

DANIEL CHANDLER

SEMIOTICS FOR BEGINNERS

INTRODUCTION

If you go into a bookshop and ask them where to find a book on semiotics you are likely to meet with a blank look. Even worse, you might be asked to define what semiotics is - which would be a bit tricky if you were looking for a beginner's guide. It's worse still if you do know a bit about semiotics, because it can be hard to offer a simple definition which is of much use in the bookshop. If you've ever been in such a situation, you'll probably agree that it's wise not to ask. Semiotics could be anywhere. The shortest definition is that it is the study of signs. But that doesn't leave enquirers much wiser. 'What do you mean by a sign?' people usually ask next. The kinds of signs that are likely to spring immediately to mind are those which we routinely refer to as 'signs' in everyday life, such as road signs, pub signs and star signs. If you were to agree with them that semiotics can include the study of all these and more, people will probably assume that semiotics is about 'visual signs'. You would confirm their hunch if you said that signs can also be drawings, paintings and photographs, and by now they'd be keen to direct you to the art and photography sections.

But if you are thick-skinned and tell them that it also includes words, sounds and 'body language' they may reasonably wonder what all these things have in common and how anyone could possibly study such disparate phenomena. If you get this far they've probably already 'read the signs' which suggest that you are either eccentric or insane and communication may have ceased. Assuming that you are not one of those annoying people who keeps everyone waiting with your awkward question, if you are searching for books on semiotics you could do worse than by starting off in the linguistics section. It is... possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it semiology (from the Greek *semeion*, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge. (Saussure 1983, 15-16; Saussure 1974, 16)

Thus wrote the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a founder not only of linguistics but also of what is now more usually referred to as semiotics (in his *Course in General Linguistics*, 1916). Other than Saussure (the usual abbreviation), key figures in the early development of semiotics were the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (sic, pronounced 'purse') (1839-1914) and later Charles William Morris (1901-1979), who developed a behaviourist semiotics. Leading modern semiotic theorists include Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Algirdas Greimas (1917-1992), Yuri Lotman (1922-1993), Christian Metz (1931-1993), Umberto Eco (b 1932) and Julia Kristeva (b 1941). A number of linguists other than Saussure have worked within a semiotic framework, such as Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1966) and Roman Jakobson (1896-1982). It is difficult to disentangle European semiotics from structuralism in its origins; major structuralists include not only Saussure but also Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908) in anthropology (who saw his subject as a branch of semiotics) and Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) in psychoanalysis. Structuralism is an analytical method which has been employed by many semioticians and which is based on Saussure's linguistic model.

Structuralists seek to describe the overall organization of sign systems as 'languages' - as with Lévi-Strauss and myth, kinship rules and totemism, Lacan and the unconscious and Barthes and Greimas and the 'grammar' of narrative. They engage in a search for 'deep structures' underlying the 'surface features' of phenomena. However, contemporary social semiotics has moved beyond the structuralist concern with the internal relations of parts within a self-contained system, seeking to explore the use of signs in specific social situations. Modern semiotic theory is also sometimes allied with a Marxist approach which stresses the role of ideology.

Semiotics began to become a major approach to cultural studies in the late 1960s, partly as a result of the work of Roland Barthes. The translation into English of his popular essays in a collection entitled *Mythologies* (Barthes 1957), followed in the 1970s and 1980s by many of his other writings, greatly increased scholarly awareness of this approach. Writing in 1964, Barthes declared that 'semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification' (Barthes 1967, 9). The adoption of semiotics in Britain was influenced by its prominence in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham whilst the centre was under the direction of the neo-Marxist sociologist Stuart Hall (director 1969- 79). Although semiotics may be less central now within cultural and media studies (at least in its earlier, more structuralist form), it remains essential for anyone in the field to understand it. What individual scholars have to assess, of course, is whether and how semiotics may be useful in shedding light on any aspect of their concerns. Note that Saussure's term, 'semiology' is sometimes used to refer to the Saussurean tradition, whilst 'semiotics' sometimes refers to the Peircean tradition, but that nowadays the term 'semiotics' is more likely to be used as an umbrella term to embrace the whole field (Nöth 1990, 14).

