image, and symbol: The cognitive basis of grammar* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990) and *Grammar and conceptualization* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999).
8. Roger W. Brown, *Psycholinguistics* (New York: Free Press, 1970), 258–73.
9. The most in-depth theory of modeling systems in semiotics is the one by Thomas A. Sebeok, *Signs: An introduction to semiotics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).
10. F. M. Müller, *Lectures on the science of language* (London: Longmans, Green, 1861).

11. B. Alpher, "Feminine as the unmarked grammatical gender: Buffalo girls are no fools," *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 7 (1987): 169–87.
12. Edward Sapir, *Language* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1921).
13. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic color terms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).
14. N. McNeill, "Colour and colour terminology," *Journal of Linguistics* 8 (1972): 21–33.
15. A detailed treatment of color categories, as well as an up-to-date debate on the relation between color categories and perception, can be found in C. L. Hardin and Luisa Maffi, eds., *Color categories in thought and language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
16. David Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
17. Marcel Danesi, *The semiotics of emoji: The rise of visual language in the age of the Internet* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
18. Danesi, op. cit.
19. Leslie Savan, *Slam dunks and no-brainers: Language in your life, the media, business, politics, and, like, whatever* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2005). In *Conversation: A history of a declining art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), Stephen Miller also decries the loss of true conversation, which he similarly claims is due to media influence. But I have a slightly different take on this, namely that conversation is a code that changes over time and it does so because the channels we use to converse are changing. Talk online is bound to be different from talk face-to-face. But the content of conversations have always remained the same from time immemorial. Conversation is about presenting the Self in daily life with the strategies that are consistent with trends within that very life.
20. Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visible action as utterance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 348.
21. David McNeill, *Hand and mind: What gestures reveal about thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and *Gesture & thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
22. Susan Goldin-Meadow, *Hearing gesture: How our hands help us think* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2003), 194.
23. R. A. Gardner and B. T. Gardner, "Teaching sign language to a chimpanzee," *Science* 165 (1969): 664–72.
24. D. Premack and A. J. Premack, *The mind of an ape* (New York: Norton, 1983).
25. R. Epstein, R. P. Lanza, and B. F. Skinner, "Symbolic communication between two pigeons," *Science* 207 (1980): 543–545.
26. G. Urban, "Metasignaling and language origins," *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002): 233–246.

27. M. L. Jensvold and R. A. Gardner, "Interactive use of sign language by cross-fostered chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*)," *Journal of Comparative Psychology* 114 (2000): 335–346.
28. Cited in Stephen Pinker, *The language instinct: How the mind creates language* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), 37.

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5

Kisses Sweeter Than Wine: Metaphor and the Making of Meaning

Midway between the unintelligible and the commonplace, it is metaphor which most produces knowledge.
—Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

Let's go back to the kissing scene on Martha's video described previously. There is something else in that scene that is semiotically interesting. During the small talk that followed the kissing action, Ted can be heard saying, "Your kisses are sweeter than wine, Cheryl." As you might surmise by now, a semiotician would not construe Ted's statement as merely a figure of speech chosen to embellish his compliment. Unlike most people, who hardly notice such expressions, having become so accustomed to hearing and using them, the semiotician would see Ted's *metaphor* as revealing something much more fundamental about human meaning-making than meets the eye (to use a metaphor). To the semiotician, metaphor is the conceptual glue that binds all the meaning systems and codes in the system of everyday life together. Language is the code that most reveals how it works, although it is found in all other codes.

Metaphor brings us into an in-depth study of iconicity. Recall from Chap. 2 that icons are signs that stand for things by resemblance or simulation of some type. Metaphor does as well, but it does so in an imaginary abstract way. To say that a kiss is sweet involves a mental simulation of a sensory experience—sweetness—that is projected onto the experience of an emotion—love. In a nutshell, that is how metaphor works. It is an icon of an imagined experience—an attempt to make the abstract, imaginary world of mind understandable in concrete terms. Metaphorical expressions are so common and pervasive

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M. Danesi, *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other* Interesting *Things*,
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that people hardly ever notice them. Although interest in metaphor is ancient, the study of its relation to cognition and culture is a relatively recent phenomenon. And the interest has soared. Since about the mid-1950s the amount of research on metaphor has been mind-boggling. There is currently so much information on metaphor scattered in journals and books that it would take a gargantuan effort just to organize and classify it. For this reason, I have had to be highly selective in this chapter.

Aristotle and the Discovery of Metaphor

If a very young child were to ask a parent "What is love?" one thing the parent would not do is give the child an encyclopedic definition of love. Rather, the parent would relate it to an experience that is familiar to the child: "Well, you know, love is like…when mummy or daddy kisses or hugs you…and that makes you feel warm and cozy inside, right?" Adults say things such as this all the time because they intuitively know that children can relate an abstract concept such as *love* to an emotional event or feeling connected with it. This is exactly what metaphor allows people to do—to link an abstraction to something concrete, familiar, or experienced. People the world over use similar "metaphorical elucidations" to explain morals, ideas, values, and other abstractions to children. Metaphor is *the* faculty that makes *Homo sapiens* sapient, yet it is still largely the popular view that it is a device of poets—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language.

The term *metaphor*, itself a metaphor (*meta* "beyond" and *pherein* "to carry"), was coined by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who saw it as much more than poetic license. Take the notion of *life*. How would one answer the question "What is life?" As Aristotle knew, there really is no literal way to answer this question satisfactorily. Aware of this, the poet would probably write a poem about it, the dramatist a play. The common person, too, would come up with something just as inventive (albeit on a much smaller scale). Someone might say that "life is a stage." Incredibly, that would be the end of the matter, for such an answer invariably seems to satisfy the questioner. The word *life* refers to something that we know exists, but when asked to describe it, there is virtually no way of conveying its meaning sufficiently in literal words. This is because the notion of *life* is something abstract, and thus produces no concrete images to which we can put literal words. A *stage*, on the other hand, is something we can visualize, and thus describe easily in such words—it is a raised platform on which theatrical performances are presented, in which actors perform actions according to their roles, and so on. Now, the use of *stage* to describe *life* makes this notion intelligible. No further explanations are needed.

Remarkably, in having described life as a stage, we now have a different understanding or view of what life means. Indeed, if one were asked "How would you change your life?" the metaphor itself would suggest the vocabulary required to formulate a viable answer. For example, one could say that a change in *role* or *setting* (whatever the case may be) would be appropriate to change one's life. In other words, the original metaphor, by its very nature, teaches and guides us by the new information it produces, as if by *magic*. Metaphor is, in fact, word magic in its most common, albeit largely unrecognized, form. Aristotle suggested that people use metaphor not only to render intelligible what is abstract, but also to create new meanings, to seek new insights, to discover new concepts, and, remarkably, no special intellectual powers are required. The ability to coin and use metaphors is an innate skill of all humans, no matter how much intelligence or erudition they may have.

Given its apparent open-endedness—one could have related *life* to many other visualizable things (to a river, to the seasons, and so on)—the question that comes to mind is how do we go about gleaning the meaning of a given metaphor? Aristotle answered this question rather cleverly. He suggested that a metaphor is like a logical proportion that people must figure out in terms of the formula **A** is to **B** as **C** is to **D**. For example, consider the meaning of "Old age is the evening of life." If *old age* is the **A** in the proportion, *life* the **B**, and *evening* the **C**, then a successful interpretation of the metaphor lies in figuring out the **D** in this formula: *old age* (**A**) is to *life* (**B**) as *evening* (**C**) is to (= **D**)? The answer to this logical puzzle is *twilight*: *old age* is to *life* as *evening* is to *twilight*. This proportion, incidentally, pervades mythical and literary traditions throughout the world. It is found in the legend of Oedipus the King and the Sphinx—the mythical creature with the head and breasts of a woman, the body of a lion, a serpent tail, and the wings of a bird who guarded entrance to the ancient city of Thebes. When Oedipus approached the city, so the legend goes, the Sphinx confronted him, posing the following riddle to him: "What is it that has four feet in the morning, two at noon, and three at twilight?" Failure to answer it correctly meant instant death—a fate that had befallen all who had ventured to Thebes before Oedipus. The fearless Oedipus answered: "Humans, who crawl on all fours as infants, then on two legs, and finally with a cane in old age." Upon hearing the correct answer, the Sphinx killed itself, and Oedipus entered Thebes as a hero for having gotten rid of the terrible monster that had kept the city enslaved for a long period of time.

Various versions of the Sphinx's riddle exist. The one paraphrased above is adapted from the play *Oedipus Rex* by the Greek dramatist Sophocles (c. 496–406 BCE). Whatever its version, it is evidence that since the dawn of history people come to an understanding of life through metaphor. As humanity's first recorded riddle, the Riddle of the Sphinx provides us, in fact, with an

early model of how metaphor manifests itself in human affairs. Often, Aristotle emphasized, metaphorical reasoning provides the only way to understand or describe something. In English, we use an agrarian term in the sentence "The ship *plowed* through the ocean," not as a mere idiomatic choice, but because it is the only way we can talk about that action. So, too, with many other concepts. The notion of "mental depth," for instance, is a product of metaphorical reasoning. That is why in English we talk about thoughts as being *deep*, *profound* (a word that contains the Latin *fundus* "bottom"), or *shallow*, even though we do not consciously experience actual physical depth when using such words.

Giambattista Vico

Aristotle himself claimed that, as knowledge-productive as it was, metaphor is essentially a poetic device. The basis of language is thus literal meaning and figurative language is essentially rhetorical embellishment. Two millennia went by before someone was perceptive enough to grasp fully the relevance of metaphor to human cognition—the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1744).

Like Aristotle, Vico saw metaphor as *the* strategy by which people come to grips with abstract knowledge. However, he went further than Aristotle, attributing the ability to use metaphor to the workings of the human imagination, the *fantasia*, as he called it. The first symbols of humanity, Vico claimed, were sensory metaphors revealing a strategy of knowing that he called *poetic*[1] because, like poets, people reflect on what they have sensed by inventing words that are designed to resemble their sensory responses. These words are metaphors and upon them human cultures are constructed. In the earliest stage of culture-making—which he called the age of the gods—human groups created religion, marriage rites, burial rites, and other basic institutions and rituals. These are based on common sense, which Vico defined as "judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire nation, or the entire human race."[2] Since these institutions originated "among entire peoples unknown to each other" they must have a "common ground of truth."[3] Vico called this primordial phase of culture the age of the gods, because it was a reaction to an intense fear of gods, to whom early people ascribed frightful events such as thunder and lightning. In the succeeding age of heroes, a dominant class of humans—the heroes of the evolving culture—emerged typically to subjugate the common people. These were men with great physical prowess who inspired fear and admiration in people, shaping cultural institutions to

satisfy their goals and aspirations. After a period of domination, a third stage—the age of equals—is brought about by the common people rising up and winning equality. However, in the process, society gradually starts to disintegrate by force of "the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits" that turn ordinary people "into beasts made inhuman by the barbarism of reflection."[4] At this point, Vico claimed, a culture has run its course, expiring "under soft words and embraces."[5]

The third age is an age of decline, of subtle irony and wit. Language is shallow, dispassionate, devoid of the poetic. However, all is not lost. On the contrary, because of the *fantasia*, we start once again to seek new meanings to life, becoming once more "religious, truthful, and faithful."[6] In this renewal, or *ricorso* as Vico called it, new metaphors are invented fostering new thoughts, new forms of expression. The lesson of history, Vico concludes, is that human beings are constantly *reinventing* themselves, but in so doing are unwittingly following a larger goal: "It is true that men themselves made this world of nations, but this world without doubt has issued from a mind often diverse, at times quite contrary, and always superior to the particular ends that men had proposed to themselves."[7]

I. A. Richards

More than a century after Vico, another philosopher, the German Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), became both intrigued and disconcerted by the power of metaphor, identifying it as humanity's greatest flaw because it allowed people to create an illusory reality in their minds and then to believe it as being true. The growing interest in metaphor shifted away from philosophy toward the scientific domain with the founding of experimental psychology in Leipzig, Germany in 1879 by the German physicist Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–87) and the German linguist and physiologist Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920). The early psychologists were the first to conduct experiments with subjects on how they processed figurative language. They found, for instance, that recall of a given metaphor was excellent if it was linked to a second one; otherwise it was easily forgotten. The early experiments thus suggested that metaphorical-associative thinking produced an effective retrieval form of memory and was, therefore, something to be investigated further by the fledgling science.

However, the scholar who kindled serious interest in metaphor as something much more than a rhetorical technique was a British literary critic—I. A. Richards (1893–1979). In his ground-breaking 1936 book, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Richards expanded upon Aristotle's basic idea that the function of

metaphor was related to the acquisition of knowledge, by proposing a viable explanation of how this function unfolded.[8] The meaning that a metaphor produces, Richards suggested, was due to an ontological interaction that is perceived to exist between the abstract topic of the metaphor (the *life* in "life is a stage") and its concrete vehicle (the *stage* in "life is a stage"). Explaining an abstract notion (*life*) in terms of something concrete (a *stage*) is hardly a mere figurative (decorative) ploy. Rather, it implies that we feel that the two share similar properties in our experience of them. Richards called this perceived commonality of properties the *ground* of the metaphor—the common area of meaning shared by the topic and the vehicle in the mind of the speaker. Therefore, the metaphor "life is a stage," was forged in the first place, not through a pure flight of poetic fancy, but because the maker of the metaphor saw *life* and *stages* as existing on the same ground in the mind. The mental perspective provided by metaphor is, in effect, a counterpart to physical perception; in English we say that *ideas* (an abstract topic) can be *approached*, *looked at*, *touched*, *taken apart*, *seen* from different *angles*, as if *ideas* had location in space and thus visible properties.

Richards' theory provides insight into the uncanny power of metaphor to generate "feeling forms" of thought within the mind. Consider a common metaphor such as "John is a gorilla." The topic in this case is a person named *John* and the vehicle the animal known as a *gorilla*. Describing *John* in terms of a *gorilla* implies that a conceptual interaction of physical and personality properties is perceived to exist between *John* and a *gorilla*. Now, even if we do not know the *John* alluded to in the metaphor, the metaphor forces us to think of *John* in terms of gorilla-like, simian traits. In our mind, we cannot help but see *John* looking and acting like a *gorilla*. Changing the vehicle shows this imaginary synesthetic effect even more sharply. If one were to call *John* a *snake*, a *pig*, or a *puppy*, then our image of *John* changes in kind—the person named *John* becomes serpentine, swine-like, and puppy-like in our mental view. John is, in short, what our metaphors say he is.

Following Richards' ground-breaking work, in the 1950s the psychologist Solomon Asch investigated metaphors based on words for sensations (*hot*, *cold*, *heavy*, and so on) in several unrelated languages.[9] Asch discovered something truly interesting, namely, that the same sense-projecting pattern was used in all the languages, even though the end results were different. For example, he found that *hot* stood for *rage* in Hebrew, *enthusiasm* in Chinese, *sexual arousal* in Thai, and *energy* in Hausa (the language of a people living in northern Nigeria, Niger, and adjacent areas). Intrigued by Asch's findings, psychologists in the late 1950s and 1960s undertook similar studies, signaling a turning point in the study of metaphor. Indeed, since then, the amount of research on

this phenomenon has been truly astronomical. In 1979, the literary scholar W. Booth calculated that, given the number of books and articles on metaphor published in the year 1977 alone, by the year 2039 there would be "more students of metaphor on Earth than people!"[10] The prediction was not itself simply a figure of speech—today, branches of linguistics, called cognitive linguistics or cognitive semantics—have arisen because of the study of metaphor.

Lakoff and Johnson

By the end of the 1970s scholars from different disciplines were convinced that metaphor was more than a metaphor (in the traditional sense). In one classic 1977 study, a series of verbal metaphors was presented to brain-damaged subjects who were asked to select one of four response pictures that best portrayed the meaning of each one.[11] For the sentence "A heavy heart can really make a difference" the subjects were shown four pictures from which to choose: a person crying (= metaphorical meaning); a person staggering under the weight of a huge red heart (= literal meaning); a 500-pound weight (= a representation emphasizing the adjective *heavy*); a red heart (= a representation emphasizing the noun phrase *red heart*). The subjects were divided into those with damage to their left hemisphere (LH), those with lesions in the right hemisphere (RH), and a normal control group. Normal and LH subjects gave up to five times as many metaphorical responses, but the RH group showed great difficulty in coming up with the appropriate metaphorical answers. The researchers, Ellen Winner and Howard Gardner, thus established a link between the meaning of a metaphor and the RH of the brain, since damage to that hemisphere obviously impeded comprehension of metaphor. This was not an inconsequential finding, because the RH is the cerebral area responsible for producing most of our mental images. Therefore, the idea that metaphor and mental imagery are intertwined turned out to be more than just speculation. In the same year, 1977, the psychologist Howard Pollio and his associates found that metaphor was a statistically pervasive force in everyday discourse.[12] They determined that speakers of English uttered, on average, 3000 novel metaphors and 7000 idiomatic expressions per week—a finding that laid the groundwork for the study that finally established metaphor as a fundamental area of concern for psychology and linguistics—George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's 1980 book, *Metaphors We Live By*.[13] The innovative claim of that book was that metaphor is the cornerstone of language.

First, Lakoff and Johnson assert what Aristotle claimed two millennia before, namely, that there are two types of concepts—concrete and abstract. The two scholars add a notable twist to this Aristotelian dichotomy—namely, that *abstract concepts* are built up systematically from *concrete* ones through metaphorical reasoning. They thus renamed abstract concepts *conceptual metaphors*. These are generalized metaphorical formulas that define specific abstractions. Recall the earlier example of John and the animals to which he was associated metaphorically (gorilla, snake, pig, puppy). Each specific metaphor ("John is a gorilla," "John is a snake," and so on) is not an isolated example of poetic fancy. Moreover, since John can be replaced by any other person (Mary, Edward, and so on), each conceivable metaphorical combination ("John is a gorilla," "Mary is a snake," and so on) is really an example of a more general metaphorical formula: *people are animals*. Such formulas are what Lakoff and Johnson call *conceptual metaphors*. Each of the two parts is called a domain: *people* is the *target domain* because it is the abstract topic (the "target" of the conceptual metaphor); *animals* is the *source domain* because it is the class of vehicles that deliver the metaphor (the "source" of the metaphorical concept). An *abstract concept* can now be defined simply as a "mapping" of one domain onto the other. This model suggests that abstract concepts are formed systematically through such mappings and that specific metaphors (called *linguistic metaphors* in contrast to *conceptual metaphors*) are traces to the target and source domains. So, when we hear people talking, for instance, of *ideas* in terms of *geometrical figures and relations*—"Those ideas are *circular*," "I don't see the *point* of your idea," "Her ideas are *central* to the discussion," "Their ideas are *diametrically opposite*," and so on—we can now easily identify the two domains as *ideas* (target domain) and *geometrical figures/relations* (source domain) and, therefore, the conceptual metaphor as: *ideas are geometrical figures and relations*.

Conceptual metaphors pervade common discourse. A few examples will suffice to make this evident.

Happiness is up/Sadness is down

I'm feeling *up*.
She's feeling *down*.
That comment *boosted* my spirits.
My mood *sank* after I heard him speak.
Your joke gave me a *lift*.

Health and life are up/Sickness and death are down

I'm at the *peak* of my health.
He *fell* ill.

Life is an *uphill* struggle.
Lazarus *rose* from the dead.
He's *sinking* fast.

Light is knowledge/Dark is ignorance

I was *illuminated* by that professor.
I was left in the *dark* about what happened.
That idea is very *clear*.
Their theory is *obscure*.
His example *shed light* on several matters.

Theories are buildings

That is a *well-constructed* theory.
His theory is on *solid ground.*
That theory needs *support*.
Their theory *collapsed* under criticism.
She put together the *framework* of a very interesting theory.

Ideas and theories are plants

Her ideas have come to *fruition*.
That's a *budding* theory.
Aristotle's ideas have contemporary *offshoots.*
That idea has become a *branch* of mathematics.

Ideas are commodities

He certainly knows how to *package* his ideas.
That idea just won't *sell.*
There's no *market* for that idea.
That's a *worthless* idea.

As Lakoff and Johnson emphasize, we do not detect the presence of conceptual metaphors in such common expressions because of repeated usage. We no longer interpret the word *see* metaphorically in utterances such as "I don't *see* what you mean," "Do you *see* what I'm saying?" because its metaphorical uses have become so familiar to us. However, the association between the biological act of seeing outside the body with the imaginary act of seeing within the mind was originally the source of the conceptual metaphor, *seeing is understanding/believing/thinking*, which now permeates common discourse:

There is more to this than *meets the eye*.
I have a different *point of view*.
It all depends on how you *look* at it.

I take a *dim view* of the whole matter.
I never *see eye to eye* on things with you.
You have a different *worldview* than I do.
Your ideas have given me great *insight* into life.

In the inner world of abstractions, ideas, like objects, can be seen, looked into, scanned, moved, arranged. This is why we have expressions such as *broad-minded*, *far-sighted*, *far-reaching*, *far-fetched*, *narrow-minded*, *short-sighted*, *worldview*, *insight*, *foresight*, and *hindsight*. As Walter Ong has pointed out, the universality of such words suggests that "we would be incapacitated for dealing with knowledge and intellection without massive visualist conceptualization, that is, without conceiving of intelligence through models applying initially to vision."[14]

The next important point made by Lakoff and Johnson is that there are several general kinds of cognitive processes involved in metaphor. The first one involves orientation. This produces concepts that are derived from our physical experiences of orientation—*up* versus *down*, *back* versus *front*, *near* versus *far*, and so on. For example, the experience of *up* versus *down* underlies conceptual metaphors such as:

Happiness is up	=	I'm feeling *up.*
Sadness is down	=	She's feeling *down* today.
More is up	=	My income rose (went *up*) last year.
Less is down	=	Her salary went *down* after her change of job.

This *up* versus *down* schema derives from the accumulated experiences of standing upright, climbing stairs, and looking up or down. Let us assume, as a hypothetical scenario, that this image spontaneously appeared in the mind of an individual during a conversation in association with a topic that involved the notion of quantity (for example, *prices*). That individual might have said something like "Prices keep going up." Caught by the force of this metaphorical image, a listener might have imitated the model, answering with something like "Yes, and my earnings have fallen." Continued associations between *up* and *more* and *down* and *less*—that is, between orientation and quantity—in routine communicative exchanges are what led over time to the establishment of the abstract concept: *more is up/less is down.* Lakoff and Johnson claim that the experiential forces at work in conceptualization constantly produce such *image schemas*.[15] These are defined as largely unconscious mental outlines of recurrent shapes, actions, dimensions, and so on that derive from perception and sensation. Image schemas are so deeply rooted that we are hardly ever aware of their control over conceptualization, but they can always be conjured

up easily.[16] If someone were to ask you to explain an idiom such as *spill the beans*, you would not likely have a conscious image schema involving beans and the action of spilling them. However, if that same person were to ask you the following questions—"Where were the beans before they were spilled?" "How big was the container?" "Was the spilling on purpose or accidental?"—then you would no doubt start to visualize the appropriate schema. You would see the beans as kept in a container and the container as being about the size of the human head.

An interesting type of image schema is, in fact, that of the container. This produces conceptual metaphors in which activities, emotions, and ideas are associated with entities and substances contained in something:

The mind is a container	=	I'm *full* of memories.
Anger is fluid in a container	=	You make my blood *boil.*

There are other types of image schemas underlying conceptualization, of course. Suffice it to say here that, in all cases, the source domain is something that has either experiential force or, by cultural conditioning, particular salience in the mind of people. This can be seen in the following examples:

Argument is war	=	I *demolished* his argument.
Labor is a resource	=	He was *consumed* by his job.
Time is a resource	=	Time is *money.*

To get a firmer sense of how such concepts shape discourse, consider the *argument is war* metaphor. The target domain of *argument* is conceptualized in terms of *warlike activities* (the source domain), and thus in terms of battles that can be won or lost, of positions that can be attacked or guarded, of ground that can be gained or lost, of lines of attack that can be abandoned or defended, and so on. These warlike images are so embedded in our mind that we do not normally realize that they guide our perception of, and emotional reactions to, arguments. Nonetheless, they are there, surfacing regularly in such common expressions as the following:

Your claims are *indefensible*.
You *attacked* all my *weak points*.
Your criticisms were *right on target.*
I *demolished* his argument.
I've never *won* an argument.
She *shot down* all my points.
If you use that *strategy*, I'll *wipe you out*.

The last relevant point made by Lakoff and Johnson in their truly fascinating book is that culture is built on conceptual metaphors, since these coalesce into of a system of meanings. This is accomplished by a kind of "higher-order" metaphorizing—that is, as target domains are associated with many kinds of source domains, the concepts they underlie become increasingly more abstract and interconnected, leading to what Lakoff and Johnson call *idealized cultural* or *cognitive models* (ICMs). To understand what this means, consider the target domain of *ideas* again. The following three conceptual metaphors, among many others, deliver the meaning of this concept in three separate ways, constituting a slice of the ICM for this concept:

Ideas are food

Those ideas left a *sour taste* in my mouth.
It's hard to *digest* all those ideas at once.
Even though he is a *voracious* reader; he can't *chew* all those ideas.
That teacher is always *spoon-feeding* her students.

Ideas are people

Darwin is the *father* of modern biology.
Those medieval ideas continue to *live on* even today.
Cognitive linguistics is still in its *infancy.*
Maybe we should *resurrect* that ancient idea.
She *breathed* new life into that idea.

Ideas are fashion

That idea went out of *style* several years ago.
Those scientists are the *avant-garde* of their field.
Those revolutionary ideas are no longer in *vogue.*
Semiotics has become truly *chic*.
That idea is an old *hat.*

Recall from other examples, cited earlier, that there are other ways of conceptualizing *ideas*—for example, in terms of *buildings* ("That is a well-constructed theory"), *plants* ("That theory has deep roots"), *commodities* ("That theory will not sell"), *geometry* ("Those are parallel theories"), and *seeing* ("That is a clearly articulated theory"). The constant juxtaposition of such conceptual formulas in common everyday thinking produces, cumulatively, an idealized cognitive model (ICM) of ideas.

ICMs allow us to get a glimpse into cultural groupthink.[17] Everything that I have written in this book, too, has been structured by ICMs. This applies to

any verbal text. Listen to a news broadcast, a sermon, a political speech, or read any textbook, newspaper article, blog, Facebook page, tweet, and you will soon realize how each text has been woven together with the handiwork of metaphor. When a preacher talks about the need for being "cleansed" or "purified" he or she is utilizing the concrete force of the *sex is dirty* conceptual metaphor to impart a moral feeling of "uncleanness" to believers.

Metaphor is also the source of innovation. As Vico argued, the metaphorical capacity is tied to the *fantasia,* which predisposes human beings to search out or forge new meanings. This is why novel metaphors are being created all the time. If someone were to say "Life is a cup of coffee," it is unlikely that you would have heard this expression before, because it is not (as far as I can tell) a routine option within English conversation. However, its novelty forces you to reflect upon its meaning. The vehicle used, a cup of coffee, is a common object and therefore easily perceivable as a source for thinking about everyday life. The metaphor compels us to start thinking of life in terms of the kinds of physical, gustatory, social, and other attributes that are associated with a cup of coffee. For this metaphor to gain currency, however, it must capture the fancy of many other people for a period of time. Then and only then will its novelty have become worn out and will it become the basis for a new conceptual metaphor: *life is a drinking substance in its appropriate container*. After that, expressions such as "life is a cup of tea," "life is a bottle of beer," "life is a glass of milk," and the like, all become similarly functional as offering different perspectives on life.

The ability to coin metaphors allows people not only to produce new concepts, but also to fill-in "knowledge gaps" in a creative way. Recall from the previous chapter how my grandson at fifteen months of age referred to our orange-haired household cat, Pumpkin, as *juice*, in obvious reference to the color of the orange juice that he drank on a regular basis. The child had obviously extracted the quality of "orangeness" from the liquid (the source domain) and applied it to a new referent—the cat's hair (the target domain). As this example shows, metaphor is a "conceptual gap-filler."

There are other figures of speech that occur in everyday discourse, but following Lakoff and Johnson's discovery of conceptual metaphors, these are now considered subcategories of the general process of metaphor. Nevertheless, there are two that are regularly studied separately—*metonymy* and *irony*—because of their particular semantic characteristics:

Metonymy is the use of an entity to refer to another that is related to it; in other words, it exemplifies part-for-the-whole reasoning[18]:

She likes to read *Emily Dickinson* (= *the writings of Emily Dickinson*).
He's in *dance* (= *the dancing profession*).
My mom frowns on *blue jeans* (= *the wearing of blue jeans*).
New *windshield wipers* will satisfy him (= *the state of having new wipers*).
The *automobile* is destroying our health (= *the collection of automobiles*).
We need a couple of *strong bodies* for our teams (= *strong people*).
I've got a new *set of wheels* (= *car)*.
We need *new blood* in this organization (= *new people*).

A conceptual formula of this type that requires special mention is *the face is the person*.

He's just another *pretty face.*
There are an awful lot of *faces* in the audience.
We need some new *faces* around here.

As we saw in Chap. 3, this concept also crystallizes in the nonverbal domain, especially in the art of portraiture. Expressions such as *saving face*, *face the music*, *putting on a happy/sad face* reveal our fascination with the face as a sign of character and personality. Unlike metaphor, metonymy does not function to create knowledge through associative-connective reasoning; rather, it allows people to cast specific mental light on certain situations, so as to make some social or personal comment on them. For instance, the use of *butt*, in expressions such as "Get your butt over here!" to stand for a *person*, forces us to focus on a part of human anatomy, the buttocks, that elicits images of laziness and indolence, given that the butt is the anatomical part used for sitting. In the choice of *buses* to stand for those who drive them as in "The buses are on strike" we are forced to evaluate the consequences of the strike. Metonymy is not productive of new knowledge. It is designed to allow people to provide perspective, opinion, point of view, or criticism.

Irony is, generally speaking, the use of words to convey a meaning contrary to their literal sense—"I love being tortured"; "That stupid plan is clever." This is a remarkable form of discourse, based on exploiting the incongruities and complexities of an experience or a situation. As such, it is both a protective strategy, deflecting attention away from the self towards others, by which one can make value judgments without commitment, and a verbal weapon that can be used against others.[19] In irony, the context is critical since without it a statement such as "I love being tortured" could be interpreted literally. If the person was a masochist, then this statement would hardly be construed as ironic. For irony to work, the person must be in real torment and dislike it.

