

# **Signs of Life in the U.S.A. Study Guide**

**Signs of Life in the U.S.A. by Sonia Maasik**

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# Plot Summary

Signs of Life in the U.S.A. by Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon seeks to teach critical thinking and writing skills using what is called the popular culture analysis approach based on using a semiotic methodology. This means looking for and recognizing the various signs and interpreting the symbolism and meaning of the signs. Using pop culture as a subject to develop writing skills in college students became popular and accepted in the 1980s. The theory is that the student is already an expert on some aspects of pop culture, whether it is dress, hairstyles, music, television, movies or whatever. Let the student write about something that he/she knows about in order to develop the critical thinking skills that are required for successful analysis and writing. The students find that many topics do not require as much research as they think.

The book teaches the student how to approach a writing problem in terms of selecting a topic and how to approach the problem of writing an essay. The book looks at the different areas of popular culture and shows the student how to approach each, including what questions the student should be asking and why. Throughout the book, there are sample essays, with the good points explained and emphasized along with a large collection of pictures and visual aids as well as classroom assignments given in boxes. The purpose of the boxed items is to help develop the student's thinking skills so the student learns how to approach a problem.

Each section has the first part of the chapter written by the authors explaining the purpose of that chapter, or window. This leading section is then followed by a readings section that has a selection of articles by various authors that explore the different aspects of the chapter subject. Each selection is followed by sections entitled "Reading the Text" and "Reading the Signs", which consist of questions and exercises to help the student absorb and understand the information given in the selection. Some of these selections may be photographs that the student has to analyze since there is one in each window. There is also a "Reading the Text" and "Reading the Signs" section for the pictures.

The Editor's Notes in the back of the book are a good accompaniment for teaching. It is also good for the student since it explains some of the concepts in greater detail than the reading selections. It also includes topics for student discussion as well as various assignment suggestions to enhance the development of critical thinking skills and writing skills.

Both students and teachers will find this book valuable in that it enhances the learning experience for the student. This book shows all of the examples and methods required for the student to analyze pop culture and use it as the subject of writing assignments. The approach teaches the students what to look for and what questions to ask for the different forms of pop culture.

# Introduction: Popular Signs

## Introduction: Popular Signs Summary and Analysis

The book begins with a discussion of September 11, 2001 and how everybody was saying that nothing would ever be the same as the events of that infamous morning were reported. The Emmy Awards show was postponed and the Latin Grammy Awards show was cancelled. The NFL even rescheduled its weekend games, something that it didn't even do after the Kennedy assassination. However, America didn't desert its popular culture. In fact, it very quickly returned in the following months, as sports events, concerts and other forms of entertainment took place.

"That America returned so quickly to its popular culture, indeed relied upon it to help cope with the disaster, is itself a sign of just how important that culture is to us and how enduring. Far from being a mere frivolity that we could easily do without, our popular culture, in effect, is our culture, constituting the essential fiber of our everyday lives. From the way we entertain ourselves to the goods and services we consume, we are enveloped in a popular cultural environment that we can no longer do without" (Introduction, pg. 2). If you don't think this is true, try doing without television, radio, shopping and other things that are a part of our culture and see how long it lasts.

Pop culture was not a part of the university academic curriculum before the 1980s, but today is an accepted part of study and this is especially true in composition and writing classes. This allows students to use something that they know about in the learning of critical thinking and writing. The purpose of this book is to show the student how to do this successfully so that the student treats popular culture as he/she treats any other academic subject. Because the student is already an expert in things like pop music and television shows, the authors feel that this is a good starting point for a writing class. The book shows the student how to write about what he/she already knows about. The knowledge learned from writing about what the student already knows about can then be used for the student to write about subjects that he/she is not as knowledgeable about.

The authors define the word sign to be anything that carries a meaning. The sign, like a stop sign, means something. In the case of the stop sign it means to stop at the intersection where the sign is located or risk being stopped by the police and receiving a ticket. Signs are evident in many different aspects of life, such as hairstyles. The kind of hair style you sport is making a statement about your identity just as changing hair styles is making a statement about your identity. What statement do you want to make? The book advises the student to look around and see what statements other students are making.

