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## Signs and myths

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### The semiotic point of view

Semiotics originates mainly in the work of two people, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Charles Peirce. Their ideas are quite closely related, but exhibit some differences, so I am going to explain some of their major insights separately in this chapter, and then indicate the kind of synthesis between them which is referred to as simply 'semiotics' in this book. Saussure was an academic who taught linguistics at the University of Geneva in the early twentieth century. His *Course in General Linguistics* was published in French in 1915, three years after his death. Saussure's book is a reconstruction of a series of lectures that he gave on language, assembled from the notes taken by his students and things discovered by his colleagues. The book explains his groundbreaking view of language, and was a major contribution to the discipline of linguistics. But Saussure viewed linguistics as only one part (though a privileged part) of a much broader science which he predicted would one day exist, a science which he called semiology. Both semiology and semiotics get their names from the Greek word *semeion*, which means sign, and they both refer to the study of how signs communicate meanings. Semiotics is now the more common name for this kind of study. Saussure showed that language is made up of signs (like words) which communicate meanings, and he expected that all kinds of other things which communicate meanings could potentially be studied in the same way as linguistic signs, using the same methods of analysis.

Semiotics or semiology, then, is the study of signs in society, and while the study of linguistic signs is one branch of it, it

encompasses every use of a system where something (the sign) carries a meaning for someone. Much of this book is concerned with the semiotic analysis of language, but much of it is also concerned with non-linguistic things (like photographs, for instance) which carry meanings for someone. The same semiotic approach can be used to discuss language-based media and image-based media, because in either case we find signs which carry meanings. Since language is the most fundamental and pervasive medium for human communication, semiotics takes the way that language works as the model for all other media of communication, all other sign systems. That is the way in which this book proceeds: explaining some of semiotics' insights into how language works, and expanding this semiotic method to other media in society.

It is usual to assume that words and other kinds of sign are secondary to our perception and understanding of reality. It seems that reality is out there all around us, and language usefully names real things and the relationships between them. So, for example, the world contains lots of very young people, and language provides the word 'children' to identify them. But by contrast, Saussure proposed that our perception and understanding of reality is constructed by the words and other signs which we use. From Saussure's semiotic perspective, the sign 'children' enables us to think of these very young people as a group who are distinct from 'adults', and who share common features. But different social groups, at different places around the world, at different times in history, have used the distinction between 'children' and 'adults' in different ways. Being referred to as a 'child' might have to do with age, legal status, religious status, physical ability, or many other things. Culture and society decide what the sign 'child' means, rather than nature or biology. What makes the sign 'child' meaningful to us is the distinction between 'child' and 'adult', according to the conventions which are normal in our culture.

At the same time as language and sign systems shape our reality, they are also media in which to communicate about this reality. A system of signs which works in this way has to be thought of as a medium in a more extended sense than the way that a medium is conventionally thought of. A medium is convention-

ally something which acts as a channel, passing something from one place to another. For example, sound is passed to our ears through the medium of air, and electricity travels to our homes through the medium of electrical cable. But if language and other sign systems are not simply channels, if they give form and meaning to thought and experience instead of just naming what was already there, then there is nothing which exists before signs and media communicate thought and experience. Rather than thinking of signs and media as channels which translate pre-existing thought and reality into communicable form, signs and media are the only means of access to thought or reality which we have.

This is one reason why Saussure's work is so important. Although Saussure never made this leap, his semiotic method, showing how we are surrounded by and shaped by sign systems, leads to the realisation that consciousness and experience are built out of language and the other sign systems circulating in society that have existed before we take them up and use them. Language was already there before we were born, and all of our lives are lived through the signs which language gives us to think, speak, and write with. All of our thought and experience, our very sense of our own identity, depends on the systems of signs already existing in society which give form and meaning to consciousness and reality. Semiotics reminds us, for example, that it is language which enables us to refer uniquely to ourselves by giving us the sign 'I', and that language gives us the words which divide up our reality in meaningful ways.

We shall be returning to these complex ideas about the self and reality later in this book, and testing them out in relation to some concrete examples. But perhaps it is already evident at this stage that thinking about signs, media and meaning in semiotic terms will have large implications for the ways in which the self, identity, reality, and society are understood. Before getting too carried away by the general thrust of these ideas, we need to be specific about how Saussure's view of language works. In doing this, some of the recurring semiotic terminology used later in this book can be explained, and we can also move from thinking mainly about language to considering visual signs with the help of some ideas developed by the American philosopher Charles Peirce.

### Sign systems

Saussure's first move was to set limits to the variety of tasks which his study of language might involve. Instead of considering language from a psychological, sociological or physiological point of view, he decided to focus on a clearly defined object of study: the linguistic sign. He showed that the linguistic sign is arbitrary. The linguistic sign 'cat' is arbitrary in that it has no connection either in its sound, or its visual shape, with what cats are really like. In another language, the sign for cat will be different from the linguistic sign in English (e.g. French uses *chat*). Clearly, there must be a kind of agreement among the users of our language that the sign 'cat' shall refer to a particular group of furry four-legged animals. But this agreement about signs is not consciously entered into, since we learn how to use language so early in our lives that there can be no deliberate choice available to us. Language has always been there before we arrived on the scene. Even if I perversely decided to adopt another sign for what we call a cat, like 'yarup' for instance, this sign would be entirely useless since no-one else would understand me. The capacity of linguistic signs to be meaningful depends on their existence in a social context, and on their conventionally accepted use in that social context.

Each linguistic sign has a place in the whole system of language (in Saussure's original French, *langue*), and any example of actual speech or writing (in French, *parole*) uses some particular elements from the system. This distinction is the same as that between, for instance, the system of rules and conventions called chess, and the particular moves made in an actual game of chess. Each individual move in chess is selected from the whole system of possible chess moves. So we could call the system of possible chess moves the *langue* of chess. Any individual move in a game of chess would be *parole*, the selection of a move from the whole set of possible moves allowed in the *langue* of chess.

The same distinction can be made about language. In English, there is a huge range of meaningful utterances which a speaker (or writer) can make. In order for an utterance to be meaningful, it has to conform to the system of rules in the English language. The whole system of rules governing which utterances

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are possible is the *langue* of English, and any utterance that is actually made is an example of *parole*. *Langue* is the structure of rules which can be partially glimpsed in any concrete example of *parole*. The linguistic signs of *parole* are only meaningful if they are used in accordance with the rules of *langue*. The first two important ideas from Saussure then are that first, linguistic signs are arbitrary and agreed by convention, and second that language is a system governed by rules, where each instance of speech or writing involves selecting signs and using them according to these rules.

Each sign in *langue* acquires its value by virtue of its difference from all the other signs in *langue*, the language system. We recognise the sign 'cat' by its difference in sound and in written letters from 'bat' or 'cap' or 'cot' or 'top', for example. Saussure described language as a system which has no positive terms, and by this he meant that signs have no special right to mean something in particular and not something else. Instead, signs acquire their potential meaningfulness by contrasting themselves with what they are not. 'Cat' is not 'bat' or 'cot'. So language is a system of differences between one sign and all others, where the difference between one sign and the others allows distinctions of meaning to be made. At any point in time it is the difference of one sign from all other existing signs which allows that sign to work. So no sign can have meaning except inasmuch as it is differentiated from the other signs in *langue*. 'Cat' works as a sign by being different from 'bat', rather than by any internal property of the sign 'cat' itself.

Written or spoken languages are only one example of what Saussure believed to be the feature which characterises the human animal: that we make use of structures of signs which communicate meanings for us. Just as language can be investigated to discover how *langue* is structured as a system, allowing us to communicate with linguistic signs, the same kind of investigation can be carried out on any medium in which meanings are generated by a system of signs. Saussure's linguistics shows the way in which semiotics operates, by seeking to understand the system of *langue* which underlies all the particular instances of *parole* in a signifying system. Semioticians search for the systems which underlie the ability of signs like words, images, items

of clothing, foods, cars, or whatever to carry certain meanings in society.

The systems in which signs are organised into groups are called codes. This is a familiar term, for instance in the phrase 'dress codes'. In our society, the dress code that governs what men should wear when going to a formal wedding includes items like a top hat and a tail jacket. These items of clothing are signs which can be selected from the almost infinite *langue* of male clothing, from the code of male formal dress, and they communicate a coded message of 'formality'. By contrast, a man might select jogging shorts, training shoes and a baseball cap to go to the local gym. These clothing signs belong to a different dress code, and communicate a message of 'informality'. In the case of dress codes, it is possible to select the clothing signs which we use in order to communicate particular messages about ourselves. Even when clothes perform practical functions (like the loose and light clothes worn to play sports) codes still give social meanings to our choices, like codes of fashionableness and codes governing what men may wear versus what women may wear. In the same way, there are linguistic codes within the whole system of *langue*, which divide language up just as clothes are divided up into coded sets of signs. There are linguistic codes appropriate for talking to babies, talking to royalty, writing job applications, or writing love poems.

The message conveyed by linguistic signs often has much to do with how they can be used as part of coded ways of speaking or writing. Similarly, a television sequence of a newscaster behind a desk is a message which gains its authority by drawing on recognisable codes, while different codes constrain the way we might interpret a sequence showing cowboys shooting at each other on the main street of a western town. As we begin to address different kinds of sign in different media, the concept of a code becomes very useful in dividing signs into groups, and working out how the meaning of signs depends on their membership of codes. Individual signs become meaningful because of their difference from all other signs. But the role of signs as members of code groupings means that many signs are heavily loaded with a significance which comes from the code in which they are used.

### Components of the sign

Saussure drew a distinction between the evolution of linguistic signs through time, called 'diachronic' linguistics, and the study of signs existing at a given point in time, called 'synchronic' linguistics. From a diachronic point of view, we might investigate the way that a particular sign like 'thou' used to be used in ordinary language but is now used only in religious contexts. But from a synchronic point of view, it is the place of 'thou' in our own historical moment that is of interest, not how it has gained its current role in our language. The linguists who preceded Saussure had concentrated on diachrony, the development of language over time, and Saussure argued that this approach was useless for giving us an understanding of how language works for the people who actually use it. For a community of language users, it is the system and structure of the current language, *langue*, which makes articulation meaningful, and not the history of how signs have come to take the form they have now. His emphasis on synchrony enabled him to show how signs work as part of a structure that is in place at a given point in time. The same emphasis on synchronic analysis works for any other communication method where signs contrast one with another. For instance, denim jeans used to be work-clothes, and were clothing signs in a code of clothes for manual labour. Today, jeans are a sign whose meaning is 'casual style' or 'youthfulness', signs belonging to a style code of everyday dress in contrast to suit trousers, which signify 'formality' and belong to a different dress code. The coded meaning of jeans depends much more on their relationship with, and difference from, other coded signs in the clothing system today, rather than their meaning depending on the history of jeans. Synchronic analysis reveals more about the contemporary meaning of jeans than diachronic analysis.