Irony has various cognitive and social functions. Suppose, for example, that a ballet dancer trips several times and her choreographer says, "You were very graceful!" The choreographer is using irony so that the dancer will become aware that she knows of the trips and that something has to be done about them. Another function is to relay to an interlocutor something that others do not know. In *Oedipus Rex*, for instance, Oedipus kills a man. He does not know that the man is Laius, his father. Oedipus puts a curse on the slayer of Laius. The irony is that Oedipus has unknowingly cursed himself, since Laius turns out to be his unknown father. Irony is also used to highlight events that work out contrary to expectations. Suppose that a home town is preparing a party for a returning soldier. However, the soldier is killed in an accident on his way home. The irony comes from the contrast between the expectations of the people and the actual situation.

These examples show that metonymy and irony can be subsumed under the same cognitive process as metaphor. So, the part-for-the-whole structure of metonymy could be considered to be a mapping of a part of something (source) onto the whole (target). For instance, the *White House* is mapped by implication onto *the President* in an expression such as "The White House made its announcement yesterday." Thus, the part of some concept is extracted from it, and then mapped back onto it. Irony can also be viewed as a mapping—in this case, a source domain consisting of an "opposite" notion is mapped onto a target so that the latter can be understood through the opposition. In "I love being tortured," uttered by someone in pain, the concept of pain is highlighted through its opposite—pleasure. Again, *pleasure* is mapped onto *pain*, which requires an advanced form of interactive cognition, so to speak.

Blending Theory

Conceptual metaphor theory has received a lot of attention from cognitive scientists and semioticians ever since the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's book in 1980. From the relevant research the concept of *blending* has emerged. In this model, metaphor is not simply the result of a mapping from one domain to another, as was originally posited, but rather the result of a cognitive mechanism that blends domains together and then maps them onto other domains. The vehicle and topic, when blended together, produce new understanding, which is the intended meaning of the blend.

Blending theory was introduced formally in 2002 by Fauconnier and Turner[20] who argued that the process of linking source and target domains occurs when someone recognizes that the two domains in a metaphor might

be mutually suggestive. A blend, once completed, is available for use in subsequent or additional blends. If this is so, then blending theory can also be used to explain any semiotic process, including the construction and interpretation of signs. Every signifier immediately suggests a signified and, by extension, various connotations. These are not separable cognitively; they co-occur. In effect, semiosis is evidence that blending may well be the way in which the brain creates and interprets information.

Love Is Indeed Sweet, Metaphorically Speaking

We are now in a better position to provide an appropriate semiotic explanation to Ted's metaphorical statement: "Your kisses are sweeter than wine." First, let's consider a few of the ways in which we conceptualize *love* in English-speaking culture.[21]

Love is a physical force

There were *sparks* between us.
We are *attracted* to each other.
My life *revolves* around her.
I am *magnetically drawn* toward her.

Love is a medical-health force

Theirs is a *sick* relationship.
Their romance is *dead*; it can't be *revived*.
Their relationship is *in good shape*.

Love is madness

I'm *crazy* about her.
I'm constantly *raving* about him.
He's gone *mad* over her.
I've *lost my head* over him.

Love is a magical force

She *cast* a spell over me.
The *magic* is gone.
She has *bewitched* me.
I'm *in a trance* over him.

Love is a sweet taste

You're so *sweet*.
She's my *sweetheart*.
He's my *honey*.

As these examples illustrate, *love* is indeed a multifaceted experience, as our stack of metaphors attest, and as the poets have always known. Ted's statement is really no more than a particular use of the conceptual metaphor *love is a sweet taste*, which commonly surfaces in courtship and romance situations. This formula is a special manifestation of a broader one: *love is a taste in one's mouth*. This is why we say that *love* that is no longer *sweet* can leave a *bad*, *sour*, *rotten* taste in one's mouth. Like wine, love can both please and displease. Therefore, as poetic as Ted might have appeared to his partner, he really was using a time-tested and time-worn formula to give a romantic verbal touch to his courtship performance.

As Alice Deignan has argued, the use of such metaphorical strategies is not restricted to the language of love; they are general strategies that allow people to encode subjective judgments in a way that conceals their subjectivity: "Speakers use a metaphorical expression to encode their approval, or—far more frequently—their disapproval, of a manifestation of desire. The evaluation, thereby, takes on the appearance of objectivity."[22] Nor are such strategies peculiar to speakers of English. There are, in fact, many cross-cultural similarities in the ways in which sexual attractiveness and desire are modeled metaphorically. In the Chagga tribe of Tanzania, for example, the perception of *sex* and *love* as abstractions that can be "tasted" metaphorically manifests itself constantly in discourse about courtship and romance. In that society, the man is perceived to be the "eater" and the woman his "sweet food," as can be inferred from everyday expressions that mean, in translated form, "Does she taste sweet?" "She tastes sweet as sugar honey." Such a remarkable correspondence to the *love is a sweet taste* formula deployed by Ted suggests that this particular conceptual metaphor probably cuts across cultures.

Metaphor in Everyday Life

Conceptual metaphors surface not only in common discourse, but in nonverbal codes, rituals, and group behaviors as well. The metaphor *justice is blind*, for instance, crops up not only in conversations, but also in pictorial representations. This is why there are statues of blindfolded women inside or outside courtrooms to symbolize justice. The metaphorical expression *the scales of justice* is evident in the sculptures of scales near or inside justice buildings. Similarly, Ted's *love is a sweet taste* concept finds expression not only in discourse, but also in rituals of love-making. This is why sweets are given to a loved one at Valentine's Day, why matrimonial love is symbolized at a wedding ceremony by the eating of a cake, why lovers sweeten their breath with

candy before kissing, and so on. Any ritualistic display of *love* will depend on what concept people infer to be more representative of a specific situation. For example, at weddings the concept of *sweetness* would probably be seen to fit the situation, whereas that of *physical attraction* would most likely be considered pertinent during other kinds of courtship situations.

More often than not, conceptual metaphors are also traces to a culture's historical past. A common expression such as "He has fallen from grace" would have been recognized instantly in a previous era as referring to the Adam and Eve story in the Bible. Today we continue to use it with only a dim awareness (if any) of its Biblical origins. Expressions that portray life as a journey—"I'm still a long way from my goal," "There is no end in sight"—are similarly rooted in Biblical narrative where journeys are allusive to self-discovery. As the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye aptly pointed out, one cannot penetrate such expressions, and indeed most of Western literature or art, without having been exposed, directly or indirectly, to the original Biblical stories.[23] These are the source domains for many of the conceptual metaphors we use today for talking about and judging human actions, which bestow a kind of implicit metaphysical meaning and value to everyday life.

All *mythical* (from the Greek *mythos* "word," "speech," "tale of the gods") stories are, in effect, extended conceptual metaphors. These allow people to depict divine entities in terms of human images, with human bodily forms and emotions. It is extremely difficult to think of a divinity in any other way. In the Bible, for example, God is described as having physical characteristics and human emotions, but at the same time is understood to be a transcendent being.

The link to the past is also evident in proverbial language. Proverbs, like myths, are extended metaphors that provide sound practical advice.

You've got too many fires burning
(= advice to not do so many things at once)

Rome wasn't built in a day
(= advice to have patience)

Don't count your chickens before they're hatched
(= advice to be cautious)

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth
(= equal treatment is required in love and war)

Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise
(= this was Benjamin Franklin's adaptation of Aesop's proverb "The gods help them that help themselves")

Every culture has its proverbs, aphorisms, and sayings. These constitute a remarkable code of ethics and practical knowledge that anthropologists call "folk wisdom." Indeed, the very concept of *wisdom* implies the ability to apply proverbial language insightfully to a situation. As the American writer Maya Angelou has put it, proverbs have "couched the collective wisdom of generations." It is interesting to note that one of the most popular publications of the eighteenth century in America was an almanac, called *Poor Richard's Almanac*, written and published by Benjamin Franklin (1706–90). Apparently, it became popular, in part, because it contained alluring proverbs that have since become household sayings in America. Franklin came to the idea of the almanac early in his career, when he was a printer and publisher in Philadelphia. He issued the almanac for every year from 1733 to 1758, writing under the name of Richard Saunders, an imaginary astronomer. Similar to other almanacs of its time, *Poor Richard's* included such features as a horoscope, practical advice, jokes, poems, and weather predictions. At first, *Richard* had little wit or humor. However, as his character developed, he became a clever spokesman for Franklin's ideas on thrift, duty, hard work, and simplicity. *Poor Richard's Almanac* grew into one of the most popular and influential works printed in colonial America. Many of its sayings have become famous. Here are two of them:

> A penny saved is a penny earned.
> God helps those who help themselves.

The almanac greatly influenced American thought before and after the Revolutionary War of 1775–83. Franklin enlarged the almanac for the 1748 edition and called it *Poor Richard Improved*. In the preface to the final edition, he collected many of *Richard's* proverbs on how to succeed in business and public affairs. The preface, called "The Way to Wealth," was reprinted separately and was widely read in England and France, as well as in America.

The constant use of a proverb, a saying, or an aphorism leads to the formation of *clichés*—expressions that have become trite through over-usage. Phrases such as *handwriting on the wall*, *many are called, few are chosen*, and *an eye for an eye* are all proverbs that have become clichés. From Shakespeare we get the following clichés: *a pound of flesh*, *method to my madness*, and *witching hour*. Despite their apparent triteness, we continue to use them because we still sense that they provide wisdom. They enable common people to quote the Bible or Shakespeare, whether they mean to or not, and thus to give implicit authority to their statements. Orations and sermons, too, dispense their own

kind of advice and wisdom through metaphor. Rarely does a charismatic preacher not use metaphorical discourse in a persuasive way. The art of preaching lies in the ability to apply metaphorical concepts effectively to a topic—*sex is dirty*, *sin is punishable by fire*, and so on.

The use of metaphor extends to scientific reasoning. Science often involves things that cannot be seen, such as atoms, waves, gravitational forces, and magnetic fields. Therefore, scientists use their metaphorical know-how to get a look, so to speak, at this hidden matter. That is why waves are said to *undulate* through empty space as water waves ripple through a still pond; atoms to *leap* from one quantum state to another; electrons to *travel in circles* around an atomic nucleus; and so on. The physicist K. C. Cole has put it into perspective as follows:[24]

> The words we use are metaphors; they are models fashioned from familiar ingredients and nurtured with the help of fertile imaginations. "When a physicist says an electron is like a particle," writes physics professor Douglas Giancoli, "he is making a metaphorical comparison like the poet who says love is like a rose." In both images a concrete object, a rose or a particle, is used to illuminate an abstract idea, love or electron.

Poet and scientist alike use metaphor to extrapolate a suspected inner connection among things. Metaphors are slices of truth; they are evidence of the human ability to see the universe as a coherent organism. When a metaphor is accepted as fact, it enters human life, taking on an independent conceptual existence in the real world, and thus it can suggest ways in which to bring about changes in and to the world. Euclidean geometry, for instance, gave the world a certain kind of visual metaphorical structure for millennia—a world of relations among points, lines, circles, and so on. The structure was, however, changed to suit new ideas. This is precisely what happened when the mathematician Nicholai Lobachevski (1793–1856) imagined that Euclid's parallel lines would "meet" in some context, such as at the poles of a globe, thus giving the visual world a different structure. We are new reaping the benefits of his metaphorical thought, since the geometries that have derived from it are the basis for a host of modern-day inventions and physical theories of the world.

Notes

1. Giambattista Vico, *The new science*, translated by Thomas G. Bergin and Max Fisch, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), par. 821.
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3. Ibid., par. 144.

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14. Walter J. Ong, *Interfaces of the word: Studies in the evolution of consciousness and culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 134.
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6

Now, You Tell Me About Yourself: Why Do We Tell Stories?

Myth is an attempt to narrate a whole human experience, of which the purpose is too deep, going too deep in the blood and soul, for mental explanation or description.
—D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930)

Let's go back to the scene discussed in Chap. 4 on Martha's video, namely, the scene in which Ted asks Cheryl to tell him something about herself. After reciting her brief autobiography, Cheryl turns to her partner and says, "Now, you tell me something about yourself," obviously wanting to know a little about his life story.

To the semiotician, the telling of life stories is not simply a way to make idle conversation. On the contrary, in such courtship situations the semiotician would see it as yet another way of presenting an attractive persona to a romantic partner. However, that is not the only, or primary, reason why people tell their life stories to each other. They do so to make sense of who they are by weaving the various episodes and events of their lives into a story with a plot, with characters, and with settings. This imparts structure, purpose, and meaning (or lack thereof) to one's life in the overall scheme of things.

Stories of all kinds give coherence and continuity to the thoughts and experiences that people find important by connecting them narratively. It would be no exaggeration to claim that narrative structure might mirror human consciousness itself. This would explain why, early in life, children learn abstract concepts through the stories they are told. It might also explain why, throughout history, humans have produced narrative accounts—factual and fictional—

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to explain who they are, why they are here, and to make sense of otherwise random and chaotic events.

Interest in the origin and nature of storytelling is as old as history. In ancient Greece, the philosophers Xenophanes, Plato, and Aristotle criticized stories, especially myths, as artful and deceitful, exalting reason and logic instead as the only trustworthy ways to gain access to the nature of reality. However, the exaltation of reason and its use in various disciplines has not eliminated the need for stories. On the contrary, people everywhere are constantly seeking engagement in stories (through movies, television programs, novels) not only to be entertained, but also to gain insights into life through the eyes of the storyteller.

Narrative

The term *narrative* refers to anything that has a recognizable story structure, which is essentially a sequence of events involving specific characters that unfold in time and that move towards some resolution. It is anything told, written, related, or exposed that shares that structure. The narrative may be construed as *factual*, as in a newspaper report or a psychoanalytic session, or *fictional*, as in a novel, a comic strip, or a film. It is often difficult to determine the boundary line between fact and fiction, given the interplay of many psychological and social factors that coalesce in the production and interpretation of narratives.[1] Some narratives have had a great impact on how people come to view human nature and the cosmos, including the earliest ones, known as myths. Storytellers have always enjoyed an important status in all cultures across time, be they soothsayers or writers of fiction. Even today, fictional works are felt by people as somehow revealing something intrinsic about the human condition. As the writer David Lodge has phrased it, creating narratives "is one of the fundamental sense-making operations of the mind, and would appear to be both peculiar to and universal throughout humanity."[2]

Narrative gives structure and logical coherence to a series of what would otherwise be perceived to be random actions. Animal programs on television sometimes exemplify how this mode works even in areas of scientific understanding. Unedited, the actions of the animals caught on film—eating, hunting, mating—would hardly make up a meaningful story line. However, with the intervention of editors, scriptwriters, and ethological consultants, such programs always produce an intriguing account of the actions connecting them thematically and chronologically. The result is a scientific narrative of animal behavior that has been put together on the basis of ideas from scientific sources.

The narrative is compelling to the viewer because it explains the animals' actions in a cohesive way that imbues them with an inherent sense and meaning. There may be no meaning in these actions; but by narrating them it somehow crystallizes by itself.

Narratives are texts that function as composite, but unitary, meaning-making forms. This is why we understand a novel or a movie, for example, not in terms of its parts but in terms of what it means overall. Narrative texts are constructed according to what some semioticians call a *narrative grammar*, which has universal properties. The Russian scholar Vladimir Propp was among the first semioticians to put forward this view with his analysis of Russian folktales in 1928.[3] Moreover, Propp argued that ordinary discourse was built on the same units that make up the narrative grammar. So, fictional texts and conversations are equally narrative in form because they tap into the same narrative grammar. This idea was pursued further by Algirdas J. Greimas, who labeled the narrative units or signs in the grammar as *actants*, including "hero," "opponent," "journey," "battle," and so on. These surface not only in novels, but also in a wide range of texts and, as Propp maintained, in ordinary discourse.[4] Indeed, life without heroes, opponents, journeys, and battles would be inconceivable, regardless of culture or era of human history. These are narrative signs standing for people, events, things, and places in the real world. Greimas claimed that differences in detail, and especially in how the final resolution or clarification of a narrative unfolds, are due to the specific ways in which these categories are "textualized" linguistically into actual narratives or discourses. In a mystery novel, for instance, the hero may have several opponents, all of whom are the "opponent"; in a love story, a lover may be both a "hero" and an "opponent"; the dénouement of a love plot may end in a "battle"; and so on.

The concept of narrative grammar would explain why the plots, characters, and settings that are found in stories across the world are remarkably similar. Although one may lose some of the semantic nuances in translating stories from one language to another, one can easily transfer the basic narrative categories across languages with little or no loss of meaning. A story told in India is as understandable as a story told in Arkansas because their actants are the same, Greimas would claim, even though their linguistic forms are different.

In biographies, too, there are heroes, opponents, journeys, battles, just as there are in novels and movies. Biography is as old as recorded history. The rulers and nobles of ancient Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon had their deeds incised in stone and clay. The Old Testament tells of the lives of many patriarchs and prophets, and the four Gospels of the New Testament are essentially parallel biographies of Christ. Until about the middle of the seventeenth century, biography was generally commemorative, dealing with the exemplary

lives of heroes and heroines, especially saints and martyrs, as well as with the lives of malefactors and tyrants—all of whom were depicted less as individuals than as actors in a narrative drama of salvation. The publication in 1791 of *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* by James Boswell (1740–95) is generally thought to be the first biography that moves away from this tradition, constituting a biography about someone other than a hero, leader, nobleman, or saint. During the nineteenth century, biographical writings of this kind proliferated. In the subsequent twentieth century, the Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) provided a further impetus for the exploration of personality through oral autobiographical narrative with the invention of a clinical technique known as *psychoanalysis*, which consists, essentially, in patients retelling their life stories. We can know ourselves only if we construct and recount our biography. Like a story, it is something we put together consciously to make sense of who we are on the basis of our life events.

Myth

The desire to know the life stories of people who stand out (artists, scientists, actors, politicians, and so on) goes back considerably in time. However, in early cultures, people sought to know about the gods, the supernatural beings who they imagined ran the world and to whom they looked for knowledge and wisdom. The stories they told about these supernatural beings are called *myths*, which are essentially early folk stories. Myths were created to provide reassuring metaphysical explanations for the reason of things in the world—how the world came into being, who or what is responsible for it, how humans and animals were created, and how cultures originated. The language of myth is metaphorical, which, as we saw, allows the human mind to make connections based on sense. Myths were thus the first "theories" of the world, which, to this day, are somehow felt to bear intrinsic meaning, even if we may no longer believe them as true. Each character in ancient myth is a sign standing for some idealized human character or some actant. Take, for example, the Greek gods. Each one represented something in nature or human society. Zeus was, essentially, a sky and weather god associated with rain, thunder, and lightning; Poseidon (brother of Zeus) represented the sea and earthquakes; Hades stood for the underworld, the dispenser of earthly riches, and the god associated with death; Apollo was the god of archery, prophecy, music, healing, and youth; Artemis was the goddess of wild animals and hunting (twin sister of Apollo); Hermes was the messenger of the gods, the god of business, of thieves, and the guide of the dead to the underworld; and Aphrodite (to

mention one more) represented love, sexual desire, and beauty. The gods were thus metaphorical names used to stand for human and natural referents.

An insightful discussion of myth, from the perspective of semiotic theory, is the one put forward by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. For Lévi-Strauss, all the oppositional clusters we find meaningful—life versus death, good versus evil, mother versus father, god versus the devil, day versus night, existence versus nothingness, and so on—are first articulated in mythic stories. If we were asked what evil is, we would tend to explain it in terms of its opposite (good), and vice versa. Similarly, if we wanted to explain the concept of right to someone, we would invariably tend to bring up the opposite concept of wrong at some point. Crucial to Lévi-Strauss' conception of myth is the Saussurean notion of value (*valeur*). Rather than carrying intrinsic meaning, Saussure argued that signs had value only in differential relation to each other.

In ancient Greece, myth (*mythos*) was seen to be in opposition with reason (*logos*), although Aristotle concluded that in some of the creation myths, *logos* and *mythos* often overlapped. Plato saw myths simply as allegories, as literary devices for persuasively developing an argument. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the notion of *history* has frequently been opposed to *myth*. Complicating this opposition was the concept that God, although existing outside of ordinary time and space, was revealed to humanity within human history. *Mythos*, *logos*, and *history* overlap in the prologue to the Gospel of John in the New Testament; there, Christ is portrayed as the *Logos*, who came from eternity into *historical* time.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, myth caught the interest of the emerging academic disciplines of anthropology and the history of religions. Scholars tried to make sense of the world's mythic stories as products of imaginary thinking and as attempts to construct models of ethical, moral, and spiritual behavior. The hypothesis that gained a foothold in these new disciplines was that the earliest myths were genuine nonscientific attempts to explain nature and human behavior, in the same fashion that we impart knowledge of the world to children. The mythic tales we tell children are universally understandable as theories about the metaphysical world and of human character and destiny. The mythic imagination, these scholars claimed, ascribed lightning, thunder, and other natural phenomena to awesome and frightful gods. Only in succeeding stages did people look for more scientific ways to explain such phenomena—that is, only later did *mythos* give way to *logos*.

In his *New Science*, Giambattista Vico saw the birth of culture in the mythic imagination (or *fantasia* as he called it). Recall that Vico viewed the "life cycle" of cultures as unfolding according to three stages—the age of the gods, the age of heroes, and the age of equals. During the first age, the mythic fantasia created

"poetic images" of the world that ascribed to it a metaphysical structure. If there was thunder in the sky, then the mythic fantasia would hear it as the angry voice of a god; if there was rain, then it would see it as the weeping of a sorrowful god. During the second age (of heroes), the mythic fantasia gave way to a more heroic form of imagination. The tales that it impelled were no longer of gods and their supernatural exploits, but of human heroes and their feats. This is an age of legends—stories that document the deeds and accomplishments of heroes, of their lives, of their journeys. The mythic fantasia is still operative during this age, Vico affirmed, but less so than previously. For this reason, legends are still highly imaginative, but at the same time also refer to actual events in history. Among the most famous legendary tales are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of ancient Greece and the *Aeneid* of ancient Rome. It is during the third age (of equals) that the fantasia becomes dim, and the stories that people tell are no longer about gods or legendary heroes, but about ordinary human exploits and frailties. It is an age of rational history, of objective facts and knowledge (dates, treaties, social movements, political ideologies, and so on) behind which the tellers of history can hide their personal perspectives. Indeed, the reason why histories are constantly being revised is not only because they are by their nature incomplete, but also because they can never be totally free of the historian's perspective. On the other hand, myths and legends, like all works of the fantasia, are perceived to enfold eternal truths about the human condition. For this reason, they are handed down and preserved unrevised for posterity.

The primary function of the early myths is to explain how the world came into being in imaginary terms. In some cultures, the creation is said to proceed from a state of nothingness. The deity who created the world is portrayed as all-powerful and may come to the forefront so as to become the center of social life, or else may withdraw and become a distant or peripheral being. In other cultures, the deity is seen as giving order to a universe that finds itself in a state of chaos, separating light from darkness, and assigning the sun, moon, stars, plants, animals, and human beings to their proper roles in existence.

Among the Navajo and Hopi societies of North America, creation is thought to unfold as a progression upward from the underground. The emergence of the human world is said to be the final stage in this progression. A Polynesian myth places the various phases of human emergence in a coconut shell, equating these to a form of metamorphosis in other creatures. In many African and oriental mythic traditions, creation is imagined as breaking forth from a fertile egg. The egg is the potential for all life and, sometimes, as in the myth of the Dogon people of West Africa, it is referred to as the "placenta" of the world.

A common theme of mythical traditions is that of the first parents. In the Babylonian creation story, for instance, the first parents, Apsu and Tiamat, bore offspring who later defeated their parents in a battle. From the immolated body of Tiamat the earth emerged. In other world-parent myths, such as those of the Egyptians and Polynesians, the parents beget offspring but remain in close embrace; the offspring live in darkness, and in their desire for light they shove the parents apart, creating a space for the deities to create the human world. In several Romanian and Indian myths, creation comes about not through parents, but through the agency of a bird, which dives into the primordial waters to bring up a small piece of earth, which later expands into the world.

Related to such cosmogonic myths, but at the other extreme, are myths describing the end of the world (so-called eschatological myths). These presuppose the creation of the world by a powerful deity who in the end destroys the world, having become angry at the very creatures that he made. Meanwhile human beings are supposed to prepare for an afterlife existence of happiness or of eternal anguish, according to how they have lived their lives on earth. A universal conflagration and a final battle of the gods are envisioned. In an Aztec myth, several worlds are created and destroyed by the gods before the creation of the actual human world, which is also destined to end. In other myths, death is not present in the world for a long period of time, but enters it through an accident or because human beings have overstepped the proper limits of their knowledge.

Myths that describe the actions and characters of beings who are responsible for the discovery of a particular cultural artifact or technological process are called myths of the culture hero. Prometheus (in Greek mythology) is a classic example of this kind of hero. Prometheus was one of the Titans and worshiped by craftsmen. When Zeus hid fire from humanity, Prometheus stole it by trickery and returned it to earth. As punishment, Zeus chained him to a rock where an eagle fed each day on his liver, which grew again each night. Prometheus was eventually rescued by Hercules, and the world has never been the same since. In the Dogon culture of West Africa, the myth of the blacksmith who steals seeds from the granary of the gods is similar to the Prometheus story. In Ceram (Indonesia), Hainuwele is yet another Promethean figure—female this time; from the orifices of her body she provides the community with essential and indulgent goods.

Usually related to initiation rituals, myths of birth and rebirth tell how life can be renewed, time reversed, or humans transmuted into new beings. Such myths are found in the cultures of Europe, Africa, South America, and Melanesia. They typically describe the coming of an ideal society or of a savior

who will bestow new life among the people. Since the beginnings of cities, in the fourth and third millennia BCE, some myths were designed to describe the founding of cities. Foundation myths, as they are called, tell of how cities developed out of ceremonial centers that were seen to possess sacred power that could be summoned in a specific sacred place; or else they tell of particular personages (real or mythical) who were the founders of the cities. The myth of Gilgamesh in Babylon and that of Romulus and Remus in Rome are typical foundation myths. Gilgamesh was the legendary king of Uruk who was supposed to have ruled during the first half of the third millennium BCE. His exploits in quest for immortality ended up being unsuccessful. Romulus is the mythic founder of Rome, one of the twin sons of Mars. He and his brother Remus were abandoned at birth in a basket on the Tiber River, but were found and suckled by a she-wolf and later brought up by a shepherd family.

A German scholar who spent most of his life in England in the nineteenth century, Friedrich Maximilian Müller (1823–1900), claimed that the categories of myth were, in fact, primordial linguistic categories, constituting the blueprint from which language evolved. Following an in-depth study of the religions and myths of India, Müller posited, for example, that the gods and their actions did not represent beings or events, but rather incipient nouns and verbs standing for natural referents (such as thunder or the sea).[5] Lévi-Strauss pursued this line of reasoning further, pointing out that there are certain clusters of relationships in myth that, although expressed in the content of the story, conform to the structure of the language in which they are framed. Later, he contended that the same mythic structural blueprint is at work in all languages and cultures.[6] As Csapo puts it: "Myth relates to language in two ways: it is like language; it is also part of language."[7]

If such scholars are correct, then myth, language, and culture came into being at the same time. This would explain why ancient mythic rituals continue to be performed to this day (in contemporary versions, of course). Indeed, there seems to be a high level of isomorphism between social ideologies and mythic themes. Male gods who come forth to dominate the world are found in myths told in patriarchal cultures, by and large, and those that put the focus on goddesses are found mainly in matriarchal cultures.[8] Whereas Superman and Batman are paragons of patriarchal mythic thinking, their female equivalents, from Wonder Woman and Batgirl to Superwoman, are modern-day equivalents of the ancient goddesses, rebranded to fit in with the changing times and the ever-adaptive views of the role of women in society.

In pop culture, the culture hero myths and legends abound, especially those revolving around the father-son theme. Spider-Man's father died when he was

young, and it was the death of his surrogate father that prompted him to take up the task of fighting crime. As a young boy, Batman saw his parents murdered, resolving to defeat injustices and evil as he grew older. Superman's father and mother perished on his home planet and he was saved by being sent away; when Superman became older he discovered a recording of his father urging him to fight for truth and justice. The Hulk's father is not deceased but is at odds with his son, and the Hulk carries much angst against him. Hellboy was rescued from the bowels of hell and he now fights against the forces of evil. He was adopted by a professor with whom he has a shaky relationship; the professor serves as Hellboy's "supervisor" in the fight against evil, a relationship that nonetheless works well. Hellboy does not know who his biological father is, but later comes to know that he was fathered by the devil himself; Hellboy has no compunction in killing his devil father at the behest of his adoptive one in order to end the reign of evil upon Earth.

Perhaps the best-known myth of this type is the one of Oedipus (discussed briefly earlier on). In one version of the story, the child Oedipus was left to die on a mountain by Laius, his father, who had been told by an oracle that he would be killed by his own son. Oedipus was saved by a shepherd. Returning eventually to Thebes, he encounters a man on his way to the city. They get into an argument and this leads to Oedipus killing the man. That man was Laius, his father. Oedipus then solved the Riddle of the Sphinx. As a result, he was made king of the city and he married the widowed Jocasta, who was his mother. On discovering what he had done, he put out his own eyes in a fit of madness, and Jocasta hanged herself.

Freud termed this mythic father-son theme the "Oedipus complex." He defined it as an emotional complex that afflicts boys as young as four years old who may want unconsciously to eliminate the father in order to have a closer relationship with the mother. Boys typically feel guilty about the complex of emotions aroused by an unconscious sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex and a wish to exclude the parent of the same sex. The equivalent in girls was called the Electra complex. Freud saw in myths veritable theories of the human psyche in narrative form. Carl Jung (1875–1961), too, developed his theory of archetypes from the observation that people living all over the world possess remarkably similar mythic rituals and symbols. He saw the unconscious part of the mind as a "receptacle" of primordial images, memories, fantasies, wishes, fears, and feelings that are too weak to become conscious. Therefore, Jung claimed that they manifest themselves by their influence on conscious processes and, most strikingly, by the symbolic forms they take in dreams, art works, and rituals. For instance, the phallic coming-of-age symbols and themes that cultures incorporate into their rites

of passage, that they represent in their works of art, and that find their way into the stories that are communicated in cultural context, are understandable in approximately the same ways by all humans because they derive from the same archetype in the collective unconscious.

