

Preface

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Semiotics and popular culture seem inseparable. They go together like love and marriage—not to mention a horse and carriage. Semiotics, as the study of sign systems, especially in areas where sign systems are not commonly thought to be in operation, fits perfectly with the analysis of the popular. Semiotics reveals hidden depths. It demonstrates the complex and nuanced nature of quotidian practices. In an age when the high culture/low culture divide can no longer be taken for granted, semiotics has demonstrated that the popular is not so “low” after all: it is sophisticated and, sometimes, even thoroughly systematic. Likewise, elite culture has been exposed under semiotics’ scrutiny as not so “high” as it thought it was: Elite culture shares the same kind of systematised tendencies as popular culture and, being the preserve of the elite, it is frequently complicit with existing power structures and often downright reactionary. Given semiotics’ persuasiveness regarding such key features of contemporary life, it is hardly surprising that semiotics and popular culture should be so closely associated.

However, the association is an historical one and not as straightforward as the benefits described above would seem to imply. Not so long ago, albeit for a brief period, semiotics was in fashion and its standing as a fashion prerequisite was predicated on its relation to popular culture. The period of semiotics’ unfortunate fashionable status roughly runs from the late 1950s to the early 1970s in France and from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s in the Anglophone world and elsewhere. It is “unfortunate” in that fads that are in fashion soon go out of fashion; moreover, rather than being held in disfavor, such fads actually become the object of (often misplaced) opprobrium. Semiotics’ short lived modishness is unfortunate for other reasons, too: chiefly, that “semiotics” during this period was actually *semi-ology*. As is well known and rehearsed in numerous well-informed and lesser-informed accounts of sign study, the founders of semiotics were Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. This information is offered by such texts despite the fact that semiotics has a long lineage, back through scholasticism to Augustine and then further beyond to the work of the ancient medics. Yet one would be hard pressed to find any volume during the modish period, as well as after, which even afforded the *semiotic* of Peirce equal space with the attempted explication of Saussure’s projected science of semiology. Semiotics, in this period—and to some extent after-

wards—was considered by many to be a strictly Saussurean affair, one which exposed the sometimes insidious functioning of popular culture.

The tasks of revelation, exposure, and critique were set for semiotics by a number of people and determinants. Clearly, the work of Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, A. J. Greimas, Vladimir Propp, and Gerard Genette were all being translated into English at a time when Western audiences were ripe for further information that demonstrated the routine naturalization of ideology in all its everyday cultural forms. Above all, though, it was the work of Roland Barthes which provided the most direct, easily applicable and adaptable vocabulary for the deconstruction of popular culture. Crucial to the process he described was the notion of “mythology,” based on an apparently substantial linguistic foundation. For Barthes, a mythology is a phenomenon of everyday life that represents a departure from that which is defined, traditionally, by the term “myth.” In *Mythologies* (published in an English translation in 1973 but originally published in French in 1957), Barthes drew together a series of brief articles he had written for French magazines in the period 1954 to 1956. These were his investigations into the nature of contemporary French life, each one a separate “mythology.” Barthes’ aim in drawing attention to these facets of everyday (French) existence was “to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden” (1973, p. 11). The mythologies he singles out in this way include wrestling, the haircuts of the Roman characters in Mankiewicz’s film of *Julius Caesar*, the face of Garbo, *steack frites*, striptease, the new Citroën, and the brain of Einstein. Importantly, though, Barthes does not simply expose the power interests underpinning these commonplaces and commodities of daily life. In addition, he insists that their existence as myths is dependent on the fact that “myth is a language” (1973, p. 11). The magazine essays were therefore supplemented by an essay called “Myth today” in which “semiological analysis [was] initiated, at least as far as I am concerned” (1973, p. 9).