In his analysis of linguistic signs, Saussure showed that there are two components to every sign. One is the vehicle which expresses the sign, like a pattern of sound which makes up a word, or the marks on paper which we read as words, or the pattern of shapes and colours which photographs use to represent an object or person. This vehicle which exists in the material world is called the 'signified'. The other part of the sign is called

the 'signified'. The signified is the concept which the signifier calls forth when we perceive it. So when you perceive the sign 'cat' written on this page, you perceive a group of marks, the letters c, a, and t, which are the signifier. This signifier is the vehicle which immediately calls up the signified or concept of cat in your mind. The sign is the inseparable unity of the signifier with the signified, since in fact we never have one without the other.

This stage of the explanation of the sign says nothing about any real cat out there in reality: the sign cat is made up of two entities, signifier and signified, which are joined together in the minds of language users. The sign cat does not refer to any particular cat, but to a mental concept. It is perfectly possible to use a sign, like 'God', which does not relate to any observable thing out there in the real world. Many linguistic signs, like nouns, clearly relate to actual things, like cats, which could be observed in reality. The actual things which signs refer to are called 'referents', so the referent of the sign 'cat' which I speak when talking to my own cat has my particular cat as its referent. If I write a note to my neighbours when I leave for a holiday, saying 'Please feed cat', it is clear from the context that my cat is the referent of the sign, but the sign 'cat' could refer to any cat. And just as the English language arbitrarily connects the signifier 'c, a, t' with the signified 'cat' in our minds, so too the language arbitrarily connects the whole sign 'cat' with a particular sort of living creature, the real cats which can be referents of this sign.

Once Saussure had divided the sign into signifier and signified, it became possible to describe how language divides up the world of thought, creating the concepts which shape our actual experience. This can be illustrated by a simple comparison between signs in different languages. In English, the signifier 'sheep' is joined to a particular signified, the concept of a certain type of animal, and the signifier 'mutton' is joined to the signified of the meat of this animal. In French, the signifier *mouton* draws no distinction between the signified animal and its meat. So the meaning of 'mutton' in English is sustained only by its difference from 'sheep'. Meaning is only generated by the relationships between signifiers, and the signified is shaped by the signifier (not the

other way around). The signifieds or concepts in our minds are shaped by the signifiers that our language provides for us to think and talk with. In English we have only one signifier for the signified colour white, so the signified concept of whiteness is indivisible, one single thing. But we can conceive of a language where there are several words subdividing whiteness into several distinct colours. For speakers of such a language our signified white would not be one colour but several different and separate colours, just as for us redness is divided into the distinctly different colours scarlet, crimson, vermilion etc. The systems which structure our language also structure our experience of reality, as indicated at the beginning of this chapter. This surprising reversal of common sense comes logically from Saussure's thinking about the components of the linguistic sign.

### Sequences of linguistic signs

One of the distinctions between linguistic signs and other kinds of sign is that language is always dependent on time. In a written or spoken articulation, one sign must come before the next, and the articulation is spread out over time. In photographs, paintings, or an outfit of clothes, each sign is present at the same time as the others: the signs are distributed across space rather than time. In film or television for example, both space and time are involved, since the shapes on the screen are next to other shapes in the same space, while the image changes over time as the film progresses. When signs are spread out in a sequence over time, or have an order in their spatial arrangement, their order is obviously important. In a sentence like 'The dog bites the man', meaning unfolds from left to right along the line of the sentence, as we read the words in sequence one after another. This horizontal movement is called the 'syntagmatic' aspect of the sentence. If we reverse the order into 'The man bites the dog', the meaning is obviously different. Each linguistic sign in the syntagm could also be replaced by another sign which is related to it, having perhaps the same grammatical function, a similar sound, or relating to a similar signified. It is as if there are vertical lists of signs intersecting the horizontal line of the sentence, where our sentence has used one of the signs in each vertical list.

These lists of signs are called 'paradigms'. We could replace 'dog' with 'cat' or 'tiger', and replace 'bites' with 'licks' or 'kicks' or 'chews'. Each different selection from these paradigms would alter the meaning of the syntagm, our horizontal sentence of words.

So an important aspect of how language makes meaning must be that each linguistic sign is surrounded by paradigms of associated signs that are not present. Explaining the meaning of an instance of *parole* must involve noting the way that the syntagmatic ordering of signs affects meaning, and the way that the signs not selected from a particular paradigm shape the meaning of the sign that has been selected. As a general principle, every sign that is present must be considered in relation to other signs present in the structure of the articulation, and every sign present has meaning by virtue of the other signs which have been excluded and are not present in the text.

### Visual signs

Most of the account of linguistic signs above comes directly from Saussure, but some of the principles and terms which we shall need in the chapters that follow derive from the semiotic work of the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1958). In particular, the semiotic analysis of images and other non-verbal signs is made much more effective by some of Peirce's distinctions. Although language is the most striking form of human sign production, the whole of our social world is pervaded by messages which contain visual as well as linguistic signs, or which are exclusively visual. Gestures, dress codes, traffic signs, advertising images, newspapers, television programmes and so on are all kinds of media which use visual signs. The same principles underlie the semiotic study of visual signs and linguistic signs. In each case, there is a material signifier, which expresses the sign, and a mental concept, a signified, which immediately accompanies it. Visual signs also belong to codes, are arranged in syntagms, and selected from paradigms. In the last few pages, I have used some examples of visual signs along with linguistic ones, to suggest that they can be approached in similar ways.

We have already seen how linguistic signs are arbitrary, since

there is no necessary connection between the signifier 'cat' on this page and the signified concept of cat in our minds, and nor is there any connection except a conventional one for English speakers between the whole sign 'cat' and its referent, the kind of furry four-legged animal which is sitting next to my desk. The relationship of signifier to signified, and of sign to referent, is entirely a matter of the conventions established by *langue* in general, and in this case by the English language in particular. This type of sign, characterised by arbitrariness, Peirce calls the 'symbolic' sign.

But a photograph of a cat looks recognisably like a specific cat. The arrangement of shape and colour in the photograph, the signifier which expresses the signified 'cat', has a close resemblance to its referent, the real cat which the photograph represents. In a photograph, the signifier is the colour and shape on the flat surface of the picture. The signified is the concept of a cat which this signifier immediately calls up. The referent is the cat which was photographed. Just as my cat is white with some black and orange patches, so a photograph of my cat will faithfully record these different shapes and colours. This kind of sign, where the signifier resembles the referent, Peirce calls an 'iconic' sign. We shall encounter iconic signs in our exploration of the semiotics of various visual media. Unlike the case of linguistic signs, iconic signs have the property of merging the signifier, signified and referent together. It is much more difficult to realise that the two components of the photographic sign plus their referent are three different things. It is for this reason that photographic media seem to be more realistic than linguistic media, and we shall be exploring this issue in greater depth later.

When a cat is hungry and miaows to gain our attention, the sound made by the cat is pointing to its presence nearby, asking us to notice it, and this kind of sign Peirce calls 'indexical'. Indexical signs have a concrete and often causal relationship to their signified. The shadow cast on a sundial tells us the time, it is an indexical sign which is directly caused by the position of the sun, and similarly smoke is an index of fire, a sign caused by the thing which it signifies. Certain signs have mixed symbolic, indexical and iconic features. For instance, a traffic light showing red has both indexical and symbolic components. It is an indexical sign

pointing to a traffic situation (that cars here must wait), and using an arbitrary symbolic system to do this (red arbitrarily signifies danger and prohibition in this context).

### **Connotation and myth**

The rest of this chapter deals with semiotic ideas which are found in the work of the French critic Roland Barthes. His ideas build on the foundations outlined so far, and take us closer to the semiotic analysis of contemporary media. Because we use signs to describe and interpret the world, it often seems that their function is simply to 'denote' something, to label it. The linguistic sign 'Rolls-Royce' denotes a particular make of car, or a photographic sign showing Buckingham Palace denotes a building in London. But along with the denotative, or labelling function of these signs to communicate a fact, come some extra associations which are called 'connotations'. Because Rolls-Royce cars are expensive and luxurious, they can be used to connote signifieds of wealth and luxury. The linguistic sign 'Rolls-Royce' is no longer simply denoting a particular type of car, but generating a whole set of connotations which come from our social experience. The photograph of Buckingham Palace not only denotes a particular building, but also connotes signifieds of royalty, tradition, wealth and power.

When we consider advertising, news, and TV or film texts, it will become clear that linguistic, visual, and other kinds of sign are used not simply to denote something, but also to trigger a range of connotations attached to the sign. Barthes calls this social phenomenon, the bringing-together of signs and their connotations to shape a particular message, the making of 'myth'. Myth here does not refer to mythology in the usual sense of traditional stories, but to ways of thinking about people, products, places, or ideas which are structured to send particular messages to the reader or viewer of the text. So an advertisement for shoes which contains a photograph of someone stepping out of a Rolls-Royce is not only denoting the shoes and a car, but attaching the connotations of luxury which are available through the sign 'Rolls-Royce' to the shoes, suggesting a mythic meaning in which the shoes are part of a privileged way of life.

Media texts often connect one signified idea with another, or one signifier with another, in order to attach connotations to people and things and endow them with mythic meanings. There are two ways in which these associations work. One is called 'metaphor' and works by making one signified appear similar to another different signified. The other is called 'metonymy' and works by replacing one signified with another related signified. For example we can imagine that Rolls-Royce might launch a fast new car, using the advertising slogan 'The new Rolls-Royce eats up the tarmac'. In this syntagm of linguistic signs, both metaphor and metonymy have been used. The sign 'eat up' has nothing to do with driving cars. But the slogan asks us to realise how a fast car might 'consume' distance in a similar way to gobbling down food. In a metaphorical sense, a fast car might eat up the road as it rushes along. Metonymy is also used in the slogan. The sign 'tarmac' clearly has a relationship with roads, since roads are made of tarmac. In the advertising slogan the sign 'road' has been replaced metonymically by the sign 'tarmac' which takes its place. Returning to the imaginary shoe advertisement denoting a person's foot stepping out of a Rolls-Royce, the shoe and the Rolls-Royce have been made to appear similar to each other because they are both luxurious, so this is a metaphorical relationship. But since we see only a foot stepping out of the car, the foot is a metonym which stands for the whole person attached to it. Our imaginary shoe advertisement is combining signs in complex ways to endow denoted objects with mythic meanings.