Semiotics is not widely institutionalized as an academic discipline. It is a field of study involving many different theoretical stances and methodological tools. One of the broadest definitions is that of Umberto Eco, who states that 'semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign' (Eco 1976, 7). Semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday speech, but of anything which 'stands for' something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Whilst for the linguist Saussure, 'semiology' was 'a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life', for the philosopher Charles Peirce 'semiotic' was the 'formal doctrine of signs' which was closely related to Logic (Peirce 1931-58, 2.227). For him, 'a sign... is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity' (Peirce 1931-58, 2.228). He declared that 'every thought is a sign' (Peirce 1931-58, 1.538; cf. 5.250ff, 5.283ff). Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as part of semiotic 'sign systems' (such as a medium or genre). They study how meanings are made: as such, being concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality. Semiotics and that branch of linguistics known as semantics have a common concern with the meaning of signs, but John Sturrock argues that whereas semantics focuses on what words mean, semiotics is concerned with how signs mean (Sturrock 1986, 22).

For C W Morris (deriving this threefold classification from Peirce), semiotics embraced semantics, along with the other traditional branches of linguistics:

- semantics: the relationship of signs to what they stand for;
- syntactics (or syntax): the formal or structural relations between signs;
- pragmatics: the relation of signs to interpreters (Morris 1938, 6-7).

Semiotics is often employed in the analysis of texts (although it is far more than just a mode of textual analysis). Here it should perhaps be noted that a 'text' can exist in any medium and may be verbal, non-verbal, or both, despite the logocentric bias of this distinction. The term text usually refers to a message which has been recorded in some way (e.g. writing, audio- and videorecording) so that it is physically independent of its sender or receiver. A text is an assemblage of signs (such as words, images, sounds and/or gestures) constructed (and interpreted) with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication.

The term 'medium' is used in a variety of ways by different theorists, and may include such broad categories as speech and writing or print and broadcasting or relate to specific technical forms within the mass media (radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, photographs, films and records) or the media of interpersonal communication (telephone, letter, fax, e-mail, video-conferencing, computer-based chat systems). Some theorists classify media according to the 'channels' involved (visual, auditory, tactile and so on) (Nöth 1995, 175). Human experience is inherently multisensory, and every representation of experience is subject to the constraints and affordances of the medium involved. Every medium is constrained by the channels which it utilizes. For instance, even in the very flexible medium of language 'words fail us' in attempting to represent some experiences, and we have no way at all of representing smell or touch with conventional media. Different media and genres provide different frameworks for representing experience, facilitating some forms of expression and inhibiting others. The differences between media lead Emile Benveniste to argue that the 'first principle' of semiotic systems is that they are not 'synonymous': 'we are not able to say "the same thing"' in systems based on different units (in Innis 1986, 235) in contrast to Hjelmslev, who asserted that 'in practice, language is a semiotic into which all other semiotics may be translated' (cited in Genosko 1994, 62).

The everyday use of a medium by someone who knows how to use it typically passes unquestioned as unproblematic and 'neutral': this is hardly surprising since media evolve as a means of accomplishing purposes in which they are usually intended to be incidental. And the more frequently and fluently a medium is used, the more 'transparent' or 'invisible' to its users it tends to become. For most routine purposes, awareness of a medium may hamper its effectiveness as a means to an end. Indeed, it is typically when the medium acquires transparency that its potential to fulfil its primary function is greatest.

The selectivity of any medium leads to its use having influences of which the user may not always be conscious, and which may not have been part of the purpose in using it. We can be so familiar with the medium that we are 'anaesthetized' to the mediation it involves: we 'don't know what we're missing'.

Insofar as we are numbed to the processes involved we cannot be said to be exercising 'choices' in its use. In this way the means we use may modify our ends. Amongst the phenomena enhanced or reduced by media selectivity are the ends for which a medium was used. In some cases, our 'purposes' may be subtly (and perhaps invisibly), redefined by our use of a particular medium. This is the opposite of the pragmatic and rationalistic stance, according to which the means are chosen to suit the user's ends, and are entirely under the user's control.

An awareness of this phenomenon of transformation by media has often led media theorists to argue deterministically that our technical means and systems always and inevitably become 'ends in themselves' (a common interpretation of Marshall McLuhan's famous aphorism, 'the medium is the message'), and has even led some to present media as wholly autonomous entities with 'purposes' (as opposed to functions) of their own. However, one need not adopt such extreme stances in acknowledging the transformations involved in processes of mediation. When we use a medium for any purpose, its use becomes part of that purpose. Travelling is an unavoidable part of getting somewhere; it may even become a primary goal. Travelling by one particular method of transport rather than another is part of the experience. So too with writing rather than speaking, or using a word processor rather than a pen. In using any medium, to some extent we serve its 'purposes' as well as it serving ours. When we engage with media we both act and are acted upon, use and are used. Where a medium has a variety of functions it may be impossible to choose to use it for only one of these functions in isolation. The making of meanings with such media must involve some degree of compromise. Complete identity between any specific purpose and the functionality of a medium is likely to be rare, although the degree of match may on most occasions be accepted as adequate.