As an illustration of the Jungian notion of archetype, consider his example of the "trickster." In every person there lies a certain instinct for childlike mischief. On one hand, this may be expressed as a playful desire for capriciousness or by the need to play devil's advocate in a conversation. On the other hand, it may manifest itself as a malicious urge to mock or ridicule someone else's achievements. It might cause us to contemplate stealing something for the sheer thrill of it or to torment someone by hiding their belongings. At such times, the "trickster archetype" is directing our behavior. Jung looked at the ways archetypes gain expression not only through everyday behaviors, but also through images and symbols contained in dreams, fairy tales, myths, legends, poetry, and painting. The trickster archetype surfaces, for instance, as Dickens' Artful Dodger, as the fabled character known as Rumpelstiltskin, as Shakespeare's Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in the art of many contemporary comedians. Archetypes can take any form according to Jung; they can be an object or an animal in stories and in art.

The gist of the psychoanalytic work on myth is that the characters, themes, and events of mythic tales are part of a pre-scientific psychology of the human mind. They are attempts to harmonize the human mind and its emotional nature with the patterns of nature by connecting human experience to such fundamental phenomena as the daily rising and setting of the sun, the alternation of the seasons, the changing phases of the moon, and the annual planting and harvesting of crops. Ritual, as found in primitive religions, is a performance of mythical themes, expressing and celebrating humanity's meaningful participation in the affairs of the universe.

Fairy Tales

Folktales, fairy tales, and fables are descendants of myth. Like myth, these do not mirror what happens: they explore reality and predict what can happen in an imaginary way. They not only recount states and events; they also interpret them.

Take, for example, the kind of story told commonly to children known as the fairy tale. Taking place in a wonderland filled with magic and unusual characters, fairy tales (which rarely have to do with fairies) have a powerful emotional appeal over every child, no matter what culture in which the child is reared. The

persistence of stories such as *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, or *Little Red Riding Hood*, and their different versions, attest to this enduring fascination. These tell of an underdog hero or heroine who is put through great trials or must perform seemingly impossible tasks, and who, with magical assistance, secures their birthright or a suitable marriage partner. Frequently, such stories begin with "Once upon a time" and end with "And they lived happily ever after," formulas that imbue them with a sense of eternity and transcendental meaning.

A fairy, in folklore, is a diminutive supernatural creature who typically has a human form and lives in an imaginary region called a fairyland. Stories abound of the magical interventions of fairies in mortal affairs, from ancient legendary tales to modern-day cinematic portrayals. The childhood imagination not only conceives of fairyland as a distinct extra-worldly place, but one that nonetheless has everyday surroundings such as hills, trees, and streams. The sirens in Homer's *Odyssey* are fairies, and a number of the heroes in the *Iliad* have fairy lovers in the form of nymphs. The *Gandharvas* (celestial singers and musicians), who figure prominently in Sanskrit poetry, were fairies, as were the *Hathors*, or female genies, of ancient Egypt, who appeared at the birth of a child and predicted the child's future. In European literature, fairies appear in works such as Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* (in Mercutio's "Queen Mab" speech), *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser, *L'Allegro* and *Comus* by John Milton, *Tales of Mother Goose* by Charles Perrault, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* by the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and *Irish Fairy Tales* by William Butler Yeats. In these stories, fairies are generally considered beneficent towards humans—like the "tooth fairy" that we teach about to our children today. They are sensitive and capricious, however, and often inclined to play pranks; so, if their resentment is not to be aroused, they must be spoken well of and always treated with obedience. Bad fairies are portrayed as being responsible for misfortunes such as the bewitching of children, the substitution of ugly fairy babies, known as changelings, for human infants, and the sudden death of animals.

Today, fairy tales continue to be invented and told through different media (such as the movies). The *Shrek* movies, for example, are really modern-day fairy tales. The quintessential movie fairy is, of course, Disney's Tinkerbell. However, she is not your average fairy—she did after all try to kill Peter Pan's pal Wendy in a jealous rage in the original movie. People today like her because of her sassy attitude and looks. She is a fairy for the times.

Fairy tales were once passed on by word of mouth. It was a Frenchman named Charles Perrault (1628–1703) who wrote them down, publishing them in a book called *Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals: or Tales of Mother Goose* in 1697. The collection included *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*,

Red Riding Hood, and *Puss in Boots*. Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859) Grimm also wrote and published fairy tales, starting in 1812. The story of Cinderella has been told and refashioned to meet the requirements of modernity, starting with Disney's 1950 animated version and morphing into contemporary versions with titles such as *Ella Enchanted*, *The Prince and Me*, and *The Cinderella Story*. In the latter, it is a lost cellphone that leads Prince Charming to the girl, not a misplaced glass slipper. The former (*Ella Enchanted*) is a spoof of the tamer Cinderella characters of the past. The title character wants to free herself of the curse of obedience, to become independent and free of the enslaving past. It is a powerful declaration of women's liberation. In fact, in virtually all contemporary versions of the Cinderella tale, the girl strives to control her own destiny; the prince good-naturedly accepts this and abides by it; and from this liberation is achieved. The Internet Movie Database lists around 40 movies with the title *Cinderella* (at the time of the writing of this book). In some ways, the movies have become our modern storytellers. As Segal observes, "Cinema-going combines myth with ritual and brings gods, hence myths, back to the world."[9]

The Persistence of Myth

Even if we live in a modern world that does not accept myth, by and large, as true, the mythic form of thinking has not disappeared. Its remnants are everywhere: we give cards with poetic, mythic messages on them; we tell nursery rhymes and fairy tales to our children; we read the horoscope daily; and so on. From our mythic heritage, we have inherited the names of the days of the week and months of the year. Tuesday is the day dedicated to the Germanic war god Tir, Wednesday to the Germanic chief god Wotan, Thursday to Thor, Friday to the goddess of beauty Frigga, Saturday to the Roman god Saturn, January to another Roman god Janus, and so on. Our planets bear a nomenclature similarly derived from myth: for example, Mars is named after the Roman god of war, Venus after the Greek goddess of beauty. Mythic themes, like that of the earth as a mother, of life as a journey, of an eternal battle between the forces of good and evil, reverberate in our spectacles, our modern narratives, and our discourses.

As the semiotician Roland Barthes argued, the presence of myth can be detected everywhere in contemporary pop culture and advertising.[10] In early Hollywood westerns, for instance, the mythic good versus evil theme was often symbolized by having heroes wear white hats, and villains black ones. In sports events, the "big game" is typically portrayed by announcers as a mythic battle between the forces of good (the home side) and those of evil (the

intruder or visiting team). The fanfare associated with preparing for the big game, like the World Series of baseball or the Super Bowl of football, has a ritualistic quality to it similar to the pomp and circumstance that ancient armies engaged in before going out to battle. The symbolism of the home team's (army's) uniform, the valor and strength of star players (the heroic warriors), and the tactical leadership abilities of the coach (the army general) all have a profound emotional effect on the home fans (one of the two warring nations). The game (the battle) is perceived to unfold in moral terms—as a struggle of righteousness and good against the forces of ugliness and evil. The players are exalted as heroes or condemned as villains. Victory is interpreted in moral terms as a victory of good over evil, or as a crushing defeat from a conquering army. The game is, as television and radio announcers were wont to say a few years back, "real life, real drama!"[11]

Myth is also recycled in modern media such as the comic book. Consider the figure of Superman—introduced in 1938 by *Action Comics*, and published separately a little later in *Superman Comic Books*. What or who does Superman represent? Why is he so popular (from time to time)? As a hero in the tradition of mythic heroes, Superman is a modern-day figment of the mythic imagination in which heroic figures, as we have seen, are archetypes of goodness and rightness. As a heroic figure, Superman has, of course, been updated and adapted culturally—he is an American hero who stands for "truth," "justice," and "the American way," as the 1950s TV series used to put it. Like the ancient heroes, Superman is indestructible, morally upright, and devoted to saving humanity from itself. But, like Achilles, he has a tragic flaw—exposure to kryptonite a substance that is found on the planet where he was born, renders him devoid of his awesome powers.

In mythology and legend, a hero is an individual, often of divine ancestry, who is endowed with great courage and strength, celebrated for bold exploits, and sent by the gods to Earth to play a crucial role in human affairs. Heroes are, thus, character signs embodying lofty human ideals for all to admire—truth, honesty, justice, fairness, moral strength, and so on. Rather than being sent by the gods from the afterworld to help humanity, Superman came to Earth instead from a planet in another galaxy; he leads a "double life," as hero and as Clark Kent, a "mild-mannered" reporter for a daily newspaper; he is adored by Lois Lane, a reporter for the same newspaper who suspects (from time to time) that Clark Kent may be Superman; and he wears a distinctive costume when he becomes Superman. This "Superman code" was (and continues to be) an adaptation of the ancient hero code. It changes in newer versions of Superman, because the times dictate it. For example, Superman has always been apolitical. Today that is no longer possible. America is no longer

perceived (by itself) as espousing the only version of truth and justice. So, the Superman code is adapting, incorporating social justice themes within it and relating these to the world of globalization.

Many of the ancient hero myths had several recurring themes that are worth mentioning here, since these are recycled in modern-day versions. First, like the Babylonian king Gilgamesh, heroes were sent typically away from their birthplace to avoid death, just as Superman had to leave the dying planet Krypton where he would have perished. Second, ancient heroes led an obscure early life, as does Superman. Third, many heroes lose their parents. Batman, Captain Marvel, Black Panther, and Cyclops have suffered this fate; Superman, actually, was given away by his parents, so that he could be saved, recalling the Oedipus legend. Fourth, heroes have superhuman powers. This is probably what we admire most in Superman, Spider-Man, and all the other action heroes of today. The tragic flaw is a fifth element in the code. Achilles had a weak heel; Superman had a fatal aversion to kryptonite; and Daredevil is weakened by blindness. Sixth, some heroes were protected by a magic weapon. The Norse god Thor possessed a hammer that could obliterate anything in the world. Spider-Man has web shooters, spider-tracers, and a versatile belt that creates an image of his mask, among other accoutrements and gadgets. Finally, the hero is unusually dedicated to help people and set things right in the world, since humanity is flawed by nature and needs guidance and help from a moral superior.

Although the foregoing discussion is a simplification of the hero code, not to mention that there is more than one hero code in mythological traditions, the main point is that myth has not disappeared from modernity. It is recycled in figures such as Superman. Movie adventurers and detectives too are cast like ancient heroes. Even in a modern urban world, we seemingly need myths to "make things right" in human affairs, at least in the realm of the imagination.

A classic remake of ancient hero mythology is the Hollywood western. In its prototypical form, the plot of the western revolved around a lonesome cowboy hero who wins a "high noon" gun duel and then rides off into the sunset, after making things right or righting wrongs. The cowboy hero is strong, handsome, honest, but also vulnerable. The cowboy villain has all the opposite traits—cowardice, physical ugliness, dishonesty, and cunning. The hero is beaten up at some critical stage, but against all odds he prevails through a test of superhuman strength and valor, becoming a champion of justice. Movie cowboy heroes such as Roy Rogers, John Wayne, Hopalong Cassidy, and the Lone Ranger have become part of cultural lore and nostalgia. The western myth is America's ersatz founding myth, extolling individualism and deriding weakness. The same mythological theme is present in movie and television heroes and heroines,

from Wonder Woman to James Bond. The details of the stories might change and might be updated in narrative detail, but the mythic code is the same.

As a final example of how myth continues to have emotional power consider the case of the *Star Wars* set of movies, which started under the directorship of American motion-picture director and producer George Lucas (b. 1944) and now are produced by the Walt Disney Company. Echoes of Greek dramatic style as well as classical mythical referents permeate this series of blockbuster movies. In a Greek tragedy, the story began typically with a prologue or monologue, explaining the topic of the tragedy. Episodes of *Star Wars* begin in the same manner through the use of rising text against the background of space: "A long time ago in a galaxy far away…." The *Star Wars* saga is also divided into individual episodes, released in a sequence that starts in *medias res* with the fourth episode being the first one released. Homer's *Iliad* is structured narratively in this manner. Significantly, the unifying theme of the series is the universal struggle between evil (the tyrannical Empire) and good (the Rebel Alliance). The villains appeared originally in futuristic white armor, covering the entire body from head to toe. Their leader, Darth Vader, stands in marked opposition semiotically, being entirely clothed in black and speaking with a low menacing tone of voice. White and black are not portrayed as opposing sides, but as forming a mythic code.

The hero of the movies cannot be identified as one particular figure, since a group of characters must work together for good to prevail. Luke Skywalker was one of them. As the story unfolds, Luke discovers that his father was a Jedi Knight, protecting the Old Republic. A Jedi Knight is one who has the ability to fight advantageously by using "the Force." Since Luke's father was once a person who possessed the Force, he is a descendent of the "other world." Luke's tragic flaw is, in effect, his yearning for a father. In line with the Greek tradition of tragic irony, Darth Vader turns out to be Luke's father—a fact suggestive of the Oedipus myth.

As a modern-day mythic tale based on the good versus evil opposition, *Star Wars* simply renames it as a battle between the Jedi and Sith. Members of the Jedi Order have dedicated themselves for thousands of generations to mastering the knowledge and tranquility found in the benevolent light side of the Force. They have pledged their lives to fight against evil, training physically and emotionally to live an austere life. By using the Force, they can manipulate the minds of the weak-willed, move objects telekinetically, peer into the future, move around at enormous speeds, and survive death with their consciousness intact. Recalling the biblical story of Lucifer, a renegade Jedi who succumbed to the dark side recruited other disenfranchised Jedi to his cause, declaring war on the Jedi Order. After a devastating battle, the fallen Jedi are

banished, settling in a far-flung planet (Korriban), becoming known as the Sith. Fueled by hatred and a never-ending thirst for power, the Sith and Jedi clash constantly. The collateral damage from these battles has devastated entire star systems. The Sith believe in conquering others, drawing their strength from the dark side of the Force, but are ultimately enslaved by it. As the popularity of *Star Wars* saga brings out, myths—ancient or recycled—continue to play an important role in human life, whether it is realized or not.

Urban Legends

The Internet has now entered the mythological realm, producing its own mythic stories and legends, known broadly as urban legends. Like the ancient myths, these are stories that are often portrayed as factual by those who circulate them, through the Internet, but that turn out typically to be not exactly as recounted. An urban legend may be untrue or true in part, recalling the ancient legends. Often, the events it describes are explainable in different ways. For example, a story about missing hitchhikers may be initiated by someone on Facebook, based on events that the originator had actually witnessed or experienced. When the narrative starts to circulate and is retold by different people, the story gathers momentum and an expanding narrative life of its own, becoming an urban legend. It may turn out to be totally untrue, or else explained as a series of disappearances with rational explanations (such as the possibility that the hitchhikers were homeless people who could not be located easily). But it often persists and continues to be told and retold, much like the ancient legends.

An example of an Internet-based urban legend is Slenderman, a fictional scary character, portrayed as a slim and very tall man with a featureless face. Slenderman was created on the Internet in 2009 and quickly became a Creepypasta Internet meme copied and pasted an enormous number of times throughout the Internet. Like the traditional stories of the bogeyman and other sinister characters of children's fable literature, Slenderman is in fact a scary and menacing figure who stalks and abducts children. There are variant narratives, depictions, and videos online that relate to the Slenderman legend. But as the legends of the past, Slenderman is believed by some children to be true. The near-fatal stabbing of a twelve-year-old girl in Waukesha, Wisconsin is attributed to the Slenderman meme. As this case showed, the world of the hyperreal, as Baudrillard claimed, is more real and perhaps more meaningful to people today than is the real world.[12] Two twelve-year-old classmates of the Wisconsin girl stabbed her nineteen times claiming under interrogation that

they had become proxies for the Slenderman, fearing that he would kill their families if they did not obey his behest to murder their classmate. The victim fortunately survived, and the two perpetrators were deemed to suffer from mental illness. One wonders, though, whether the illness was not induced by the Slenderman meme. As Richard Dawkins, the originator of the term *meme* long before the Internet, claimed, memes are just as transferable to others as are genes.[13] It could well be that nasty memes such as the Slenderman one are particularly transferable to susceptible individuals, like pubescent children whose emotions may be out of whack and needing balance.

This possibility is corroborated by the fact that the same meme "infected" other young people. On September 4, 2014, a fourteen-year-old girl in Florida allegedly set her own house on fire while her mother and little brother were inside. The teenager had been apparently inspired to do so by the Slenderman stories online. Alarmingly, a 2015 epidemic of suicide attempts by young people aged twelve to twenty-four years took place on the Pine Ridge Valley Indian Reservation. Slenderman was identified as a direct influence. It was not coincidental, according to tribal elders, that the Slenderman myth was consistent with the Native American belief in a suicide spirit similar to the online meme. Clearly, cyberspace and its memetic structure might be changing—or mutating—human mentality, taking it back to its primordial mythic form of consciousness where anything that appears in cyberspace is believable, whether or not it is real or true.

Food and Culture Myths

In many of the ancient mythic stories, food plays a prominent role as a symbolic artifact. This mythological association persists to this day. In American society, we tend not to eat rabbits, keeping them instead as pets. The reason is that rabbits have a mythic or archetypal status in our groupthink—think of all the stories we tell our children with rabbits in them (for example, the Easter Bunny and Bugs Bunny). Similarly, we do not eat cat and dog meat because such animals resonate with narrative-mythic meanings. Movies with cats and dogs in them as principal characters, in effect, show how deeply rooted our mythic connection to such animals is.

Claude Lévi-Strauss referred to the meanings associated with food as falling into two domains—"the raw" and "the cooked."[14] Raw food is just that—raw uncooked food. Cooked food is food that has been "humanized," so to speak; it is evidence of the human ability to transform nature into culture. According to Lévi-Strauss, this transformation was accomplished by two processes,

roasting and boiling, both of which were a result of the first technological advances made by humanity. Roasting implies a direct contact between the food and a fire and, thus, is technologically primitive. It is also associated initially with "the raw." Boiling reveals an advanced form of food treatment, since the cooking process is mediated by a pot and a sophisticated cooking process. Boiling is thus associated with "the cooked."

To get a firmer sense of the interconnection between culture and food, imagine being in a "Robinson Crusoe" situation. Robinson Crusoe, the hero of Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel of the same name, was a shipwrecked English sailor who survives for years on a small tropical island. Let's suppose that you have somehow been abandoned alone on an isolated island in the middle of nowhere, cut off from the rest of the world, to fend for yourself. Without the support and protection of society, your instincts will urge you on to survive in any way that you can. Clearly, your need for food and water will take precedence over everything else. In a basic sense, your state of living will be dependent on a purely biological level of existence. When your hunger becomes extreme, your tastes in food will hardly be guided by "good taste," notions of cuisine, or by any desire to have the food cooked. You will consume any raw flora or hunt any fauna that will satisfy your hunger. Eating food in such a drastic situation has only one function—survival.

Now, let's suppose that you discover other similarly abandoned people on another part of the same island. Since there is strength in numbers, you all decide to stay together as a group. To reduce the risk of not finding food and of not eating, the group decides to assign specific roles to each person for hunting food and for its preparation. After a period of time, what will emerge from these agreements is a proto-culture. As time passes, other social contracts and arrangements will undoubtedly be made, and the cooking of food will become more and more routine and subject to communal taste preferences.

The purpose of this vignette has been to argue that the cooking of food in prehistoric groups was the likely basis for the foundation of early culture. No wonder then that in early tribes, food—the source of survival—was offered to the gods. Food continues to be imbued with mythic and sacred meanings. Virtually all of the world's religious and folk traditions are centered on food, such as turkey meat at Thanksgiving, lamb at Easter, and so on. Food is a symbolic constituent of communal rituals and feasts such as weddings. The story of Adam and Eve in the Bible revolves around the eating of a forbidden fruit—subsequently portrayed in narratives and paintings as an apple, which is not coincidental. The discovery and cultivation of the apple date back to 6500 BCE in Asia Minor. Ramses II of Egypt cultivated apples in orchards along the Nile in the thirteenth century BCE. The ancient Greeks also cultivated apple trees

from the seventh century BCE onwards. They designated the apple "the golden fruit," since Greek mythology, like Christian doctrine, assigned a primordial significance to the apple. An apple from the Garden of the Hesperides was given to Hera as a wedding present when she married Zeus. The point of this excursus into the symbolic history of the apple is to underscore the point that some foods are imbued with mythic meaning across all cultures. Bread and lamb, for instance, invariably evoke latent mythic symbolism. This is why we talk of the *bread of life*, of *earning your bread*, of *sacrificial lambs*. Indeed, in some languages the same word is used for bread and life, such as the Egyptian Arabic word *aish*, which means in fact both "bread" and "life."

The origin of human culture is, arguably, the result of efforts to secure a stable source of food for a group and then to acknowledge its communal importance in rituals, rites, customs, and early myths. The critical importance of food as a sign system within a communal system of meaning-making was noted by the Greek historian Herodotus, who spent a large part of his life traveling through Asia, Babylon, Egypt, and Greece, recording the differences he perceived (with respect to Athenian culture) in the language, dress, food, etiquette, legends, and rituals of the different people he came across. As Herodotus discovered, food is an index of a culture's origins and a symbol of its mythic beliefs. These are carried unconsciously forward to present times. In American society, by and large, beef has value as food and is therefore part of cuisine; rabbit does not and is thus excluded from it, although it is as edible as beef. The reason is, as mentioned, that rabbits are defined as pets and thus as inedible as other companionship animals (dogs and cats, for example).

As prehistoric people began to interact with one another, they learned to behave in ways that made life easier and more pleasant. As they learned to plant crops and farm, the ability to store food led to communal eating events, acknowledging the value of food as a bond within the tribe. Early civilizations subsequently developed rules for proper conduct at meals and for including or excluding certain animals (or plants) from the rules. So, animal meats such as pork, beef, and lamb were defined in social terms, not as alternative sources of nourishment. Such rules became more formal during the Middle Ages, when young men training to become knights learned a code of conduct called *chivalry*. According to this code, a knight was devoted to the Christian church and his country and expected to treat women with great respect. He also was obligated to eat only certain "noble foods." Some aspects of this code became a traditional part of table manners throughout Europe, spreading to the emerging bourgeois middle classes. Much of today's formal etiquette originated in this way. The word "etiquette", incidentally, is traced to the French royal courts during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. King Louis

XIV drew up a daily list of events, organized around a specific time frame, place, and proper dress. It was posted in his palace at Versailles as an *etiquette*, French for "ticket," to assist the nobles in what to do. In time, upper classes throughout Europe adopted the code.

Cuisine is a style of cooking that defines food preparation and consumption in a specific region or country. It informs us not only as to what certain people eat, but also how they make it, and ultimately what it reveals about them. So, when one thinks of "Italian cuisine," for example, images of pasta, antipasti, and the like come to mind. Italian cuisine is, thus, indistinguishable from Italian ethnic identity and culture. To use the earlier example of the rabbit, many Italians perceive rabbits as a delicacy (in some regions). This shows that a specific food is part of a semiotic code. American society does not eat rabbits (outside of some rural areas), but it eats the meat of other animals such as cows and pigs. It also does not perceive foxes or dogs as edible food items; but the former is reckoned a delicacy in Russia, and the latter a delicacy in China.

It is interesting to note, parenthetically, that the ancient Romans were the ones who had domesticated the rabbit, which flourished throughout their empire as a source of food. In sixteenth-century England, rabbits were prized instead for their fur. For this reason, they were bred selectively in order to enhance their rich coats. In the nineteenth century, England passed strict game laws prohibiting rabbit hunting. In the remainder of the previous Roman Empire, however, rabbits continued to be perceived as food sources. By the turn of the twentieth century, rabbits were redefined in Anglo-American culture as household animals. The reinforcement of the anthropomorphic connotations that the rabbit has since taken on can be seen in the popularity of fictional rabbit characters (Bugs Bunny, the Easter Bunny, Benjamin Bunny) that have become a part of American childhood. Clearly, all this has nothing to do with the edibility of rabbits, but with their cultural value. Outside of those that have a demonstrably harmful effect on the human organism, the species of flora and fauna that are considered to be edible or inedible are very much the result of history and tradition. We cannot get nourishment from eating tree bark, grass, or straw. But we certainly could get it from eating frogs, ants, earthworms, silkworms, lizards, and snails. Most people in American culture might, however, respond with disgust at the thought of eating such potential food items. However, there are cultures where they are not only eaten for nourishment, but also as part of symbolic traditions.

So, how does the contemporary fast food, and even junk food, that we eat every day fit in with all this, the reader might legitimately ask? In a society where "fast living" and "the fast lane" are metaphors for the system of everyday life, everything seems indeed to be "moving too fast," leaving little time

for classic traditional food rituals. Is this the reason why people go to fast-food restaurants, where the food is affordable and the service fast?

Junk food constitutes an anomaly when it comes to notions of cuisine and even edibility. So, the question of what function it has in modern societies is hardly a trivial one. Hamburger is beef and eating beef has always been a common occurrence in traditional meals. But whereas a beef steak is part of the historical food code, hamburger is not. In other words, a beef steak and a hamburger form a cultural opposition. Several decades ago hamburgers were hardly construed as part of a viable cuisine; they were termed part of "junk food culture," aimed at young people by the fast-food industry. This situation has changed today. Hamburger is no longer viewed as "junk," but as a simple food option for people of any age or class, even if it still somewhat harbors the meaning of "unhealthy dietary food." Restaurants and various eateries now offer hamburgers as part of regular fare. The cultural definition of junk food has changed and the reason lies not in any scientific discovery related to any previously undetected nutritional benefits of junk food, but to shifts in the sociocultural order.

Some historical accounts of the hamburger indicate that it was sold at fairs, amusement parks, and other recreational venues in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The hamburger was produced for a specific purpose—to be part of a recreational venue. Any food item can be reconceptualized in this way. Take fried chicken. As such, it is part of traditional southern American cuisine where it would hardly be classified as fast food. But in the context of a Kentucky Fried Chicken food outlet, it would fall, even today, under that rubric. That same rubric would include not only fried chicken and hamburgers, but also candy bars, hot dogs, cupcakes, and the like.

It is believed that the term "junk food" was coined by Michael Jacobson, the director of the Center for Public Interest, in 1972. But, to the best of my own recollection, the term was being bandied about already in the 1950s, when a fully formed youth culture came into being. The term was used to refer to the perception that food such as hamburgers and hot dogs was injurious to health, but that teenagers ate it anyhow because it was cooked quickly, it was inexpensive, and it united adolescents as a distinct social group. It was commodified food for fast consumption and connected symbolically with youth culture.

Diners and fast-food eateries generally started appearing in the 1920s. They were locales serving mainly young people: hot dogs, milkshakes, and other fast foods were the core of the menu. Adults would visit such diners only on occasion, perhaps to treat their children. By the 1950s, the teenagers had their own burger and milkshake joints—locales designed to be socializing sites for adolescents. The food served at such places was viewed, correctly, to be "junk" injurious to one's health and only to be consumed by young people, since their

metabolism could ostensibly break it down more quickly and since they could purportedly recover from its negative health effects more easily than older people. However, very soon, junk food, promoted by effective advertising campaigns, became an indulgence sought by anyone of any age, from very young children to seniors. The compulsion to consume junk food has, consequently, became a fact of contemporary life, inducing unhealthy eating habits.

Today, restaurant chains serving fast food have been rebranded as casual dining chains. They have thus been renamed quick-service restaurants (QSR). The total revenue of QSRs is estimated to amount to more than 200 billion US dollars annually. Junk food is no longer "junk." It is part of popular cuisine—a cuisine with few if any historical ties to either the American settlers or to European cuisine traditions. The exception has become virtually the norm.

As indirect proof of this, it is interesting to note that fast foods or beverages have become themselves signs in pop culture. Pizza, for example, has played roles in movies such as *Mystic Pizza* (1988) and *Pizza* (2005). Coffee too has played a semiotic role in the movies. In the 1998 film *You've Got Mail* coffee is everywhere. The coffee bar in the bookstore offers a variety of flavors and preparations, mirroring the flavors and modalities of modern romance. As Tom Hanks explains in an email to Meg Ryan:

> The whole purpose of places like Starbucks is for people, with no decision- making ability what-so-ever, to make six decisions, just to buy one cup of coffee! Short, tall, light, dark. Café, decaf, low fat, non-fat, etc…So people don't know what they are doing or what the hell they are getting, and only for $2.95, not just a cup of coffee but an absolute defining sense of self. Tall, decaf cappuccino.

Analogously, in the 2000 film *What Women Want*, Mel Gibson meets up with Marisa Tomei in the coffee shop where she works. Gibson orders a "mochaccino" with extra foam. Tomei then asks him to specify the size he wants: "tall" or "grande." At this point there is a pause, allowing us to realize that the question is laden with sexual innuendoes. Gibson proceeds to tell Tomei that he is getting a promotion: "Come with me, celebrate, I'll buy you a cup of coffee." She replies: "Memo, for you: I work in a coffee shop!"

Quentin Tarantino chose a diner for the opening scene of his 1994 movie *Pulp Fiction*, introducing the main characters sitting across from each other as they sip coffee. The waitress politely interrupts by asking, "Can I get anyone more coffee?" Suddenly discussions of criminal activity between two characters become loud and a robbery ensues. We are taken back to the coffee shop at the end of the movie, where we see the conclusion of the first scene. Coffee is indeed a symbol of modern-day society. The coffee shop is an oasis in a

barren human wasteland, where conversation and social interaction can return to a previous dignified state (at least according to Hollywood). From an intimate encounter in an upscale bistro between two past and future lovers in *The Family Man* (2000), to a seedy dark corner of a ghetto in *A Man Apart* (2003), coffee is a vehicle of conversation and human warmth—at least in the world of fantasy.

In sum, the story of food is a side story of human history itself. It shows that the only way to grasp the meaning of something is to relate it to its narrative and mythic functions. These are constantly at work in human life, as Freud and Jung certainly understood.

Notes

1. Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A brief history* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.
2. David Lodge, "Narration with words." In *Images and Understanding*, edited by H. Barlow, C. Blakemore, and M. Weston–Smith, 141 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
3. Vladimir J. Propp, *Morphology of the folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1928).
4. Algirdas J. Greimas, *On meaning: Selected essays in semiotic theory*, translated by Paul Perron and Frank Collins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
5. Friedrich M. Müller, *Lectures on the science of language* (London: Longmans, Green, 1861).
6. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962).
7. Eric Csapo, *Theories of mythology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 220.
8. A good analysis of this is found in David Leeming, *Myth: A biography of belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
9. Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 142.
10. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957).
11. In *The meaning of sports* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005), Michael Mandelbaum aptly characterizes the reverence for sport as a quasi-religious experience.
12. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, op. cit.
13. Richard Dawkins, *The selfish gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).
14. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The raw and the cooked* (London: Cape, 1964).