Myth takes hold of an existing sign, and makes it function as a signifier on another level. The sign 'Rolls-Royce' becomes the signifier attached to the signified 'luxury', for example. It is as if myth were a special form of language, which takes up existing signs and makes a new sign system out of them. As we shall see, myth is not an innocent language, but one that picks up existing signs and their connotations, and orders them purposefully to play a particular social role.

### **Mythologies of wrestling**

In 1957 the French lecturer and critic Roland Barthes published a book called *Mythologies*. It consisted of short essays, previously

published in French magazines, which dealt with a wide variety of cultural phenomena, from wrestling matches to Greta Garbo, from Citroen's latest car to steak and chips. These essays on aspects of contemporary French culture sought to look beyond the surface appearance of the object or practice which they discussed, and to decode its real significance as the bearer of particular meanings. What Barthes did was to read social life, with the same close attention and critical force that had previously been evident only in the study of 'high art', like literature, painting or classical music. *Mythologies* uses semiotics as the predominant means of analysing aspects of everyday culture. The book concluded with an essay called 'Myth Today', which drew together the implications of the semiotic method Barthes was using in his short essays, and showed why his reading of social life was significant. *Mythologies* had a huge impact in France, and later in the English-speaking world, and opened up everyday popular culture to serious study. This section is devoted to the discussion of one of the short essays in *Mythologies*. Then the essay 'Myth Today' which provides a general framework for the study of popular culture is more fully discussed. Many of the analytical methods and critical concepts in 'Myth Today' will be recurring in later chapters of this book.

The first essay in *Mythologies* is 'The World of Wrestling'. Barthes discusses the meaning of the rather seedy wrestling matches which at that time took place in small auditoria around Paris. Something fairly similar can be seen today in the televised WWF wrestling from the United States, where exotically named and colourfully clad wrestlers perform very theatrically. The modern television form of this type of wrestling is much more glossy and widely marketed than the backstreet entertainment Barthes discusses, however. Who wins and who loses in these wrestling contests is insignificant compared to the excessive posturing and the dramatic incidents which are displayed in the bouts and in the stadium by the wrestlers. This form of wrestling is not only popular enough to be televised recently, but has also given rise to spin-off products: a TV cartoon featuring star wrestlers, poseable toy action figures, T-shirts and other clothing, and computer games. Clearly, something about this theatrical wrestling spectacle has been significant and popular, in 1950s

Paris and in Britain and the United States today.

Barthes describes wrestling as a theatrical spectacle rather than a sport. The spectators, he finds, are interested primarily in the powerful emotions which the wrestlers simulate. These can be clearly read in their gesture, expression and movement, which are so many coded signs signifying inner passions. Wrestling becomes a kind of melodrama, a drama using exaggerated physical signs, and is characterised by an emphasis on emotion and questions of morality. Here Barthes describes some of the physical signs made by the wrestlers, and it is easy to read their connotations, since they belong to a very clear code:

Sometimes the wrestler triumphs with a repulsive sneer while kneeling on the good sportsman; sometimes he gives the crowd a concealed smile which forebodes an early revenge; sometimes, pinned to the ground, he hits the floor ostentatiously to make evident to all the intolerable nature of his situation. (1973: 18)

For Barthes, wrestling is like ritual, pantomime, or Greek tragedy, where what is important is to see some struggle being played out by actors who do not represent realistic individual characters, but ideas or moral positions. The 'bad-guy' wrestler, the 'bastard' as Barthes calls him (1973: 17), appears to fight cruelly and unfairly, but is pursued by his opponent despite the 'bastard's' attempt to hide behind the ropes of the wrestling ring, and he is deservedly punished. The spectators enjoy both the outrageous cheating and cruelty of the 'bastard', and also the eventual punishment of the 'bastard' by the good-guy wrestler. The physical signs made by the wrestlers communicate all of this drama, and these signs belong to a code which is familiar to the audience. The audience's pleasure comes from reading and enjoying the wrestlers' coded signs.

Whether the good wrestler wins or not, the bout will have made Good and Evil easily readable through the medium of the coded signs the wrestlers use to communicate their roles and their emotions to the crowd. Grins, sneers, gestures and poses are all indexical signs which connote triumph, revenge, innocence, viciousness or some other meaning. A grin would be an indexical sign of triumph, or hitting the floor an indexical sign of submission in defeat, for instance. The wrestlers combine these signs



together in syntagms and exaggerate them, so that there can be no doubt about how to read their connotations. The wrestling bout is much more like a pantomime than a fight, because highly coded signs are being presented for the enjoyment of the audience. Barthes' conclusion is that wrestling makes our confusing and ambiguous world intelligible, giving clearly readable meanings to the struggle between moral positions represented by the wrestlers. Once we look beyond the surface of wrestling, where it can appear to be a rather silly and pointless spectacle, we find that wrestling is a way of communicating about morality and justice, transgression and punishment, through signs which belong to a code. Wrestling is a medium which speaks about our culture in a highly codified (and entertaining) form.

### Myth and social meanings

Having looked briefly at one of Barthes' short essays in *Mythologies*, the rest of this chapter explains and discusses the longer essay which concludes the volume, 'Myth Today'. In it, Barthes draws together some of the more general critical points which his analyses of cultural products have led him to, and explains a coherent method for going on to study more aspects of social life. At the beginning of 'Myth Today', Barthes declares that 'myth is a type of speech' (1973: 109). We saw above that wrestling can be regarded as a medium in which messages about morality and behaviour are communicated through a theatrical type of entertainment. The moves, gestures and expressions in wrestling are a form of coded communication through signs, used self-consciously by the wrestlers. Wrestling, as it were, speaks to us about our reality. On one level, the wrestlers' gestures can signify 'defeat' or 'helplessness'. They are signs for emotional or moral attitudes. But on another level, more abstractly, the whole wrestling match is itself a sign. It represents a moral terrain in which there is a crude and 'natural' form of justice. The 'bastard' is made to pay for his cheating and cruelty, and the match shows the spectators an exciting yet ordered world, compensating for the ordinariness and disorder of reality. The wrestling match makes good and evil, conflict and violence, intelligible by putting these ideas on stage in the artificial form of the match itself.

But is this way of understanding the world in moral terms natural, common sense, unchangeable? Should we understand behaviour in these moral terms? Barthes argues that in fact the wrestling match, with its moral structures and positions represented by the wrestlers, merely makes morality and justice seem as if they were natural. Wrestling, and morality, are both products of a specific culture (west European Christian culture). They are both tied to a certain historical period, and to a particular way of organising society in a particular place. The meanings in wrestling are not natural but cultural, not given but produced, not real but mythical. Myth, as Barthes uses the term, means things used as signs to communicate a social and political message about the world. The message always involves the distortion or forgetting of alternative messages, so that myth appears to be simply true, rather than one of a number of different possible messages.

The study of these myths, mythology, is part of the 'vast science of signs' which Saussure predicted, and called 'semiology' (or semiotics) (Barthes 1973: 111). Reading the messages in myth involves identifying the signs which it uses, and showing how they are built by means of codes into a structure which communicates particular messages and not others. This can be explained by discussing the main example Barthes uses in 'Myth Today'. Barthes imagines himself at the barber's, looking at the cover of an edition of the French glossy magazine *Paris-Match*. On the cover is a photograph of a black soldier in uniform, who is saluting the French flag. The signifiers, the shapes and colours in the photograph, can be easily read as meaningful iconic signs, which denote the message 'a black soldier is giving the French salute'. But the picture has a greater signification, which goes beyond what it denotes. The picture signifies that

France is a great empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. (Barthes 1973: 116)

A set of iconic signs which already possess a meaning ('a black soldier is giving the French salute') becomes the basis for the

imposition of an important social message, that French imperial rule is fair and egalitarian. This social message is myth, and a controversial one when Barthes wrote the essay in the 1950s. France's empire was disintegrating, and there was brutal military conflict in France's North African colony of Algeria where black Algerians fought and campaigned for independence. The crisis was the main political issue in France, and extensively debated in the media. The mythic signification of the picture on *Paris-Match's* cover argues in favour of colonial control over Algeria, without appearing to do so.

The myths which are generated in a culture will change over time, and can only acquire their force because they relate to a certain context. In myth, the context and history of the signs are narrowed down and contained so that only a few features of their context and history have a signifying function. Where the photograph was taken, the name and life-experience of the soldier, who it was that took the photograph, are all historical and contextual issues which are irrelevant and neglected once the photographic sign is used as the signifier to promote the myth of French imperialism. Instead, the mythic signification invokes other concepts, like France's success as a colonial power, the contemporary conflict over Algeria, and issues of racial discrimination. What myth does is to hollow out the signs it uses, leaving only part of their meaning, and invest them with a new signification which directs us to read them in one way and no other. The photograph of the black soldier saluting makes the reader aware of the issue of French colonialism, and asks him or her to take it for granted that black soldiers should be loyal to the French flag, and that colonial rule is perfectly reasonable.

This is not the only way to read the mythic image of the soldier, though it is the reading which appears most 'natural'. Barthes suggests three ways of reading the photograph. First, the photograph could be seen as one of a potentially infinite number of possible images which support the myth of French imperialism. The black soldier is just one example of French imperialism in this case. Thinking of the image in this way, Barthes suggests, is how a journalist would think of it. Seeking to present a certain mythic signification on the cover of the magazine, the journalist would look for a suitable photograph which gives a concrete

form to this abstract concept, and creates the mythic signification.

Alternatively, a mythologist like Barthes himself, or someone using the semiotic methods discussed here, would 'see through' the myth. This critical reader would note the way that the black soldier has had his meaning emptied out of the photograph, except that he is an alibi, a justification, for the mythic signification. The rightness and naturalness of France's colonial power is the dominant signification of the photograph, but one which the semiologist is able to explain and unmask. The myth of French imperialism has been imposed on the photograph, but the mythologist is able to separate out the photograph and the myth, the sign and the signification, to undo the effect which the myth aims to produce. The mythologist 'deciphers the myth, he understands a distortion' (Barthes 1973: 128).

Thirdly, an uncritical reader noticing the cover of *Paris-Match* but not analysing it, would simply receive the mythic signification as an unremarkable and natural fact. The photographic sign would seem to just show France's imperialism (translated in *Mythologies* as 'imperiality') as a natural state of affairs, hardly worth commenting on. 'The black soldier saluting would seem to be the very presence of French imperialism' (Barthes 1973: 128). The photograph in this case is neither an example chosen to illustrate a point, nor a distortion trying to impose itself on us. Instead, 'everything happens as if the picture naturally conjured up the concept, as if the signifier gave a foundation to the signified: the myth exists from the precise moment when French imperialism achieves the natural state' (Barthes 1973: 129-30). For Barthes, the function of myth is to make particular ideas, like France's colonial rule of other countries, seem natural. If these ideas seem natural, they will not be resisted or fought against. Myth makes particular social meanings acceptable as the common-sense truth about the world. The function of the criticism and analysis of myth must then be to remove the impression of naturalness by showing how the myth is constructed, and showing that it promotes one way of thinking while seeking to eliminate all the alternative ways of thinking.