I am reminded here of an observation by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss that in the case of what he called bricolage, the process of creating something is not a matter of the calculated choice and use of whatever materials are technically best-adapted to a clearly predetermined purpose, but rather it involves a 'dialogue with the materials and means of execution' (Lévi-Strauss 1974, 29). In such a dialogue, the materials which are ready-to-hand may (as we say) 'suggest' adaptive courses of action, and the initial aim may be modified. Consequently, such acts of creation are not purely instrumental: the bricoleur "'speaks" not only with things... but also through the medium of things' (ibid., 21): the use of the medium can be expressive. The context of Lévi-Strauss's point was a discussion of 'mythical thought', but I would argue that bricolage can be involved in the use of any medium, for any purpose. The act of writing, for instance, may be shaped not only by the writer's conscious purposes but also by features of the media involved - such as the kind of language and writing tools used - as well as by the social and psychological processes of mediation involved. Any 'resistance' offered by the writer's materials can be an intrinsic part of the process of writing. However, not every writer acts or feels like a bricoleur. Individuals differ strikingly in their responses to the notion of media transformation. They range from those who insist that they are in total control of the media which they 'use' to those who experience a profound sense of being shaped by the media which 'use' them (Chandler 1995).

Norman Fairclough comments on the importance of the differences between the various mass media in the channels and technologies they draw upon.

The press uses a visual channel, its language is written, and it draws upon technologies of photographic reproduction, graphic design, and printing. Radio, by contrast, uses an oral channel and spoken language and relies on technologies of sound recording and broadcasting, whilst television combines technologies of sound and image-recording and broadcasting...

These differences in channel and technology have significant wider implications in terms of the meaning potential of the different media. For instance, print is in an important sense less personal than radio or television. Radio begins to allow individuality and personality to be foregrounded through transmitting individual qualities of voice. Television takes the process much further by making people visually available, and not in the frozen modality of newspaper photographs, but in movement and action. (Fairclough 1995, 38-9)

Whilst technological determinists emphasize that semiotic ecologies are influenced by the fundamental design features of different media, it is important to recognize the importance of socio-cultural and historical factors in shaping how different media are used and their (ever-shifting) status within particular cultural contexts. For instance, many contemporary cultural theorists have remarked on the growth of the importance of visual media compared with linguistic media in contemporary society and the associated shifts in the communicative functions of such media. Thinking in 'ecological' terms about the interaction of different semiotic structures and languages led the Russian cultural semiotician Yuri Lotman to coin the term 'semiosphere' to refer to 'the whole semiotic space of the culture in question' (Lotman 1990, 124-125). The concept is related to ecologists' references to 'the biosphere' and perhaps to cultural theorists' references to the public and private spheres, but most reminiscent of Teilhard de Chardin's notion (dating back to 1949) of the 'noosphere' - the domain in which mind is exercised. Whilst Lotman referred to such semiospheres as governing the functioning of languages within cultures, John Hartley comments that 'there is more than one level at which one might identify a semiosphere - at the level of a single national or linguistic culture, for instance, or of a larger unity such as "the West", right up to "the species"'; we might similarly characterize the semiosphere of a particular historical period (Hartley 1996, 106). This conception of a semiosphere may make semioticians seem territorially imperialistic to their critics, but it offers a more unified and dynamic vision of semiosis than the study of a specific medium as if each existed in a vacuum.