Given the focus of Barthes’ concept of “myth” on popular culture, it was hardly surprising that his work was taken up with great fervor, especially by Anglophone media and cultural studies. The example that Barthes uses in “Myth today,” that of a photograph on the cover of *Paris-Match* of a black Algerian soldier saluting the French flag, has served numerous commentators as a prime example of the pervasive nature of myth, from Coward and Ellis (1977, pp. 27–29) through Deacon et al. (1999, pp. 144–145). Thus, the understanding of “myth” has been a regular part of the armory by which to deconstruct or “demythologise” the mythological texts that popular culture promulgates. Generations of students have been taught to expose ideology in popular culture, to see how signs suffer the imposition of mythical messages from without, almost as though some kind of subliminal and corrupting message has been secretly placed by some shady agency on every artefact that large numbers of people enjoy. In fact, such a use of myth is either a misunderstanding, an instance of laziness, or a deliberate distortion of Barthes’ systematic approach to the matter (for examples, see

Bignell 1997, pp. 16–17, 23; Fiske 1990, pp. 85–91; and, to a slightly lesser extent, Dyer 1982, p. 128).

Ironically, years before Barthes' initial conception of myth was being taken up by cultural critics and media theorists in Britain and North America, he had already shifted the emphasis of his analysis. In his 1971 retrospective on *Mythologies*, Barthes argued that the identification and uncovering of myths was no longer sufficient in the post-1968 world. Myths had become easily recognizable and their exposure a routine exercise. Barthes therefore recommended that work should proceed on the identification of "sociolects." The task of semiology was

No longer simply to *upend* (or *right*) the mythical message, to stand it back on its feet, with denotation at the bottom and connotation at the top, nature on the surface and class interest deep down, but rather to change the object itself, to produce a new object, point of departure for a new science. (1977, p. 169)

For Barthes, "denunciation, demystification (demythification)" (1977, p. 166) of the bourgeois and the petit-bourgeois became, itself, a mythological *doxa*. Denouncing popular culture had become as complacent as celebrating it. Such "mythoclasm" must be succeeded by "semioclasm," he claimed, and what was needed was a far-reaching interrogation of *all* sign systems and a *challenge* to their very basis. This would not simply entail unravelling the connection of, for example, denotation and connotation, but a more thorough assault on the mechanics of meaning. For many, this is now the very crux of contemporary semiotics.

Barthes' call for "semioclasm" was written shortly after the formation of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in 1969, where a coalition of international semioticians broadened the entire agenda of sign study by encouraging its application to the whole of life. Notwithstanding the experience of the failed student rebellions of 1968, it cannot be a coincidence that Barthes moved away from "mythoclasm" at this precise point, even if he was not directly asking the really big questions that came to characterise international semiotics. While communications, cultural and media studies in universities and certain areas of public intellectual life continued to believe that repeated attempts to demythologise popular culture were worthwhile, semiotics had moved on. Operating internationally, semiotics began to explore all possible avenues open to it in the humanities and sciences. Under the aegis of its third founding father, Thomas A. Sebeok, a name less mentioned in the celebrated literature that regularly trotted out Peirce and Saussure, semiotics pursued the nature of sign relationships in the animal and plant domains as well as through extensive studies in all areas of human cultural endeavor.

From the early 1990s onwards, an increasing number of scholars were turning to the sign theory of Peirce, with Sebeok in particular promoting its timeliness. Peircean semiotics allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of signs in the world and a much wider field of application, especially beyond popular culture. Concomitantly, the project of biosemiotics, growing out of Sebeok's coinage of "zoosemiotics" for the study of

animal communication in the 1960s as well as the Sebeok inspired re-discovery of Jakob von Uexküll's work, sought to explicate semiosis and the web of relations that goes with it in the entire biosphere (Barbieri 2006). Furthermore, semiotics had expanded well beyond the realm of communication sciences and had now become crucial, again through Peirce, in the understanding of cognition (Deacon 1997). Those who "do" semiotics in the present, then, operate in a field where it is no longer adequate to simply pronounce that sign systems underlie cultural artefacts. Semiotics has reached so far that any element of surprise that such a pronouncement might have made in the days when it was in fashion would simply fall on fallow ground.