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7

At Arm's Length: The Meanings of Spaces

We shape our buildings: thereafter they shape us.
—Winston Churchill (1874–1965)

A later segment on Martha's video shows the entrance of a third person, Mark, onto the scene. He is, apparently, one of Ted's friends, who happened to be at the same restaurant. Seeing Ted and his companion, he decided to go over to their table and say hello. A typical greeting encounter ensues, whereby Ted introduces Mark to Cheryl. Now, before proceeding to view and analyze the greeting ritual let's put the video on pause for a second to ponder a few relevant questions. How close do you think the two strangers, Cheryl and Mark, will stand to each other? Will they shake hands delicately or with force, for a relatively short or for a drawn-out period of time? Will they touch any other part of each other's bodies?

As we allow the video to go forward, we see that they stood, predictably, at arm's length from each other, that they did not touch any part of their bodies other than their hands. To the semiotician, the predictability of these behaviors suggests the existence of a *proxemic code*, as it is called, regulating the zones Cheryl and Mark maintained between each other and a *tactile code* governing touch. Executing the greeting ritual at a close distance would have been perceived by both Cheryl and Mark to constitute a breach of "personal space." It would have been interpreted as a transgression of an imaginary boundary line around the body that can only be traversed by those with whom a person is intimate. This is also why they did not touch any other body part, other than the hands. Now, since Cheryl's and Mark's behavior is semiotically

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coded, it should come as no surprise to find that it is not universal. Indeed, people in other cultures touch much more upon meeting one another and stand closer to each other than people do in America.

Proxemics is the study of how people perceive and semiotically organize the zones they maintain between each other in culturally specific situations. The founder of this interdisciplinary science, which has become a target of research in anthropology, social psychology, and semiotics, was the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1914–2009), whose research paradigm for studying interpersonal zones consists of very precise notions and procedures, which he developed after systematically studying people interacting during World War II when he served in the US Army in Europe and the Philippines. Hall came to realize that failures in intercultural communication arose typically from unconsciously coded differences in the ways that members of different cultures perceived interpersonal zones and in the ways they acted within them.

As an example of how proxemic zones guide interpersonal behavior consider the following typical scenario. Imagine entering an elevator on the fifth floor of a multi-floor skyscraper. There are three people already in the elevator, obvious strangers to each other, because they are in separate corners of the elevator, facing the door or looking down at the ground, and silent. Where will you stand? Near one of the others? Or will you probably go to the remaining corner? In what direction will you orient your body? Will you face the other passengers or will you face the door? Without going into a detailed analysis of the situation, if you have been living in American society for a period of time, you will know exactly the answers to these questions. The proxemic code informs you to occupy the remaining corner, to face the door or look down at the floor to avoid eye contact with the others, and, of course, to maintain silence. So critical is this code in maintaining social harmony that if you decide to act in some other way—that is, to face the others, to look directly at them, to sing—they would become uneasy or angry with you, because they would interpret your behavior as being either conflictual or disturbed. To cope with your breach of conduct, they might ignore your actions completely, as if they had not occurred.

In 1963, Hall defined proxemics broadly as the study of how we "unconsciously structure microspace"—the distance between people in the conduct of daily transactions, as well as "the organization of space in houses and buildings, and ultimately the layout of towns."[1] A few years later he expanded its definition to include "the interrelated observations and theories of the use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture."[2] Hall's proposal to study the zones people maintain between each other has led to a large body of data on this aspect of social behavior, most of it showing that such zones are measurable

with statistical accuracy, varying predictably and systematically according to age, gender, and other social variables. Today, proxemics is a robust area of research pursued by all kinds of social scientists. Hall did not explicitly use semiotic notions to study proxemic behavior, but his whole outlook and framework are, de facto, semiotic in nature. The inclusion of proxemics as a branch of nonverbal semiotics started in 1968 with Umberto Eco, who defined each zone as a particular kind of spatial sign.[3]

Interpersonal Space

To execute the greeting ritual, Mark and Cheryl extended their right hands, but kept their bodies at arm's length from each other—a boundary that, as Hall discovered, could be measured fairly accurately, allowing for predictable statistical variation.[4] In American culture, he found that a distance of less than six inches between two people was reserved for intimates. Within this zone the senses are activated and physical presence is tangible. It is a zone reserved for love-making, comforting, and protecting. A six- to twelve-inch zone between individuals is the space where interactions between family members and close friends unfold. A distance of one and a half to four feet is the minimal comfort zone between non-intimate individuals. This is the space where handshaking and other forms of formal tactile communication are carried out. A distance of four to six feet is considered non-involving and non-threatening by all individuals. This is the space in which people carry out casual social discourse. Formal discourse, on the other hand, occurs within a seven- to twelve-foot zone. Finally, Hall found that a distance of twelve feet and beyond is the zone people tend to keep between themselves and public figures. Discourse at this distance is highly structured and formalized (for example, lectures and speeches). Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that the social meanings associated with interpersonal zones are reflected in common idioms, such as *Keep your distance*, *They're very close*, *We've drifted far apart*, *You're trespassing into my personal space*, *I can't quite get to him*, *Please keep in touch*, and so on.

Research has shown that such zones vary predictably. For example, younger people maintain closer zones when interacting than do older people; similarly, non-intimate individuals of the opposite sex stay farther apart than do those of the same sex. Also influencing interpersonal zones are factors such as the topic of discourse (pleasant topics draw people closer together, unpleasant ones keep them farther apart), the setting (lighting, noise, available space), the physical appearance of an interlocutor (those perceived to be more attractive

draw in the other person more), the interlocutor's personality (people tend to stay closer to a friendly person), and the status of the interlocutor (one with higher social status is given more space than one with a lower status).

Proxemic codes not only regulate interpersonal space, but also the orientation of the body and the social meanings ascribed to its relative location in the interaction context (above or below a platform, behind or in front of a desk). When someone is standing on a stage at the front of an audience, for example, they are perceived as being more important than someone sitting down. Speeches, lectures, classes, and various performances unfold in this way, with the speaker, performer, and teacher "at the front" or "on stage," and the audience members seated (usually). Officials, managers, directors, and the like sit behind a desk to mark their importance and superiority. Only their superiors can walk behind it to talk to them. To show friendliness, the person behind the desk would have to come out and sit with the other person in a different part of the room.

Touch

Similar to proxemic codes, tactile codes also regulate social interaction. Holding hands with a child entails a different tactility (variation in force or intensity) than holding hands with a lover. Patting a superior to convey approval or appreciation also involves a different tactile pattern than touching a friend. Needless to say, tactility varies across cultures. In San Juan, Puerto Rico, the rate at which people touch each other during social discourse is much higher than it is in Paris, London, or New York. In Japanese society, during infancy and childhood a close tactile relationship among family members is encouraged, but at adolescence and beyond touch in general is discouraged.[5]

Tactile codes inform individuals who they are allowed to touch and who not to touch, where it is permissible to touch another person, and so on. For example, a doctor or nurse may touch a patient, but the reverse is normally perceived as inappropriate. An adult may pat a child on the head, but a child patting an adult on the head has no specifiable social meaning. Touching oneself in certain parts, such as the head and the face, is generally acceptable, but touching oneself in the genital area is construed as either offensive and, in some places, illegal. Linking arms normally indicates companionship; putting one's arm around someone's shoulder typically indicates friendship or intimacy; and holding hands conveys intimacy of some kind.

The most common form of initial tactile communication in American culture is handshaking. The zoologist Desmond Morris claims that this greeting

ritual may have started as a way to show that neither person in a greeting activity was holding a weapon.[6] It thus became a "tie sign," because of the social bond it was designed to establish. Throughout the centuries, it evolved into a symbol of equality among individuals, being used to seal agreements of all kinds. Indeed, refusing to shake someone's outstretched hand will invariably be interpreted, even today, as the opposite—a sign of aggressiveness or a challenge. Predictably, handshaking reveals a high degree of cross-cultural variation. People can give a handshake by squeezing the right hand (as Europeans and Americans do), shaking the other's hand with both hands, shaking the right hand and then patting the other's back or hugging the person, leaning forward or standing straight while shaking hands, and so on. Handshaking is not a universal social protocol, though. Southeast Asians, for instance, traditionally press their palms together in a praying motion to carry out the greeting ritual. The fact that they now also use the handshake form of greeting bespeaks of the influence of one culture on another.

Anthropologists are unclear as to why touching patterns vary so much across cultures, at least traditionally. The reason may be the ways in which people perceive the meaning of the self in relation to the body. In some societies, people think of themselves as literally "contained" in their skin. The privacy zones that define "self-space" in such cultures, therefore, include the clothes that cover the skin. On the other hand, in other cultures—as, for example, in most Middle Eastern ones—the self is perceived as being located down within the body shell. This results in a totally different patterning and perception of proxemic and tactile actions. Middle Eastern individuals are in general more tolerant of crowds, of noise levels, of touch, of eye contact, and of body odors than are most North Americans.

Some psychologists claim that, in evolutionary terms, one of the original functions of touch was to initiate a mating encounter. Remnants of this mechanism can still be seen in the fact that lovers hold hands, touch each other on the hair and face, pat each other to convey affection, and so on. Sexual touching is universal, although its specific coding varies widely. In her book, *The Gift of Touch*, Helen Colton poses the following embarrassing situation to illustrate how culturally diverse the sexual coding of touch is.[7] Let us say that someone comes upon a strange woman in her bath. Which part of her body would the woman touch in order to conceal it? According to Colton, it depends on which culture she belongs to. Clearly, as Colton's argument implies, the specific bodily parts that are perceived to be sexually suggestive differ widely from culture to culture. What is considered as erotic or obscene touching behavior in some cultures is considered natural or desirable behavior in others.

Territoriality

According to some biologists and psychologists, interpersonal zones and touch patterns are remnants of an innate territoriality mechanism that allows an animal to gain access to, and defend control of, critical resources such as food and nesting sites found in certain habitats. This is why animals compete for territories, either fighting actual battles or performing ritual combats as tests of strength, with the defeated animal being excluded from holding a territory or forced to occupy a less desirable locale. The victor then typically marks the boundaries of its conquered territory in a species-specific way. A cat, for instance, will urinate along the boundary that marks the territory it claims as its own. This sends out a scent to potential competitors signaling possession of a tract of land.

The Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz (1903–89) was among the first scientists to identify and document territoriality patterns. He discovered that they were an important part of an animal's repertoire of survival strategies, as critical, in evolutionary terms, as its anatomical characteristics. Lorenz also suggested that human aggression and warfare were explainable as residual territoriality impulses. Lorenz's controversial theory gained widespread popularity through a best-selling book by Robert Ardrey published in 1966, *Territorial Imperative*. The book subsequently generated a heated debate in academia and society at large on the nature and origin of human aggression.[8] The notion of "human territoriality" has an intuitive logic to it: intrusions into one's home or car are perceived as signals of aggression, and humans mark off their territories with props such as landmarks, boundary lines, and fences, which would seem to have similar functions to the territoriality mechanisms of other species.

The instinct for securing territories as "survival spaces" became the target of psychological experiments with rats in the 1950s and 1960s. These received broad media coverage because of the implications they seemed to have for people living in crowded urban areas. The gist of the experiments can be condensed as follows. When two laboratory rats were enclosed in the same cage, the researchers found that each one would instinctively seize an area of approximately equal dimensions. When a third rat would be introduced into the same cage, then a tripartite arrangement of subdivided areas would seem to be negotiated among the three rats. However, there always seemed to be some initial reluctance to do so, as signaled by minor altercations among the three rats at the beginning of the negotiations. As each extra rat would be introduced progressively into the cage, more reluctance and aggression would ensue until a "critical mass" would apparently be reached whereby the rats in

the cage would either fight relentlessly or demonstrate some form of capitulation behavior. The implications for "urban overcrowding" that those experiments apparently had were not missed by journalists and reporters. They also seemed to provide an explanation as to why some people "snap," as the expression goes, when this critical mass is surpassed; and why others seek rational solutions such as escaping into the suburbs, moving into the country, and so on.

Maps

Humans represent their territories with texts known as *maps*. Semiotically, maps are visual texts of significant spaces—spaces that mean something to us in some way—constructed with the three basic types of representational processes—indexicality, iconicity, and symbolism (Chap. 2). A map is, at one level, an indexical "territorial text," since it indicates where a territory is located on terra firma. Its layout is iconic because it shows the features in a territory in topographical relation to each other. It involves symbolic coding as well because it is decipherable on the basis of conventionalized notational systems (key, scale, and so on). All civilizations have developed map-making techniques to meet a host of social needs. These were elaborated and refined in tandem with the rise and growth of the mathematical sciences, and especially in accordance with the principles of Cartesian coordinate geometry. In a fundamental way, maps are like words—they classify the world in specific ways. It is relevant to note that today, with GPS systems, the paper map has become virtually obsolete. The shift from paper to screen maps mirrors the larger shift away from Print Age textualities to electronic-digital ones.

How do we interpret a map? To say "I am here, but I want to get to there" on a map involves understanding (1) that *here* and *there* are indexes in map space standing for points in real space, and (2) that the movement from *here* to *there* on a map stands for the corresponding iconic (simulative) movement between two points in real space. However, this is only the denotative dimension of map interpretation, that is, the basic way in which we interpret it as a text composed of indexical, iconic, and symbolic signifiers. A map is also an interpretant of space. As Denis Wood aptly puts it: "the history of the map is our history because the connections from the map to the rest of the culture radiate from every part of it."[9] Moreover, as J. B. Harley observes, this is the reason why they are "persuasive":[10]

> Like all other texts, maps use signs to represent the world. When these become fixed in a map genre, we define them as conventional signs…Maps are also inherently rhetorical images. It is commonplace to say that cartography is an art of persuasion. What goes against modern wisdom is to suggest that *all* maps are rhetorical…They are part of persuasive discourse, and they intend to convince.

The first known maps were made by the Babylonians around 2300 BCE. Carved on clay tablets, they consisted largely of land surveys made for the purposes of taxation. More extensive regional maps, drawn on silk and dating from the second century BCE, have been found in China. The precursor of the modern map is believed to have been devised by the Greek philosopher Anaximander (c. 610–547 BCE). It was circular and showed the known lands of the world grouped around the Aegean Sea at the center and surrounded by the ocean. Anaximander's map constituted one of the first attempts to think beyond the immediate territorial boundaries of a particular society—Greece—even though he located the center of the universe in the Aegean Sea, thus betraying his own worldview. Around 200 BCE, the Greek geometer and geographer Eratosthenes (c. 276–195 BCE) introduced the technique of parallel lines to indicate latitude and longitude, although they were not spaced evenly and accurately. Eratosthenes' map represented the known world of his times, from England in the northwest to the mouth of the Ganges River in the east and to Libya in the south. Approximately 150 CE, the Greek scholar Ptolemy (c. 100–170 CE) published the first textbook in cartographic method, titled *Geographia*. Maps became the tools for planning travel and for exploration and the basis for naming new territories. In 1507, the German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller (c. 1470–1522) applied the name America to the newly identified transatlantic lands, further classifying America into North and South—a cartographic tradition that continues to this day—and differentiating the Americas from Asia. In 1570, the first modern atlas—a collection of maps of the world—was put together by the Flemish cartographer Abraham Ortelius (1527–98). The atlas, titled *Orbis Terrarum*, contained seventy maps. The world, it seemed, was now under the "control" of human semiotic skills.

An important development came in the sixteenth century when Gerardus Mercator (1512–94) developed the technique of cylindrical projection in 1569. This allowed cartographers to portray compass directions as lines, at the expense, however, of the accurate representation of relative size. The new maps led, in the nineteenth century, to topographic surveys in Europe for determining political boundaries. In 1891, the International Geographical Congress proposed the political mapping of the entire world on a scale of

1:1,000,000, a task that occupied cartographers for more than a century. Throughout the twentieth century, advances in aerial and satellite photography, and in computer modeling of topographic surfaces, greatly enhanced the versatility, functionality, accuracy, and fidelity of map-making and, thus, the geographic classification of geographical space. Towards the end of the century, the Geographic Information System (GIF) and the Global Positioning System (GPS) were invented to produce sophisticated maps from stored data (in the case of the latter) or to guide drivers of moving vehicles. The GPS tracks a vehicle's location by using signals from a group of space satellites. A computer in the vehicle combines the position data with stored street map data, producing optimal maps of the route to a destination.

Despite such technological sophistication, the basic premise underlying map-making has not changed since Mercator's era—it inheres in the segmentation of geographical space in terms of topological, political, and other categories. The traditional maps of North American aboriginal peoples, on the other hand, are designed to show the interconnectedness among the parts within the map space through a relation of distance, angulation, and shape. Western maps represent the world as an agglomeration of points, lines, and parts, related to each other in terms of the mathematics of the Cartesian plane; aboriginal maps represent the same world instead as a holistic unsegmentable entity. Arguably, the design of these kinds of maps has influenced the design of living areas. Aboriginal territories are interconnected to each other holistically; modern American territories (such as urban centers), on the other hand, are divided and subdivided into sections that are determinable in discrete ways. Not only does the layout of the city of New York, for instance, mirror a Cartesian map, but the city also names many of its streets in terms of the grid system: for example, 52nd and 4th refers to the intersection point of two perpendicular lines in the city grid. In a fundamental semiotic sense, such cities are the "iconic byproducts" of the worldview that has been enshrined by the widespread use of grid maps since the early sixteenth century.

Maps are clearly much more than maps, so to speak. As Thrower observes, some of our greatest achievements have been made possible through cartographic expression "from philosophical considerations on the nature of the earth to setting foot on the lunar surface."[11] The representational power of maps thus raises a fundamental philosophical question: Is scientific representation (diagram-making) an attempt to encode reality in a particular cultural way, or is it independent of culture? Geometry and trigonometry are basically diagram-making sciences that have allowed human beings to solve engineering problems since ancient times, and the science of cartography has allowed explorers to solve travel problems with amazing accuracy. In the past, explorers

set out on a journey without knowing what they would encounter along the way, nor whether they would reach a land mass or a body of water. However, they still took their journeys of discovery with a high degree of assurance that they would find the intended destination, thanks to their maps.

What is even more remarkable is that cartography has permitted us to describe the positions of heavenly bodies and to calculate their distances from Earth with great exactness. It is truly mind-boggling to think that with the aid of a simple representational text (the map), we have been able to set foot on the moon and will no doubt be able to visit other places in the skies in the not-too-distant future.

What is the main implication of the foregoing discussion, semiotically speaking? It is a truly amazing one—namely, that discovery is guided by semiosis. Signs give shape to formless ideas, not in an arbitrary fashion, but in response to inferential processes that are tied to our experience of reality. Knowledge systems vary throughout the world. However, such variation is, upon closer scrutiny, superficial. Below the surface of these systems are sign creation processes that reflect imaginative universals in how reality is perceived. The problem is that we never get the "whole picture" at once. This is why special theories of the physical universe are possible and highly useful, but general ones are not. In other words, our knowledge systems can only give us partial glimpses of reality. What is important to note is that discoveries cannot be forced by logical analysis. They simply *happen.* However, they are not totally random or fortuitous, as cartographically directed exploration shows. Discovery is tied to unconscious modes of interconnecting experiences and their implications—implications that are captured in representational forms such as maps.

A perfect example of the relation between signs and discovery is the story of π (pi) = 3.14. Pi is the ratio that results when the circumference of a circle is divided by its diameter. Serendipitously, π appears in a number of mathematical calculations and formulas, such as the one used to describe the motion of a pendulum or the vibration of a string. It also turns up in equations describing the DNA double helix, rainbows, ripples spreading from where a raindrop falls into water, waves, navigation calculations, and the list could go on and on. Does this mean that the circle form is implicit in these domains? If so, what is the connecting link between the circle form that produced the notion of π and other forms such as rainbows?

The enigma of discovery is examined in a fascinating 1998 movie, titled *π: Faith in Chaos*, by American director Darren Aronofsky. A brilliant mathematician, Maximilian Cohen, teeters on the brink of insanity as he searches for an elusive numerical code that he believes is hidden in π—a code that might provide answers to the great questions of philosophy (What is life? Is there a

hidden pattern in nature? etc.). For the previous ten years, Cohen had been attempting to decode the numerical pattern beneath the ultimate system of ordered chaos—the stock market. As he verges on a solution, real chaos is swallowing the world in which he lives. Pursued by an aggressive Wall Street firm set on financial domination and a Kabbalah sect intent on unlocking the secrets hidden in their ancient holy texts, Cohen races to crack the code, hoping to defy the madness that looms before him. As the movie's subtext implies, the stream of digits after the decimal point in π seems to challenge us to try and find a pattern within them. Does a pattern exist? If so, how do we discover it? What is the attraction to this number? Is it perhaps the fact that a circle is probably one of the most perfect and simple geometric forms known to human beings? Why does π appear in nature, biology, and in many other domains of reality? It simply keeps cropping up, reminding us that it is there, and defying us to understand why. Very much like the universe itself, the more technologically advanced we become and as our picture of π grows larger, the more its mysteries grow. Because of this simple representational device—π—derived from taking a ratio, we are led to make discoveries serendipitously. That is, perhaps, the greatest mystery of all.

As a final word on maps, it is interesting to note that they have played a significant role not only in exploration, but also in narratives. Stories with maps showing where treasure is buried abound. In his introduction to *Treasure Island*, Robert Louis Stevenson describes how he sketched the island's imaginary shorelines, providing a framework for the reader to use in reading the text. The map traces the strategic movements of the pirates and the others in their search for the treasure. Sir Thomas More, Jonathan Swift, John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, William Faulkner, Michael Ondaatje, among others have similarly used maps as integral components of their plots.

Signifying Spaces

The discussion of territories and maps brings us logically to the topic of space itself as constituting a semiotic code. All societies build and design their streets, marketplaces, abodes, and public edifices with specific designs and culturally-focused meanings. Indeed, a building is hardly ever perceived by the members of a society as simply a pile of bricks, wood, or straw put together to provide shelter. Rather, its shape, size, features, and location are perceived to be signifiers that refer to a broad range of meanings. The rituals and behaviors that govern activities in private and public spaces are the outcome of these meanings: in American

society one knocks on the door of private dwellings, but not on the door of retail stores, to seek permission to enter (because a store is perceived to be a building that is literally open for business); one sits and waits for someone in a public foyer, atrium, or lobby, but not normally in a public bathroom (because the latter is a secretive personal space); one walks on a public sidewalk, but not on someone's porch without permission (because the porch is a private space).

We perceive a particular society as a communal space and by extension a communal body. This is why we refer to societies as being *healthy*, *sick*, *vibrant*, *beautiful*, or *ugly*. Indeed, visitors habitually judge a society instinctively as they would judge a human person, namely, on how its public spaces appear to the eye—*neat*, *dirty*, *organized*, *chaotic*, and so on. This is also why a society feels violated "as a single body" if someone defaces its public or sacred places. Conflicts among peoples or nations are often triggered by such transgressive acts against the "communal body."

This perception would also explain why we talk of a city's roads as having *arteries*, of its downtown core as its *heart*, of its design as being *warm* or *cold*. In ancient Greece religious and civic structures in cities were designed to give a sense of aesthetic balance; streets were arranged in a grid pattern and housing was integrated with commercial and defense structures to give a feeling of organization and security. Renaissance city planners built radial streets leading to a central point, like spokes of a wheel, so as to promote social interaction. To this day, the downtown core is known as *centro* in Italy, reflecting the Renaissance design of cities as circles. The city of Siena is a classic example of this kind of design; so too is the city plan of seventeenth-century London and the streets of Mannheim and Karlsruhe in Germany. After the Industrial Revolution, the concept of the Cartesian grid started to gain a foothold on city designs (as mentioned earlier). Modern grid cities are the semiotic structural byproducts of Cartesian geometry.

The gist of the foregoing semiotic story is that cities, shelters, buildings, and communal sites are built in specific ways that bear culture-specific meanings. This is why the buildings of a particular university stand for that institution visually; why St. Peter's basilica symbolizes a specific religion; and so on. Market squares, sacred sites, and other kinds of communal places are invariably perceived as meaningful by the members of a society. Public spaces are those sites where communal or social interactions of various kinds take place; private spaces are those places that individuals have appropriated or designated as their own; and sacred spaces are those locales that are believed to have metaphysical, mythical, or spiritual attributes. Spatial codes also inform people how to act and behave in such places: the way one dresses for church is different from the way one dresses for work; the way one behaves in a restaurant is different from the way one behaves at home, and so on.

As a concrete example of the meanings that are attributed to buildings and sites, consider the shopping mall. In all societies, past and present, certain spaces are set aside for community interaction. In villages, the market square is a locus for people to enact certain rituals, to exchange goods and services, to socialize. These same kinds of functions are served, in modern urban societies, by the shopping mall. The mall, therefore, is much more than just a locus for shopping. It satisfies several semiotic needs at once. It is a signifying space that imparts a feeling of security and protection against the outside world of cars, mechanical noises, and air pollution. It also provides shopping solutions to personal problems. It has transformed shopping into a social activity, rather than one based on need. People in malls perceive shopping typically as a form of recreation, buying things that they may not need, but finding the act pleasurable in itself. Cinemas, restaurants, and amusement parks are found within some malls, enhancing the entertainment factor. The Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, for instance, has more than 400 stores, around fifty restaurants, several night clubs, and a giant roller coaster, drawing millions of visitors per year, equal or greater in number than Walt Disney World, the Grand Canyon, or Graceland (the home of rock legend Elvis Presley). Malls have morphed, in effect, into self-contained "fantasylands," where one can leave the problems, dirt, and hassles of modern life literally outside.

Buildings

Buildings are not only shelters. As in all things human, they are also perceived as signs with connotative values literally built into them. We typically react to our home, for instance, as if it were an extension of self-space. At a denotative level, a home, whether a crude hut or an elaborate mansion, has a straightforward meaning: it is a shelter providing protection from weather and intruders. It also demarcates territory, constituting a privately bounded space that ensures safety and preserves sanity. When one steps inside, one feels as if one has retreated into the safety of one's own body. This is why intrusion into a home is felt as a violation of the self.

However, denotation stops there. Within the home, each room elicits a specific type of connotative meaning. Take the bedroom as an example. Concealing a bedroom has a practical basis: we are extremely vulnerable when we are sleeping, and so it is judicious to keep sleeping areas concealed or secret. The ancient Egyptians hid their bedrooms at the back or the sides of their homes. North American families also prefer to keep their bedrooms away from the line of sight. However, bedrooms are also signs of the self. It is

the room where we display our persona, through decoration, accoutrements (photos, objects) and other meaning-bearing objects. This is why only intimates are allowed to share that space literally and symbolically. Conceptions of "clean" and "dirty" in a home are also interpretable at the level of connotation. Dirt is really no more than displaced matter. An object "out of its proper place" must be put back or reallocated, otherwise it might be perceived as litter or debris. This is particularly true with regard to our kitchens, because we think of them as "dirt-free" or "dirt-removal" spaces. We can tolerate "dirty" bedrooms much more because food is not involved and because they are out of the line of sight.

The experience of the home space contrasts with the experience of other kinds of spaces, especially those designated as sacred. When one enters a church, a chapel, a synagogue, a temple, or a mosque, one tends to speak with a lower voice, to walk more quietly, to feel a sense of respect and reverence. The configuration and set-up of the sacred space is also laden with meanings. In a Catholic church, for example, the altar is more sacred and therefore less traversable than the area containing the pews. A confessional is a very intimate enclosure. It cannot be lit or made overly amenable. It imparts a feeling of intimate reflection, providing a physical space within which one can look into the dark depths of the soul to reveal to God one's weaknesses. The way the altar faces is also highly meaningful. As a table for eating spiritually along with Christ, it was once put against the wall of the church with the priest's back to the people. The language spoken was Latin, which further imbued the ceremony with a detached, abstract, and yet, seemingly spiritual, quality. Nowadays, the altar and the priest are oriented towards the faithful. This new configuration conveys a feeling of communion with and among the people, not just of communion with God. The change in orientation of the altar reflects, clearly, a change in emphasis on the part of the Church and its members.

Sacred buildings make individuals feel that they have entered a special place, a place where contact with the deities is real and meaningful. Indeed, the word *church* comes from Greek *ekklesia*, meaning "those called out," that is, those called by God away from their communities to form a new and spiritually deeper community. New Testament metaphors bear this out. Christians refer to the *body of Christ*, to Christ as the *head*, and to the faithful as *members* (originally meaning "limbs"). This feeling that the congregation is part of a communal body has spawned its own architectural traditions. In some modern-day designs of churches the altar is placed in the center of a circular arrangement, allowing people to face each other and thus to feel united through the ongoing ceremony.

Churches, temples, mosques, and other sacred buildings stand out clearly from their surroundings and have a pronounced architectural character. Since the dawn of history, people have sought to establish their relationship to the forces of nature by building substantial structures commanding attention, in places where the divinities are thought to reside, and where miracles and supernatural events are thought to take place. Around these, the ceremonies of worship were elaborated. As a result, priests and rulers became very powerful because they were thought to have direct access to the divinities. Egyptian rulers built elaborate tombs in the form of *mastabas*, rectangular masses of masonry that were transformed into the great pyramids around 1500 BCE. These immense buildings testify to the vast social control that Egyptian pharaohs exerted over the populace. Other cultures have similar monuments. In India, the commemorative monument takes the form of a large hemispherical mound, called a *stupa*; in Southeast Asia it is called a *wat*—a richly sculptured stone complex that is approached by a ceremonial bridge. In the Mayan and Inca cultures, ceremonial monuments resembled the Egyptian pyramids, in that they used the same kinds of architectural design.

Churches were the tallest buildings of medieval European cities and towns. The spires on those churches rose majestically upwards to the sky, imparting a sense of awe as people looked up. There was no doubt as to which group had political and social power in medieval Europe. The churches were, literally and symbolically, places of power and wealth. As the churches started to lose their clout and wealth after the Renaissance, other kinds of buildings emerged to reflect in their architecture the new cultural order. The tallest buildings were the palaces of aristocrats and the emerging bourgeoisie. Today, the tallest structures in cities such as Dallas, Toronto, Montreal, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and London are owned by large corporations and banks. Wealth and power now reside in these institutions. Inside these mammoth buildings there is a structure that mirrors the social hierarchical structure implicit within it—the jobs and positions with the lowest value are at the bottom of the building; the more important ones at the top. The company's executives reside, like the gods on Mount Olympus, on the top floor. The atmosphere on this level is perceived to be rarefied and other-worldly. This architectural symbolism is the reason why we use expressions such as "to work one's way up," "to make it to the top," "to climb the ladder of success," "to set one's goals high," and so on.

It is often the case that not only buildings, but also entire cities are believed to represent a form of heaven on earth. As Humphrey and Vitebsky note:[12]

> Many ancient civilizations believed that it was the reproduction of the structure of the cosmos in sacred architecture that made human life possible by providing a model for the laws of society on earth. This view applied to the city as well as

> to the temple and it made the spiritual and political dimensions of power virtually identical. In Mesoamerica, the city was often laid out as an exact model of a heavenly city. The Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán was constructed according to a divine ideogram, while at Teotihuacan, the entire city, containing thousands of temples, was itself equivalent to a great temple.