There are, of course, other approaches to textual analysis apart from semiotics - notably rhetorical analysis, discourse analysis and 'content analysis'. In the field of media and communication studies content analysis is a prominent rival to semiotics as a method of textual analysis. Whereas semiotics is now closely associated with cultural studies, content analysis is well-established within the mainstream tradition of social science research. Whilst content analysis involves a quantitative approach to the analysis of the manifest 'content' of media texts, semiotics seeks to analyse media texts as structured wholes and investigates latent, connotative meanings. Semiotics is rarely quantitative, and often involves a rejection of such approaches. Just because an item occurs frequently in a text does not make it significant. The structuralist semiotician is

more concerned with the relation of elements to each other. A social semiotician would also emphasize the importance of the significance which readers attach to the signs within a text. Whereas content analysis focuses on explicit content and tends to suggest that this represents a single, fixed meaning, semiotic studies focus on the system of rules governing the 'discourse' involved in media texts, stressing the role of semiotic context in shaping meaning. However, some researchers have combined semiotic analysis and content analysis (e.g. Glasgow University Media Group 1980; Leiss et al. 1990; McQuarrie & Mick 1992).

Some commentators adopt C W Morris's definition of semiotics (in the spirit of Saussure) as 'the science of signs' (Morris 1938, 1-2). The term 'science' is misleading. As yet semiotics involves no widely-agreed theoretical assumptions, models or empirical methodologies. Semiotics has tended to be largely theoretical, many of its theorists seeking to establish its scope and general principles. Peirce and Saussure, for instance, were both concerned with the fundamental definition of the sign. Peirce developed elaborate logical taxonomies of types of signs. Subsequent semioticians have sought to identify and categorize the codes or conventions according to which signs are organized. Clearly there is a need to establish a firm theoretical foundation for a subject which is currently characterized by a host of competing theoretical assumptions. As for methodologies, Saussure's theories constituted a starting point for the development of various structuralist methodologies for analysing texts and social practices. These have been very widely employed in the analysis of a host of cultural phenomena. However, such methods are not universally accepted: socially-oriented theorists have criticized their exclusive focus on structure, and no alternative methodologies have as yet been widely adopted. Some semiotic research is empirically-oriented, applying and testing semiotic principles. Bob Hodge and David Tripp employed empirical methods in their classic study of Children and Television (Hodge & Tripp 1986). But there is at present little sense of semiotics as a unified enterprise building on cumulative research findings.

Semiotics represents a range of studies in art, literature, anthropology and the mass media rather than an independent academic discipline. Those involved in semiotics include linguists, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, literary, aesthetic and media theorists, psychoanalysts and educationalists. Beyond the most basic definition, there is considerable variation amongst leading semioticians as to what semiotics involves. It is not only concerned with (intentional) communication but also with our ascription of significance to anything in the world. Semiotics has changed over time, since semioticians have sought to remedy weaknesses in early semiotic approaches. Even with the most basic semiotic terms there are multiple definitions. Consequently, anyone attempting semiotic analysis would be wise to make clear which definitions are being applied and, if a particular semiotician's approach is being adopted, what its source is. There are two divergent traditions in semiotics stemming respectively from Saussure and Peirce. The work of Louis Hjelmslev, Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Julia Kristeva, Christian Metz and Jean Baudrillard (b 1929) follows in the 'semiological' tradition of Saussure whilst that of Charles W Morris, Ivor A Richards (1893-1979), Charles K Ogden (1989-1957) and Thomas Sebeok (b 1920) is in the 'semiotic' tradition of Peirce. The leading semiotician bridging these two traditions is the celebrated Italian author Umberto Eco, who as the author of the bestseller *The Name of the Rose* (novel 1980, film 1986) is probably the only semiotician whose film rights are of any value (Eco 1980).

Saussure argued that 'nothing is more appropriate than the study of languages to bring out the nature of the semiological problem' (Saussure 1983, 16; Saussure 1974, 16). Semiotics draws heavily on linguistic concepts, partly because of the influence of Saussure and because linguistics is a more established discipline than the study of other sign systems. Structuralists adopted language as their model in exploring a much wider range of social phenomena: Lévi-Strauss for myth, kinship rules and totemism; Lacan for the unconscious; Barthes and Greimas for the 'grammar' of narrative. Julia Kristeva declared that 'what semiotics has discovered... is that the law governing or, if one prefers, the major constraint affecting any social practice lies in the fact that it signifies; i.e. that it is articulated like a language' (cited in Hawkes 1977, 125). Saussure referred to language (his model being speech) as 'the most important' of all of the systems of signs (Saussure 1983, 15; Saussure 1974, 16). Language is almost unvariably regarded as the most powerful communication system by far. For instance, Marvin Harris observes that 'human languages are unique among communication systems in possessing semantic universality... A communication system that has semantic universality can convey information about all aspects, domains, properties, places, or events in the past, present or future, whether actual or possible, real or imaginary' (cited in Wilden 1987, 138). Perhaps language is indeed fundamental: Emile Benveniste observed that 'language is the interpreting system of all other systems, linguistic and non-linguistic' (in Innis 1986, 239), whilst Claude Lévi-Strauss noted that 'language is the semiotic system par excellence; it cannot but signify, and exists only through signification' (Lévi-Strauss 1972, 48).