### Myth and ideology

The analysis of myth to reveal its selectiveness and distortion is obviously political in the broadest sense. In Barthes' work, and in the work of many semiotic critics, the analysis of culture and society is carried out from a left-wing perspective, and often closely tied to Marxist ideas. In 'Myth Today', the later sections of the essay take up the methods of semiotic analysis which have been discussed so far, and relate them to a general political analysis of society. The key concept in this analysis is 'ideology', which will be discussed further in subsequent chapters of this book as it relates to the study of the media. An ideology is a way of perceiving reality and society which assumes that some ideas are self-evidently true, while other ideas are self-evidently biased or untrue. Ideologies are always shared by the members of a group or groups in society, and one group's ideology will often conflict with another's. Some of the arguments about ideology which are advanced by Barthes and others will be subject to criticism later, as we investigate their usefulness in relation to concrete examples of contemporary media texts. In particular, I shall argue that an ideology is not necessarily a false consciousness of reality. But first, it is important to see how Barthes' analysis of myth is connected to the concept of ideology.

Barthes proposes that myth serves the ideological interests of a particular group in society, which he terms 'the bourgeoisie' (1973: 137). This term refers to the class of people who own or control the industrial, commercial, and political institutions of the society. It is in the interests of this class to maintain the stability of society, in order that their ownership, power and control can remain unchanged and unchallenged. Therefore, the current ways of thinking about all kinds of questions and issues, which allow the current state of economic and political affairs to continue unchallenged, need to be perpetuated. Although the existing state of society might sometimes be maintained by force, it is most effective and convenient to maintain it by eliminating oppositional and alternative ways of thinking. The way that this is done is by making the current system of beliefs about society, the 'dominant ideology', seem natural, common sense and necessary.

The dominant ideology of a society is subject to change, as the economic and political balance of power changes. Ideology then, is a historically contingent thing. If we look back, say, two hundred years, some features of the dominant ideology have obviously changed. Two hundred years ago, it would be self-evident that black people were inferior to whites, that women were inferior to men, that children could be employed to do manual labour. These ideas were made to seem natural, common sense. Today, each of these ideological views has been displaced. The ideology of today is different, but not necessarily any less unjust. However, it would be difficult to perceive that current ideologies need to be changed, since the function of ideology is to make the existing system appear natural and acceptable to us all. Myth, for Barthes, is a type of speech about social realities which supports ideology by taking these realities outside of the arena of political debate.

In the case of the soldier-Negro, for example, what is got rid of is certainly not French imperialism (on the contrary, since what must be actualized is its presence); it is the contingent, historical, in one word: fabricated, quality of colonialism. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of explanation but that of a statement of fact. If I state the fact of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and goes without saying: I am reassured. (Barthes 1973: 143)

The function of the photograph of the black soldier saluting the flag is to make French imperialism ('imperiality' in the quotation) seem like a neutral fact. It discourages us from asking questions or raising objections to colonialism. It serves the interests of a dominant ideology. The way that it is able to do this is by functioning as myth, presenting a historically specific situation as a natural and unremarkable one. Today, more than forty years after Barthes published *Mythologies*, colonial rule is regarded by most people as an outdated and embarrassing episode in European history. It is much easier to see how myths like French imperialism are constructed once they become distanced from the prevailing ideology. When analysing contemporary examples

of myth in the media, the task of the mythologist in analysing the semiotic construction of myth becomes more difficult, since the very naturalness and self-evident quality of myth's ideological messages have to be overcome.

Semiotic methods are not always used to analyse cultural meanings from a left-wing point of view. For example, advertising agencies in continental Europe (e.g. Italy) and a few in Britain use semiotics to design more effective advertisements. Just as Barthes argued that a photographer might look for an image which conveys the myth of French imperialism, advertising copy-writers might look for linguistic and visual signs which support the mythic meanings of a product. Both verbal and visual signs are used in ads to generate messages about products and their users, and semiotics can provide a framework for precise discussion of how these signs work. But it will also become clear that advertisements have a highly ideological role, since 'by nature' they are encouraging their readers to consume products, and consumption is one of the fundamental principles of contemporary culture, part of our dominant ideology. In advertisements, consumption is naturalised and 'goes without saying'. In order to accomplish this ideological effect, we will see that advertisements make use of myth, attempting to attach mythic significations to products by taking up already-meaningful signs in a similar way to the photograph on the cover of *Paris-Match*. The investigation of advertisements will involve further discussion of myth and ideology, and introduce some of the problems with the concepts of myth and ideology which have not so far been addressed.

### Sources and further reading

The theories of the sign in Saussure (1974) and Peirce (1958) are considerably more complex than the outlines of them in this chapter. For other explanations and discussions of the sign, see Culler (1976), from a linguistic and literary perspective Hawkes (1983) and Eagleton (1983), and from a media studies perspective Ellis (1992), Burton (2000) and Tolson (1996). Branson and Stafford (1999) draw on the first edition of this book in their first chapter, and provide explanation, discussion and suggestions for further work on signs and myth.

Barthes (1973) contains many entertaining short essays in addition to those discussed in this chapter and is not too difficult, although some of his references to French culture and theorists may be obscure to a present-day reader. Danesi (1999) is a more recent and entertaining use of semiotics to decode social behaviour. Three books which analyse aspects of culture in a similar way to Barthes are Blonsky (1985), Hebdige (1988), and Hall (1997). Masterman (1984) contains short essays discussing myth and social meaning with reference to television. Barthes' work is discussed by Culler (1983) and Lavers (1982).

### Suggestions for further work

- 1 Make a selection of road signs from the Highway Code or from observation of your local area. Which features of the signs are iconic, indexical or symbolic (some may be combinations of these)? Why do you think these signs were selected?
- 2 Analyse the front and back covers of this book and two others you are using on your course, or two others you use in different contexts (like cookbooks or leisure reading). What is denoted and connoted by the signs you find, and why?
- 3 Note the clothing, hairstyles and other adornments of two people you encounter. What do these signs connote, and what knowledge of cultural codes do you need in order to read the connotations?
- 4 Find an example of a short text written in one linguistic code (like a love poem, or the instructions for operating a video recorder) and try to 'translate' the text into another code (like the condensed style of SMS phone text-messaging, or a police report). Why are some signs and meanings more resistant to 'translation' than others?
- 5 There are cultural codes governing the 'natural' combinations of foods in each course in a meal (paradigmatic choices), or the order of courses in a meal (syntagmatic choices). How do the cultural codes of foods and eating you are familiar with differ from those of other cultures (for example, Indian, Chinese, French) whose foods you have sampled?
- 6 Analyse the layout, decor, music, staff uniforms, and displays etc. in your local supermarket. How do the connotations of these signs contribute to mythic meanings about the shop, shoppers, and shopping?
- 7 Analyse the physical attributes, accessories and packaging of dolls and action figures like Sindy, Barbie, Action Man and G.I. Joe. In what ways do their connotations encode ideological assumptions about each gender?

# Advertisements

## Introduction

This chapter introduces the semiotic study of advertisements. The combination of linguistic signs with visual, often photographic signs in ads allows us to explore the terms and ideas outlined in the previous chapter, and to begin to question them. The discussion of advertisements here is mainly focused on magazine and poster ads, and I have made this decision for several reasons, some of them pragmatic and some academic. Ads in magazines often take up a whole two-page spread in a magazine, and can be thought of, for the moment, as relatively self-contained. Two ads are reproduced as illustrations in this chapter so you can see the ad I am discussing, whereas TV or cinema ads, for instance, are composed of a syntagmatic sequence of images, sounds and words. It is much harder to get a grip on these syntagms of moving images when you can't see and hear them in their original form. The ads discussed here appeared in magazines, and glossy magazines are the subject of my next chapter. So the context of ads like those discussed here can be more fully explained in chapter 3. There have been several influential academic books dealing with ads from a semiotic point of view, so my focus on magazine ads allows me introduce some of the key findings which have previously emerged from semiotic work on ads, and identify some of the problems which semiotic analysis has encountered.

The beginning of this chapter gives an overview of advertising as an industry and of the socio-economic functions of ads. Then we move on to the types of signs and codes which can be found in ads themselves, and consider a theoretical model of how ads

are read. The remaining part of the chapter deals with the problems which semiotic analysis faces when it attempts to justify its findings and apply them to the experience of real readers of ads, rather than using an abstract theoretical model of what readers do. I shall be using the two ads reproduced in this book to show how semiotic methods can be applied to ads, and to point out how semiotic methods often have to reduce the complexity of what reading an ad is really like.

## The advertising business

Advertising is very common and is found in a range of media. If we begin to list the places where advertisements are found, it soon becomes obvious that they are both widespread and diverse. Ads are found in magazines, and in local and national newspapers, where we encounter brief 'small ads' which are mainly linguistic, and much larger 'display ads' placed by businesses, comprising images and words. There are small posters on walls, in shop windows, on railway platforms, and huge poster boardings next to roads and railway lines. There are advertisements on radio, on television and on film. All these kinds of advertisement are usually recognisable as ads and not something else, but there are other more subtle kinds of advertisement. We will note later in this book, in the chapters dealing with television and cinema, how products 'tying in' with films and TV programmes, can also fulfil advertising functions. In the next chapter, we will encounter self-contained advertisements in the pages of magazines, as well as advertisements embedded in editorial material, and advertisements for magazines themselves within their pages. As we shall see, it can be difficult to determine what is an ad and what is not.

Advertising is highly professionalised and competitive, and the people who work in the advertising business are very often highly creative and well-educated. Many of them have studied semiotics as part of their formal education, and there is even a British advertising agency called Semiotic Solutions, which uses semiotic methods to design advertisements. While semiotic analysis has been used in the past for a critique of advertising, it can also be used in the industry to help make ads more effective.

Companies spend very large amounts of money on advertising. It is not unusual for a large manufacturer or financial corporation to spend several million pounds on advertising in Britain each year. But it is not only businesses that buy advertising; government agencies, for instance, also advertise. The media monitoring service A. C. Nielsen MMS reported in February 2001, for example, that the Central Office of Information (a government agency) spent over £16 million on advertising in the preceding year. Campaigns against cigarette smoking, drug use, or drink driving, and campaigns promoting healthy exercise, are all government-funded advertising. Other major advertisers in 2000 were Unilever (makers of household cleaning products) who spent over £12 million, Ford cars who spent nearly £9 million, Lloyds TSB Bank and the Orange mobile telephone company who spent nearly £6 million each. There are several different ways in which advertising campaigns are produced. Probably the most common model is for a company to employ an advertising agency, which will propose a campaign plan involving ads in one or more media, and perhaps other promotional activities like mailings direct to potential customers. Space for the ads will be bought from magazine publishers, newspapers, or TV companies for instance, for a specific placing and length of time. Publications which feature advertisements are therefore able to charge advertisers a considerable sum to place advertising material before their readers. Advertising is a significant commercial activity, and is evidently thought to be effective enough to warrant large financial commitments.