Overall, buildings are semiotic texts. This is why, in addition to size and shape, a building's location bears meaning. An office building in the downtown core signifies, in general, more prestige than a building on the outskirts of town. Head offices are normally located downtown. Since the late 1960s, the design of such buildings has been influenced by the style known as postmodernism. The AT&T building in New York City, built in 1984, is a classic example of this style. With its allusions to Renaissance architectural forms and design features evoking Chippendale furniture, it combines historical tradition with satirical style, the old with the new, the important with the trivial. Postmodernists strive for individuality, mocking those who seek standardized ways of constructing buildings.

In a sense, architecture is all about imposing order on space or in giving it an "aesthetic feeling," so to speak. It reflects the general semiotic-aesthetic principle that when things look right, they are right. In ancient Greece, religious and civic citadels were oriented in such a way as to give a sense of aesthetic balance to the inhabitants—streets were arranged in a grid pattern and housing was integrated with commercial and defense structures. In the Renaissance, the design of cities around piazzas was in sharp contrast to the narrow, irregular streets of medieval cities. Renaissance city planners stressed wide, regular radial streets forming concentric circles around a central point, with other streets radiating out from that point like spokes of a wheel. To this day, the downtown core of many Italian cities reflects this Renaissance view of city design. In China, the principle of "things looking right" has even been given expression in the form of the "art of placement," known as *Feng Shui*. Practitioners of this art use an octagonal template called the *ba-gua* to assess an area, since the orientation, layout, and placement of objects within the area are considered to be significant in metaphysical terms.

Today hotels and recreational buildings (for example, casinos) are taking on some of the symbols of power that were once associated exclusively with churches, aristocratic palaces, banks, and corporations. The city of Las Vegas is a perfect example of a city designed to cater to our modern-day craving for recreation and consumption. The tall hotel towers that mark its landscape are symbols of a world of fast money, quick recreational fixes, and consumerist delights.

Overall, we perceive territories, spaces, and shelters as signs and sign systems—systems that have allowed us to exercise some control over nature. This has, of course, had many positive consequences. However, it has also brought about some extremely negative ones as well. One of these is the level of pollution and overcrowding that has put survival of the earth at risk. The effort to free the world of pollution and to control population growth is leading more and more to futuristic scenarios that are more frightening than anything ever written in science fiction. Entire urban communities may be enclosed in plastic domes in the future. Temperature and humidity inside the domes would be controlled, and electronic filters would keep the air clean and fresh. The world, however, would be a terrifying place. Let's hope that this will not occur and that rather than attempting to control nature, we can come to some co-existential *modus vivendi* with her.

Cyberspace

The concept of space in the age of the Internet has become amplified—there are now two spatial realities in human life, real and virtual. The current world of digital communication technologies impels all of us to become more involved with one another, no matter what language we speak, what culture we come from, where we live physically, and who we are. We are all denizens of the same digital global village. Everything from purchasing goods, accessing and recording information, seeking recreation and even courtship takes place through the space in which the village exists—cyberspace. This has engendered a new perception of what information, communication, and literacy are—retrieving many of the features of orally based tribal life. The new media have, indeed, become the new message—to paraphrase McLuhan. They have offset the individualistic and privatizing forces of the Print Age, allowing people to engage with each other in a more communal way, deconstructing authorship and the primacy of canonical texts. Even sources of authoritatively coded knowledge, such as print encyclopedias, have now become open to the participation and collaboration of everyone, not just individual experts—as can be seen by the advent and spread of the various "wikis" on the Internet, which, going against all traditions of the past, allow for the collaborative editing of content by users. The advent of the global village signals that the world is morphing gradually into a paradigmatically different one from any imaginable social system of the past. The whole semiotics of space is in fact in need of revision or at least some amplification.

Computers and various digital devices allow users to move and react in simulated environments, manipulating virtual objects in place of real objects. Constant engagement in such environments is conditioning us more and more to perceive the body as separable from the mind. Everything from courtship on websites to self-presentation and diary-keeping on social media, now illustrates the role of cyberspace as a connecting space—a veritable electronic village. The term *cyberspace* was coined by American writer William Gibson (b. 1948) in his 1984 science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, in which he described cyberspace as a place of "unthinkable complexity." Human lives are literally becoming unthinkably complex in that space, which Baudrillard called the hyperreal space of the mind (as mentioned), seeing it as more real than real space. Cyberspace now has its own communities and virtual spaces with their own set of conventions for communicating and interacting. As Mikael Benedikt observed a while back, in cyberspace "the tablet becomes a page becomes a screen becomes a world, a virtual world. Everywhere and nowhere, a place where nothing is forgotten yet everything changes."[13]

Neuromancer was the inspiration for the emergence of cyberpunk science fiction writing. Cyberpunk narratives take place typically in a bleak, dehumanized future world dominated by technology and robotic humans. Gibson's description of cyberspace is worth repeating here:[14]

> *Cyberspace*. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by millions of legitimate operators. A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of Light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters of constellations of data. Like city lights, receding.

The Internet promises a type of immortality that only religions in the past could have ensured. Although the form of immortality is devoid of consciousness (which religions pledge), it is nonetheless a real possibility that most people would never have been able to contemplate previously. What is online about ourselves will define us well beyond our mortal lives. In the past, only artists, writers, musicians, and other "important" individuals would have been able to leave behind their "selves" for posterity through their work; now virtually anyone can do something similar. Our Facebook pages and our tweets define us, remaining in cyberspace well beyond our physical lives. In cyberspace we can leave a record of ourselves for future generations to read. This is affecting not only how we remember and grieve, but also how we view mortality. Cyberspace, like Gibson claimed, is indeed an infinite one, in both

the physical and spiritual senses—it is a virtual universe without physical boundaries and it provides a bizarre sense of reassurance that life will go on even after we are dead in the real world.

Notes

1. Edward T. Hall, "A system for the notation of proxemic behavior," *American Anthropologist* 65 (1963): 1004.
2. Edward T. Hall, *The hidden dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).
3. Umberto Eco, *Einführung in die Semiotik* (München: Fink, 1968), 344–49.
4. Hall, *The hidden dimension,* pp. 12–15.
5. See, for instance, Michael Argyle, *Bodily communication* (New York: Methuen, 1988).
6. Desmond Morris, *The human zoo* (London: Cape, 1969).
7. Helen Colton, *The gift of touch* (New York: Putnam, 1983).
8. Robert Ardrey, *The territorial imperative* (New York: Atheneum, 1966).
9. Denis Wood, *The power of maps* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1992), 144. In *How to lie with maps*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), Mark Monmonier shows how easily it is to misinterpret maps in cultural terms.
10. J. B. Harley, *The new nature of maps: Essays in the history of cartography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 36–7.
11. Norman J. W. Thrower, *Maps & civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 233.
12. Caroline Humphrey and Piers Vitebsky, *Sacred architecture* (London: Duncan Baird, 1997), 13.
13. Michael Benedikt, *Cyberspace: First steps* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 1.
14. William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: Grafton, 1984), 67.

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8

What a Beautiful Ring!: The Meaning of Clothes and Objects

I believe in the total depravity of inanimate things, the elusiveness of soap, the knottiness of strings, the transitory nature of buttons, the inclination of suspenders to twist and of hooks to forsake their lawful eyes, and cleave only unto the hairs of their hapless owner's head.
—Katharine Walker (1840–1916)

Martha's video has still much more to offer the semiotician. For example, we can see Cheryl wearing an enticing red skirt and matching black lace blouse, Ted an elegant dark-blue suit, white shirt, and matching blue tie. Also, something that Ted said at one point is worthy of our attention: "Oh, what a beautiful ring, Cheryl! Who gave it to you?" "It's a friendship ring," Cheryl replies. "I've worn it since I was 14." Why is it, a semiotician would ask, that we are so attached to, and meticulous about, our clothes and our trinkets of jewelry? More generally, why is it that people find so much significance in the objects they make (as discussed briefly in Chap. 3)? What role do objects play in human life? Do clothes *make* the person, as the expression goes? Why do we associate clothing with ritual behaviors, such as the courtship display unfolding between Cheryl and Ted?

"Things" have special value in many consumerist societies, becoming fetishes as Karl Marx once claimed. A fad is an object, a fashion style, or some trend that becomes extremely popular relatively quickly, but tends to lose popularity just as quickly. Some fads may come back if a subsequent generation finds out about them through media retrospectives and nostalgic portrayals. For instance, the fad of karate lessons in the 1980s was due in large part

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to the popularity of the Bruce Lee movies and, later, of the set of *Karate Kid* movies. Blue jeans and T-shirts became clothing fads for young people in the mid-1950s because they were worn by actors such as James Dean and Marlon Brando. The T-shirt as fad made its debut in the 1951 movie, *A Streetcar Named Desire* that featured Marlon Brando wearing a T-shirt in highly erotic scenes that finally catapulted the T-shirt into the realm of pop culture. A similar story can be told about any major fad. In the 1950s, Hula Hoops became truly popular after Georgia Gibbs sang *The Hula Hoop Song* in a 1958 episode of the *Ed Sullivan Show* on CBS, associating the hoop with the emerging youth culture. The fad of black clothing, hair, and cosmetics, popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s, came from several sources, including vampire movies and goth culture.

Clothes and Dress

Suppose you have a twenty-something-year-old brother who has an important job interview at the head office of a bank. During his adolescent years, your brother had become accustomed to dressing like a rap musician. Aware that he must present a vastly different persona at the interview, he decides to ask you to help him get dressed appropriately for the occasion. To put it in semiotic terms, your task is to acquaint him with the *dress code* that will allow him to put together an appropriate *clothing text* through which he can present an acceptable persona to his potential employer. As you know, the code suggests that he must be well-groomed; that he should wear a white or blue, long-sleeved shirt, with no designs on it, with a suitable tie. It also suggests that he should wear a gray or blue jacket with matching pants, and, finally, that he should wear black shoes, preferably with shoelaces. Of course, he should remove all traces of his previous lifestyle clothing. Like any code, there is some latitude in the choices and combinations of signifiers (clothing items) your brother has in constructing his apparel text, but not very much. He certainly cannot ignore the basic structure of the dress code, for if he does—if he decides to wear a tuque, or if he decides to put on sneakers, for instance—the chances are that he would not even get past the door of the job interviewer. Deploying the appropriate dress code will not guarantee him a job, but it will at least get him past that door. Dressing for the occasion is a semiotic social act.

Now, let's switch the situation from the standpoint of gender. Suppose that this time your sister is the one with an important job interview at the head office of a bank. Once again, as an adolescent she had become accustomed to dressing in a youthful style with nose rings, ripped jeans, and so on. Like your

brother, she comes to you for help. In her case, the code suggests that she also set her hair in an appropriate way, avoiding her neo-punk hairstyle; that she wear a blouse with soft colors, preferably white; that she wear a gray or blue jacket with a matching skirt or pants; and that she put on shoes, preferably, with high or semi-high heels. Although there are some paradigmatic (selectional) differences in the female dress code with respect to the male one, there are also many similarities. This suggests that the type of job both are seeking cuts across gender categories. In such cases, dress codes tend to be more flexible or "unisexual."

Clothes supplement the body's biological resources (bodily hair, skin thickness) for counteracting environmental fluctuations, such as weather changes. At this rudimentary denotative level, they are specific kinds of amplifications of these resources, as clothing variation in relation to different climates testifies. However, in the system of everyday social life clothing items also function as signs, and therefore are organized conceptually and metaphorically into the various dress codes (from Old French *dresser* "to arrange, set up") that are interconnected with the other codes of this system.

At the connotative level, clothes convey persona (identity, gender, age, status, ideology, and so on) and regulate social interaction. To someone who knows nothing about Amish culture, the blue or charcoal *Mutze* of the Amish male is just a jacket, but within the Amish community the blue one indicates that the wearer is between sixteen and thirty-five years of age, and the charcoal one that he is older than thirty-five. Similarly, to an outsider the Russian *kalbak* appears to be a brimless red hat; to a Russian living in rural areas, it once meant that the wearer is a medical doctor.

Dress codes have an enormous range of historically based meanings. In ancient Rome, for instance, only aristocrats were allowed to wear purple-colored clothes; in religiously oriented cultures, differentiated dress codes for males and females are regularly enforced to ensure modesty; and the list could go on and on. When people put clothes on their bodies, they are not only engaged in making images of themselves to suit their own eyes, but also to conform to cultural models, such as gender codes. Before the middle part of the twentieth century, females in Western culture did not wear pants. The one who *wore the pants* in a family meant, denotatively and connotatively, that the wearer was a male. With the change in social-role structures during the 1960s, women too began to wear pants regularly in acknowledgment of the change. The reverse situation has not transpired. Except in special ritualistic circumstances—for example, the wearing of a Scottish kilt—men have not openly worn skirts in America. If they do, then we label it an act of transvestitism. Today, with our expansion of the notion of gender to include LGBTQ

individuals, our perceptions of clothing are also changing. In effect, as the clothes change so too do other sign systems associated with them.

The identification of gender through clothes is characteristic of cultures across the world. As children develop a sense of gender, they often want to experiment with the dress code of the other gender. In doing so, children are trying to cull from such cross-dressing episodes a better understanding of their own sexual persona; by assuming the gender of the other sex *through* the dress code, children are attempting to unravel what it is like *to be* the other sex, contrasting it with their own sense of sexual identity, and thus coming to a better grasp of its meaning. In transgender individuals, who identify with a gender other than their biological one, clothing experiments are more than simple gender role experiments; they are vital activities that help them understand themselves semiotically.

The power of dress as conveyor of persona becomes particularly noticeable at puberty. In tribal cultures, the clothes that individuals are expected to wear when they come of age are dictated by the elders or leaders of the collectivity. In modern industrialized cultures, pubescent youth are left alone to develop their own dress codes. Indeed, the history of youth dress styles since the mid-1920s is the history of contemporary adolescence and even of contemporary society. In that era, the so-called flappers were distinguished by the hat they wore as well as by their short dresses and stylish shoes, introducing a new kind of sexy fashion that was unthinkable in the Victorian era. In the 1950s, young people imitated the clothing and hairstyles that characterized early rock-and-roll culture (with pompadour hairstyles for males, poodle skirts and pony tails for females). In the 1960s, the fashion trends came out of the hippie culture, epitomized by long hair for both males and females and the wearing of blue jeans for both, in a unisex fashion style. Like all fads, fashion styles tell side stories of a culture and of social trends generally. Flapper hats defined the era of the Roaring Twenties, representing an emerging women's liberation movement; blue jeans symbolized the beginnings of gender and class equality.

Often, clothing is ideological, social, or political statement. The dress codes adopted by totalitarian regimes, with their dull uniformity, is a case in point. On the other side, a dress code such as the hipster one, exudes individualism. Hipsters are associated with indie or alternative music styles, and are often compared to the hippies and Beat writers (who were the first to be called hipsters in the 1950s). Hipsters are all about a flight from conformity, a way to put oneself in contrast to it, to stand out, to look and be different.

The Beat writers of the 1950s who broke from literary and moral traditions, emphasizing freedom of lifestyle and expression, also broke away from clothing fashions, introducing minimalist clothing that was later adopted by the hippies.

They were concentrated in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and in Greenwich Village in New York City. They held "happenings," which included a reading of their works combined with jazz, drugs, and sexuality. The best-known writers were Allen Ginsberg, especially famous for his poem *Howl* (1956), and Jack Kerouac, for his novel *On the Road* (1957). Other writers included William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gary Snyder. Critics accused the writers of promoting anarchy and obscenity for their own sake. But the movement captured the post-war generation's dissatisfaction with dull conformity and what they called the false values of "square" society. The beatniks, as they came to be called, also advocated peace and civil rights, which set the stage for the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Nudity

The human being is the only animal that does not "go nude," so to speak, without social repercussions (unless, of course, the social ambiance is a nudist camp or perhaps a sexual locale such as a striptease joint). Nudity is the semiotic counterpart of clothing. What is considered "exposable" of the body will vary significantly from culture to culture, even though the covering of genitalia for modesty seems, for the most part, to cross cultural boundaries. As anthropologist Helen Fisher aptly observes, even among Yanomamo tribal members, who live in the jungle of Amazonia, and wear very little clothing because of the climate, a woman would feel as much discomfort and agony at removing her vaginal string belt as would a North American woman if one were to ask her to remove her underwear; and a man would feel just as much embarrassment at his penis accidentally falling out of its encasement as would a North American male if he were to be caught literally "with his pants down."[1]

Clearly, nudity is imbued with meaning. Consider the performance art of strip-teasing. A semiotician would ask: Why do we attend (or desire to attend) performances whose sole purpose is the removal of clothing to reveal the naked body? The act of "suggestive clothing-removal" in an audience setting has, first and foremost, a profane ritualistic quality to it. The dark atmosphere, the routines leading up to the act, the predictability of the performance with its bodily gyrations imitating sexual activities, and the cathartic effects that it has on spectators are all suggestive of a rite worshipping carnality and fertility. There is no motive for being at such performances other than to indulge in a fascination with the nude body. Of course, sexual perversions can also be realized at such locales, but this is rarer than one would think. The Internet now offers much more opportunity to engage in sexual perversion.

This semiotic take on nudity would explain, arguably, why visual artists have always had a fascination for the nude figure and for erotic representation generally. The ancient Greek and Roman nude statues of male warriors, Michelangelo's powerful *David* sculpture (1501–4), Rodin's *The Thinker* (c. 1886), are all suggestive of the brutal power of the nude male body. On the other side of this paradigm, the female body has historically been portrayed as soft, sumptuous, and submissive, as can be seen in the famous ancient Greek statue known as the Venus de Milo, which represents Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty (Venus in Roman mythology). However, there has always been some ambiguity with regard to the female body. Feral and powerful women have always existed, as can be seen in the sculptures of Diana of Greek mythology.

The modern-day fascination with erotic materials is a contemporary testament to our fascination with nudity as a semiotic code in our system of everyday life. Those who see exploitation in such materials, and seem prepared to censor them, are probably more overwhelmed by the connotative power of this code than are most people. Depicting the human body in sexual poses or activities reveals, to the semiotician, a fascination with nudity as a signifying text that blends sexuality with historical meanings. Only when such depictions are repressed does this fascination become perilous.

The Sacred and the Profane

The topic of nudity brings us to one of the more important themes in the semiotic study of culture today—the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane across cultures, usually interpreted concretely as a distinction between the body and the soul. This distinction manifests itself in rituals and symbolism.[2] In many religious traditions, for instance, there are periods of fasting (such as Lent in Catholicism) preceded by periods of indulgence into all kinds of carnal pleasure (the Carnival celebration that precedes Lent). This dual dimension is intrinsic to understanding the role of many spectacles and ceremonies in contemporary cultures.

The concept of the carnival is especially relevant, as elaborated by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin.[3] The festivities associated with carnivals are tribal and popular; in them the sacred is "profaned," and the carnality of all things is proclaimed. At the time of carnival, everything authoritative, rigid, or serious is subverted, loosened, and mocked. Bakhtin's carnival theory would assert that acts of transgression or mockery against social norms are instinctual, paradoxically validating them. In effect, we come to understand

the role of those norms through a mockery of them. This would explain why vulgar forms of pop culture, such as erotic movies and strip-teasing, do not pose (and never have posed) any serious subversive challenge to the moral status quo. They are not really transgressive in a true political subversive sense; they just appear to be. 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.

Carnival theory asserts that mockery actually institutes a vital dialogue between those who feel that expressing the sacred in human life is the only lofty goal to pursue, and those who want to mock it. Through this form of "polyphonic" dialogue we come to understand the meaning of social life intuitively. It is an oppositional dialogue, pitting the sacred against the profane in a systematic gridlock, and it is polyphonic because in it there are no voices of authority, but all voices. It makes it obvious that this kind of dialogue goes on all the time in human life. It is so instinctive and common that we hardly ever realize consciously what it entails in philosophical and psychological terms. It even manifests itself in conversations, chats, and even internally within ourselves. It manifests itself as well in the theatrical and narrative arts, from drama and comedy to rock concerts and social networking websites. Carnival displays are part of popular and folkloristic traditions that aim to critique traditional mores and idealized social rituals, bringing out the crude, unmediated links between domains of behavior that are normally kept 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. Another main tenet of carnival theory regards the role of occultism in culture. Occultism was rampant throughout the ancient world and the Middle Ages. Even eminent scholars such as thirteenth-century Italian theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) believed in the powers of occult symbolism. Carvings of animals on roofs and walls, along with sculptures of mysterious animals and female figures, go back tens of thousands of years. According to some estimates, the earliest known visual-symbolic artifact might even be 135,000 years old. By and large, the belief in literal occultism has disappeared from contemporary secular societies, even though it has left some notable residues in practices and artifacts, such as the popularity of daily horoscopes, the widespread wearing of lucky charms and amulets, and the omission of thirteenth floors on high-rise buildings (or more accurately, the intentional misidentification of thirteenth floors as fourteenth floors). The embracing of

occultism (or occult symbolism) by specific groups and cults comes as little surprise to carnival theorists. It is essentially part of carnivalesque or "profane theater" complete with appropriate costume (dark clothes and cosmetics) and sacrilegious activities and rituals (such as the devil-worshipping rituals).

Bakhtin introduced his concept of the carnival around 1929. People attending a carnival, he claimed, 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. It is through this carnivalesque identity that the "grotesque" within humans can seek expression through overindulgent eating and laughter, and through unbridled sexual acting. In such behaviors, people discover who they really are. The dark clothes and cosmetics worn by goths are steeped in carnival traditions. The color constitutes a pictography of danger, mystery, the unexplained, and other occult meanings. The outlook of the goths is more than a simple lifestyle choice, but a more fundamental reactive carnivalesque one. The goths of the recent past were engaged in a kind of shadow culture that implied an acceptance of the dark side of the human soul, not its concealment. In a way, goth culture was (and still is) an attempt to obliterate distinctions between life and death, between the sacred and the profane. Moreover, the gender distinctions that society has imposed on all of us are deleted through the dark masks that goths wear. The blending of masculine and feminine symbols is actually an ancient occult practice—expressed in myths and belief systems throughout the world.

A particularly interesting modern-day play on occultism and its carnivalesque nature is the so-called Rocky Horror Picture Show, which was at one level a parody of 1950s rock-and-roll culture and bourgeois America wrapped into one, utilizing occult symbolism in an ironic way. As Greenwald remarks, it was an attempt "to shock by departing from the tradition of rock and roll machismo established by Elvis," vaunting a new form of sexual theater that favored "makeup, cross dressing, and an overall smearing of the lines between the sexes."[4] The show debuted in 1975 in Britain. It continues as a tradition in many areas of the world at midnight on Halloween, when patrons show up dressed in drag and lingerie. Like the ancient and medieval carnivals, the audience is not only part of the show, it is the show. Audiences dance and sing, shout lewd comments at the screen, and throw objects at certain points in the film, such as toast, toilet paper, water, or rice. The master of ceremonies, called sardonically Dr. Frank-N-Furter, instructs and exhorts the audience, saying, "Give yourself over to absolute pleasure. Swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh—erotic nightmares beyond any measure, and sensual daydreams to treasure forever. Can't you just see it? Don't dream it, be it."

To his entreaty, audience members start to indulge themselves in “absolute pleasure” by drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes (among other things). The show never made it into mainstream movie theaters at first because its carnivalesque elements were so weird and transgressive at the time that, as the movie itself warns, in parodic imitation of censorship ratings: “Society must be protected. You’re lifestyle is too extreme.” The use of the word horror in the spectacle is significant. Horror movies have the same psychological function as the freak shows of the carnivals. Like P. T. Barnum’s sideshows, with its displays of Siamese twins, bearded ladies, eight-foot wrestlers, and eight-hundred-pound individuals, the horror genre taps into our fascination with, and fear of, the grotesque and the possibility that there is nothing beyond extinction. As British film critic Robin Wood aptly observes, “One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses and oppresses,” including our inability to face our “nothingness and probable purposelessness.”[5]

Fashion

Why are fashion shows popular in many modern societies? Until relatively recently, fashion trends were primarily the concern of the aristocracy, while the dress codes of ordinary people changed far less regularly and radically. Even among the upper classes of Medieval and Renaissance Europe, clothing was costly enough to be cared for, altered, reused, and passed from one generation to the next, more so than it is today. Indeed, radical changes to this pattern occurred infrequently until the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century made the production of both cloth and clothing far easier and less expensive.

Let us return briefly to the dress code with which we started this chapter—the business suit—to see how fashion trends are formed and institutionalized. The message underlying this apparel text is, of course, *dress for success*. How did this message crystallize in our culture? As you might know by now, the semiotician would look at the history of the business suit to seek an answer.

In seventeenth-century England there existed a bitter conflict to gain political, religious, and cultural control of society between the Royalist Cavaliers, who were faithful to King Charles I, and the Puritans, who were followers of Oliver Cromwell and controlled the House of Commons in Parliament. The Cavaliers were aristocrats who only superficially followed the teachings of the Anglican Church. Their main penchant was for flair and the good life. They dressed flamboyantly and ornately, donning colorful clothes, feathered hats,

and long flowing hair. The romantic figure of the cavalier aristocrat has been immortalized by novels such as *The Three Musketeers* (Alexandre Dumas, 1844) and *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Edmond Rostand, 1897). The Puritans, on the other hand, frowned on ostentation and pomp. Known as the Roundheads, Cromwell's followers cropped their hair very closely, forbade all carnal pleasures, and prohibited the wearing of frivolous clothing. They wore dark suits and dresses with white shirts and collars. Through their clothes they hoped to convey sobriety, plainness, and rigid moral values.

The Cavaliers were in power throughout the 1620s and the 1630s. During this period the Puritans fled from England and emigrated to America, bringing with them their lifestyle and rigid codes of conduct and dress. Then in 1649, the Puritans, led by Cromwell, defeated the Royalist forces and executed the king. The king's son, Charles II, escaped to France to set up a court in exile. For a decade, England was ruled by the Puritans. Frowning upon all sorts of pleasure and frivolous recreation, they closed down theaters, censored books, and stringently enforced moralistic laws. Unable to tolerate such a strict way of life, many Cavaliers emigrated to America. The Puritans had set up colonies in the northeast; the Cavaliers settled in the south. With Cromwell's death in 1658, the Puritans were eventually thrown out of power and England welcomed Charles II back. Known as the Restoration, the subsequent twenty-five-year period saw a return to the adoption of a general cavalier lifestyle. For two centuries the Puritans had to bide their time once again. They were excluded from political office, from attending university, and from engaging in any official social enterprise. Throughout those years, however, they never strayed from their severe moral philosophy and lifestyle.

By the time of the Industrial Revolution, the Puritans had their final revenge. Their thrift, diligence, temperance, and industriousness—character traits that define the "Protestant work ethic"—allowed Cromwell's descendants to become rich and thus take over the economic reins of power. Ever since, Anglo-American culture has been influenced by Puritan ethics in the work force. The origins of modern corporate capitalism are to be found in those ethics. The belief that hard work, clean living, and economic prosperity are intrinsically interrelated became widespread by the turn of the twentieth century, and continues to undergird American social worldview.

The business suit is a contemporary version of the Puritan dress code. The toned-down colors (blues, browns, grays) that the business world demands are the contemporary reflexes of the Puritan's fear and dislike of color and ornament. The wearing of neckties, jackets, and short hair are all signifiers of solemnity and self-denial. During the hippie era of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the office scene came briefly under the influence of a new form of cavalierism. Colorful suits, turtle-neck sweaters, longer hair, sideburns, Nehru jackets, medallions, and

beards constituted, for a time, a transgressive dress code that threatened to radically change the ethos of corporate capitalism. However, this fashion experiment failed, as the cavalier 1960s were overtaken by neo-puritanical forces in the late 1970s and 1980s. The Puritan dress code became once again prevalent in the business world, with only minor variations in detail. Today, "geek computer capitalists" have revived the informal dress code, donning jeans and other signifiers of "cool dress" to work. However, the workplace is much too much grounded in the Puritan ethic to allow a broad deviation from this ethic. It remains to be seen if the traditional business suit will indeed disappear from the workplace because of lifestyle changes brought about by technology.

The story of the business suit makes it obvious that fashion is a product of semiotic forces at work and, thus, like any other code, can be used for a host of connotative reasons. Military dress, for instance, connotes patriotism and communal values; but outside the military world it can convey a countercultural statement, a parody of nationalistic tendencies. Consider the case of blue jeans. In the 1930s and 1940s, blue jeans were cheap, strong, and mass-produced blue-collar working clothes. High-fashion articles, on the other hand, were manufactured with expensive fancy materials and fabrics. As early as the mid-1950s, the youth culture of the era adopted blue jeans as part of its thematic dress code. By the 1960s and 1970s, blue jeans were worn by the new generation of young people to proclaim equality between the sexes and among social classes. By the 1980s, this subversive meaning was forgotten, and the same clothing item became fashion statement. Blue jeans became much more expensive, much more exclusive, often personalized, and available at chic boutiques. Today, jeans are just jeans—comfortable clothing worn by people of all ages in informal settings. Clearly, the hippie view that they connote equality of all kinds has finally prevailed, at least semiotically speaking.

Objects

Recall Cheryl's friendship ring. It is indeed remarkable that a simple object can have such meaning. To the semiotician, however, this comes as no surprise. Any human-made object is perceived as a sign and is thus imbued with meaning. Marshall McLuhan claimed that objects are extensions of the human body and mind that evolve by themselves and, in turn, influence the evolution of the species.[6] From the invention of basic tools to the invention of computers, human evolution has indeed been shaped by the objects people make. The rapidity of social change is due to the nature of the technology itself. As Donald Norman puts it: "Human biology and psychology do not change much with time. High technology changes rapidly."[7]

From the dawn of civilization, objects have had great personal and cultural significance for no apparent reason other than they appeal to people. Archeologists reconstruct ancient cultures on the basis of the artifacts they uncover at a site. The reason why they are able to do this is because they reveal personal and social meanings and, thus, social organization by extension. Archeologists can imagine the role that any object they find played in the society by stacking it up against the other objects at the site. This helps them reconstruct the system of everyday life of the ancient culture.

