Introduction to semiotics

Semiotics (or semiology) is the study of signs. It explores how we encode and decode meaning from cultural texts, which could include books, films, clothes, cities – anything that can be 'read' and interpreted. Semiotics is a good starting point for cultural analysis training as it offers a set of straight forwards methods for analysis that can then be applied in a range of contexts. It also connects well to the creative practice workshops, as artists and creators are concerned with encoding meaning, whether consciously or not.

By the end of this workshop, you should be able to …

1. Understand and apply basic ideas from semiotics to the analysis of cultural texts
2. Identify different types of sign
3. Distinguish between encoding and decoding meaning in cultural texts
4. Practice synchronic and diachronic analysis

Toolkit for Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching
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Lesson plan

In preparation for this workshop, learners can be asked to find a cultural object (a book or a song, an artwork, an item, a website, for example) that explores relevant issues or ideas. As an optional task, they could be asked to write 100 words about how this object addresses the courses topic or question.

Reading signs

Task 1 (whole group, 10 mins): Briefly introduce the cultural object that you have selected or written about as preparatory task. Why did you choose this one? What did it 'tell' you about the topic or question?

⇨ Tutor to bring different types of cultural objects relating to the sub question as well (e.g., for the question "How is wealth distributed?" might use a tabloid newspaper, a Ken Loach film DVD, a Hannah Lavery poem, a Lowry painting, George Orwell or Dickens novel, a utility bill, a piece of clothing or jewellery – anything related to the topic). This is mainly to ensure that a variety of human-made objects are available as examples.

Aim: students are asked to consider how these objects might be interpreted and what they might reveal in relation to the question.

Key point to emphasise: All of these objects can be considered **'texts'** that can be interpreted and analysed. (Optional: quick brainstorm on what other human-made things they can think of – including architecture, landscapes, structures etc.)

Task 2 (whole group discussion, 5-10 minutes): What skills or methods might we need to develop in order to understand and research these objects?

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⇨ Explain that there are many theories and methods, representing a range of approaches to analysing and working with cultural texts. Perhaps the students are aware of some of these? (Collate a few ideas/responses; Examples might include: textual analysis, narrative analysis, close reading, visual analysis, producing and reading maps, observations…)

Brief (10 minutes?) 'lecture' on semiotics as key theory to understand the study of *signs*: 'those objects by which humans communicate meaning: words, images, behaviour, arrangements of many kinds, in which a meaning or idea is relayed by a corresponding manifestation we can perceive' (Fortier 2016, 14).

Note the distinction between the "manifestation we can perceive" (the 'thing', in semiotic terminology the 'signifier' – this can be something tangible but also anything else made or used by humans), and the corresponding "meaning or idea [that] is relayed" (the 'signified'). The link between signifier and signified is not self-explanatory! And often/usually, the signifier refers not to a specific item but rather to the concept behind it (e.g., not a specific cow, but 'cow' in general).

⇨ Provide some examples: I stick out my tongue; The sky gets cloudy; I put two fingers in the air – that way; And the other way; I wear a suit; What I am wearing now. How would you 'read' (interpret) all these signs?

⇨ It should also be easy to see how this idea of signs can be applied to the study of cultural artefacts – books, plays or films, as a **way of understanding how meaning is conveyed** to the reader, audience or spectator: A low base note plays; Realistic Elizabethan costumes are worn; Lighting gradually turns blue

⇨ Everything can be read as a sign, but there has to be someone to read these signs (or to *decode* them), and when we use semiotics, or semiology, in cultural analysis, we are looking for the signs that have been *encoded* – e.g. put on screen or stage for others to interpret. One of the key things to consider is whether these signs have been put there consciously.

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⇨ Signs are the raw material of semiotics.

⇨ Semiotic theory is based on / started with linguistics (Ferdinand de Sassure, Course in General Linguistics; he distinguished between the signifier – the sound of a word, a gesture – and the signified; the sound 'hello' together with the wave of a hand signal 'a greeting'). The relationship between the sound/word and the meaning is arbitrary. But language works because it is a system, words have meanings in relationship to other words.

CAT and (image of a cat) have no logical connection; it may as well be called FROG or TABLE or SWEDEN. Words have meaning only in relation to other words; thus CAT is only distinct because it is not FROG or TABLE or SWEDEN. (Elaine Aston and George Savona: 'it is through the interplay of similarities and differences between signifiers that meaning is created, and, in order to understand this, a structuralist approach is required in which the 'parts' of language are considered in relation to the "whole"' (1991, 6).)

⇨ Written words / letters can be seen as 'symbols' because they only symbolise the thing that they refer to, rather than having any literal connection. Other more obvious types of sign/signifiers include icons.

Provide printed images: a dollar sign (symbol: something that stands for or represents something else), the picture of a cow (index: (visual) representation of something that exists/existed) and a picture of bathroom/toilet icon (icon: a sign that represents an object, place or idea, and that shares some qualities of the thing it represents)

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⇨ In the late nineteenth century, Charles Peirce introduced a categorisation of signs, and also focussed on the ways in which signs are interpreted, rather than the ways in which they operate as a fixed system.

⇨ De Saussure and Peirce were interested in the social and historical evolution of signs, and this diachronic approach indicated the complex ways in which signs could shift and change meaning over time (diachronic approach rather than synchronic), as different people from different places and cultures interpreted them at different times. There is a social dimension to semiotics.

Emphasise again some important points that will often play a role when we analyse any type of cultural object (sign):

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⇨ They don't operate in isolation, they are part of a system. The relationship between them is as important (and often more important) than what they signify themselves. An image of the sun may signal 'holiday' (to us – remember the social/cultural dimension) when part of a picture together with a pool or a beach. But it may signal 'climate crisis' when part of a picture that shows scorched earth.

⇨ This relationship can be explored either synchronously (looking at the relationship between signs on a still image, or at the relationship between the words in a poem, for example) or with a diachronic approach: how does the relationship change over time (e.g., the meaning of a word or an icon/symbol/item changes over time as human language/culture evolves, or we see it differently because it is part of a scene that enfolds over time as part of a film clip etc.)

Task 3 (10 minutes, in pairs): Analyse / interpret the signs in an image (a *synchronic* analysis) – a propaganda poster or a tabloid front page, for example. Complete in pairs, discuss as group.

⇨ What signs do you identify? Describe the image and how it relates to the article (headline).

⇨ What do they tell us about our question (e.g. How is wealth distributed)?

⇨ Key point: signs work together or against each other

Task 4 (15 mins): Analyse / interpret the signs in a video clip (a *diachronic* analysis) – a theatre scene or a TV advert, for example.

⇨ Identify types of sign that were part of the clip: kinesics/body language, light, sound, clothing, voice, scenery

⇨ How do they contribute to the meaning overall? (Specifically: in relationship to our question)

⇨ Can you think of yet other signs that might be used to convey meaning? (e.g, smell, haptics, proxemics/use of space)

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Key readings or resources

- Aston, Elaine, and George Savona. 1991. *Theatre as Sign System: A semiotics of text and performance*. London: Routledge.

- Fortier, Mark. 2016. *Theory/Theatre: An introduction*. 3rd ed. Oxon: Routledge.

- de Saussure, Ferdinand. 2011. *Course in General Linguistics*. Bally, Albert (original edn.) Sechehaye, Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy. New York: Columbia University Press.

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