The book is designed to help students think. Each chapter is a different 'window' that looks into some aspect of American culture that is important in shaping the sense of reality and self. These different aspects include things like shopping and the items that



people buy to things like movies, television and music. These are also forms of media that shape the self and reality. This book will help the student understand how the ideological side of popular culture is linked to the entertainment side. The student is encouraged to find his/her own topics to analyze. This activity makes the student familiar with the signs and the environment as well as the process. The windows presented in the book are the common ones found in everyday life, like advertising. Most things have a meaning and the student is taught to look for the meaning that is what the sign is all about.

The method used in this book is called the semiotic method. Semiotic method refers to the recognizing of and the interpreting of signs. This method can refer to the act of reading since symbols and letters are signs that need to be interpreted. The method can also refer to hairstyles or dress styles. What are you and your classmates saying with the hairstyles and dress styles that you choose? Semiotic method means that there are signs that must be interpreted to discover the meaning. This is not a new methodology since it has been around since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was first applied to popular culture by Roland Barthes, who applied the methodology to many different aspects of French culture. Barthes gave the methodology its political dimension since politics is active and encoded in any clash of views.

The television sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s are used to illustrate the clash of views and ideologies contained in the various forms of entertainment. The sitcoms portrayed the stay-at-home housewife as the wife's place is in the home and not in the workplace. The way that women were portrayed in this period conveyed the message that women shouldn't compete with men outside of the home. This was the message that the feminists disagreed with and objected to so strenuously.

Students should ask a lot of what and why questions in the analysis of popular culture events. Why do the characters say and do the things that they say and do and what are they really saying and doing? Ask what it is that you respond to in an advertisement even if the advertisement is a picture. Sometimes photos are arranged in a way to elicit a response or to imply a connection where one doesn't exist. Students need to be able to decipher these signs to learn the meaning and this is what semiotics is all about. Nevertheless, signs and symbols aren't the whole story. Signs and symbols related to ideology and power.

An example of the use of the semiotic method is the Volkswagen Beetle. The car was first introduced in Nazi Germany and billed as the car for the people. This connotation changed when the car began to appear in America in the 1950s and 1960s when it became the symbol of the counter culture. It was the car of choice not only for hippies, but also for the frugally minded who were looking for an alternative to the muscle and luxury cars of the time. In the 1970s, Beetle production ceased for the American market and the car didn't reappear until the end of the 1990s. It represented a return to an earlier style and a nostalgic revival. This is also seen in terms of movies and other items. Much of this was attributed to the unknown of the new millennium. The thought process is what is important here with a look at the past and the context of the situation



with its associations and distinctions. The conclusions are then drawn from this process. The student must remain objective throughout this process.

A value system consists of the way in which the world is viewed. The way we see things are the result of cultural mythologies and they are different for each culture. No one culture can claim to have the correct view because the view is relative to the culture. What is important in one culture may not be important in other cultures. How an individual interprets or views an event is the result of the culture the individual is a product of. This is why there are clashes. If you don't agree with an author that does not necessarily mean that the author is wrong. The message of this chapter is to question everything, even if you think you know the answers.

In writing about popular culture, the student is writing about something that the student knows about and because of this, many students don't think of it as being the subject matter of college assignments. The first thing the student should do is to generate ideas, the step known as prewriting. One method of doing this involved reading the material twice, once to gain an idea of the subject matter of the selection and the second time to learn more about what the author's method is. This process is known as active reading. The student should ask many questions at this stage such as the purpose of the author, the words used to express the purpose, what the underlying assumptions are, etc. The student should brainstorm all alone on the topic without any censoring of thoughts or ideas at this stage. This should be in writing and should last for about ten or fifteen minutes.

If the student uses the internet as part of the brainstorming process, the student should be sure that the sources are relevant and appropriate. The sites should be informational, documented, and not personal home pages with personal opinions or sales pages. Sometimes students are requested to work in groups with other students. This is also important as the student learns to incorporate other opinions. The evaluation process does not mean that the student must write a negative paper. The student can have his own opinion enter into a subjective paper if it is documented. Evidence must be given to support the student's opinion.