To see how intrinsic objects are to this system, consider the case of toys. Denotatively, toys are objects made for children to play with; but toys connote much more than this. At no other time in North America did this become more apparent than during the 1983 Christmas shopping season. That season is now often described by cultural historians as the Christmas of the Cabbage Patch doll. Hordes of parents were prepared to pay almost anything to get one of these dolls for their daughters. Scalpers offered the suddenly and unexplainably out-of-stock dolls for hundreds (and even thousands) of dollars through classified ads. Adults fought each other in line-ups to get one of the few remaining dolls left in some toy store. How could a simple doll have caused such mass hysteria? Only something with great connotative power, the semiotician would reply. What is that connotative power? The Cabbage Patch dolls came with "adoption papers." Each doll was given a name, taken at random from 1938 state of Georgia birth records. Like any act of naming, this conferred upon the doll a human personality (Chap. 2). Thanks to computerization, no two dolls were manufactured alike, emphasizing their "human meaning" even more. The doll became alive in the child's mind, as do generally objects with names. The dolls were "people signs." No wonder they caused such hysteria. The children had adopted a real child (in the imagination at least). And this adoption was sanctioned and acknowledged by the doll makers and givers. What more could the child, and especially the parents, ask for?

The Cabbage Patch incident is a case of the power of latent animism, the attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects. North Americans are not unique in animating dolls. In some societies, as mentioned previously, people believe that harm can be inflicted on a person by damaging a doll constructed to resemble that person. The Cabbage Patch doll craze was, really, a modern version of animism, or the view that objects have an inner being. In 1871, the British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) described the origin of religion in terms of animism.[8] According to Tylor, primitive peoples believed that spirits or souls are the cause of life in both human beings and objects. The difference between a living body and an object, to such peoples, was one of degree of animism, not lack thereof.

Before the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most people lived in agricultural communities. Children barely out of infancy were expected to share the workload associated with tending to the farm. There was, consequently, little distinction between childhood and adult roles. Society perceived children to be adults with smaller and weaker bodies. Indeed, in the medieval and Renaissance periods, the "babes" and "children" that appear in portraits look more like little adults than they do children. During the Industrial Revolution the center of economic activity shifted from the farm to the city. This led to a new social order in which children were left with few of their previous responsibilities, and a new conceptualization, or more accurately mythology, emerged, proclaiming children as vastly different from adults, needing time for school and play. Child labor laws were passed and the public education of children became compulsory. Protected from the harsh reality of industrial work, children came to have much more time at their disposal. As a result, toys were manufactured on a massive scale so that children could play constructively in the absence of parental tutelage.

Since then, toys have become inseparable from childhood, and thus reveal how adults relate to children and what kinds of values they want to instill in them. Toys, as the logo for a major toy chain once stated, "are us" *(Toys 'R Us)*. Aware of the signifying power of toys, manufacturers make them primarily with parents in mind. Toys symbolize what the parent wishes to impart to the child: educational toy makers cater to parents who emphasize learning, musical toy makers to those who stress music, doll makers to those who give emphasis to nurturing values, and so on. Children, on the other hand, often seem to prefer playing with objects they find around the house than with the toys that are bought for them. The adult fascination with toys is also a clear sign that the distinction between *young* and *old* is being blurred more and more in our culture. Toys are being designed with layers of meanings aimed at adults. Today, grown-ups enjoy children's music, comic books, and motion picture heroes such as Batman and Superman—all once considered strictly kid stuff. Toys are still for children, but childhood isn't as childish as it used to be, and adulthood tends to be a lot less adultish than it once was.

Video Games

In contemporary society, where electronic technologies can turn objects into beings through digital animism, the semiotics of objects is expanding its purview. Take the case of video games. Video games (VGs) played on a video console started out as arcade games, as far back as the 1920s. A modern computer

VG is really an arcade game with expanded technical capabilities. In the early 1970s, an electronic tennis game named *Pong* introduced the video-game industry to the United States. After this industry nearly collapsed in the mid-1980s, Japanese companies, such as the Nintendo Corporation, assumed leadership, improving game technology and introducing popular adventure games such as *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Bros*. Since then a VG culture has crystallized that is blossoming into one of the most profitable of all media ventures. As a result, concern over the effects of VGs on the mind and on behavior have cropped up across the social landscape.

The term *video game* is now used to refer to any electronic game, whether it is played on a computer with appropriate software, on a console, on some portable device (such as a cellphone, an iPhone, and so on), or through some Internet venue. There are now genres of VGs, and various formats in which they can be played. One of the most significant ones, for the purposes of the present discussion, is the so-called role-playing game (RPG), which gained popularity with the *Dungeons and Dragons* game in the 1980s. Players pretend to be in a situation or environment, such as a battle or newly discovered place; each simulated situation has its own rules and each participant is expected to play a specific role or character in the scenario. Occult and horror themes, along with related fantasy themes, are also common. The increase in the popularity of online gaming has resulted in subgenres appearing, such as multiplayer online role-playing games.

In a typical RPG, participants create a character, known as an avatar, by inputting descriptions of appearance and behavior into a communal online space for the game. Other characters have no way of knowing if the avatar's appearance is the real physical appearance of the player, or not. In this way, reality and fantasy overlap. The simulacrum effect seems to be occurring constantly in VG worlds. As Gary Fine observed already in the early 1980s, for many players such games constitute the main reality. For the game to work as an aesthetic experience, the "players must be willing to bracket their natural selves and enact a fantasy self."[9] Thus, VGs provide "a structure for making friends and finding a sense of community."[10] When players enter into the RPG world they assume a fantasy identity, abandoning the real-life one. It allows players to "endow themselves with attributes that in reality they do not possess: strength, social poise, rugged good looks, wisdom, and chivalric skills."[11]

Video gaming has a broad appeal because it is simulated reality and thus a means of creating imaginary worlds autonomously. For many it is replacing the traditional media and genres—adventure, spy, war, sports, and so on—making the escapism provided by the traditional media even more powerful by taking the make-believe element from the author and putting it directly

into the hands of the player. In RPGs, the player(s) is the scriptwriter, actor, and director at once. It is virtual cinema, and now has its own culture, with attendant websites, blogs, magazines, and the like. VGs give players the feeling of being immersed in a simulated world that resembles the real world. Today, VGs also record and send the speech and movements of the participant to the simulation program. This feature, which relays the sense of touch and other sensations in the virtual world, is making the VG world virtually indistinguishable from real life. Baudrillard's simulacrum, as mentioned several times, is revealing itself to be more of a description of the modern mind rather than a theory of it.

Steven Johnson has argued that VGs are not just a play on fantasy, but may actually be producing new forms of consciousness and increasing intelligence, since they provide a channel for the same kind of rigorous mental workout that mathematical theorems and puzzles do.[12] As a consequence, they improve the problem-solving skills of players. The complex plots and intricacies of video games are making people sharper today because of a "Sleeper Curve." Johnson took the term from Woody Allen's 1973 movie *Sleeper*, in which a granola-eating New Yorker falls asleep, waking up in the future, where junk and rich foods actually prolong life rather than shorten it. According to Johnson, the most apparently debasing forms of mass culture, such as VGs, are turning out to be nutritional after all. This may or may not be true. Will our next scientists, artists, and geniuses be addicted VG players? It is quite a stretch of the imagination to say that VGs enhance problem-solving skills and that these are helping our species evolve.

Technology

The methods and techniques that a society employs to make its objects are known cumulatively as technology. The term is derived from the Greek words *tekhne*, which refers to an "art" or "craft," and *logia* "a system of logic." Although it is a product of culture, technology eventually becomes itself a contributing factor to the culture's development, transforming traditional signifying systems, frequently with unexpected social consequences. The earliest known human artifacts are hand-ax flints found in Africa, western Asia, and Europe. They date from approximately 250,000 BCE, signaling the beginning of the Stone Age. The first toolmakers were nomadic groups of hunters who used the sharp edges of stone to cut their food and to make their clothing and shelters. By about 100,000 BCE the graves of hominids show pear-shaped axes, scrapers, knives, and other stone instruments, indicating that the original

hand ax had become a tool for making tools. The use of tools is not specific to the human species; it can be observed in other animal species. However, the capacity for creating tools to make other tools distinguishes human technology from that of all other animals.

Perhaps the biggest step forward in the history of technology was the control of fire. By striking flint against pyrites to produce sparks, early people could kindle fires at will, thereby freeing themselves from the necessity of perpetuating fires obtained from natural sources. Besides the obvious benefits of light and heat, fire was also used to bake clay pots, producing heat-resistant vessels that were then used for cooking, brewing, and fermenting. Fired pottery later provided the crucibles in which metals could be refined. No wonder then that the Prometheus myth is about the discovery of fire. As the story starts, the god Zeus plotted to destroy humanity by depriving the earth of fire. Prometheus, a member of the Titans (an early race of gigantic gods), stole fire and gave it to human beings. Zeus punished him by ordering him bound to a remote peak in the Caucasus Mountains. An eagle came to devour Prometheus' liver every day, and the liver grew back each night. After Prometheus had suffered for many centuries, the hero Hercules killed the eagle, setting Prometheus (and by implication technology) free.

Early technologies were not centered only on practical tools. Colorful minerals were pulverized to make pigments that were then applied to the human body as cosmetics, and to other objects as decoration. Early people also learned that if certain materials were repeatedly hammered and put into a fire, they would not split or crack. The discovery of how to relieve metal stress eventually brought human societies out of the Stone Age. About 3000 BCE, people also found that alloying tin with copper produced bronze. Bronze is not only more malleable than copper but also holds a better edge, a quality necessary for making such objects as swords and sickles. Although copper deposits existed in the foothills of Syria and Turkey, at the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the largest deposits of copper in the ancient world were found on the island of Crete. With the development of ships that could reach this extremely valuable resource, Knossos on Crete became a wealthy mining center during the Bronze Age. Humans had embarked on a major cultural revolution—a shift from a nomadic hunting culture to a more settled one based on agriculture. Farming communities had actually emerged near the end of the most recent Ice Age, about 10,000 BCE. Their traces can be found in widely scattered areas, from southeastern Asia to Mexico. The most famous ones emerged in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) near the temperate and fertile river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates. The loose soil in this fertile crescent was easily scratched for planting, and an abundance of trees was available for firewood.

The purpose of the foregoing schematic historical excursus has been to emphasize the theory that technology shapes cultural evolution and worldview. Take as a simple example of this theory the invention of the clock in 1286. The invention meant that, from that moment on, people would no longer have to live in a world based primarily on reference to the daily course of the sun and the yearly change of the seasons. The precise measurement of time made it possible for people to plan their day and their lives much more exactly. The repercussions of this event are being felt to this day. We plan our entire day, week, and even life around precise "time signifiers," that would have been unthinkable before the invention of the clock. "Meet you at 8:30" would have had no meaning in, say, the year 868. In that era, the more likely expression night have been "Meet you at sunset." Today, everything from class times and movie times to wedding dates are planned exactly on the basis of clock time.

Such nineteenth- and twentieth-century inventions as the telephone, the phonograph, the wireless radio, motion pictures, the automobile, television, the airplane, and the computer have added to the nearly universal respect that society in general has come to feel for technology. With the advent of mass-production technology, not only has the availability of objects for mass consumption become a fact of everyday life, but mass consumption has itself become a way of life. Not everyone thinks that this social outcome is a blessing. Since the middle part of the twentieth century, many people have reacted against the very consumerist lifestyle and worldview that it has engendered, believing that it threatens the quality of life. Supporters of this viewpoint propose a value system in which all people must come to recognize that the earth's resources are limited and that human life must be structured around a commitment to control the growth of industry, the size of cities, and the use of energy.

"Babbage's Galaxy"

No other invention since the printing press has changed society more radically than the computer. The computer has transferred the human archive of knowledge from paper to electronic storage. Today, information storage is measured not in page numbers but in gigabytes. Common computers and digital devices can now store the equivalent of millions of books. They can retrieve information from the Internet within seconds. The Web 2.0 world in which we live has literally connected all knowledge into one huge database of information. In effect, we no longer live in "Gutenberg's Galaxy," as McLuhan called the age of print, but in "Babbage's Galaxy," to coin a parallel phrase in reference to the nineteenth-century British mathematician who worked out the principles of the modern digital computer, Charles Babbage (1791–1871).

Living in Babbage's Galaxy, the modern human being is now more inclined to learn from the screen than from the book or from any other source. The mystique associated with the author of a published work is starting to fade as the world's texts become available literally at one's fingertips. The whole notion of authorship is being drastically transformed as a consequence. Journalists, students, instructors, and many more professionals can now compose their verbal texts electronically and communicate them to others from remote locations. Many people work at home (or anywhere else for that matter) and communicate with fellow workers with their digital devices.

The computer has also introduced a new form of text-making and text-usage known as hypertextuality. Reading a printed page is, at the level of the signifier (that is, of deciphering the actual physical signs on the page), a linear process, since it consists in decoding the individual words and their combinations in sentences in the framework of a specific signification system (a novel, a dictionary, and so on). Information on any specific sign in the printed text must be sought out physically: for example, if one wants to follow up on a reference in the text, one has to do it by consulting other printed texts or by asking people. This is also what must be done when one wants to determine the meaning of a word found in a text. Dictionaries serve this very purpose. The computer screen has greatly facilitated such tasks by introducing a hypertextual dimension. The term *hypertext* was coined in 1965 to describe an interlinked system of texts in which a user can jump from one to another. This was made possible with the invention of *hyperlinks*—portions of a document that can be linked to other related documents. By clicking on the hyperlink, the user is immediately connected to the document specified by the link. Web pages are designed in this way, being written in a simple computer language called HTML (Hypertext Markup Language). A series of instruction tags are inserted into pieces of ordinary text to control the way the page looks and these can be manipulated when viewed with a Web browser. Tags determine the typeface or act as instructions to display images, and they can be used to link up with other Web pages.

As opposed to the linear structure of printed paper texts, hypertextuality permits the user to browse through related topics, regardless of the presented order of the topics. The links are often established both by the author of a hypertext document and by the user, depending on the intent of the document. For example, navigating among the links to the word *language* in an article contained on a website might lead the user to the *International Phonetic Alphabet*, the science of *linguistics*, samples of languages, and so on. Hypertextuality was introduced as a regular feature of computers in 1987 when Apple began distributing a new program called *Hypercard* with its new

machines. This was the first program to provide a linking function permitting navigation among files of computer print text and graphics by clicking keywords or icons. By 1988, compact disc players were built into computers.

Interpreting a text involves three types of cognitive processes. First, it entails the ability to access the actual contents of the text at the level of the signifier, that is, the ability to decode its signs paradigmatically as words, images, and so on. Only someone possessing knowledge of the codes (verbal and nonverbal) with which the text has been assembled can accomplish this. If it is in Finnish, then in order to derive an *interpretant* (a specific kind of meaning) from it, the decoder must know the Finnish language, the conceptual metaphors that characterize Finnish modes of speaking, and so on and so forth. The second process entails knowledge of how the semiotic organization unfolds in the specific text, that is, of how the text generates its meanings through a series of internal and external semiotic processes (denotation, connotation, and so on). This requires some knowledge on the part of the interpreter of cultural codes. This is, in fact, the level of the signified that is implicit in the question: *What does it mean?* Finally, various contextual factors enter into the entire process to constrain the meaning. Such things as the reason for accessing a text, the purpose of the text, and so on will determine what the individual interpreter will get from the text. When viewed globally, these processes suggest that text-interpretation is, de facto, hypertextual, because it involves being able to navigate among the three processes simultaneously. In effect, the physical structure of hypertextuality on the computer screen may constitute a kind of "mirror model" of how people process all kinds of texts.[13]

Technopoly

Living in the Internet age, one cannot but admire and take delight in the staggering achievements made possible by the computer revolution. However, our naive faith in the computer is really no different from other forms of animism. The computer is one of *Homo sapiens'* greatest technological achievements. As a maker of objects and artifacts, the human species has finally come up with an object that is felt more and more to have human-like qualities. This, too, reflects an ancient aspiration of our species. In Sumerian and Babylonian myths there were accounts of the creation of life through the animation of clay. The ancient Romans were fascinated by automata that could mimic human patterns. By the time Mary Shelley's grotesque and macabre novel, *Frankenstein*, was published in 1818, the idea that robots could be brought to life horrified the modern imagination. Since the first decades of the twentieth century the quest to animate machines has been relentless. It has captured the

imagination of many image-makers. Movie robots and humanoids have attributes of larger-than-life humans. Modern human beings are experiencing a feeling of astonishment at finding themselves for the first time ever at the center of everything, having recreated themselves in the form of robots. However, there is a risk here. It is easy to forget that we are much more than machines, possessing a consciousness imbued with *fantasia*, sensitivity, intuition, and pathos, which comes with having human flesh and blood.

This can be called a simulacrum illusion, to paraphrase Baudrillard. The human brain is a connective organ that comes to an understanding of things through amalgams of various kinds. Given the connective structure of the Internet it is easy to believe in a new mythology—the human brain can be easily reproduced through technology. As the world has become constantly more linked through new digital technologies, the linkage of people through electric circuitry has brought about a new depth and breadth of people's involvement in world events and has broken down the traditional boundaries that kept them apart. Interaction through technology is becoming more and more the default of daily life.

But all this could lead to what Neil Postman called, in 1962, the emergence of a technopoly.[14] Postman defined technopoly as a society that has become totally reliant on technology and seeks authorization in it, as well as deriving recreation from it, and even taking its orders from it. This is a coping strategy that results when technology saturates the world with information. In a way, technopoly theory is the counterpart of connected intelligence theory. Postman is, if course, aware of the principle that tool-using is a technology that has brought about paradigm shifts throughout human history, since it leads to amplifications of human skills and attributes, as discussed earlier. He identifies three shifts based on this principle:

1. *Tool-using cultures* invent and employ tools to solve physical problems of existence and to serve an emerging world of ritual symbolism and art. These cultures are theocratic and unified by a metaphysical view of the world.
2. *Technocratic cultures* invent and employ cognitive tools, such as the alphabet, for creating a particular worldview or "thought-world," as he called it. This serves to overthrow the previous metaphysical thought-world—for example, heliocentricity overthrew the belief in the Earth as the center of the universe. Technocracy impels people to invent, hence the rise of science and literacy. A technocratic society is still controlled "from above," that is by religious, educational, scientific, and other social institutions.
3. *Technopoly* is a "totalitarian technocracy," evolving on its own. It reduces humans to seeking meaning in machines and in computation.

Postman also saw negative consequences for education in a technopoly, viewing the world of mass communications as a system that would turn society into an amorphous mass of non-thinkers. He altered McLuhan's phrase of "the medium is the message" to "the medium is the metaphor," insisting that new media are mind-numbing tools. Postman was particularly concerned about children's upbringing in a technopoly. While children were once seen as little adults, the Enlightenment brought broader knowledge of childhood, leading gradually to the perception of childhood as an important period of development. Since children now have easy access to information intended for adults, the result is a diminishment of their developmental potential. He thus warned that those who do not see the downside of technology, constantly demanding more innovation and therefore more information, are in effect silent witnesses to a new cognitive form of mind control. The only way to improve the situation, as Postman saw it, would be to get students to use technology smartly by being educated in the history, social effects, and psychological biases of technology. The dangers of technology have arrived. But the semiotician would say that the human imagination has always been one that was immersed in its own objects—it especially believes as true what it itself makes. The implication is that as the technology changes, so too will our world-making ways.

Notes

1. Helen E. Fisher, *Anatomy of love* (New York: Norton, 1992), 253–4.
2. In *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), Mircea Eliade gives an in-depth analysis of how the sacred vs. profane dichotomy undergirds the constitution of cultures generally.
3. See, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin, *The dialogic imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), and *Speech genres and other late essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).
4. Ted Greenwald, *Rock & roll* (New York: Friedman, 1992), 53.
5. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 23.
6. Marshall McLuhan, *The mechanical bride: Folklore of industrial man* (New York: Vanguard, 1951).
7. Donald A. Norman, *The design of everyday things* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), xiv.
8. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive culture* (London: Murray, 1871).
9. Gary Alan Fine, *Shared fantasy: Role-playing games as social worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 5.

10. Ibid, p. 59.
11. Ibid, p. 60
12. Steven Johnson, *Everything bad is good for you: How today's popular culture is actually making us smarter* (New York: Riverside Books, 2005).
13. An analysis of hypertextuality is the one by George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical theory and new media in an era of globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
14. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

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9

Art Is Indistinguishable from Life: The Artistic Nature of the Human Species

Art is not to be taught in Academies. It is what one looks at, not what one listens to, that makes the artist. The real schools should be the streets.
—Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

Martha's video contains yet other segments that are of direct interest to the semiotician. There is one scene, for instance, where Cheryl shows a picture on her cellphone of a sculpture that she had made, showing it proudly to her amorous partner. Ted looks at it with admiration, remarking, "How beautiful, Cheryl. I didn't know you were so talented." "I have always loved to draw and sculpt," she responds. "For me art is indistinguishable from life, as the saying goes." The semiotician would agree completely.

The making of art is likely unique to the human species. The capacity to draw and appreciate pictures, to make music, to dance, to put on stage performances, to write poetry, is a truly extraordinary and enigmatic endowment of our species. Art not only gives pleasure and delight, but also affords a truly profound perspective on the human condition. The subfield of semiotics (and other disciplines) that deals with art is called *aesthetics*; the related subfield of art interpretation is called *hermeneutics*. The two are concerned with such phenomena as human responses to sounds, forms, and words and with the ways in which the emotions condition such responses.

It should be mentioned that there are apparently examples of art made by animals other than humans. Already in the 1950s, anthropologists were collecting paintings made by non-human primates, which seemed to show a kind of intrinsic motivation to simply create abstractions on a surface. Many

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M. Danesi, *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other* Interesting *Things*,
https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95348-6_9

of these paintings were exhibited in art galleries in the 1960s. These soon disappeared, given the problem of interpretation. What do they mean? Since these could be simply markings on a surface, rather than visual texts in the human sense, they are no longer seen as "art." Elephants in captivity have been trained to paint, producing some rather remarkable works. Again, it is not clear what the paintings are about, nor what the elephants themselves are actually doing. Since the elephants draw the same painting over and over, conditioning effects (mentioned earlier) cannot be ruled out.

What Is Art?

Art is so much a part of human life that it is impossible to define it adequately as separate from it. There is no culture that does not have its own repertoire of art forms. Art expresses the entire range of human feelings and spiritual beliefs. It is indisputable evidence of the workings of what Vico called the *fantasia*, the human capacity for knowing from within. No one knows exactly why, but everyone loves certain pieces of music, certain poems, some dance styles, and so on. Art works can be seen, heard, touched, experienced in different ways; art gives pleasure, excites the senses, and "moves" the spirit. Art survives because it is valued as precious, because it is perceived as transcending time, because it is seen as saying something about human nature. Art is something that everyone knows and recognizes, but which defies definition with words.

The word *art* is derived from the Latin *ars* ("skill"). Art is, at one level, skill at performing a set of specialized actions, such as, for example, those required to be a gardener or to play chess competently. We also refer to such skills as "gardening art" and "chess art." Art provides the person or people who produce it and the community that observes it with an experience that is both emotional and intellectual. In classical and medieval times, poets and other writers who used linguistic skills expertly were usually ranked above dancers, musicians, painters, and sculptors, who used physical skills. From the Renaissance on, as all aspects of human creativity came to be valued, those skilled in the visual and performing arts gradually gained greater recognition and social prestige. Today, art in all its categories is considered an essential part of human achievement, and all types of artists are ranked among the most prominent citizens of the world. Traditionally, art has combined practical and aesthetic functions. In the eighteenth century, however, a more sophisticated public began to distinguish between art that was purely aesthetic and art that was mainly practical. The *fine arts* (*beaux arts* in French)—literature,

music, dance, painting, sculpture, and architecture—came to be distinguished from the *decorative* or *applied arts*, such as pottery, metalwork, furniture, tapestry, and enamel, which were later "demoted," so to speak, to the rank of *crafts*. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, greater appreciation of crafts and folk traditions has tended to blur this distinction. Both categories are valued as art once again.

Because many prehistoric paintings seemingly symbolizing rites or meaningful events of some type have been discovered, it is probable that art originated in ritual. The notion of artists as individualists and eccentric creators crystallized in the Renaissance. Since then, artists of all kinds created art for its own sake—to be put in galleries, to be performed in public settings, to be read by common folk, and so on. In ancient cultures, art was part of ritual, of magic ceremonies, and thus a form of creative behavior meant to please the gods. It was made and performed by various members of the community, rather than by professionals alone. Art was anonymous because it belonged to everyone. In aboriginal cultures of North America, art continues to be perceived as one aspect of community rituals that are designed to ensure a good harvest or to celebrate a significant life event such as a birth.

Even in the Internet age, art continues to reverberate with ritualistic connotations. At a performance of a piece of classical music, there is ritualistic silence and stillness in the audience. At a rock concert, on the other hand, there is ritualistic shouting and movement. Hanging a painting in an art gallery invites an individualistic interpretation; drawing something on a city wall, on the other hand, invites social participation (graffiti, commentary, annotations, and so on). In the first cities, art was meant to decorate the public square, to give communal life a sense of purpose through sculpture, to commemorate some meaningful event with wall carvings of various kinds, and to invite opinions through wall painting. Anonymous, participatory art is much more ancient than the "private" or "authored" art that has become the standard since the Renaissance. In a public space, art is open to "contributions" from observers. In a gallery setting, on the other hand, interpretation focuses on the intentions of the individual artist; and any "contribution" to the painting by an observer would constitute defacement.

Archeologists trace the origin of visual art to the Old Stone Age (20,000–15,000 BCE). The well-known figure of a bison painted on the rock wall of a cave in Altamira, Spain, is one of the first examples of art-making in human history. What it means remains a mystery, but the features that make it art are easily noticeable. It is not just a reproduction of a bison, but of a bison in motion, seemingly scared, perhaps running away from something or

someone. It is, in a word, a reflective representation, an interpretation of an event that attempts to provide a particular perspective of its broader meaning to human life.

As American philosopher Susanne Langer insightfully pointed out, art is powerful because it works on our perceptions and our feelings. It is a "feeling form" of representation. We experience a work of art not as an isolated event, but in its entirety as a unitary emotive form, and thus as interconnected with personal life events.[1] Trying to understand what it means forces us, however, to analyze why the art work so moved us. However, no matter how many times we try to explain the experience, it somehow remains beyond analysis. One can analyze the opening movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* as a series of harmonic progressions and melodic figures based on the key of C# minor. However, the elements of melody and harmony come into focus as components of the work only during an analysis of the sonata's structure. When one hears it played as an artistic performance, on the other hand, one hardly focuses on these constituent elements. One will experience the music holistically. This is what makes it emotionally moving. In effect, no theory of art is really possible. Langer remarked, further, that because of its emotive qualities, great art transforms human beings and cultures permanently. It is truly a "mirror of the soul." The course of human history was changed permanently after Michelangelo sculpted his *David,* Shakespeare wrote his *King Lear*, Mozart composed his *Requiem,* Beethoven composed his *Ninth Symphony*, and so on and so forth. The spiritual meanings and the aesthetic effects in such great art works are constantly being experienced across time, across cultures. Such works seem to have been constructed with the universal spiritual blueprint of humankind.

The word *aesthetic* requires some commentary. It means, literally, "perceiving with all the senses." More generally, it refers to a sense of beauty or a feeling of *meaningfulness*. The first aesthetic theory of any scope was that of Plato, who believed that reality consists of ideal forms, beyond human sensation, and that works of art are imitations of those forms. He claimed that forms already existed in the world and that it was the role of the artist to flesh them out. For example, the human form is already present in a slab of marble. However, it can only be seen by the eyes of sculptors, who literally draw it out with their hands. If the form resonates with viewers, then the artist has extracted from matter an ideal form (or a form that is felt to be meaningful). However, fearing the power of art to move people, Plato wanted to banish some types of artists from his ideal republic because he thought their work encouraged immorality, caused laziness, or incited people to immoderate actions. Aristotle also spoke of art as form, but not in the Platonic sense. For Aristotle, the role of art was to

complete what nature did not finish by imitating it. The artist separates the form from the matter of objects, such as the human body or a plant, and then imposes that form on another material, such as canvas or marble. Thus, imitation is not just copying an object; rather, it is a particular interpretation of an aspect of the object. Because Aristotle held that happiness was the aim of life, he believed that the major function of art was to provide satisfaction. In the *Poetics,* his great work on the principles of dramatic art, Aristotle argued that tragedy so stimulates the emotions of pity and fear, which he considered morbid and unwholesome, that by the end of the play the spectator is purged of them. This *catharsis*, as he called it, makes the audience psychologically healthier and thus more capable of happiness.

The third-century philosopher Plotinus (205–70 CE), born in Egypt and trained in philosophy at Alexandria, also gave art great philosophical and psychological importance. In his view, art revealed the true nature of an object more accurately than ordinary experience did, thus raising the human spirit from the experience of the mundane to a contemplation of universal truths. According to Plotinus, the most precious moments of life are those mystical instants when the soul is united, through art, with the divine.

Art in the Middle Ages was viewed as serving religious functions. Visual artists and playwrights were hired by the Church to create art texts designed to extol Christian themes. The choice to be an artist was a matter of social custom, not of some esoteric inclination at birth. Artists, like other people, customarily followed their fathers' profession. It was during the Renaissance that it reacquired its more secular role. The Renaissance also saw little difference between the artist and the scientist. Indeed, many were both: Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), for example, was a painter, writer, and scientist. After the Enlightenment and Romantic movements, a division emerged, pitting artists against scientists. However, this is a misguided view, the semiotician would remark, because both are "seekers of meaning," trying to represent the world and to convey their experience of the world to others in their own ways.

The view of the artist as an eccentric genius impelled by inner creative energies, free of the yoke of culture, is very much a product of Romanticism. Traditionally, artists were considered employees of society. Sumerian priests and Renaissance princes, for instance, provided sufficient wealth to professional artists to enable them to work comfortably. Even the kind of art that artists created was dictated by social needs and conditions. The Romantic Movement, which lasted from about 1800 to 1870, changed all this dramatically. The Romantics praised subjectivity and the passions. The individual artist's work was seen as intrinsic to their life. From this period we have inherited our modern assumptions about the primacy of artistic freedom, originality, and self-expression.

