Textual Analysis and Semiotics

Learning about an important tool in media studies and analysis
Semiotics

- Semiotics is one of the first and central concepts to the study of media and other disciplines
- Things “signify” other things
- Began in the late 1950s because language and concepts of literature and art were not enough to explain different media
• People asked how meaning is constructed in language and culture
• Language is a reflection of the world where meaning is fixed and exist in events, people and objects which need language to explain them
• Language is constructed and inherited to express ideas, feelings or concepts
• Things and events don’t have meaning, we “agree” on what they mean -- a social agreement
• Semiotics has two parts in the signs:
  – Signifier: the physical form
  – Signified: something other than itself: the concept, the idea
• Meaning is constructed and shaped by words
So what does all this mean?

- The world is divided into different areas where we give it meaning:
  - Snow has few words in English and many in Inuit
  - Terrorist/freedom fighter, hero of liberation can all be the same person
Why do this?

• Semiotics is a means of focusing on the underlying structure of sign systems, enabling us to talk about how this text constructs meaning
How is meaning created?

• By using
  – different symbols
  – colours
  – content

• different meaning is given
Semiotics Recap

- Semiotics is a tool of textual analysis to explain the inner workings of a text and identifies its significance in terms of wider social and cultural issues.
Denotation and Connotation

- Denotation is the physical/literal meaning
- Connotation describes the interaction that occurs when signs meet emotions of the user and values of their culture
Therefore, denotation is what is photographed, connotation is how it is photographed.

Tone is connoted (choice of words: dispute or strike, oiling the wheels of commerce, or bribery)
Different kinds of signs

• Icons: resemble what they signify
• Indexical signifiers are a kind of evidence, like smoke of a fire
• Symbols are visual signs that indicate something else
Codes

• Words mean what they mean because we agree on it
• Broad cultural or social agreement is needed for meaning to be produced
• Learning to read these signs in relation to their wider context is referred to as codes
• Agreement sometimes shifts
Changing Meaning

- Black is Beautiful
- Cool, wicked, sick
- Caution, Elderly people crossing

- Symbols can have very powerful meaning