The first step in writing on a pop culture subject is to read or study the subject carefully. If there are pictures involved, look at them and study the characters. Determine what should or shouldn't be there and what is missing. The subject may not require as much research as the student first thinks it will, as it is probably a topic that the student is familiar with. Sample essays are presented with a discussion of each. The authors point out the good and bad points as well as the method of the student writing the essay. The first is the experience of an eighteen-year-old girl as she visits a tattoo parlor. The second is applying a theory to a film and the third is an open-ended assignment where the student selects his own topic and focus. The tendency for most students is to choose too broad a topic in this situation. A narrower specific topic should be selected and defined by the student. In each case the style and method of writing is discussed. The sample essays are a good way of showing students how to write on various topics.



# Consuming Passions: The Culture of American Consumption

## Consuming Passions: The Culture of American Consumption Summary and Analysis

The chapter begins with the suggestion that the student make a list of his belongings which ones he/she purchased and why, and which ones were presents. The student is supposed to determine what these items say about himself/herself and what kind of statement is made by the ones selected as gifts. This is a good way to begin a semiotic analysis of consumerism. Every selection and choice represents a symbol or sign that gets its meaning from the system. The significance of each depends on its symbolism, not on its usefulness. The student must ask what statement he/she is trying to make since this is how the semiotic interpretation process begins.

The cell phone used to be a status symbol in America. In the 1980s when they first appeared, they were usually in limousines and were used by the well-to-do. As technology progressed, costs came down. Today, almost everyone has a cell phone. It is no longer the status symbol that it once was since it no longer conveys that message. The cell phone, like the pager, still has a semiotic message just not the same one as in the 1980s. Today, the image of cell phones is somewhat negative because of problems with people driving and talking and the violation of others in public spaces. Sitting in a restaurant gabbing on your cell phone can be very irritating to others.

In many cases, when considering a sign, the sign must be viewed in the context of the decade in which it appeared. Think of the sixties, seventies and eighties. Each decade had their own relevant signs and styles. Many items can be explained within the context of the fads that were popular during a particular decade, like Nehru jackets. This is the result of advertising and the need to create markets for the output of mass production. The consumer who wants to be in fashion must keep replacing items to do so. The constant buying keeps the economy going.

"In a cultural system where our identities are displayed in the products we buy, in accordingly behooves us to pay close attention to what we consume and why. From the cars we drive to the clothes we wear, we are enmeshed in a web of consuming images. As students, you are probably freer to choose the particular images you wish to project through the products you consume than most other demographic groups in America" (Chapter 1, pg. 54). Students do not have to fit into the corporate structure and conform, as they will have to do when they begin their working careers. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the role of consumerism and to teach the student how to analyze this topic and write about it.

In "The More Factor", Laurence Shames looks at the craving for more. Americans have also wanted more goods, services and opportunities and this craving dates back to the





frontier days. Much accumulation, especially of land, is for speculation purposes. The individual hopes to make money on the venture. This was especially true during the days of the expanding frontier where accumulation was directly related to expansion. There was always a chance that money could be made. Even though expansion of land frontiers ended, expansion of production continued as did increases in the standard of living. Real earnings increased until the 1970s, when they began to fall. The ups and downs in economic activity called for adjustments on the part of Americans.

Anne Norton uses the semiotic method to analyze consumer behavior while shopping in "The Signs of Shopping". Shopping does not always have to be in a shopping mall. Consumers can shop via mail order or via shopping networks. Each of these represents an attempt to mold the consumer. The sellers are pedaling an image and shopping malls that appear to be public places are not in reality. They are private and restrict freedom of speech and assembly. Teenagers spend time at the mall and identify with the products that are being sold. The designer names are symbols that represent a connotation of a particular life-style to people. Shopping also represents an outing for the housewife. Catalogue shopping allows the construction of identities for men and women and the buyer identifies with the identity when buying a product. Consumers vote for different products with their dollars whether they are shopping at a mall, by catalogue or on a home shopping network.

Nina Leen's selection is a photograph called "Just What do You Do All Day?" The picture says it all in terms of what the housewife does around the house. The "Reading the Signs" exercises help the student understand how to interpret pictures that does have any words attached. John De Graaf, David Wann and Thomas Naylor write an essay called "The Addictive Virus" which looks at materialism and the American pre-occupation with acquiring things that comes from their addiction to shopping. Because they acquire so much, the things they have don't mean as much to them. Shopping is a form of addictive behavior just as drug use and gambling are and the shopper never gets enough of the stuff he/she buys. The shopper keeps shopping and buying stuff because the signals keep changing and the law of diminishing marginal utility becomes operative meaning the shopper gets less satisfaction from each additional unit of stuff purchased.