Dadaism and Pop Art

But almost right after the Romantic movement, artists started to explore different functions of art, moving it away from its spiritual quest to a more mundane, almost ironic, domain of representation. From this new Zeitgeist Dadaism surfaced. This was an art and literary movement, starting around 1916 and fading by the early 1930s. The artists rejected traditional forms of art by creating nonsensical images. The term *dada* is itself indicative of the movement—it is a French baby-talk word for "hobbyhorse," chosen arbitrarily by writer Tristan Tzara (1896–1963). In discarding all accepted values in traditional art-making, Dadaists produced works that were deliberately provocative and outrageous. Their approach is sometimes paralleled to various aspects of pop culture, which often produces forms that provoke or befuddle. The mammoth sculpture by the Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1923)—a work that defies any simple or singular interpretation—is sometimes pegged as the first example of a Dadaist painting. Duchamp was the originator of conceptual art and "ready-made," mass-produced objects selected at random and displayed as works of art. Defying any standardized aesthetic interpretation, perhaps this painting, and Dadaist art generally, was a way to mirror the inanity of the modern world in the form of the art text itself. The mosaic-pastiche technique brings out the heterogeneous and disconnected cultural structure of modern urban societies and their commodity-based worldview, wherein everything from actual goods to art and ideas are conceived and distributed as if they were commodities. The Dadaist imprint in aesthetic thinking can be seen conspicuously everywhere today in cultural representations.

More significantly, it led seamlessly to the pop art movement, which actually used commercial objects and pop culture texts (such as comic books) as its subject matter. The movement emerged shortly after World War II. It was inspired not only by Dadaism, but also by the mass production and consumption of objects. For pop artists, the factory, supermarket, and garbage can became their art school. It was an artistic reaction to consumerism. So, despite its apparent absurdity, modern people have always loved pop art, no matter how controversial or crass it appeared to be, because it emerged from a commercial environment to which people can relate directly. In a certain sense, the pop art movement bestowed on common people the assurance that art was for mass consumption, not just for an élite class of cognoscenti. Some artists duplicated beer bottles, soup cans, comic strips, road signs, and similar objects in paintings, collages, and sculptures; others simply incorporated the objects themselves into their works. Using images and sounds that reflected the materialism and vulgarity of modern consumerist culture, the first pop artists sought to provide a view of reality that was more immediate and

relevant than that of past art. It rendered it obsolete as an artistic sign system that related to the modern world.

Pop art reached the zenith of its popularity from the 1940s to the 1960s, when painters like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns strove to close the gap between traditional art and mass consumerist culture. Rauschenberg constructed collages from household objects such as quilts and pillows, Johns from American flags and bull's-eye targets. The first full-fledged pop art work was *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing?* (1956) by the British artist Richard Hamilton. In this satiric collage of two ludicrous figures in a modern-day and cluttered living room of useless objects, the pop art hallmarks of crudeness and irony are emphasized.

Pop art developed rapidly during the 1960s, as painters started to focus their attention on brand-name commercial products, producing garish sculptures of hamburgers and other fast-food items, blown-up frames of comic strips, or theatrical events staged as art objects. Pop artists also appropriated the techniques of mass production. Rauschenberg and Johns had already abandoned individual, titled paintings in favor of large series of works, all depicting the same objects. In the early 1960s, the American Andy Warhol carried the idea a step further by adopting the mass-production technique of silk-screening, turning out hundreds of identical prints of Coca-Cola bottles, Campbell's soup cans, and other familiar subjects, including identical three-dimensional Brillo boxes. It is unclear if there are any true pop artists painting or sculpting today. Pastiche and collage are elements that anyone can execute with computers, through appropriate software. Indeed, if there is any movement that is a possible descendant of the pop art one, it is likely to be computer art, based on the utilization of digital technologies. An artist may combine traditional painting techniques with digital (algorithmic) ones. This has also led to robot-produced art, whereby a robot is programmed to produce paintings that are indistinguishable from artist-created paintings.

The question a semiotician would ask the robot is: What does it mean? Now, a programmer may anticipate this question and program it into the robot. But without that human-made program, the robot would have no way to answer this fundamental semiotic question. Indeed, answering unprogrammed questions is the basis of the art of semiotic interpretation. This is unique to humans.

The Performing Arts

Performance is, literally, the enactment of an artistic form (from Latin *per* "through" and *forma* "form") before an audience. Performances are given spatial prominence, through a raised stage or a platform, or else on a screen where

the same enactment can be seen; they generally involve using props and paraphernalia such as costumes, masks, and artifacts of various kinds; they occur within a socially defined situation (they are scheduled, set up and prepared in advance, or else made available permanently today on YouTube or through streaming); they have a beginning and an end; they unfold through a structured sequence of parts (for example, acts in a play); and they are coordinated for public involvement.

From the very beginning of time, performances have been mounted to serve ritualistic and other social functions: to get people to reflect upon the values and goals of the culture, to critique them, to convey the "will of the gods," and so on. The type of performance called *theater* extends right back to the origins of culture. Theatrical performances reenact some event in human life, involving actors and a spatial location, such as a raised stage, around which an audience can view and hear the performance. The term *theater* describes both the performance itself and the place where it takes place, because the stage setting is intrinsically intertwined with the dramatic text. The performance involves both words and actions, but it can also be based purely on bodily movement. The latter is referred to more precisely as *pantomime*, or the art of dramatic representation by means of facial expressions and body movements rather than words. Pantomime has always played a basic part in theater generally. In the open-air theaters of ancient Greece and Rome, where the audience could see more easily than it could hear, it was a critical element of acting. Ancient actors used stylized movements and masks to portray a character to the accompaniment of music and the singing of a chorus.

The most common form of theater is the *drama*, which comes from the Greek word *dran* meaning "to do." The first notable dramas—those of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in ancient Greece, for example—tell as much, if not more, about the meaning of life than do the writings of philosophers. Most theories on the origin of drama point to ancient religious rites and practices. The first evidence that drama became autonomous performance art was in ancient Greece in the sixth century BCE. The plays of the Greek dramatists were drawn from myth and legend, though their focus was not a simple reenactment of mythic stories but a portrayal of the tragedy or comedy of human actions. The oldest extant comedies are by the Greek satirist Aristophanes, who ridiculed public figures and the gods equally. A few centuries later, the emerging Christian Church attacked ancient genres as profane. With the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 CE, classical theater forms were banished, replacing them subsequently with the *liturgical drama*, which was based on Bible stories, evolving, by the fifteenth century, into the *morality plays* performed by professional actors.

The roots of the modern drama can be traced to the Renaissance when the Florentine statesman and writer Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) wrote and staged *The Mandrake*, which revived the farcical comedy genre. At around the same time (and probably earlier), there emerged in northern Italy a form of theater, called the *Commedia dell'arte*, which emphasized improvisation. Troupes of *Commedia* actors relied on stock characters, masks, broad physical gestures, and clowning to entertain large, diverse crowds. The characters were instantly recognizable—lecherous, cunning Arlecchino (Harlequin) wore a black, snub-nosed mask; gullible Pantalone disguised his old age by wearing tight-fitting Turkish clothes, hoping to attract young women; the pot-bellied rascal Pulcinella (Punch) concocted outrageous schemes to satisfy his desires; and so on. Although some governments attempted to censor and regulate this vulgar form of theater, the characters of the *Commedia* were so popular they eventually were incorporated into conventional theater.

To use a cliché, drama is psychologically powerful. For example, take Samuel Beckett's (1906–89) late 1940s play, *Waiting for Godot*, a dramatic "countertext" to the morality plays, which portrayed life as a spiritual journey, and the world as a place created by God for humans to earn their way back to the paradise lost by Adam and Eve. Those plays depicted human actions as centered on God's plan and desires, guaranteeing that death is not extinction.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a disturbing parody of this inherent narrative. In Beckett's world there is only a void. Human beings fulfill no particular purpose in being alive. Life is a meaningless collage of actions, leading to death and a return to nothingness. The play revolves around two tramps stranded in an empty landscape, passing the time with banalities reminiscent of slapstick comedians or circus clowns. The tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, seem doomed to repeat their senseless actions and words forever. They call each other names, they ponder whether or not to commit suicide, they reminisce about their senseless past, they threaten to leave each other but cannot, they perform silly exercises, and they are constantly waiting for a mysterious character named Godot, who never comes. A strange couple, Lucky and Pozzo, appears, disappears, reappears, and finally vanishes. Pozzo whips Lucky, as if he were a cart horse. Lucky kicks Estragon. The two tramps tackle Lucky to the ground to stop him from shrieking out a deranged parody of a philosophy lecture. Vladimir and Estragon talk endlessly about nothing in particular, and keep on waiting, pointlessly, for Godot. Allusions in their dialogue to the Bible are sardonic and acrimonious. There is a bare tree on stage ironically suggestive of the biblical tree of life. The tramps engage in trivial theological discourse. On and on it goes like this throughout the play, which ends with no resolution. The theme is transparent. Life is meaningless; a veritable circus farce. The God we are supposed to meet will not come.

Beckett's bleak portrait spurs us on, paradoxically, to search for the very meaning it seems to deny. Beckett's text impels us to think "Please, let there be a God!" We may be condemned to waiting for Godot, and the rational part of our mind might tell us that existence is absurd, but at a more profound spiritual level we seem to sense that there is meaning to life. This is how drama works. The ancient tragedies portrayed life as a mythic struggle between humans and the gods. Medieval morality plays put on display actions and themes that informed the populace how to live according to a divine plan. Playwrights like Beckett capture the modern angst, the fear of nothingness, all the while stimulating in us a more desperate search for meaning.

Waiting for Godot questions traditional assumptions about certainty and truth. It satirizes language, portraying it as a collection of words that refer only to other words. It also deconstructs classic theater, which drew its stories and characters from myth or ancient history. The objective of the ancient dramas was to consider humanity's place in the world and the consequences of individual actions. The classical actors wore costumes of everyday dress and large masks. Movement and gesture were stately and formal. The plots emphasized supernatural elements, portraying how humans and the gods struggled, interacted, and ultimately derived meaning from each other. *Waiting for Godot* is a deconstruction of this kind of theater. The ancient dramas portrayed a world full of metaphysical meanings; Godot portrays a world devoid of them.

The Musical Arts

Music plays a role in all societies, existing in a large number of styles, each characteristic of a geographical region or a historical era. Like any art, music is not easy to define, and yet most people recognize what it is and generally agree on whether or not a given combination of sounds is musical. The great works of musical art of all cultures transcend time and are performed again and again, inducing listeners to extract meaning about themselves and the world they inhabit. In a fundamental sense, music is an international language, since its structures are not based on word meanings and combinations, but on melody, rhythm, and harmony, which seem to evoke the same pattern of feelings universally.

Three basic forms of music are now commonly distinguished: *classical* music, composed and performed by trained professionals originally under the patronage of aristocratic courts and religious establishments; *folk* music, shared by the population at large and transmitted informally; *popular* music, performed by professionals and disseminated through radio, television, YouTube, social media, and the like, and consumed by a mass public. Although most of our musical performances are text-based (composed by someone in advance), some

involve improvisation. The latter usually proceed on the basis of some previously determined structure, such as a tone or a group of chords, as in jazz. In other cultures, however, improvisation schemes can be devised within a set of traditional rules, as in the *ragas* of India or the *maqams* of the Middle East.

An interesting amalgam of music and theater is *opera*, which traces its origins to the chorus of Greek tragedy whose function was to provide commentary on the drama being performed. A similar genre exists throughout the world. The puppet drama, *wayang*, of Indonesia is a musical-dramatic reenactment of Hindu myth. Acting, singing, and instrumental music are mingled with dance and acrobatics in many varieties of Chinese musical theater. In Japan, the theatrical genres of *No* and *kabuki* represent a union of drama, music, and dance. In Europe and Britain, the few secular medieval plays to survive, such as *Le jeu de Robin et Marion* (The Play of Robin and Marion, 1283), alternate spoken dialogue and songs. During the Renaissance, aristocratic courts staged performances that mixed pageantry, recitation, and dance with instrumental, choral, and solo vocal music. Out of these, opera became a staple in Florence near the end of the sixteenth century. A group of musicians and scholars who called themselves *Camerata* (Italian for “salon”) decided to revive the musical style used in ancient Greek drama and to develop an alternative to the highly contrapuntal music (the technique of combining two or more melody lines in a harmonic pattern) of the late Renaissance. Specifically, they wanted composers to pay close attention to the texts on which their music was based, to set these texts in a simple manner, and to make the music reflect, phrase by phrase, the meaning of the text.

The first composer of genius to apply himself to opera was the Italian Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643). He molded songs, duets, choruses, and instrumental sections into a coherent operatic text based on purely musical relationships. Monteverdi thus demonstrated that a wide variety of musical forms and styles could be used to enhance the drama. Opera spread quickly throughout Italy. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it had become popular in most parts of Europe. What is particularly interesting is that traditional opera—that of Mozart, Rossini, Verdi, Puccini—has perhaps never achieved more favor with the general public than it has today. This is because technology has exposed new audiences to it, especially through the proliferation of recordings and through Internet sites. Today, opera as a popular spectacle has become a thriving enterprise.

The power of music to transform people was brought out brilliantly by the 1984 movie *Amadeus* directed by Milos Forman (1932–2018). The movie is based on the 1979 play by British playwright Peter Shaffer (1926–2016) about the purported eighteenth-century rivalry between Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Italian composer Antonio Salieri. The play plumbs the

meaning of musical art and genius in the life of human beings. It captures these themes by juxtaposing the sublime music of Mozart against the backdrop of dramatized events in his life and the truly splendid commentaries of Salieri, who guides the audience through the musical repertoire with remarkable insight and perspicacity. Forman's close-ups, angle shots, tracking shots, and zooming actions allow us to literally probe Mozart's moods (his passions, his tragedies, his successes, his disappointments) on his face as he conducts or plays his music, as well as those of his commentator Salieri (his envy, his deep understanding of Mozart's art) as he speaks through his confessor to us. *Amadeus* thus blends music, biography, and aesthetic commentary through camera artistry to create a truly effective *mise-en-scène* that is narrative, drama, musical performance, and historical documentary at once. The movie conveys the power of music to transform human evolution. A world without the music of Mozart can be envisioned, but it would be a greatly impoverished one.

Whatever the style, and whatever its function, music has great significance to people because it speaks to them emotionally. The ancient philosophers of Classical Greece believed that it originated with the gods Apollo and Orpheus, and that it reflected in its melodic and harmonic structure the mathematical laws that ruled the universe. They also believed that music influences human thoughts and actions. The question of what constitutes musical art is not an easy one to answer, because music appeals to our feelings more than it does to our intellect. However, one thing is for certain—only those works that are genuinely meaningful to one and all will remain. Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and his last four string quartets, to mention but two examples, will remain because they convey a profound inner quest for meaning to life.

Some musical styles are connected with nations and historical epochs. This is true of much of classical music and it is true of jazz—the only genuinely novel American musical art form, or more accurately, African-American art form. African-American culture actually produced the first genres of popular American music, including jazz, blues, and gospel, at the turn of the twentieth century. From these other musical styles, dance trends, and overall lifestyles developed. This in itself should constitute a powerful unconscious antidote to racism, that African Americans have unfortunately always experienced and continue to experience.

Jazz emerged as a distinct musical form in the 1920s. The specific origins of jazz are not known. It was an amalgam of several styles in New Orleans at the start of the 1900s, including West African music, folk music, and light classical music popular in the late nineteenth century. Most early jazz was played by small marching bands or by solo pianists. In 1917, a group of New Orleans musicians called The Original Dixieland Jass (Jazz) Band recorded a jazz phonograph record, creating a sensation. The term "Dixieland jazz" was immediately attached to it. In 1922 the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, and in 1923 the Creole

Jazz Band, led by cornetist King Oliver, became popular throughout the United States. The term "cool jazz" surfaced 1948, when tenor saxophonist Stan Getz recorded a slow, romantic solo of Ralph Burns' composition *Early Autumn* with the Woody Herman band. This style was adopted by a group of young musicians that included Miles Davis, Lee Konitz, Gerry Mulligan, and arranger Gil Evans. Their recordings emphasized a lagging beat, soft instrumental sounds, and unusual orchestrations that included the French horn and the tuba. The recordings, with Davis as leader, were later released as *Birth of the Cool*.

The role of jazz in the evolution of American music and even society cannot be overemphasized. This was a major theme of the movie *Chicago* (2002), which starts off with the signature tune "All That Jazz." Once strictly background music in the brothels of Kansas City and New Orleans, jazz started to spread and flourish as a mass musical art because people related to it and loved it. It was fun and it bespoke of a new freer lifestyle, in contrast to the stodgy one of the previous Victorian era. By the end of the 1920s, spurred by the cheapness and availability of mass-produced records and the emergence of the radio as a promoter of popular music, jazz and its derivatives came to define early pop culture. To this day, recordings of jazz music sell in the millions, with updated versions played and sung by a new cadre of "retrospective" jazz artists.

The Visual Arts

Visual art predates civilization. As discussed several times, art works of remarkable expressiveness have been discovered by archeologists deep within caves of southern Europe that go back to the Paleolithic period, roughly between 40,000 and 10,000 BCE. The invention of sharpened flint blades by Paleolithic humans also led to the first sculptures—small carved or incised pieces of wood, ivory, and bone. These symbolized a dependence on hunting and a worship of fertility.

Every culture has developed its own particular way of representing the world through visual forms. The aesthetic pleasure these give seems, by itself, to be a motivation for their creation. Paintings and sculptures betray an innate fascination in our species with what the eye sees and attempts to understand. In Italy and other parts of Renaissance Europe, painting became a sophisticated visual art form with the development of the principles of linear perspective by various Italian architects and painters early in the fifteenth century. This enabled painters to achieve, in two-dimensional representations, the illusion of three-dimensional space. Renaissance artists also introduced innovations in how to represent human anatomy and new drawing media and methods, such

as oil painting and fresco (painting on fresh, moist plaster with pigments dissolved in water) techniques. Masters of the High Renaissance, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian developed these techniques to perfection. Paradoxically, Leonardo left only a handful of paintings, so occupied was he with the scientific observation of natural phenomena and with technological inventions. Raphael perfected earlier Renaissance techniques involving color and composition, creating ideal types in his representations of the Virgin and Child and in his penetrating portrait studies of contemporaries. The Vatican's *Sistine Chapel*, with its ceiling frescoes of the *Creation*, the *Fall*, and the vast wall fresco of *The Last Judgment* attest to Michelangelo's genius as a painter. Titian's portraits include representations of Christian and mythological subjects, and his numerous renderings of the female nude are among the most celebrated of the genre.

Since the late nineteenth century, meaning-bearing visual communication has found a new medium—*photography*. Through the photographic image we can relive the moment or recall someone as they were at that point in time. The photographs that adorn tables and walls in homes, offices, and other buildings are visual testimonials of who we are, giving a visual form to human memory. This is one off the subtexts in the 2001 film *Memento*, written and directed by Christopher Nolan and based on a short story written by his brother Jonathan Nolan (*Memento Mori*). The main character, Leonard, is forced to live entirely in the present, unable to create new memories after a head injury. The movie revolves around his attempts to get revenge for the rape and killing of his wife. Leonard writes notes on his body, takes Polaroid photos, and keeps pieces of paper so that he can remember what he has discovered—hence the name *Memento* to indicate that his memory is a series of external mementos, which he is unable to connect to any life story and therefore to any sense of reality. The time sequence of the narrative is presented in reverse manner, so that the audience is denied the key clues of which the protagonist is also deprived, due to his amnesia. The viewer is thus projected directly into the horror of having lost one's memory. Fragmentation and dislocation lead to doubt about the reality of consciousness and existence.

We get the idea that Leonard's wife was killed at the very start. Leonard was hit on the head in the act, and is left without short-term memory. He carries a picture of a man he suspects of the murder. The death of this man, and the inference that he killed him, ends the tale. Leonard goes on to write a letter, in the style of previous mementos, perhaps to himself, knowing that he would otherwise forget that he was the one who wrote them.

The movie is replete with symbols of time—alarm clocks ringing, a wristwatch, notepads, and so on. The movie, however, destroys the sense of time

created by such artifacts by showing the plot in both forward and reverse time, distinguishing the two sequences by black-and-white and color cinematography. Color sequences show what actually happened; black-and-white ones what Leonard believes happened. The first color scene, in which Leonard shoots and kills the suspected man Teddy is, in actual fact, the last scene of the narrative. In it we see a Polaroid undevelop, a bullet fly back into the barrel of a gun, and Teddy come back to life after the sound of a shot is heard. This is followed immediately by a black-and-white scene of Leonard in a motel room talking to an anonymous person on the phone explaining his circumstances.

To make the movie even more horrifying, Nolan intersplices the parallel story of a man named Sam Jenkins. As an insurance investigator, Leonard came across a medical claim from Jenkins, who eerily had the same memory problem that he has now. Leonard investigated the case and had the insurance company deny giving Jenkins the money he sought, believing that Jenkins was faking his condition. Sam's wife also wasn't sure if her husband was putting on a charade. So, she devises a memory test, based on the fact that she suffered from diabetes and it was Sam's job to administer shots of insulin to her. If she repeatedly had to ask for the shots, she would be able to prove that his condition was real. Sam administered the shots, forgetting however that he had just given her one. Eventually, she slipped into a coma from the overdoses and died, leaving Sam a patient in a mental institution. The Sam Jenkins subplot clearly creates a sense that Leonard may, himself, be a patient in the same mental institution, and that he also killed his wife. Ultimately, the movie raises ancient philosophical questions in a new way: What is truth? Is memory the essence of selfhood?

Movies such as *Memento* and *Amadeus* bring out the power of cinematic art. Cinema is perhaps the most influential visual art form of the contemporary world. Today, movie actors and directors are better known, and certainly more popular, than writers and playwrights. Names such as Fellini, Spielberg, Polanski, Hitchcock, DeMille, Cocteau, to name but a few, are part of modern cultural lore. Cinema actors enjoy more fame and recognition than do scientists and philosophers.

Cinema historians trace the origins of this art form to French magician Georges Méliès. In 1899, in a studio on the outskirts of Paris, Méliès reconstructed a ten-part version of the trial of French army officer Alfred Dreyfus and filmed *Cinderella* (1899/1900) in twenty scenes. He is chiefly remembered, however, for his clever fantasies, such as *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), in which he exploited the movie camera's capacities to capture the emotional subtleties of human expression through close-up and angle camera techniques. His short films were an instant hit with the public and were shown internationally. Although considered little more than curiosities today, they are significant precursors of an art form that was in its infancy at the time.

American inventor Edwin S. Porter produced the first major American silent film, *The Great Train Robbery*, in 1903. Only a little more than eight minutes long, it was to become a great influence in the development of motion pictures because of its intercutting of scenes shot at different times and in different places to form a unified narrative, culminating in a suspenseful chase. Most films of the era were short comedies, adventure stories, or filmed performances by leading vaudevillian actors of the day.

Throughout the first century of its existence, cinema was experienced as a communal event, inside a movie theater, complete with intermissions, food fare, and other accoutrements of the traditional theater. On every corner of urban America one was bound to find a movie theater. It was often the center of attraction of the town. However, all that changed in the late 1980s with the advent of VCR technology, which threatened to make the movie-watching experience a more individualistic one and, thus, lead to the elimination of the movie theater. The new technology, combined with the advent of cable television, which featured relatively current films on special channels, seemed in fact to seriously threaten the survival of movie theaters and created a climate similar to that of the early 1950s, when television also began to challenge the popularity of motion pictures. As a result, film companies increasingly favored large spectacles with fantastic special effects in order to lure the public away from home videos and back to the big screen. However, despite the challenge from video, and even new sites and platforms today like Netflix and HBO, the traditional movie theater has remained popular—a testament to the power of cinema as a "social art form." Although one can now see movies on YouTube or stream them in some way, thus making it possible to enjoy movies individualistically, the movie theater is still around.

In effect, today, the threat to the traditional movie theater is coming from the same sources that are threatening traditional paper book culture—cyberspace and new electronic devices. It remains to be seen, however, if the social function of movie theaters will be transferred to other locales (whether indeed they will be replaced). As it has turned out, so far, the advent of videos, movie channels, Netflix, and other new devices for receiving movies has actually fostered a much wider audience for movies. All kinds of films, past and present, are now available in different media and formats. With television cable networks and Internet platforms as additional sources of revenue, and functioning in some cases as producers themselves, a substantial increase in feature-film production has ensued.

However, movie theaters have shown themselves to be resilient by becoming more and more part of the overall experience. Indeed, to emphasize their entertainment function, today's megaplexes feature not only movies

and the usual fast food fare, but also video game sections, restaurants, and other recreational accoutrements. The movie theater has become itself an amusement park.

The Verbal Arts

As already discussed in Chap. 6, every culture has produced verbal accounts (tales, stories, and so on) to make sense of the world. The most ancient and universal verbal art is poetry—a form of expression that creates an aesthetic effect through the special sounds, rhythms, and imagery produced by its language. These mark the difference between poetry and other kinds of verbal art.

Views on the nature and function of poetry in human societies have been varied. Plato asserted that poetry was divinely inspired, but that it was nonetheless a mere imitation of ideal forms in the world. Aristotle, on the other hand, argued that poetry was the most sublime of the creative arts, representing what is universal in human experience. The philosopher Vico saw poetry as the primordial form of language. He characterized the first speakers as poets. The texts found by archeologists at ancient Sumerian, Babylonian, Hittite, Egyptian, and Hebrew sites suggest that poetry originated alongside music, song, and drama as a communal form of expression to seek favor from, or give praise to, the divinities. This ritualistic aspect of poetry is still functional in many societies. In the Navajo culture, for instance, poetic forms are used as incantations for rain. We use poetic form on greeting cards and on special kinds of invitations; we use poetry to impart knowledge of language to children (just think of the widespread use of nursery rhymes and children's poetry books in our society).

Alongside poetry, the world's cultures have also developed prose forms of verbal art. The novel, for instance, has become a major genre of literature. The word *novella*, from Latin *novellus*, "new," was first used by the great Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) to refer to the anecdotal tales that he spun in his *Decameron* of 1353. This collection of 100 stories is set within a framework of ten friends telling stories to one another. To escape an outbreak of the plague, the friends have taken refuge in a country villa outside Florence, where they entertain one another over a period of ten days with a series of stories told by each one in turn. As mentioned, Boccaccio called the stories, more specifically, *novella*, "new things." The novel is an outgrowth of the novella.

Many of the tales that are part of our own literary traditions originated in Egypt. Narrations also enjoyed considerable popularity among the Greeks. The chief examples of "proto-novels" written in Latin are the *Golden Ass*

(second century CE) by Lucius Apuleius and the *Satyricon* (first century CE), which is generally considered the work of Petronius Arbiter. It must not be overlooked that in Japan, the Baroness Murasaki Shikibu (c. 978–1031) wrote what many literary scholars now regard as the first real novel, *The Tale of Genji*, in the eleventh century (translated 1935).

The long narrative verse tale, the equally voluminous prose romance, and the Old French *fabliau* flourished in Europe during the Middle Ages, contributing directly to the later development of the novel. Advances in realism were made in Spain during the sixteenth century with the so-called picaresque or rogue story, in which the protagonist is a merry vagabond who goes through a series of realistic and exciting adventures. Between 1605 and 1612, the Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616) wrote what is considered the first great novel of pre-modernity, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. As the novel genre became increasingly popular during the eighteenth century, writers used it to examine society and the human condition with psychological depth and breadth. They wrote revealingly about people living within, or escaping from, the pressures of society, and criticizing society for failing to satisfy human aspirations.

From the nineteenth century onwards, novels have become widely read texts, ranging from trashy bestsellers to works of great import and substance. In the latter category, one thinks, for example, of the novels and short stories of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens, Hesse, Mann, Woolf, the Brontë sisters, Poe, Hemingway, Camus, Sartre, Kafka, Twain, and Joyce. Such writers used the novel and novella genre as a narrative framework for probing the human psyche.

To conclude the discussion of art, it is remarkable indeed that even in seemingly commonplace situations, such as a courtship displays, human beings are constantly attempting to transcend their biological state to reach for something elusive, beyond the physical. Cheryl's pride in her artistic abilities reminds us that there is more to life than flesh and blood. For humans, art is indeed indistinguishable from life. Art is a guarantee that our weary search for meaning is itself meaningful. Life would be inconceivable without art.

Note

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10

There's More to Perfume than Smell: Advertising, Pop Culture, and Meme Culture

Advertising is the greatest art form of the twentieth century.
—Marshall McLuhan (1911–80)

There is one final scene on Martha's video that is worth discussing before summing up. Near the end of the evening, Cheryl turns inquisitively to Ted and says: "The cologne you're wearing, Ted, smells very nice. What is it?" "Yes," replies Ted. "It's called *Drakkar Noir*. Do you like it? I decided to try it on because of an ad I saw a while back on a YouTube retrospective of historical ads." "Oh, can you describe the ad to me?" retorts Cheryl. Ted's description of the ad follows. "Well, actually, I remember the bottle was a ghastly, frightful, black color. It was placed right in the center of the ad against a dark background that was shattered by a beam of white light which just missed the bottle but illuminated the platform on which it stood. That had a bizarre effect on me. I felt as if I were in awe of the bottle!"

The semiotician would find Ted's description of the ad text intriguing. With the themes of advertising, pop culture, and meme culture we have come full circle, back to the human fascination with apparently trivial, but still meaningful, objects such as cigarettes, high heels, and cologne bottles. Ted's reaction to the ad indicates that advertising images are effective. These are designed to produce a need to buy—a compulsion that Roland Barthes called "neomania."[1] The smartly constructed ads harbor a constant subtext: Buy this or that and you will not be bored; you will be happy; you will be famous; you will be liked.

The sad truth is that happiness cannot be bought, as an old proverb warns us. We are living in a world that often puts more of a premium on satisfying

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desires than it does on gaining wisdom. Advertisers rely on a handful of themes—happiness, youth, success, status, luxury, fashion, and beauty—to promote their products, promising solutions to human problems in the form of cologne, deodorant, beer, cars, mobile phones, and the like.

Let's start the discussion in this chapter by interpreting Ted's *Drakkar Noir* ad. Darkness connotes fear, evil, mystery. This is why villains in classic adventure stories are often dressed in black, and why forbidden or mysterious happenings occur in the dark at night. The dark bottle and the dark background of the ad tap into these connotations. The bottle's placement in the middle of the scene, as if it is on an altar, is suggestive of veneration, idolatry, of a dark ritual being performed secretively. This is reinforced by the sepulchral name of the cologne. Its guttural sound—obviously reminiscent of Dracula, the deadly vampire who mesmerized his sexual prey with a mere glance—arouses unconscious fear and desire at once. To complete the picture, the piercing beam of light (the paradigmatic opposite of dark) that just missed the bottle, illuminating the platform on which it stood, makes the bottle stand out as the "center of attention." Since colognes and perfumes are worn to enhance one's attractiveness and to entice a prospective mate, the ad elicits a web of sexual connotations: *darkness* = *night* = *sexuality* = *forbidden pleasures* = *fear* = *desire* = *mystery* = *vampirism.* This lacework of meanings is built into the visual signifiers of the ad. In a real sense, the ad is a small work of art, which has, however, the specific commercial purpose of enhancing sales.