### Analysing advertising

The semiotic analysis of advertising assumes that the meanings of ads are designed to move out from the page or screen on which they are carried, to shape and lend significance to our experience of reality. We are encouraged to see ourselves, the products or services which are advertised, and aspects of our social world, in terms of the mythic meanings which ads draw on and help to promote. As we saw in the last chapter, Barthes discussed the mythic meanings of the front cover of *Paris-Match*, and showed that signs and codes were used to represent French

colonial rule as natural and self-evident. This process of naturalising colonial rule had an ideological function, since the legitimacy of French colonialism was a political stance which the mythic meaning encoded in the photograph made neutral and scarcely noticeable. The photograph worked to support the ideological view that colonialism was normal, natural and uncontroversial. In the same way that Barthes uncovered the workings of that image, the semiotic analysis of the signs and codes of advertisements has also often been used to critique the mythic structures of meaning which ads work to communicate. In her classic study of the semiotics of advertisements, Judith Williamson declares that advertising 'has a function, which is to sell things to us. But it has another function, which I believe in many ways replaces that traditionally fulfilled by art and religion. It creates structures of meaning' (Williamson 1978: 11-12). As well as just asking us to buy something, Williamson argues that ads ask us to participate in ideological ways of seeing ourselves and the world.

In fact many contemporary ads do not directly ask us to buy products at all. Ads often seem more concerned with amusing us, setting a puzzle for us to work out, or demonstrating their own sophistication. The aim of ads is to engage us in their structure of meaning, to encourage us to participate by decoding their linguistic and visual signs and to enjoy this decoding activity. Ads make use of signs, codes, and social myths which are already in circulation, and ask us to recognise and often to enjoy them. At the same time that we are reading and decoding the signs in ads, we participate in the structures of meaning that ads use to represent us, the advertised product, and society. Many previous studies of the semiotics of advertising use semiotic methods as part of a critique of advertising's role in perpetuating particular mythic meanings which reinforce a dominant ideology.

Analysing ads in semiotic terms involves a number of 'unnatural' tasks. In order to study them closely, we need to separate ads from the real environment in which they exist, where they often pass unnoticed or without analysis. We need to identify the visual and linguistic signs in the ad, to see how the signs are organised by paradigmatic and syntagmatic selection, and note how the signs relate to each other through various coding sys-

tems. We need to decide which social myths the ad draws on, and whether these myths are reinforced or challenged. These are the main tasks which semiotic analysis of advertisements have concentrated on in the past, and which this chapter will explain. But since we cannot be certain that all readers read ads in the same way, we also need to examine two limiting factors which will complicate our ability to be sure of our findings. The first limiting factor is the potential ambiguity of the meanings of signs, and the second is that real readers of ads might decode signs differently, with a range of different results. These two limiting factors pose challenges to the semiotic methods outlined above, and we shall need to assess their importance later in this chapter. At this point, it is necessary to show how semiotic analysis has proceeded until quite recently.

### The semiotic critique of ads

The first step in analysing an advertisement is to note the various signs in the advertisement itself. We can assume that anything which seems to carry a meaning for us in the ad is a sign. So linguistic signs (words) and iconic signs (visual representations) are likely to be found in ads, as well as some other non-representational signs like graphics. At first sight, most of these signs simply seem to denote the things or people which the images represent, or to denote the referents of the linguistic signs. But the signs in ads very rarely just denote something. The signs in ads also have connotations, meanings which come from our culture, some of which we can easily recognise consciously, and others which are unconsciously recognised and only become clear once we look for them. Let's take a hypothetical example which reproduces the features of a large number of ads. A picture of a beautiful female model in a perfume ad is not simply a sign denoting a particular person who has been photographed. The picture of the model is also a sign which has connotations like youth, slimmess, health etc. Because the sign has these positive connotations, it can work as the signifier for the mythic signified 'feminine beauty'. This concept belongs to our society's stock of positive myths concerning the attributes of sexually desirable women. The ad has presented us with a sign (the pho-

tographed model) which itself signifies a concept (feminine beauty). This concept of feminine beauty is what Barthes would describe as a mythic meaning. Yves Saint-Laurent's ad campaign for Opium perfume in 2000, for example, featured Sophie Dahl, described by *Marie Claire* magazine as 'realistically curvy'. The ads denoted Dahl reclining on her back with her knees raised and legs slightly apart, one hand on her left breast and her head thrown backward. She was completely naked except for heavy gold jewellery, and her pale skin, emerald green eye make-up, fuchsia lipstick and red hair contrasted with the deep blue fabric on which she lay. Clearly the sign 'Opium' has connotations of indulgent pleasure which derive from the codes for representing drugtaking and sexual abandonment, and the connotations of the ad's visual signs supported them. As Dee Amy-Chin (2001) has discussed, Sophie Dahl's pose and costume alluded to French nineteenth-century paintings representing harems, Turkish baths, and scenes in oriental palaces. The mythic meaning of the ad connected the perfume, feminine beauty, and exotic sensual pleasure.

As in the case of Barthes' black soldier saluting the flag, it does not matter who the model is, who the photographer was, where the picture was taken, etc. The only significant attribute of the photographed model is that she exhibits the physical qualities which enable her to function as a signifier for the mythic meaning 'feminine beauty'. The photographic sign has been emptied of its meaning except inasmuch as it leads the reader of the ad towards comprehending the myth. In analysing the signs in ads, we pass from the sign's denotative meaning to its connotative meanings. These connotative meanings are the ingredients of myth, the overall message about the meaning of the product which the ad is constructing by its use of the photographed model. The ad works by showing us a sign whose mythic meaning is easily readable (the photographed model is a sign for feminine beauty) and placing this sign next to another sign whose meaning is potentially ambiguous (the name of the perfume, for instance). The mythic meaning 'feminine beauty' which came from the photographic sign (the model) is carried over onto the name of the perfume, the linguistic sign which appears in the ad. So the name of the perfume becomes a linguistic sign that seems

to connote feminine beauty as well. The product has been endowed with a mythic meaning.

This short example gives a sense of how the semiotic analysis of ads works at a basic level. We identify the signs in the ad, try to decide what social myths the connotations of the ad's signs invoke, and see how these mythic meanings are transferred to the product being advertised. The next step is to consider how the mythic meaning constructed in the ad relates to our understanding of the real world outside the ad. In other words, we need to ask what the ideological function of the ad might be. Our perfume ad invited us to recognise the connotations of the signs in the ad, and to transfer these connotations to the product being advertised. The perfume became a sign of feminine beauty, so that buying the product for ourselves (or as a present for someone else) seems to offer the wearer of the perfume a share in its meaning of feminine beauty for herself. As Williamson argued: 'The technique of advertising is to correlate feelings, moods or attributes to tangible objects, linking possible unattainable things with those that are attainable, and thus reassuring us that the former are within reach' (Williamson 1978: 31). Buying and using the product (an attainable thing) gives access to feminine beauty (a social meaning). To possess the product is to 'buy into' the myth, and to possess some of its social value for ourselves.

### Ideology in ads

Our perfume ad, by placing the photographed woman next to the product, actively constructs a relationship between the woman and the product. It does this by placing an iconic sign (the photographed woman) and a linguistic sign (the name of the perfume) next to each other. It is this relationship between one sign and another which is important for the meaning of the ad, since the relationship involves the sharing of the mythic meaning 'feminine beauty' by both the product and the photographed model. The ad is constructed to make this sharing of the same mythic meaning appear automatic and unsurprising, whereas in fact it only exists by virtue of the ad's structure. So one point that a semiotic critic of ads would make is that the ad conceals the way that it works. Perfume ads do not literally announce that a

perfume will make you seem beautiful (this claim would be illegal in many societies anyway). Instead this message is communicated by the structure of signs in the ad, by the way that we are asked to decode the ad's mythic meaning.

It is worth considering what would happen to the meaning of the ad if a different type of model had been photographed. We could list the different attributes of different photographic models, like youthful/mature, underweight/overweight, above average height/below average height, etc. The positive connotations of women used as signs in perfume ads derive from the positive connotations in our culture of the first sign in each of these pairs of opposites when they are applied to women in ads. The mythic meaning of 'feminine beauty' is much more likely to be perceived by the reader of the ad if the photographic sign calls on our social prejudices in favour of images of young, slim and tall women as signifiers of beauty. The iconic sign of the model can signify beauty because she is not elderly, overweight or below average height.

The ad presupposes that we can read the connotations of photographed women as if they were signs in a kind of restricted language, a code. Just as language works by establishing a system of differences, so that cat is not dog, red is not blue, youthful is not elderly, ads call on systems of differences which already exist in our culture, and which encode social values. One of the reasons I chose to discuss a hypothetical perfume ad featuring an iconic sign denoting a beautiful woman was that the example is controversial. Feminists have been critiquing ads and many other media texts for over three decades, showing that iconic signs denoting women in the media very often perpetuate oppressive ideological myths about real women. By calling on the positive social value of youth, slimmess and tallness, for instance, our perfume ad could be described as supporting a dominant ideological myth of what feminine beauty is. It is easy to see that our ideological view of feminine beauty is not 'natural' but cultural if we look at representations of women in the past or in other cultures. In earlier historical periods, and in other parts of the world, the ideological myth of feminine beauty is not always signified by youth, slimmess, tallness etc. Ideologies are specific to particular historical periods and to particular cultures.



### The ideology of ads

The mythic meanings which ads generate are usually focused onto products. Ads endow products with a certain social significance so that they can function in our real social world as indexical signs connoting the buyer's good taste, trendiness, or some other ideologically valued quality. So ads give meanings to products, to buyers of products and to readers of ads, and to the social world in which we and the products exist. One central aspect of this process is the way in which ads address us as consumers of products. Critics of advertising have argued that real distinctions between people in our society are based on people's different relationships to the process of producing wealth. From this point of view, which derives from Marx's economic analysis of capitalist societies, it is economic distinctions between individuals and between classes of people that are the real basis on which society is organised. Some people are owners, and others are workers or people who service the work process. However, it has been argued that ads replace these real economic distinctions between people with a completely different way of regarding our relative status and value in society.