Rachel Bowlby looks at the shopping experience in "The Haunted Superstore". Shopping is a complex activity. It is fun to shop but it is also hard work so people don't want to walk out of a superstore, like Ikea, empty handed. When the checkout computers go down it has a strange effect on people. They don't want to walk out after all of the time they have already spent shopping. That time represents an investment. It doesn't matter if the shopper is male or female or if the store is Ikea or a supermarket or department store. The department store represents more of a fantasy environment with fashion being the goal where the shopper can get lost in the fantasy. The supermarket represents more of a chore. One is a form of leisure. The other is a form of labor.

"What's in a Package, by Thomas Hine is concerned with packaging. Packaging involves the use of signs and their interpretation by consumers. The shape and design of packaging is almost as important as what is in the packages. The supermarket does





not have anyone doing the selling. The consumer is walking around pushing a shopping cart through various kinds of packages. The purpose of the package is to tempt the consumer to buy product. Once the product is in the home, then the usefulness of the product becomes important. Packaging functions in different ways in different cultures with packages being designed for particular markets. Part of this has to do with the differing rules and regulations in different places.

Fred Davis looks at the history of blue jeans in the next selection entitled "Blue Jeans". Blue jeans were originally the pants of choice for miners and laborers and associated with the hard work of the American West. In Europe, they were worn by sailors. Jeans have gone from being the clothing of workmen to being a fashion and leisure statement. They are one of the few items to bridge the work-leisure gap and to spread throughout the world and become an elitist item. Blue jeans went from being play clothes to being symbols in their various forms - faded, torn, studded, frayed, etc. and went from the fields and mines to the offices and boardrooms and became a classless form of dress. Jeans can be generic or designed branded now.

"The Semiotics of Home Décor", by Joan Kron, looks at the use of furniture and interior design as a form of personal identity. The home and the interior furnishings are as much of a statement as clothing is. People have yard sales because houses acquire more than they can hold as the occupants keep acquiring goods. Acquiring goods gives the owners a feeling of control and status and these are signs in the semiotic method. They represent the self and the ability to consume the same levels as the neighbors and friends do. This is the so-called 'keeping up with the Joneses' that people refer to. The symbol system of the home is an important statement to others.

David Goewey looks at the role of the SUV in his essay, "Careful, you may run out of Planet": SUVs and the Exploitation of the American Myth". Goewey uses the semiotic approach in looking at the role of the SUV in vehicle ownership. The SUV has different signs associated with it than a car does and this is important in the message that SUV ownership conveys. In the 1990s, the SUV was the fastest growing segment in the auto market. The vehicles are gas-guzzlers and very few people drive them off-road to explore nature and the wilderness. However, they were symbols of expanding frontiers and exploration as given by names such as Yukon and Cherokee. They also represent a militaristic symbol being associated with military jeeps. The SUV represents the reinvention of America in terms of pop culture.

"The Spam Spoils of War", by Damien Cave looks at the effect of the 9/11 attacks on America and explores the relationship between crisis and capitalism given by the products that appeared on the market in the aftermath of the attacks. He views items such as Osama Bin Laden toilet paper to be evidence of the fact that people express their grief and frustration by buying items. It somehow helps provide a release for the needed revenge and a way of expressing the patriotic feeling.

The last two selections in the chapter look at American culture and the culture behind the attacks. Benjamin R. Barber's "Jihad vs. McWorld" looks at the technologies that enable the attack. The rebirth and importance of tribalism in other cultures promotes



Jihad against the modern world, its culture and its technology. Not all cultures want to be streamlined into information superhighway of the McWorld with its required conformity. This struggle between Jihad and McWorld may be taking place within a country not just between countries. Thomas L. Friedman's essay, "Revolution is U.S." looks at the impact of globalization given the end of the Cold War. The U.S. dominates the markets in terms of consumers and entertainment but is not the only player. Globalization does not have to equal Americanization although there is a strong current for such a thing. Not everyone wants the American form of culture or economic system even though it was the American power structure and economy that made globalization possible.