Saussure saw linguistics as a branch of 'semiology': Linguistics is only one branch of this general science [of semiology]. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics... As far as we are concerned... the linguistic problem is first and foremost semiological... If one wishes to discover the true nature of language systems, one must first consider what they have in common with all other systems of the same kind... In this way, light will be thrown not only upon the linguistic problem. By considering rites, customs etc. as signs, it will be possible, we believe, to see them in a new perspective. The need will be felt to consider them as semiological phenomena and to explain them in terms of the laws of semiology. (Saussure 1983, 16-17; Saussure 1974, 16-17)

Whilst Roland Barthes declared that 'perhaps we must invert Saussure's formulation and assert that semiology is a branch of linguistics', others have accepted Saussure's location of linguistics within semiotics (Barthes 1985, xi). Other than himself, Jean-Marie Floch instances Hjelmslev and Greimas (Floch 2000, 93). However, even if we theoretically locate linguistics within semiotics it is difficult to avoid adopting the linguistic model in exploring other sign systems. Semioticians commonly refer to films, television and radio programmes, advertising posters and so on as 'texts', and to 'reading television' (Fiske and Hartley 1978). Media such as television and film are regarded by some semioticians as being in some respects like 'languages'. The issue tends to revolve around whether film is closer to what we treat as 'reality' in the everyday world of our own experience or whether it has more in common with a symbolic system like writing. Some refer to the 'grammar' of media other than language. For James Monaco, 'film has no grammar', and he offers a useful critique of glib analogies between film techniques and the grammar of natural language (ibid., 129). There is a danger of trying to force all media into a linguistic framework.

With regard to photography (though one might say the same for film and television), Victor Burgin insists that: 'There is no 'language' of photography, no single signifying system (as opposed to technical apparatus) upon which all photographs depend (in the sense in which all texts in English depend upon the English language); there is, rather, a heterogeneous complex of codes upon which photography may draw' (Burgin 1982b, 143).

We will shortly examine Saussure's model of the sign, but before doing so it is important to understand something about the general framework within which he situated it. Saussure made what is now a famous distinction between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech). *Langue* refers to the system of rules and conventions which is independent of, and pre-exists, individual users; *parole* refers to its use in particular instances. Applying the notion to semiotic systems in general rather than simply to language, the distinction is one between code and message, structure and event or system and usage (in specific texts or contexts). According to the Saussurean distinction, in a semiotic system such as cinema, 'any specific film is the speech of that underlying system of cinema language' (Langholz Leymore 1975, 3). Saussure focused on *langue* rather than *parole*. To the traditional, Saussurean semiotician, what matters most are the underlying structures and rules of a semiotic system as a whole rather than specific performances or practices which are merely instances of its use. Saussure's approach was to study the system 'synchronically' if it were frozen in time (like a photograph) - rather than 'diachronically' - in terms of its evolution over time (like a film). Structuralist cultural theorists subsequently adopted this Saussurean priority, focusing on the functions of social and cultural phenomena within semiotic systems. Theorists differ over whether the system precedes and determines usage (structural determinism) or whether usage precedes and determines the system (social determinism) (although note that most structuralists argue that the system constrains rather than completely determines usage).

The structuralist dichotomy between usage and system has been criticized for its rigidity, splitting process from product, subject from structure (Coward & Ellis 1977, 4, 14). The prioritization of structure over usage fails to account for changes in structure. Marxist theorists have been particularly critical of this. In the late 1920s, Valentin Volosinov (1884/5-1936) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) criticized Saussure's synchronic approach and his emphasis on internal relations within the system of language (Voloshinov 1973; Morris 1994). Volosinov reversed the Saussurean priority of *langue* over *parole*: 'The sign is part of organized social intercourse and cannot exist, as such, outside it, reverting to a mere physical artifact' (Voloshinov 1973, 21). The meaning of a sign is not in its relationship to other signs within the language system but rather in the social context of its use. Saussure was criticized for ignoring historicity (ibid., 61). The Prague school linguists Roman Jakobson and Yuri Tynyanov declared in 1927 that 'pure synchronism now proves to be an illusion', adding that 'every synchronic system has its past and its future as inseparable structural elements of the system' (cited in Voloshinov 1973, 166). Writing in 1929, Volosinov observed that 'there is no real moment in time when a synchronic system of language could be constructed... A synchronic system may be said to exist only from the point of view of the subjective consciousness of an individual speaker belonging to some particular language group at some particular moment of historical time' (Voloshinov 1973, 66).