In ads, and in the ideology which ads reproduce, we are distinguished from others by means of the kinds of products which we consume. Social status, membership of particular social groups, and our sense of our special individuality, are all signified by the products which we choose to consume. Which beer you drink, which brand of jeans or perfume you wear, become indexical signs of your social identity. In any particular category of products, like perfumes, margarines, jeans or washing powders, there are only minimal differences between the various products available. The first function of an advertisement is 'to create a differentiation between one particular product and others in the same category' (Williamson 1978: 24). But ads not only differentiate one product from another, but also give different products different social meanings. Once products have different social meanings by virtue of the different mythic concepts they seem part of, products become signs with a certain social value. They signify something about their consumers, the people who buy and use them.

For critics influenced by this Marxist analysis, the real structure of society is based on relationships to the process of production. But far from making the real structure of society apparent, ads contribute to the myth that our identity is determined not by production but by consumption. Ads therefore mask the real structure of society, which is based on differences between those who own the means of production and those who sell their labour and earn wages in return. In a consumer society, these real economic differences between people and classes are overlaid with an alternative structure of mythic meanings oriented around buying and owning products (consumption). So according to this critical view ads have an ideological function, since they encourage us to view our consumption positively as an activity which grants us membership of lifestyle groups. But what ads are really doing is serving the interests of those who own and control the industries of consumer culture. Ideology consists of the meanings made necessary by the economic conditions of the society in which we live: a real way of looking at the world around us, which seems to be necessary and common sense. But this ideological way of perceiving the world is there to support and perpetuate our current social organisation: a consumer society. The individual subject's need to belong and to experience the world meaningfully is shaped, channelled and temporarily satisfied by ideology. In the sense that it provides meaning in our lives, ideology is necessary and useful. But the question is what kind of meanings ideology perpetuates, whether these meanings mask and naturalise an inequitable social system. Advertising has been critiqued as one of the social institutions which perform this function of naturalising dominant ideologies in our culture, for example that it naturalises ideologies based on consumption, or ideologies which oppress women.

### Problems in the ideological analysis of ads

There are some theoretical problems with the ideological critique of ads outlined above. This critical discourse claims to 'see through' the ideological myths perpetuated in advertising. The critique of ideology claims to set itself apart from what it analyses, and to investigate the way that advertising (or any other

Some people  
criticise

social institution) perpetuates an ideology. This notion of setting oneself apart in order to criticise advertising is parallel to the way that scientists set themselves apart from something in order to understand it objectively. Indeed, the theorist who proposed the model of ideological critique discussed here, Louis Althusser, saw his analytical method as scientific and objective (Althusser 1971). But the scientific objectivity of the critique of ideology is easy to dispute, especially if you are not a Marxist as Althusser was. There seems to be no definite reason for a Marxist analysis of ideology to be any more scientific and objective than another theoretical approach to society.

Indeed, the discourse of science can be seen to be just another ideological view. The notion of a scientific viewpoint, standing outside of experience and endowed with a special ability to see into the truth of things, gives automatic priority to this point of view over all others. Science is a discourse, a way of using language which has its own codes and a particular social meaning. The discourse of science presupposes, for instance, that what we see on the surface is less true than what we see beneath the surface. Science passes from the observation of surface effects to proposing an underlying theory which accounts for these surface effects. Semiotic analysis borrows the assumptions of the scientific discourse when it moves from the signifier to the signified, from what we perceive in the material world (signifier) to the concept which it communicates (signified). Similarly, semiotics moves from the signs on the surface to the mythic meaning which the connotations of signs signify. And again, semiotics moves from the mythic meaning of a particular set of signs in a text to the ideological way of seeing the world that the myth naturalises. In each case, looking at what is on the surface leads the semiotician to what is beneath the surface. We move from observation to knowledge, from a particular instance to a general theory. Building on the same assumptions as scientific discourse, semiotics and the theory of ideology claim to reveal what is really true by going beyond, behind or underneath what appears to be true.

Scientific discourse has a high degree of status in contemporary culture, but we can critique its coded use of signs in the same way that we can critique the coded use of signs in our perfume ad. We saw that the mythic meaning 'feminine beauty'

rested on the positive connotations of youthfulness, underweightness, etc., in opposition to the connotations of elderliness or overweightness, etc. Scientific truth is a mythic meaning based on the positive connotations of objectivity and depth, in opposition to the connotations of subjectivity and surface, for instance. Scientific truth is a mythic meaning which comes from the use of signs with positively valued connotations, in the same way that the mythic meaning 'feminine beauty' works. Once we see that scientific truth is a cultural construct, a mythic meaning, its special status has to be acknowledged as cultural and not natural, not necessary but contingent on the way that our culture perceives itself and its reality. Scientific truth must be equally as mythic as feminine beauty.

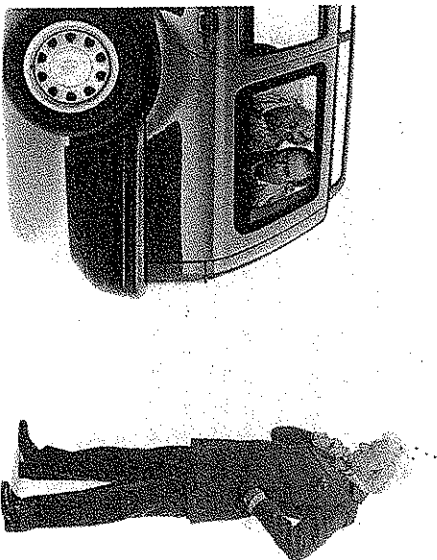
If scientific discourse is not necessarily superior to the discourses which it analyses, the scientific claims made by semiotic analysis and the theory of ideology must be treated with caution. The discourse of semiotic analysis, as I stated briefly at the beginning of this chapter, requires us to adopt some 'unnatural' procedures. We have to separate an ad being studied from its context in order to study how its signs work. We have to pay more attention to the detail of how meaning is constructed in an ad than an ordinary reader probably would. We tend to come up with an underlying meaning of an ad, relating the ad to mythic meanings and ideological values, which is justified only by the rigour of our analysis, rather than by any other proof which would ensure that our reading is correct. These features of semiotic analysis do not mean that it is useless, or that its results are wrong. But semioticians have to take account of the limitations which the semiotic method brings with it. Semiotics is a very powerful discourse of analysis, but it always has to struggle against other discourses and argue its case. We shall be considering these issues further in later sections of this chapter, and in the other chapters of this book. It is now time to examine two ads in detail, and see what a semiotic analysis might reveal.

### **Volkswagen Golf Estate**

First we need to identify the signs in this ad. There are iconic signs here, denoting three men, and the rear half of a car. There

are linguistic signs, the copy written underneath the picture. There is also a graphic sign, the logo of VW cars. Taking the three men first, we can see that their poses and facial expressions are themselves signs which belong to familiar cultural codes. Their poses and expressions are signs which connote puzzlement. The standing figure is still, looking intently at the car, with the positions of his arms and hands signifying that he is deep in thought. The two crouching men are also looking intently inside the car, with expressions which connote curiosity and mystification. For these men, there is something puzzling about this car. To decode this ad more fully, we need to examine the linguistic signs which are placed beneath the picture. The function of the linguistic signs is to 'anchor' the various meanings of the image down, to selectively control the ways in which it can be decoded by a reader of the ad (Barthes 1977b: 39).

The copy text begins with the syntagm of linguistic signs 'We've doctored the Golf'. Drawing on the presence of the graphic sign on the right, the VW Cars logo, and the syntagm 'The new Golf Estate', we can assume that the car denoted in the picture, and the signified of 'Golf' in the first linguistic syntagm, is a new VW car. What does the signifier 'doctored' signify? To



1 Magazine advertisement for VW Golf Estate

doctor something is to conduct a medical procedure, often to remove an organ, or figuratively to doctor is to alter something by removing a part of it. So two related meanings of the syntagm 'We've doctored the Golf' are that Volkswagen have called some doctors in to conduct a procedure on their car, or that VW have altered their car by removing something from it. This meaning of the syntagm is constructed by referring to the value of the sign 'doctored' in the code of language. Moving back to the picture, we might assume that the three men are doctors, who have just altered the car. This decoding of the picture might seem to be supported by the next linguistic syntagm in the caption, 'The new estate is 41 per cent bigger on the inside than the hatchback version'. After being treated by the doctors, the car has been altered. But how could it become bigger if something has been removed from it? The meaning of the sign 'doctored' seems to contradict the meaning of the second syntagm in the ad.

There is a puzzle here, which can only be solved by referring to another media text. This ad can be described as 'intertextual', since it borrows from and refers to another text. The three men are iconic signs denoting actors who played fictional characters in the British television series *Doctor Who*. Each man appeared as the character Doctor Who, a traveller in time and space, in separate series of the programme in the 1970s and 1980s. So the sign 'doctor' signifies Doctor Who, and the car has been 'Doctor Who-ed' rather than just 'doctored' in the usual sense. To decode the meaning of 'Doctor Who-ed' it is necessary to know something about the television series. It involved travelling in space and time in a vehicle called the TARDIS, which appeared on the outside to be a blue police telephone box (something small) but on the inside was a very large spacecraft (something big). To 'Doctor Who' the VW Golf is to make it bigger on the inside than it appears on the outside.

Once we perceive the intertextual reference in the ad to *Doctor Who*, much more meaning becomes available to us. The car is blue, like the TARDIS. The car is for travelling in physical space, like the TARDIS. The Doctor Whos in the picture were incarnations of Doctor Who at different times, but they are together in the picture at the same time. The car seems to have acted like the TARDIS, which travelled in time, by bringing the Doctors

together from their different times to the time the picture was taken. The Doctor Who character solves mysteries and problems. The three Doctors are now puzzling over the apparent mystery of the VW Golf Estate's bigger internal space. These further meanings of the ad are only communicated once we decode the intertextual reference to *Doctor Who* in the ad, and use this cultural knowledge to solve the puzzle set by the ad. Many of the signs in the ad function as clues to help us select the appropriate cultural knowledge, and to eliminate knowledge which is not appropriate. For instance, it does not matter whether we know the names of the actors who appear in the ad, the plots or other characters in *Doctor Who*, or even whether the men in the ad are real or waxwork dummies.