# Brought to You B(u)y: The Signs of Advertising

## Brought to You B(u)y: The Signs of Advertising Summary and Analysis

This window explores the sign of advertising. Advertisers play a big role in our lives. If you need batteries, you may automatically reach for Energizers on the store shelf. "That effort was made by advertisers, and whether they are pitching batteries, blue jeans, beer, or a myriad of other products and services they are more influential in your life than you may realize, filling your head with brand names, jingle, and slogans long after the ads they made may have disappeared" (Chapter 2, pg. 141). The purpose of advertising is to persuade the consumer to buy the product and advertisers are always experimenting with different ways trying to get the attention of the consumer. Some forms of advertising look like MTV videos. Consumers who have been subjected to advertisers for so many years have become highly skeptical of most forms of advertising.

For the most part, in terms of success, the Energizer bunny is a cultural icon. The ad first appeared in the late 1980s and is still running today in various forms so successful was the ad campaign. The Energizer bunny ad was in response to ads by competitor Duracell that used toy animals to show how long their batteries lasted. The early Energizer commercials were spoofs of other commercials, which is one reason why they were so successful. Most people tire of repetitive commercials so there is nothing better than a good spoof of them and this is what Energizer did. People who get tired of commercials identify with the product that spoofs the others and buy the product. This is not because it's better than the others are but because they identify with it.

When confronted with advertisements, the critical thinker will ask why he/she is being shown or told something. Look at all of the details of the ad and ask about the colors and the figures that are chosen. Be critical. Learn to interpret the signs and you will learn to find the values that the advertiser is appealing to or trying to exploit. Many ads are based on imagery. They are selling the situation, like the fun the viewer sees the participants having in the ad. Drink this soft drink and you too will be popular is the message of the ad. The purpose of the ad is to make you feel that you need the product. You don't just want it.

The authors use a term called the commodification of desire to refer to a situation where a product has an unrelated desire associated with it through advertising. In order to keep the product being purchased, it has to be sold and this is what Madison Avenue does. It comes up with reasons for people to replace the products that they already have. One of the ways of doing this is through the commodification of desire.

Advertising also changes over time. It's interesting to look at ads for the same product from different eras to see how the advertising has changed. As the popular culture



changes, so does the advertising. In the 1920s, most ads were aimed at social status and associations with the middle or upper classes. How did one associate with the social class - by using a particular product or brand of product. Not much has changed today since many ads still send the same message and many do this by using celebrities in their ads.

Advertising, especially in the United States, swings being the elitism of social status and populism like with truck drivers or the working class. Americans tire of one and switch to the other. Humor became a fad in advertising in the 1990s and it was the kind of humor that appealed to the Saturday Night Live crowd. This era in advertising has come to an end and the only way to ascertain what has replaced it is to look at what there is and to interpret the signs and that is what the selection of reading is aimed at.

Roland Marchand's selection, "The Parable of the Democracy of Goods", looks at advertising in a historical context. In the early days of advertising in the 1920s and 1930s, Americans were told they shared something with the wealthy when they used particular products or particular brands. Cream of Wheat is the advertising example that opens the selection. The lower classes can enjoy the same goods that the wealthy do and be wealthy by association is the message of these ads that lead the public to believe that they could share a lifestyle. Marchand refers to this phenomenon as the Democracy of Goods. The negative counterpart of this is the Democracy of Afflictions that was used to promote deodorants, mouthwash, soaps and items of this nature. The theme here is that nobody is free of certain problems no matter what their social status is. Many advertisers found the parables of the Democracy of Goods and Democracy of Afflictions to be highly effective in helping to increase their market shares as real incomes were rising throughout the economy at this time.

Jack Solomon writes on "Masters of Desire: The Culture of American Advertising," in which he undertakes a semiotic analysis of advertising in America. He examines the response to advertising and then looks for the underlying value system that results in that response. Advertising programs exploit various cultural patterns that don't change very easily, and this is what the author is looking for. The basis of what is called the American dream is described as communally egalitarian and competitively elitist. Everybody wants to fit in and be an equal part of the whole but at the same time the want to get ahead and be a member of the elite. This contradictory nature was pointed out by Alexis de Tocqueville. There is still a desire for elite social status and distinction in a society based on equality because America affords people the opportunity to change social classes.