Nevertheless, contemporary semiotic analysis of popular culture is vibrant and resourceful in its discovery of new ways of understanding the everyday phenomena that are consumed on such massive scales in the West. Despite the fact that students are still routinely taught by tired academics to do basic myth criticism or ideology critique, the contributions to this issue evince a freshness which speaks of semiotics' pluralism and its commitment to semioclasms. All the contributions to this special issue come from young scholars who represent a new generation with fresh eyes searching the myriad forms of popular culture. Although this collection of articles is quite small, the contributors nevertheless offer some flavor of the diversity of popular culture in the early twenty first century. There are two contributions on pop music which, in spite of the superficial similarity of their subject matter, embody two very different sets of approaches to analysis (one musicological, the other a cultural study) and two very different modes of address. There is one article on self-generated digital music, an under-discussed topic, but a surprisingly widespread and popular practice. There is one on film, a perennial of popular culture analysis in the period between the 1970s and the 1990s, but here suggesting a new orientation for understanding cinema, based on some key principles from contemporary semiotics. There is an article that carries out image analysis on the unexpected topic of electronic literary texts as popular culture. And there is one article demonstrating not only the cunning required to carry out semioclasms and seek out the places where the popular resides (in this case, in the design of car interiors), but also illustrating the range of new questions that Peircean sign study and developments in theory of the emotions and cognitive science have presented for semiotics.

A sense of the articles' remit and the scope of this special issue are offered if they are summarised together. In the first article, Machin and Griffiths analyse the transient, but influential, phenomenon of "Britpop" in the late 1990s. Although the iconography of Britpop and its connection with politics has been discussed at length, what unites Britpop components musically has never been properly addressed. The assumption has been made that Britpop was merely a marketing ploy to lump together a number of diverse producers of music. Yet, as Machin and Griffiths show, Britpop has its own, "internal" musical discourses which distinguish it from the Indie scene out of which it grew, the harder authentic edge of punk and, especially, the then prevalent mainstream of "boybands." Through a fundamen-

tal and cogent form of musical analysis, they show how Britpop negotiated positions of authenticity, cynicism and modernity in such a way that it was left open to co-opting by New Labour and the Blair regime. In much the same way that Blair was to opportunistically pronounce *The Full Monty* (1997) his favourite film, New Labour's association with Britpop took the latter's most digestible elements and disregarded the more cutting satire which might otherwise have seemed integral.

Mazzali's article focuses on an area of contemporary popular culture which has a close bearing on the still fraught "high culture/low culture" divide. She discusses "hypertextual transpositions" in electronic versions of literary texts; that is, "multimedial added materials (explicative texts, images, video clips, audio files, etc.) that aim at enriching the reading experience and at sustaining the reader's comprehension of the literary text's significance." What she finds is important both to the understanding of popular culture as well as to theories regarding images and "visual literacy." Frequently, hypertextual transpositions will consist of images predominantly, often with the accompanying assumption that pictorial material necessarily aids comprehension: the "understanding by seeing" maxim. However, the use of pictorial images in hypertextual transpositions is often ambiguous and can sometimes impede comprehension of the literary text. Arguing for a greater understanding of inferential processes, the article provides a semiotic approach to images that serves as a corrective to many of the credulous accounts offered by linguists and critical discourse theorists drunk on the new-found power of images. Implicit in the article's conclusions is a criticism of those approaches which believe that simply adding pictures makes reading more simple and transforms culture into "popular culture." In addition, the article suggests that popular culture—of which the electronic literary text is an example—may itself require the attentive reading afforded to literature. Interestingly, Mazzali ultimately keeps faith with the project of hypertextual transpositions because of its contribution to the diversity of culture in its promise of rendering literary texts more approachable to those of us on this side of the "high culture/low culture" divide.

In "Computers as Medium in Music Production," Jan Voss focuses on a feature of technology that is transforming the production and consumption of music. As a producer (and consumer) of music, Voss demonstrates that the process of understanding popular cultural artefacts is always an inescapably semiotic one because sign systems are in operation whether one perceives them or not. Whereas cultural producers have used analogue means to convey signs to users or consumers and have done so on the basis of knowledge of sign systems enabling decoding, Voss points out that much transmission of signs can take place through digital encoding where a sign system may not be perceived (as in the mediation by computer). Indeed, as he argues, digital encoding may amount to no sign system at all since it is seldom susceptible of decoding until it is "re-coded" in analogue form. However, the article argues that digital signs can be considered as *qualisigns*, latent and waiting to become embodied. Using Peirce's sign theory, the article goes on to demystify aesthetic production in a fashion that simulta-

neously exemplifies the best popular culture critique (especially when aimed at “high culture”) and produces something new.