Whilst the French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss applied a synchronic approach in the domain of anthropology, most contemporary semioticians have sought to reprioritize historicity and social context. Language is seldom treated as a static, closed and stable system which is inherited from preceding generations but as constantly changing. The sign, as Voloshinov put it, is 'an arena of the class struggle' (ibid., 23). Seeking to establish a wholeheartedly 'social semiotics', Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress declare that 'the social dimensions of semiotic systems are so intrinsic to their nature and function that the systems cannot be studied in isolation' (Hodge & Kress 1988, 1).

Whilst Saussure may be hailed as a founder of semiotics, semiotics has become increasingly less Saussurean. Teresa de Lauretis describes the movement away from structuralist semiotics which began in the 1970s: In the last decade or so, semiotics has undergone a shift of its theoretical gears: a shift away from the classification of sign systems - their basic units, their levels of structural organization - and towards the exploration of the modes of production of signs and meanings, the ways in which systems and codes are used, transformed or transgressed in social practice. While formerly the emphasis was on studying sign systems (language, literature, cinema, architecture, music, etc.), conceived of as mechanisms that generate messages, what is now being examined is the work performed through them. It is this work or activity which constitutes and/or transforms the codes, at the same time as it constitutes and transforms the individuals using the codes, performing the work; the individuals who are, therefore, the subjects of semiosis.

'Semiosis', a term borrowed from Charles Sanders Peirce, is expanded by Eco to designate the process by which a culture produces signs and/or attributes meaning to signs. Although for Eco meaning production or semiosis is a social activity, he allows that subjective factors are involved in each individual act of semiosis. The notion then might be pertinent to the two main emphases of current, or poststructuralist, semiotic theory. One is a semiotics focused on the subjective aspects of signification and strongly influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, where meaning is construed as a subject-effect (the subject being an effect of the signifier). The other is a semiotics concerned to stress the social aspect of signification, its practical, aesthetic, or ideological use in interpersonal communication; there, meaning is construed as semantic value produced through culturally shared codes. (de Lauretis 1984, 167)

This text outlines some of the key concepts in semiotics, together with relevant critiques, beginning with the most fundamental concept of the sign itself. I hope it will prove to be a useful companion to the reader in finding their own path through the subject. But before launching on an exploration of this intriguing but demanding subject let us consider why we should bother: why should we study semiotics? This is a pressing question in part because the writings of semioticians have a reputation for being dense with jargon: Justin Lewis notes that 'its advocates have written in a style that ranges from the obscure to the incomprehensible' (Lewis 1991, 25); another critic wittily remarked that 'semiotics tells us things we already know in a language we will never understand' (Paddy Whannel, cited in Seiter 1992, 1). The semiotic establishment is a very exclusive club but, as David Sless remarks, 'semiotics is far too important an enterprise to be left to semioticians' (Sless 1986, 1).

Semiotics is important because it can help us not to take 'reality' for granted as something having a purely objective existence which is independent of human interpretation. It teaches us that reality is a system of signs. Studying semiotics can assist us to become more aware of reality as a construction and of the roles played by ourselves and others in constructing it. It can help us to realize that information or meaning is not 'contained' in the world or in books, computers or audio-visual media. Meaning is not 'transmitted' to us - we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware. Becoming aware of such codes is both inherently fascinating and intellectually empowering. We learn from semiotics that we live in a world of signs and we have no way of understanding anything except through signs and the codes into which they are organized. Through the study of semiotics we become aware that these signs and codes are normally transparent and disguise our task in 'reading' them. Living in a world of increasingly visual signs, we need to learn that even the most 'realistic' signs are not what they appear to be. By making more explicit the codes by which signs are interpreted we may perform the valuable semiotic function of 'denaturalizing' signs. In defining realities signs serve ideological functions. Deconstructing and contesting the realities of signs can reveal whose realities are privileged and whose are suppressed. The study of signs is the study of the construction and maintenance of reality. To decline such a study is to leave to others the control of the world of meanings which we inhabit.