The two main notions semioticians use to decipher such texts are those of subtext and intertext. The term *subtext* refers to any meaning, message, or interpretation that a given text evokes subconsciously and that is not immediately accessible to interpretation. The subtext in the *Drakkar Noir* ad is, as argued, *darkness* = *night* = *sexuality* = *forbidden pleasures* = *fear* = *desire* = *mystery* = *vampirism.* The traces to this subtext are the visual signifiers discussed previously. *Intertextuality* refers to the parts of a text that are understandable in terms of other texts. The placement of the bottle in the center of the scene with a dark background broken by a beam of light recalls stories where light and dark are in tension, including origin myths in which light emerges from the dark. The most critical intertext here is, however, the Dracula myth, a vampire figure that has come to symbolize so many things to us, including forbidden pleasure and the search for immortality. This interweaving of allusions and suggestions to other texts is what makes ads very powerful emotionally. And it also opens up the number of possible interpretations. The one given here is only one interpretation; there are many others. Like art, it is impossible to pin down one and only one meaning to an ad text, which, clearly, is more than a simple announcement about a product.

Advertising

Why are such subtextual themes and images used by advertisers? What's their relation to the product the ad promotes? Is the association itself between myth and product the trigger that gets people to buy the product? These are the questions that a semiotic approach to advertising attempts to answer.

The term *advertising* derives from the Medieval Latin verb *advertere* ("to direct one's attention to"). It designates any type or form of public announcement intended to direct attention to specific commodities or services. Advertising is, thus, a form of discourse, which is designed with rhetorical (persuasive) force. It exalts and inculcates consumption by playing on fears and archetypal desires—fear of poverty, sickness, loss of social standing, unattractiveness, and so on. As Barthes claimed, in a society that relies on mass consumption for its economic survival, it is little wonder that the trivial has become art.[2] One of the first known methods of advertising was the outdoor display, usually an eye-catching sign painted or attached on the wall of a building. Archaeologists have uncovered many such signs. A poster found in Thebes in 1000 BCE is thought to be one of the world's first "ads." In large letters it offered a gold coin for the capture of a runaway slave. An outdoor placard found among the ruins of ancient Rome offered property for rent; another, found painted on a wall in Pompeii, called the attention of travelers to a tavern located in a different town. Similar kinds of posters have been found scattered throughout ancient societies.

Throughout history, advertising in marketplaces has constituted a means of promoting the barter and sale of goods. Criers employed by merchants read public notices aloud to promote their wares. With the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, fliers and posters could be printed easily and posted in public places or inserted in books, pamphlets, newspapers, and magazines. By the latter part of the seventeenth century, when newspapers were beginning to circulate widely, print ads became the primary means for the advertisement of products and services. The *London Gazette* became the first newspaper to reserve a section exclusively for ads, which showed considerable rhetorical and graphic skill aimed at persuading readers to buy the products. The era of modern advertising had clearly dawned. Print advertising spread rapidly throughout the eighteenth century, proliferating to the point whereby the writer and lexicographer Samuel Johnson (1709–84) felt impelled to make the following statement in the newspaper *The Idler*: "Advertisements are now so numerous that they are very negligently perused, and it is therefore become necessary to gain attention by magnificence of promise and by eloquence sometimes sublime and sometimes pathetic."[3] Ad creators were

starting to pay more attention to the language, design, and layout of the ad text. The art of coining and inventing new expressions to fit the ad text (now called slogans) was also becoming a basic technique. Advertising was thus starting to change the meaning of commodities. Everything, from clothes to beverages, was promoted as part of something more than the actual or practical functions of the product—as a key to success, popularity, and the like. These techniques transformed products into signs and codes standing for meanings that extended beyond their physical qualities. Advertising had become rhetorical art.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the advertising agency came onto the scene. By the turn of the twentieth century, such agencies had themselves become large business enterprises, constantly developing new techniques and methods to get people to think of products as signifying structures rather than just products. Throughout the twentieth century, advertising focused on promoting and ensconcing consumerism as a way of life, proposing marketplace solutions to virtually all psychological and social problems. No wonder, then, that the shopping malls are filled with thrill-seekers who would otherwise become stir crazy. Perhaps, as many social critics warn, we do indeed live in a world conjured up by lifestyle ads.

The pervasiveness of advertising today raises a number of issues. Has it become a force molding cultural mores and individual behaviors or does it simply mirror the cultural tendencies of urbanized, industrialized societies? Is it a legitimate form of artistic expression, as the Cannes Film Festival clearly believes (awarding prizes to the best advertisements)? The starting point of the debate on advertising was probably Vance Packard's 1957 book *The Hidden Persuaders*, which inspired an outpouring of studies examining the purported hidden effects of advertising on individuals and on society at large.[4] Packard argued essentially that advertising was brainwashing.

Is advertising to be blamed for causing culturally-based afflictions such as obesity and its tragic counterpart anorexia? Are advertising moguls the shapers of behavior that so many would claim they are? Are we all the victims of advertising rhetoric, as Brian Wilson Key quips?[5] There is no doubt that advertising plays a role in shaping some behaviors in some individuals. Any text, a semiotician would claim, has an effect on us because of semiosis—the interplay between signs and the mind. However, although people have become conditioned to mindlessly absorbing images, and although these may have some effects on behavior, people accept the images, by and large, only if they suit already established preferences. Advertisements are not in themselves disruptive of the value systems of the cultural mainstream; rather, they reflect shifts already present in that mainstream. If they are indeed psychologically effective, then it is primarily because they tap into the system of everyday life more successfully than do other forms of rhetorical discourse.[6]

The messages in ad subtexts often offer the kind of hope to which religions and social philosophies once held exclusive rights: security against the hazards of old age, better position in life, popularity and personal prestige, social advancement, better health, happiness, eternal youth. The advertiser stresses not the product, but the psychological and social benefits that may be expected from its purchase. The advertiser is becoming more and more successful at setting foot into the same subconscious regions of psychic experience that were once explored by philosophers and artists. However, blaming advertising for social ills is like blaming the messenger for the message that is embedded in the materialistic ethos of consumerist societies.

Because of this ethos, it should come as little surprise to find that advertising, brands, and pop culture have become integrated today. Take, for example, the Disney Corporation cartoon character Mickey Mouse. In 1929, Disney allowed Mickey Mouse to be reproduced on school slates, effectively transforming the character into a logo. A year later, Mickey Mouse dolls went into production and throughout the 1930s the Mickey Mouse brand was licensed with huge success. In 1955 *The Mickey Mouse Club* premiered on US network television, further entrenching the brand—and by association all Disney products—into the cultural mainstream. The case of Mickey Mouse has repeated itself throughout modern consumerist societies. The idea is to get the brand to become intertwined with cultural spectacles and trends (movies, TV programs, and so on).

Another way for product advertising to blend into the cultural mainstream is through the ad campaign, which can be defined as the systematic creation of a series of slightly different ads and commercials based on the same theme, characters, jingles, and so on. An ad campaign is comparable to the theme and variations form of music. One of the primary functions of ad campaigns is to guarantee that the brand's image will be in step with the changing times. Thus, for example, the Budweiser ad campaigns of the 1980s and early 1990s emphasized rural, country-and-western ruggedness, and crude female sexuality seen from a male viewpoint. The actors in the commercials were "Marlboro men," and the women their prey. In the early 2000s, the same company changed its image with its "Whassup!" campaign to keep in step with the changing socio-political climate. The campaign showed young urban males who hung around together, loved sports, and did whatever such males seemingly loved to do together in order to bond. So appealing was the "Whassup!" campaign that its signature catchphrase was joked about on talk shows, parodied or mimicked in various media, and used by people commonly in their daily conversations. The makers of Budweiser had clearly adapted their advertising style to mirror social changes and trends.

Indeed, the most effective strategy is not only to keep up with the times but also to co-opt them. In the 1960s, for example, the rebels and revolutionaries, referred to generally as hippies, who genuinely thought they were posing a radical challenge to the ideological values and lifestyle mores of the mainstream consumerist culture, ended up becoming the incognizant trend-setters of the very culture they deplored, providing it with features of lifestyle and discourse that advertisers adapted and recycled into society at large. Counterculture clothing fashion was quickly converted into mainstream fashion, counterculture music style into mainstream music style, counterculture symbolism and talk into society-wide symbolism and discourse—hence the crystallization of a social mindset whereby every individual, of every political and ideological persuasion, could feel that they were a symbolic participant in a constant revolution.[7]

Campaigns such as the Pepsi Generation and the Coca-Cola universal brotherhood ("I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony…") ones directly incorporated the rhetoric and symbolism of the hippie counterculture, thus creating the illusion that the goals of the hippies and of the soft drink manufacturers were one and the same. Rebellion through purchasing became the subliminal thread woven into the ad campaigns. The Dodge Rebellion and Oldsmobile Youngmobile campaigns etched into the nomenclature of the cars themselves the powerful connotations of rebellion and youthful defiance. Even a sewing company came forward to urge people on to join its own type of surrogate revolution, hence its slogan "You don't let the establishment make your world; don't let it make your clothes." In effect, by claiming to "join the revolution," advertising created the real revolution. This is why, since the 1970s, the worlds of advertising, marketing, youth trends, and entertainment have become synergistically intertwined. As Leiss, Kline, Jhally, and Botterill aptly put it, "there is no longer a separation between advertising and culture, culture and commerce, culture and politics."[8] This is particularly obvious in the realm of online ads, which pop up continually and thus surreptitiously. There are now websites that record advertising history and that discuss the aesthetics of ads. Ad culture has become virtually synonymous with pop culture.

The answer to curtailing the power of advertising is not to be found in censorship or in any form of state control, as some proclaim. Even if it were possible in a consumerist culture to control the contents of advertising, this would invariably prove to be counterproductive. The answer is, in my view, to become aware of how advertising produces meanings with semiotic analysis (as illustrated above). In that way, we will be in a much better position to fend off the undesirable effects that it may cause.

Pop Culture

The term *pop culture* was coined in analogy to *pop art*, which was discussed previously. Pop culture is, by and large, a carnivalesque culture. It is culture for the people by the people, that is, a form of culture produced by common people, not by artists commissioned by the nobility or the church on purpose to do so. Pop culture rejects the distinction between "high" and "low" culture. It is highly appealing for this very reason. It is populist and popular, subject not to aesthetic canons, but to the vagaries of the marketplace and of changing tastes.

The terms of "high," "low," and "popular" culture have been used to differentiate between levels of representation within society. "High" culture implies a level considered to have a superior value, socially and aesthetically, than other levels, which are said to have a "lower" value. Traditionally, these two levels were associated with class distinctions—high culture was associated with the Church and the aristocracy in Europe; low culture with common folk. Pop culture emerged in the early twentieth century to obliterate this distinction. Already in the Romantic nineteenth century, artists saw "low" or "folk culture" as the only true form of culture, especially since they associated "high culture" with the artificial demands made of artists by those in authority. Pop culture emerged shortly thereafter to efface any residue distinctions between levels of culture.

The inventors of early pop culture forms were young people. Setting themselves apart from the adult culture, the youths of the 1920s emphasized a new sexual freedom with musical trends such as the Charleston and jazz. Although the older generation initially rejected them, the trends eventually caught on for a simple reason—they held great appeal. Pop culture engages the masses because it takes the material of everyday life, as well as common emotions, and gives them expression and meaning. Everything from comic books to fashion shows have mass appeal because they emanate from people within the culture, not from authority figures. As such, pop culture makes little or no distinction between art and recreation, distraction and engagement.

The spread of pop culture has been brought about, in part, by developments in mass communications technologies. The rise of music as a mass art, for instance, was made possible by the advent of recording and radio broadcasting technologies in the 1920s. Records and radio made music available to large audiences, converting it from an art for the élite to an art for one and all. The spread and appeal of pop culture throughout the globe today is due to the advent of Internet technologies. Pop culture is a transgressive culture, since it shatters authoritative social structures, by giving voice to common people.

Satellite television, for example, is often cited as bringing about the disintegration of the former Soviet system in Europe, as people became attracted to images of consumerist delights by simply tuning into American TV programs. McLuhan claimed that the spread of American pop culture images through electronic media has brought about a type of "global culture" that strangely unites people in a kind of "global village."

Young people have always been the creative force behind pop culture's trends and products. So, in a fundamental sense, there are few differences between youth and pop culture. However, since young people become old, trends change with new generations of youth. The main difference between pop and youth culture is that some of the trends of the former do not coincide with those of the latter. Youth culture and pop culture are thus different in the fact that previous youth culture is recycled by those who carry it over into their later years. There is, nevertheless, a constant dynamic between youth and pop culture. However, all this does not mean that pop culture is incapable of producing truly meritorious and lasting art. Indeed, some of the modern world's most significant artistic products have come out of pop culture. The comic book art of Charles Schultz (1922–2000) is a case in point. His comic strip *Peanuts*, which was originally titled *Li'l Folks*, debuted in 1950, appealing to mass audiences. Through the strip, Schultz dealt with some of the most profound religious and philosophical themes of human history in a way that was unique and aesthetically powerful.

The medium that has been the most effective in spreading pop culture into the mainstream, since the 1950s, is television. Television service was in place in several Western countries by the late 1930s. By the early 1940s, there were a few dozen television stations operating in the United States. It was not until the early 1950s, however, that technology had advanced far enough to make it possible for virtually every North American household to afford a television set. By the mid-1950s, television was becoming a force in shaping all of society. TV personalities became household names and were transformed into celebrities. People increasingly began to plan their lives around their favorite television programs. Performers like Elvis Presley and the Beatles became culture-wide icons after appearing on TV.

The role that television has played (and continues to play) in cultural evolution cannot be stressed enough. By the 1970s, television had become a fixture inside the household. Most people alive today cannot remember a time without a television set in their homes. Like the automobile at the turn of the century, television has changed society permanently. Some social critics are even claiming that TV satellite transmission is leading to the demise of the nation-state concept as television images cross national boundaries. When

asked about the stunning defeat of communism in eastern Europe, the Polish labor leader, Lech Walesa, was reported by the newspapers as saying that it "all came from the television set," implying that television undermined the stability of the communist world's relatively poor and largely sheltered lifestyle with images of consumer delights seen in Western programs and commercials.

Like any type of privileged space—a platform, a pulpit, and so on—television creates icons by simply "showing" them. Think of how you would react to your favorite television personality if they were to visit you in your own home. You certainly would not treat their presence in your house as you would that of any other stranger. You would feel that it constituted an event of momentous proportions, an almost unreal and other-worldly happening. TV personalities are perceived as larger-than-life figures by virtue of the fact that they are "seen" inside the mythical space created by television screen. The same reaction would apply to any celebrity, because of the power of the electronic screen.

TV is where moral issues and politics are showcased. The horrific scenes coming out of the Vietnam War, which were transmitted into people's homes daily in the late 1960s and early 1970s, brought about an end to the war. A riot that gets airtime becomes a momentous event; one that does not is ignored. This is why terrorists have often been more interested in "getting on the air," than in having their demands satisfied. The mere fact of getting on television imbues their cause with significance. Political and social protesters frequently inform the news media of their intentions to stage demonstrations, which are then carried out in front of the cameras. Television takes such events and fashions them into dramatic stories; and we call them reality.

In semiotic terms, television can be characterized as the medium that provides a *social text*, an authoritative textual point of reference for evaluating real-life actions, behaviors, and events. To grasp this concept, imagine stepping back in time, living in some village in medieval Europe. How would you conceive and organize your daily routines in that village? The routines of your day, week, month, and year would no doubt be centered on a Christian worldview. Some of the offshoots of that worldview are still around today. This is why religious dates such as Christmas and Easter are celebrated in a predominantly secular culture. In medieval Europe, people went to church regularly, and lived by moral codes that were iterated in church sermons. The underlying theme of the medieval "social text" was that each day brought people closer and closer to their true destiny: salvation and an afterlife with God. Living according to this text imparted a feeling of emotional shelter. All human actions and natural events could be explained and understood in terms of the text.

With the scientific advances brought about by the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution, the Christian social text lost its grip on the system of everyday life. Today, unless someone has joined a religious community or has chosen to live by the dictates of the Bible or some other religious text, the social text by which people live is hardly a religious one. We organize our day around work commitments and social appointments, and only at those traditional "points" in the calendar (Christmas, Easter, etc.) do we synchronize our secular social text with the more traditional religious one. The need to partition the day into "time slots" is why we depend so heavily upon such devices and artifacts as clocks, watches, agendas, appointment books, and calendars. We would feel desperately lost without such things. In this regard, it is appropriate to note that in his 1726 novel, *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) satirized the reliance of society on the watch. The Lilliputians were intrigued and baffled that Gulliver did virtually nothing without consulting his watch. Today, most people would similarly deem it unthinkable to go out of the home without a watch or a cellphone that records time in the same way. We always seem to need to know "what time it is" in order to carry on the business of our daily life.

When television entered the scene in the 1950s, it almost instantly became the modern world's social text. With cable television, satellite dishes, HBO, TV streamlining, and the like, this text now appears to be a highly individualistic one, tailored to meet the needs of individuals, rather than of society at large. But there are still various social functions related to current TV, including that of village moral gossip. Talk shows are moral dramas, replacing the pulpit as the platform from which moral issues are discussed and sin is condemned publicly. The host has replaced the medieval priest, commenting morally on virtually every medical and psychological condition known to humanity.

Television has become so intertwined with life that we no longer distinguish between its contents and reality. This was brought out by the 1998 movie *The Truman Show* directed by Peter Weir. The main character, Truman Burbank, is the unsuspecting star of his very own reality TV show. The first baby to be legally adopted by a corporation, the show's creator has filmed and documented every moment of Truman's life for a voyeuristic TV audience to witness. Truman goes about his life living in the largest studio ever constructed (without knowing it), a world within a world, filmed by more than 5000 cameras all controlled from a room at the top of the domed studio. Truman's friends and family are carefully selected actors. After becoming the most popular television show ever, with a gross national product equivalent to that of a small country—all revenues generated by product placement—a series of accidents and a dose of paranoia lead Truman to discover the truth, despite attempts to stop him from doing so.

The world manufactured for Truman is that of the 1950s bolstered by current technologies. Life is reassuring and inviting, even nostalgic. This mix of old culture and new technology, however, also signals to the audience that something isn't quite right. Truman drives a 1990s-model Ford Taurus, uses an ATM card, and works on a computer. This technology seems anachronistic when compared to the simplistic world of the 1950s era. The subtext of the movie is a transparent one—the hyperreal world of TV and actual reality are now psychologically the same. They have formed a simulacrum. TV programming itself has morphed into a kind of has become a sort of Truman world. Starting in 2000 with *Survivor*, the reality TV genre exploded. A program called *The Joe Schmo Show* followed a contestant, who was unaware that everyone else on the show was an actor. The most popular primetime series of the last couple of decades are reality shows such as *American Idol*, *The Apprentice*, and *The Bachelor*. The appeal of the unscripted program, which blurs the difference between reality and fiction, lies in its "text-in-the making" nature. As with Luigi Pirandello's (1867–1936) great 1921 play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the audience is presented with real-life characters in search of a script and a narrative. The fun is in figuring out how this will come about.

Ultimately, however, reality TV is voyeurism plain and simple. And it is spreading. The boundaries between the private and the public have been eroded through the influence of TV and especially now by the Internet and social media. Everyone, from celebrities to housemakers, is airing personal laundry in public for everyone to see on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the like. Virtually the entire globe now has access to the spectacle of human "reality" at its most trivial. Maybe at some deep unconscious level we are all trying to understand what human life is all about through the media simulacrum. It certainly seems to be a bizarre way of doing so.

Meme Culture

The medium that may be taking the place of TV as a social text is the online one. Indeed, as we find out at one point on Martha's video, Cheryl and Ted initially made contact through a dating website. In the history of human communications, no other medium has made it possible for so many people to interact with each other virtually instantaneously, irrespective of the distances between them. The Internet has also led to an online culture that may be bringing pop culture, as understood traditionally, to an end. The online culture is a virtual one with nano-celebrities, nano-spectacles, and nano-trends—

that is, celebrities, spectacles, and trends that have a short shelf life. Andy Warhol's "fifteen minutes of fame" prediction for everyone has become the norm. The Internet is blurring the lines between performer and audience, giving free reign to self-expression like never before, producing a DIY form of culture that is based on the viral video, rather than on a recurring program or event.

In the Internet Age what is popular can be something very different to every person. Certainly, the dichotomy between entertainment and engagement is still there, since we can get both from online venues. Celebrities, narrative genres, lifestyles, fads, and other aspects of the popular are also still around, but in different ways. The primary use of the Internet is for individualistic entertainment, that is, entertainment experienced as a person outside of an audience setting. And the time frame for a spectacle or event is measured in minutes, rather than hours. Even knowledge transmission is made to fit this the online mode, as the Ted (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Talks indicate. These started in 1984, but in the contemporary Internet Age they have evolved into online presentations blending knowledge and entertainment that last around fifteen minutes—recalling Andy Warhol's prophetic aphorism.

In previous eras of pop culture, a few people—agents, radio announcers, TV producers, and the like—decided who or what would be put on a stage, played on radio, or shown on television in view of achieving popularity. Now the decision of what becomes popular is influenced by memes. Memes have replaced agents and the other previous makers of pop culture. Memes are the new marketers. However, they carry only the content that is fleetingly popular, as decided by social media users. This implies that pop culture is now likely giving way to mem culture. Posting a photo of people involved in humorous situations is replacing *Funniest Home Videos* and people dancing some new style on YouTube is replacing previous dance shows—at least in part. Television networks, artists, and musicians also have Facebook sites for communicating with fans, followers, and audiences generally. Facebook has become a major agency for the spread of trends in entertainment culture.

Social media are, in sum, where memes are created and disseminated throughout cyberspace; but in its vast expanse they have little chance of gaining stability. The life span of Internet memes through social media sites became dramatically obvious, when in December of 2012, the so-called Gangnam Style video became the first YouTube clip to be viewed more than one billion times. Thousands responded by creating and posting their own variations of the video on YouTube and on Facebook. But the meme quickly evanesced in cyberspace. The same story can be told for virtually any meme that surfaces on

the Internet. There are now even popular meme genres, which reveal how the Internet and participatory Web 2.0 culture are redifining the meaning of popular.

Sometimes, however, an Internet meme can crossover into the traditional art world. The best example of this is the Grumpy Cat meme—which has migrated from the Internet to other areas of society, including to art museums and other referential points in pop culture: that is, it has made its way into other media and other channels of dissemination. One can claim this is the ultimate in banality, but there is much more to it than literally meets the eye. The cat fits in with contemporary perceptions of animals as pets and ersatz humans, which has always been a part of pop cultural representations—from the Disney animated movies to the *Looney Tunes* cartoons. Grumpy Cat is a meme that has become a celebrity, in the style of other animal celebrities. Walter Benjamin addressed this issue already in the 1930s when mechanical reproduction technology made art reproductions common. He suggested that this was part of an ever-growing democratization of art, leading to a demise in the notion of originality and the ways in which art was viewed and appreciated as something truly unique. A successful meme is, in fact, something that is highly reproducible, recognizable, and easily shared.

Lying

There is an aspect of the Internet that is worth emphasizing here, in the era of so-called fake news. The Internet has made lying, dissimulation, and confabulation respectable modes of interacting. The Internet has enabled the pathological or compulsive liar to gain a voice that can be spread widely. Can we ever know the truth of anything in a world where lying is simply an alternative way of communicating information? It is little wonder that the scientific study of lying has become widespread in academia, crisscrossing various disciplines. This includes semiotics. Recall Umberto Eco's definition of semiotics as anything that can be used to lie. It is relevant to note that the historical father of semiotics, St. Augustine, had written two books on lying—*De mandacio* and *Contra mendacio*, in which he divided lying into eight categories according to the harmful effects these brought about:

- Lies in how religion is taught and presented.
- Lies that are harmful and serve no foreseeable social purpose.
- Lies that are harmful but are intended to help others.
- Lies told for the pleasure of lying.

- Lies told in conversations to make the discourse fluid and smooth.
- Lies that harm no one but help someone materially.
- Lies that harm no one but help someone spiritually.
- Lies that harm no one and that protect someone from some form of defilement.

Augustine concludes that all lies are sinful, no matter how severe or beneficial their effects. They are unethical and impermissible. Not until Eco had Augustine's particular purview on how lies affect behavior been contemplated by semioticians. A lie, in fact, can be recast as a fabrication, an invention, a piece of fiction, a falsification—all features that are present in the current era of political populism. As Eco put it, a lie is itself a sign function: "Every time there is possibility of lying there is a sign function; which is to signify (and then to communicate) something to which no real state of things corresponds. The possibility of lying is the proprium of semiosis."[9] People lie all the time, often to avoid negative outcomes or to gain some advantage. Moreover, people typically tend to ignore the signs of lying when speaking with others. As psychologist Ken Ashwell observes:[10]

> Often lies go undetected because we do not attempt to detect them, a phenomenon dubbed the "ostrich effect" by psychologist Aldert Vrij. It may reflect the emotional cost of recognizing and dealing with lies—in other words, people do not always want to hear the truth.

Given the power of mendacious memes to influence outcomes, from elections to choices in friends and dates, at no time like the present has semiotics emerged as an important—indeed critical—science. By unmasking something as purposefully mendacious we can hopefully instill or restore truth in the world. The analysis of the ad with which we started this chapter is an example of how to approach and unmask what is essentially a lie—the promise of attractiveness through a cologne. Eco was right after all—the study of lying is the study of semiosis.

Of Cigarettes and High Heels, Again

My purpose in this book has been to illustrate what a semiotic study of everyday life would entail, what things it would focus on, and what insights it might provide into the human condition. My treatment has left out many of the technical details of semiotic analysis, and many of the debates (such as

structuralism versus post-structuralism), which inform its current practice. My objective has been simply to show how "interesting" the study of meaning can be and how many areas of human activity it embraces. My underlying premise has been that there is an innate tendency in all human beings to search for, and to make, meaning in the world. The task of the semiotician is to look everywhere for the signs that render this tendency manifest. My hope is that this excursus into semiotic analysis has engendered in readers an inquisitive frame of mind with which to view their own society up close, unimpeded by habits of thought. In a fundamental sense, semiotics is a dialectic exercise in *knowing oneself.*

I contrived my presentation of the subject matter of semiotics around an imaginary courtship display. The gestures, bodily postures, dialogue, and other features that characterize such a display testify to the fact that humans carry out their everyday life schemes with a skillful deployment of signs. This display also testifies to the fact that we live our lives like characters in a play, constantly rehearsing, acting out, and at times changing our social roles. Semiotics catalogues the features of the play's unconscious script. Our imaginary scene occurs in bars, restaurants, and cafés throughout American society. I must emphasize that the characters in my vignette, Cheryl and Ted, are prototypical characters. Changing their ages, race, ethnicity, or adapting the lifestyle codes they deployed in the vignette to meet contemporary standards will not change the basic message of this book. On the contrary, it will confirm one of its themes: that semiotic codes are dynamic, flexible sign systems, adaptable to the whims of individuals and entire societies.

The overarching theme of this book has been that systems of everyday life provide networks of shared meanings that define human cultures. Such networks have come about in our species, arguably, to make possible the formulation of answers to the basic metaphysical questions that haunt humans everywhere: Why are we here? Who or what put us here? What, if anything, can be done about it? Who am I? As philosopher Johan Huizinga has put it, these questions constitute the psychic foundations of cultural systems: "In God, nothing is empty of sense; so, the conviction of a transcendental meaning in all things seeks to formulate itself."[11] The goal of semiotics is, ultimately, to unravel how culture guides the human search for larger meaning and, thus, how it influences the ways in which people think and act. By seeing the answers of any one culture to the questions of existence as tied to a meaning network, semiotics provides a strong form of intellectual immunization against accepting those answers as the only ones that can be devised. It also encourages acceptance of the "Other," which in a troubled world has become a critical necessity.

Carl Jung, the great Swiss psychoanalyst, was fond of recounting how culture had the power to affect even what one sees. During a visit to an island tribal culture that had never been exposed to illustrated magazines, he found that the people of that culture were unable to recognize the photographs in the magazines as visual representations of human beings. To his amazement, he discovered that the islanders perceived them, rather, as smudges on a surface. Jung understood perfectly well, however, that their interpretation of the photographs was not due to defects of intelligence or eyesight; on the contrary, the tribal members were clear-sighted and highly intelligent hunters. Jung understood that their primary assumptions were different from his own, and from those of individuals living in cultures where magazines were common, because they had acquired a different form of semiosis that blocked them from perceiving the pictures as visual signs.

Overall, I have attempted to argue and show that the thoughts and actions of human beings are shaped by forces other than the instincts. The most powerful argument against reductionist theories of humanity is the fact that humans can change anything they want, even the theories they devise to explain themselves. This is made possible by the human imagination—the creative force behind the great works of art, the great scientific discoveries, the profound ideas contemplated by philosophers, and, of course, cultural change. There is no way to explain the human condition. We can, of course, develop philosophies, mythical narratives, or scientific theories to explain it, but these are of our own making. The twentieth-century poet T. S. Eliot argued that knowledge of who we are starts with understanding the past, with comprehending the historical forces that have made us what we are today.

Semiotics attempts to make good on Eliot's idea. We can know ourselves today only by knowing how we got here. The history of cigarettes, of words, of names, of rituals, of art works, tells us where our search for meaning has led. History is nothing if not a record of our search for meaning. Hopefully, this book has shed some light on how we search for it, and why we will continue to do so.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957).
2. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957) and *Système de la mode* (Paris: Seuil, 1967).
3. Cited in Marcel Danesi, *Interpreting advertisements: A semiotic guide* (Ottawa: Legas Press, 1995), 16.

4. Vance Packard, *The hidden persuaders* (New York: McKay, 1957).
5. Brian Wilson Key, *The age of manipulation* (New York: Henry Holt, 1989), 13.
6. This opinion is based primarily on my own experience with advertisers and marketers as a consultant on the meanings that their ads generate and on the kinds of reactions that subjects have to them. This experience has given me a behind-the-scenes look at the whole advertising and marketing business.
7. The concept of cooption was formulated by Thomas Frank, *The conquest of cool: Business culture, counterculture, and the rise of hip consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
8. William Leiss, Stephen Kline, Sut Jhally, and Jacqueline Botterill, *Social communication in advertising: Consumption in the mediated marketplace,* 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 286.
9. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 58.
10. Ken Ashwell, *The brain book*. (Buffalo: Firefly, 2012), 211.
11. Johan Huizinga, *The waning of the Medieval Ages* (Garden City, Conn.: Doubleday, 1924), 202.

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

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