Haeffner’s article, ostensibly on Michael Winterbottom’s film, *In This World* (2002), presents some pointers for thinking about that perennial issue in popular culture, realism. Haeffner notes that what is understood as realism, especially with reference to film, has tended to become entrenched and reified. Furthermore, this is not unrelated to the way in which media studies has recently attempted in vocational pedagogy to teach students the “realities” of media production. Semiotics, too, has had a part to play in the reification of realism, especially through the influential, putatively Brechtian-influenced teachings of Roland Barthes on “anti-realism.” Haeffner proposes that contemporary semiotics and its sub-field of “semioethics” can help to reconceptualise realism. Taking from semioethics its central concern with the demands of dialogue, Haeffner presents a discussion with the screenwriter of *In This World*, Tony Grisoni. As the latter’s comments demonstrate, the making of the film and the crafting of the film’s special kind of realism depended not so much on entrenched categories as on answering demands in dialogue, operating according to the call of intersubjectivity and working within the restraints of intertextuality.

As has been noted, much work in contemporary semiotics is not just concerned with the old communication paradigms of sender–message–receiver but, instead, with the processes of cognition and their relations with signs. Drawing on some of the most groundbreaking work in this area, including Peircean sign theory, Merja Bauters’ essay analyses the interior design of the Volvo car, comparing a model from the 1960s with a contemporary version. What the differences in design exemplify is quite arresting. Using a mode of semiotic enquiry derived from the neurological work of Damasio and the semiotics of Peirce, Bauters describes the complex way in which humans’ emotional and sensual faculties are inculcated in the process of using and appreciating design features. What are at issue in this article are the ways in which “new” media go about the task of mediating between the vehicle and the human. Damasio’s work has shown that supposedly rational processes in humans are liberally dosed with the work of the emotions and that these are fed by material from all the five senses traditionally identified, as well as a few more. Peirce, on the other hand, suggests that the universe can be categorised with reference to three kinds of phenomena: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. In her marrying of these perspectives for the purposes of investigating car design, Bauters shows that the benefits of “new” media can be somewhat overstated. Indeed, as she shows, some conceptions of “new” media unthinkingly privilege the visual (and, sometimes, auditory) sense over the tactile and olfactory senses. The results of such privileging are not necessarily beneficial.

Finally, Martino analyses the career of the peerless British pop icon, Morrissey, from his early work with The Smiths up to his most recent release, *Ringleader of the Tormentors*. Employing an eclectic approach to sign study, Martino finds in Morrissey a figure whose potent iconic status fulfils a number of Bakhtinian virtues, chief among which are the resolutely “dialogic” bearing of his work, his inversion of mainstream cultural priori-

ties and his exemplification of a polyphonic consciousness. Crucial to Martino's analysis is a topic which is central to contemporary semiotics, that of translation. Martino finds that Morrissey's capacity for reinvention—a reinvention that one might relate to that performed by David Bowie but which is very different—depends on his translatability as a “living sign.” One ground for this translatability, of course, is Morrissey's liminal identity: as an unfailingly British—especially, English—icon, he is also traversed by his Irish heritage and the burden of history that that entails. As such, Morrissey embodies a powerful postcolonial voice in a period when mainstream media views—particularly those of music journalists—are too conservative and backward-looking to recognise contemporary cultural change. Martino provides a useful career overview of Morrissey while employing a lightness of tone as well as considerable insight and erudition to his analysis, all of which would be envied by the more aspiring rock journalists.

What all of these contributions exemplify—more, even, than a new breed of diverse analyses of popular culture—is a skill that is both ancient and modern and which, periodically, goes through phases of neglect. It is, simply, the skill of close reading. That is, the skill involving hard work and dedicated scrutiny by which patterns hitherto not apparent to others may be discerned. Some have said, without the slightest self-consciousness of the absurdity of such a statement, that if you can carry out close reading competently, in a manner that is convincing to a significant number of others, then there is no need for semiotics. Of course, whether one is closely reading the communications of two barn owls, masses of bacteria, or the varied features of popular culture, one is doing semiotics whether one likes it or not.

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