The ad empties out the meanings of *Doctor Who*, leaving only some of them behind. The mythic meaning of the ad, that the new VW Golf Estate is very roomy, is constructed from a few connotations of the iconic signs denoting the men looking at the car, and a few connotations of the linguistic signs 'doctored' and 'bigger on the inside'. The unexpected way that the ad communicates this message was one of the reasons that the ad complement 16 December 1994), as the award judge, Tim Mellors, commented. The ad borrows signs and meanings from another media text, a process known as intertextuality. But it only borrows some meanings and not others, and the semiotic richness of the ad depends on the cultural currency of *Doctor Who* among readers of the ad. Without some knowledge of *Doctor Who*, the ad might seem rather mysterious. To 'doctor' the Golf might decode as to mutilate or castrate it, for instance. Perhaps the men looking at the car are working out how to steal it. Perhaps 'We've doctored the Golf' refers to the way that the photographer has cut off the front half of the car from the picture. The potential ambiguity of the visual signs and linguistic syntagms in the ad are reduced once the signs 'bigger on the inside' show us how to decode the ad. This linguistic syntagm anchors the meanings of the image and of other linguistic signs.

For someone unfamiliar with *Doctor Who*, the denoted linguistic message that the Golf estate is bigger than the hatchback version would still be meaningful, but the meanings of the picture

would not be anchored down by the reference to *Doctor Who*. The back and forth movement of meaning between text and image, the 'relay' (Barthes 1977b: 41) of meaning between the two, would also be much less clear. It is evidently important to ask who the reader of this ad is assumed to be, since the reader's cultural experience of other media texts (specifically *Doctor Who*) is the basis of the ad's intertextual effectiveness.

#### The VW Golf Estate ad's contexts and readers

The ad was placed in these magazines: *Golf Monthly*, *Motor Boat & Yachting*, *Practical Boat Owner*, *Horse & Hound*, *Country Life*, *Amateur Photographer*, *The Field*, and *Camping & Caravanning*. The readers of these magazines probably carry equipment around when they are pursuing their leisure interests, or they are people who would like to indulge in the relatively expensive leisure interests featured in the magazines. An estate car would satisfy a real need for some readers, or, for aspiring readers, to own the car could function as a sign that they belong to the group who might need an estate car like this. So there are several functions of this ad, including announcing a new VW model, associating the VW Golf Estate with relatively expensive leisure pursuits, and encouraging readers to find out about the car (the ad includes a telephone contact number). The reader of the ad is 'positioned' by the ad as someone who needs or desires a VW Golf Estate.

But all of these functions of the ad in positioning its reader do not explain why the ad is structured as a puzzle that can be solved by someone familiar with *Doctor Who*. This is what Nigel Brotherton, marketing director of Volkswagen (UK) is quoted as saying:

Estate cars are often seen as dull and boring. This is not helped by advertising which normally portrays them as the load carrying derivative of the range. We wanted the Golf Estate to be aspirational and not just a load lugger from Volkswagen. The target market was 'thirty-somethings' with young families whose lifestyle required an estate. These people were currently driving hatchbacks as the image of estate cars was not for them. By advertising the Golf Estate in a new and unusual way we hoped to convince them that the car was not like its dull and worthy rivals. (*Campaign* supplement, 16 December 1994)

So the *Dr Who* puzzle, because it is 'unusual', was chosen partly to establish a correlation between unusualness and the VW Golf Estate. The mythic meaning 'unusualness' is shared by the ad, by the car, and by the potential buyers of the car. The ad stands out from other less interesting competitors, and according to the message of the ad, the car and its potential purchasers stand out too. Furthermore, *Doctor Who* was a television series which was very popular in Britain in the 1970s and early 1980s when the Doctors in the ad appeared in the programme. People in their thirties in the early 1990s were very likely to know of the programme and to remember it with nostalgic affection. Decoding the ad's puzzle was probably a pleasurable experience for thirty-something readers, because they possess the appropriate cultural memory and this memory has pleasurable connotations for them.

It should now be clear that the intertextual reference to *Doctor Who* in the ad is not just amusing, not just unusual, and not just a puzzle. It is an unusual and amusing puzzle because this is a way of targeting a particular group of people. Aspiring thirty-somethings with families who are interested in certain leisure pursuits were 'ideal readers' of this ad. The ad is not simply asking these readers to buy a VW Golf Estate. It is endowing the car and these ideal readers with positive mythic meanings that can be attained only by decoding the ad appropriately. It is possible to decode the ad partially, incorrectly, or perversely. But the ad reduces the chances of these outcomes by virtue of the particular cultural knowledge it calls on, the context in which it appears, and the way that its visual and linguistic signs point the reader in the right direction, towards the correct position for understanding it.

This issue of positioning by the text is central to the way that ads (and other kinds of text) have been discussed by semiotic critics. In order to make sense of the signs in an ad, it is necessary for the reader to adopt a particular subject-position. The individual subject (the reader of the ad) positions himself or herself as a decoder of the ad's signs, and as the recipient of its meanings. The individual subject has to occupy the reading-position laid out by the structure of the ad, since this reading-position is the place from where the ad makes sense. The situation is like that of

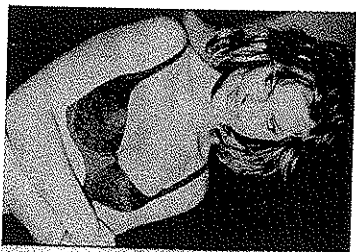
someone in an art gallery walking past a series of pictures. It is only possible to see a particular picture properly if you stand still, at an appropriate distance from the picture. If you walk past quickly, stand too close, too far away, or too much to one side, you can hardly see the picture. There is a particular position from which the picture 'makes sense', and to make sense of the picture you must occupy the position which it demands. Here it is a physical position in space which is important, but, returning to ads, it is not only physical position but also ideological position that counts. Ads position us as consumers, and as people who have a need or desire for certain products and the social meanings which these products have. There is a subjective identity which ads require us to take on, in order to make sense of ads' meanings.

But this notion of positioning by the text has several drawbacks as a way of describing how people read ads. It tends to treat all ads as if they were in the end the same, since all ads are regarded as positioning the individual subject in such a way as to naturalise a dominant ideology of consumerism. It tends to treat all real individuals as the same, since the positioning of subjects by the ad's structure of signs is a general model which applies to all readers. As we have seen, a quite well-defined group of readers were positioned by the VW Golf ad to receive all of its meaning. Other readers and groups of readers might easily decode the ad perversely, 'incorrectly', in which case the ad would still make a kind of 'sense', but a very different sense from the one the advertisers intended. The theory of textual positioning assumes that there is one 'correct' reading of any ad, which is its true meaning. It de-emphasises the ambiguity of signs (like 'doctored'), since all the signs in the ad seem to lead finally to the true meaning. It assumes that the 'scientific' discourses of semiotics and the theory of ideology are more objective than other analytical techniques, and can reveal a 'true' meaning of an ad which most real readers do not perceive because they are in the grip of ideology. We can see in more detail how some of these problems affect the analysis of ads by looking at an ad from one of the most successful campaigns of the 1990s, a Wonderbra ad.

### Wonderbra

This ad can be read in a number of different ways, from different subject-positions, and problematises the distinction between an evident surface meaning and a concealed depth meaning which semiotic analysis can reveal. Like the VW Golf Estate ad, it draws on cultural knowledge of other media texts. It also appeals to an awareness of the critical discourses about advertising from feminist analysts and critics of ideology. It becomes very difficult to see what the 'true' or correct meaning of this ad might be. Discussing this ad brings us face to face with the limits of semiotic analysis, and of the theoretical model of media communication which has been developed earlier in this book.

Our first step must be to identify the signs in the ad, and then to decide how they relate to mythic meanings. The picture is an iconic sign denoting a woman, who is leaning against something, perhaps an open door. She is wearing a bra, and in the original picture the bra is bright green (this is the only colour in the picture, the rest of the picture is in tones of black and white). There is a syntagm of linguistic signs, 'Terrible thing, envy', and a further syntagm 'Now available in extravert green'. There is a further iconic sign denoting the brand label which would be attached to a Wonderbra when on sale. To read this ad, we would identify the connotations of the signs present in it, seeing how the anchorage between the picture and the text directs us towards the 'correct' reading of the ad. But there are several



TERRIBLE  
THING, ENVY.

THE ONE AND ONLY  
WONDERBRA

NOW AVAILABLE IN EXTRAVERT GREEN.

2 Wonderbra poster advertisement

### Advertisements

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ways of reading the connotations of the signs in this ad, and several social myths which the ad invokes.

The relay between the bra denoted iconically in the ad and the linguistic sign 'Wonderbra' makes it easy to see that this ad for a Wonderbra product. There is a further relay between the greenness of the bra and the linguistic sign 'envy', since green signifies envy in a cultural code (just as red signifies anger, for instance). But the iconic sign of the green bra does not anchor the meanings of 'envy' here in any obvious way. Let's assume that 'Terrible thing, envy' signifies the response of the reader of the ad to the picture. Perhaps a female reader would envy the woman because she owns this bra (the bra is signified as a desired object), but the reader's envy feels 'terrible'. Perhaps a female reader would envy the woman because of the sexual attractiveness which the bra gives the woman (the bra is a sign of desired sexual attractiveness), but the reader's envy feels 'terrible'. Perhaps a heterosexual male reader would envy the bra because it holds the breasts of the woman (the woman is signified as a desired object), but the reader's envy feels 'terrible'. Perhaps a male reader would envy the woman because she can display her sexual attractiveness by wearing this bra (female sexual display is signified as a desired mythic attribute of women but not men), but the reader's envy feels 'terrible'. Perhaps a heterosexual male reader would envy the person to whom the woman displays herself in the picture, her partner perhaps (the woman's partner is a desired subject-position), but to envy the partner is 'terrible'.

There is a range of possible meanings of the linguistic signs, and of possible relays between linguistic and iconic signs. But in each case, the relationship of the reading subject to the picture is one of desire, either a desire to have something or to be something, and in each case the reading subject feels terrible about this desire. Envy is signified in the ad as an attribute of the reader, but is at the same time acknowledged as an undesirable emotion. Another set of decodings of the ad would result if the syntagm 'Terrible thing, envy' represents the speech of the woman in the picture, but I shall not list them all here. This would affect the relay between the iconic and linguistic signs, and the way that the linguistic signs anchor the meanings of the

iconic signs. Once again there would be several ways of decoding the ad, and several subject-positions available for the reader. As before, enviousness would be signified as an attribute of the reader, but the condemnation of envy would come from the woman rather than the reader. The ad would establish a desire to have or to be something, but also withdraw permission for the desire.

The ambiguity which I have noted briefly here is reinforced by the connotations of the model's pose. Her arms are folded. This gives greater prominence to the lifting up and pushing forward of her breasts which the bra achieves, reinforcing the decodings of the ad which focus on her sexual desirability. But her folded arms also create a kind of barrier between her and the reader, and this is a common connotation of folded arms in our culture in general. Like the linguistic syntagm 'Terrible thing, envy', the folded arms are an ambiguous sign, connoting that the woman is to be envied, but that she is unattainable or critical of the one who envies her. Similarly, the woman's sidelong glance might connote flirtatiousness, or a sardonic attitude, or both at the same time. The ad therefore exhibits a kind of give and take in the possible decodings which it allows. It offers the reader a range of possible subject-positions, but denies them to the reader at the same time. This is a feature which is very common in ads, and depends on irony. Ironic statements contain a denoted meaning, and a connoted meaning which contradicts the denoted meaning. The linguistic syntagm 'Terrible thing, envy' denotes that envy is a negative emotion, but it connotes that its speaker is envious or envied anyway, and doesn't really mind being envious or envied. This ironic quality of the syntagm means that envy is regretted but also enjoyed. The social meaning of envy is being made ambiguous by the ad in a very subtle way. Envy, it seems, is bad, but it is also good in the sense that it is pleasurable.

The irony of the linguistic syntagm is reinforced by a relay between it and the picture, since the double decoding of the syntagm is parallel to the doubleness in the meaning of the woman's gesture and expression. As noted above, her gesture and expression can be read in at least two ways. The mythic meaning of the ad as a whole then seems to be that the woman, the bra, and

body  
language

the reader, can mean several things at once. The woman, the bra and the reader are not single and fixed identities, but sites where several different coded social meanings overlap and oscillate back and forth. We do not need to decide on a single social meaning for the bra, the woman who wears it in the picture, or for ourselves as readers of the ad or buyers of the bra. The ad invites us to enjoy the unanchoredness of its signs, and the multiplicity of the bra's social meanings. This oscillation of meaning back and forth, which irony makes possible, has very major consequences for the semiotic analysis of the ad.

The outline of a critical semiotic analysis of the Wonderbra ad would be something like this. The ad addresses women, presenting them with a sign connoting sexual attractiveness and power (the woman wearing the bra). These social meanings, according to the ad, can be attained by women if they buy the bra. To buy the bra is to 'buy into' an ideological myth that women should present themselves as objects for men's sexual gratification. To critique the ad in this way is also to critique it as a mechanism for perpetuating an oppressive ideology. However, as we have seen, it is by no means certain that the ideological message of the ad revealed by such a critique is the 'true' meaning of the ad. There are a number of coherent alternative ways of reading the ad, and a number of possible subject-positions from which to understand it. The signs in the ad are too ambiguous, too 'polysemic' (multiple in their meanings), to decide on one 'true' message of the ad.

Furthermore, the ad seems to be constructed so that it can disarm an ideological critique of its meanings. The ad signifies (among other things) that women can choose whether or not to become 'extravert': sexually desirable, displaying their bras and themselves as signs of desirability. The irony in the ad signifies that women can both choose to become desirable and at the same time distance themselves from being perceived as objects of desire by others. Irony like this was used by Madonna, who popularised bras as fashion items and was also represented simultaneously as an object of desire and as the controller of her own image, for instance, and the ad's irony may therefore function as an intertextual borrowing, offering its readers clues about its relationship with representations of powerful and desirable

women. To take on the identity of a desired object can be enjoyed by women, but they can also retain their power as subjects (and not just objects) by adopting an ironic attitude towards this status as a desired object. The Wonderbra ad takes on a feminist ideological critique which would see women as signs of desirability and objecthood, and is ironic about this critique. The wearer of Wonderbra has two kinds of pleasure: both the pleasure of being a desired object, and the pleasure of refusing to be perceived as a desired object while nevertheless being one. In fact, both of these pleasures can exist simultaneously. The Wonderbra product becomes a sign of a woman's power over the way she is perceived, for she is perceived as both desirable, and in control of the social meaning of her desirability, at the same time.

### The Wonderbra ad's contexts and readers

The Wonderbra ad discussed here was one of a sequence, featuring the same model, similarly ironic slogans, and similarly ambiguous mythic meanings. The 'Terrible thing, envy' ad ran in a range of glossy women's magazines, and ads like it were also displayed on poster hoardings around Britain. The ad campaign began on St Valentine's Day, February 1994, a day on which romance is celebrated, so that the social meanings of St Valentine's Day clearly supported the codings of the ad. While the readers of women's magazines are mainly women, the poster versions of these ads would have been seen by a wide range of people of both sexes and of varying ages (which was one reason for offering the different reading-positions outlined above). For example, 40 per cent of perfume sales are to men for women at Christmas. Some perfume ads are targeted at women, to increase brand awareness and the desirability of a brand. But poster ads address men too, who can be prompted to recognise and select a brand for purchase as a gift. This is called 'overlook' in advertising terminology and refers to the targeting of one audience with an image apparently designed for another audience. The Wonderbra campaign was very successful. It reportedly cost £130,000 to put the first three Wonderbra posters on 900 hoardings around Britain for two weeks, and £200,000 to publish the same three ads in women's magazines until June (Cam-

paign, 9 January 1995: 21). This is a relatively small cost for a national advertising campaign. The response to the ads led to the production of a total of fifteen different ads by January 1995, and by then the campaign was running in ten countries.

The effects of the campaign are difficult to assess, and the responses of real readers of the ads are even more elusive. TBWA, the agency which created the ads, won Campaign of the Year for Wonderbra in 1994 (they also won silver at the 1994 Advertising Effectiveness Awards). UK sales of Wonderbras rose by 41 per cent and the manufacturer (Playtex) reported sales of 25,000 bras per week. It seems reasonable to deduce that the multiple meanings of Wonderbra signified in the ads were able to prompt at least some of these sales. But in addition, the campaign was mentioned in at least 400 stories in the local and national press, on radio and on television, supported by public relations initiatives. The woman denoted in the ads, Eva Herzigova, had previously been unknown but became the subject of extensive journalistic interest. Wonderbra ads were displayed in Times Square, New York, and during the football World Cup in Dublin, with puns and references specific to their location and occasion respectively. Kaliber beer ads were produced by another ad agency, Euro RSCG, which referred intertextually to the 'Hello Boys' Wonderbra ad by replacing Eva Herzigova with the Scottish comedian Billy Connolly pictured next to the slogan 'Hello Girls'. Giant Wonderbra ads were projected against the side of London's Battersea Power Station, with the line 'Happy Christmas from Wonderbra'.

In a situation like this, it becomes even more difficult to determine the 'correct' meaning of an ad. Even if a semiotic analysis claims to determine the 'correct' meaning which the signs and codes of a single ad construct, the ad is not a self-contained structure of signs. The meanings of the ad will be inflected and altered by the intertextual field of other ads, press stories, and media events which surround the ad. The Advertising Standards Authority, which ensures that ads are 'legal, decent, honest and truthful' received 959 complaints about the sexual suggestiveness of the poster ad for Optium perfume in 2000 (Amy-Chin 2001), and the ad was withdrawn. The ad did not generate controversy when printed in women's magazines, where its audience



was assumed to be predominantly women. But the appearance of the ads in poster form, coupled with widespread coverage of them in newspapers, alerted many people to them. The Opium ad was reproduced on the front page of *The Sun* newspaper on 20 December, and was connected to previous erotic ads including the Wonderbra series, one of which was reproduced by *The Sun* on the same page. Readers of ads bring their decodings of related texts to their decoding of the ad. Indeed, when the Wonderbra campaign became a media event in itself, the effect of the ads may have been to advertise the campaign as much as to advertise the product. These factors, which have to do with the social context of ads and of their readers, make any reading of an ad as a self-contained system of signs with a determinable ideological effect very difficult to justify as 'true'.

This chapter has focused on the ways in which semiotic analysis helps us to decode the meanings of ads. Ads have been discussed here as relatively self-contained texts, although we have seen that the mythic meanings which ads draw on and promote are also dependent on cultural knowledge which exists for readers outside of the particular ad being read. The meanings of signs are always multiple or 'polysemic', and we have seen how some ads narrow down this polysemic quality of signs but do not eliminate it altogether, while other ads exploit polysemia. In the next chapter, which deals with a range of glossy magazines, we shall encounter polysemic signs and the importance of cultural codes again. We will also be considering the importance of models of how readers are positioned again too, drawing on some of the insights which psychoanalytic theories of subjective identity have contributed to semiotic analysis. As we have seen here in the case of theories of ideology and readership, it is always necessary to think about the limitations and assumptions behind our analytical techniques, as well as making use of the critical power they offer.

### Sources and further reading

The first and still very perceptive use of semiotics to analyse advertisements is Williamson (1978), which is more theoretically dense than this chapter but illustrates its points with reference to a huge number of

magazine ads that are reproduced in its pages. Later studies of advertisements include Goffman (1979), Dyer (1982), Vestergaard and Schrøeder (1985), Myers (1986), Goldman (1992), Cook (1992), Myers (1994, 1999) and Cannon *et al.* (2000). There are also useful sections on advertising in Alvarado and Thompson (1990), and Marris and Thornham (1999). All of these books use semiotic methods to some degree, and recent books also discuss the limitations of critical semiotic studies of ads. Advertising producers' perspective on their business can be found in *Campaign* and *Admap* magazines. White (1988) is an example of a book by an advertising practitioner on making ads, and Meech (1999) discusses the advertising business. Umiker-Sebeck (1987) contains a series of essays on advertising, some of which present the case for using semiotics to make more effective ads. Althusser's (1971) theory of ideology is quite difficult. There are books like Fairclough (1995) which contain explanations and discussions of ideology, and it is often better to see how this concept is deployed in relation to concrete media examples. This is done in the books listed above which use semiotics to critique advertisements, where ideology is discussed with specific reference to ads.

### Suggestions for further work

- 1 Note the situations in which ads can be found (on bus shelters, on trains, on hoardings, in magazines, etc.). How might the situation of an ad affect its meanings and the ways it is decoded?
- 2 Analyse the representations of men in a group of ads. How similar or different are the codes used to represent men to those used to represent women in ads you have seen? What are the reasons for these similarities and differences?
- 3 Choose three ads for a similar type of product (car, training shoe, pension, or soft drink, for example). How similar and how different are the mythic meanings of the products in the three ads? Why is this?
- 4 Ads for some products (like cigarettes) are not allowed to recommend the product explicitly. What semiotic strategies are used to connote desirability, pleasure, or difference from competing products in these ads? Are the same strategies used in ads for other products which could be explicitly recommended?
- 5 Both ads discussed in this chapter contain linguistic signs as well as visual ones. How do ads with no words attempt to organise the multiple connotations of what is denoted visually in them?
- 6 Compare ads from earlier decades with contemporary ads for similar products (Williamson 1978 has many ads from the 1970s, and

Myers 1994 has some from before World War II if you cannot find your own). What similarities and differences do you find in the semiotic strategies of each period? Why is this?

- 7 Analyse the connotations of the brand names and logos of five products. Why were these names and logos chosen? Could any of them be used as the name of a product of a different type?