Solomon looks at the role of status symbols in advertising. A status symbol is a sign that defines the holders place in society. If somebody has to be wealthy or influential to obtain a particular item, that item is a sign of the individual's status in terms of wealth or influence. The status symbol represents a sign of power and it is the status symbol that the advertiser tries to exploit. Much of advertising appeals to fantasy, i.e., eat a Big Mac and you'll be a socially popular teen. McDonald's appeals to other age groups with different kinds of commercials appealing to fantasy. Due to their desire to remain family oriented, the corporation doesn't use ads based on sex, as do other businesses, like



cars, perfumes, etc. Advertisements can also be based on the fears of social rejection that will occur if the consumer doesn't control his dandruff or body odor. These were very popular during the 1950s and 1960s. Guilt and fear are also the motivators used in ads. The housewife that doesn't remove the ring around the collar faces guilt and her husband faces the fear of being overlooked as he climbs the corporate ladder. Americans can tire of these kinds of ads.

In "A Gentlemen and a Consumer" Diane Barthel looks at the role of gender in advertising. Advertising forces men and women to conform to certain images or standards, whether they want to or not. Men are expected to be aggressive, but if they appear to be too aggressive about their appearance, then they can be considered feminine. They are not supposed to show that they are overly concerned about their appearance and beauty as women are. Most men's magazines focused on sports or sex and not fashion until the appearance of magazines like GQ in 1957. Many male traits were presented in auto advertisements. The situation has changed, as there are now many products that promote male beauty. Today's male care's about his appearance and health and hygiene even though that is considered to be a feminine issue, it is accepted.

Eric Schlosser looks at the role of advertising and children in "Kid Kustomers". Advertising aimed at children is based on the children pestering their parents to buy a particular product. Companies sell toys by gearing their advertising to the toy user not the toy buyer. Many producers of adult products also aim their advertising at children for the same reason. Working parents seek to accommodate their kids by spending money on what they want since they don't have the time they want to spend with them. One of the most notable ads in this category is the Joe Camel cigarette ads of the 1990s. Studies have even distinguished between the kinds of nags that different ads seek to evoke. There are pleading, persistent, forceful, demonstrative, sugarcoated, threatening and pity nags. The skillful advertiser learns how to use this information to persuade the parents to buy their products.

"Sex, Lies, and Advertising" is the title of Gloria Steinem's selection. She examines what occurs behind the scene at women's magazines in relation to advertising. Sometimes the magazine has to compromise its own goals in order to retain their advertisers, since magazines can't exist without advertisers. Eventually, the magazine reached a point where it refused to accept ads from certain companies. Steinem wondered if women were aware of the influence and control that advertisers had over what appeared in magazines and wrote this article as an expose. The responses to the expose came from readers and from staff and writers at other women's magazines and they were all supportive of Steinem. Advertising executives responded that the problem was at Ms magazine. It wasn't the advertising industry. The magazine was not appropriate for the products. In addition to reader support, Steinem knew she had done the right thing when her articles was included for study in college classrooms since Ms tried to break the link between the magazine content and the ads it carried. They tried to be selective in the ads that they allowed, for example, banning cigarette and feminine hygiene ads because of the health risk but needing them because they are a source of revenue. Steinem thinks it is possible to break the advertisers hold on content if women act



together and follow her advice in boycotting products, writing editors, publishers, advertisers and manufacturers, and in only supporting certain magazines and laws.

In "What We are to Advertisers" James B. Twitchell looks at the roll of market researchers and the stereotyping of consumers. The role of the market researcher is to develop a personality profile of the consumer that the advertiser can use to sell his product. Market researchers seek to categorize consumers as believers, strivers, achievers, strugglers, experiencers or makers or whatever other groups they have. People move between these groups as they go through life. Mass production and mass marketing requires the use of groups so consumers must be stereotyped so they fit into a group. The job of the advertiser is to position the product or to make different groups of consumers think that the product is different from other products. Different products have different meaning for different groups. People acquire products based on a system called VALS. It means Values and Lifestyle System. They look for bundles of products that given them the identity that they want.

The last two selections in the chapter, "How Advertising Informs to our Benefit" by John E. Calfee and "Hype" by Kalle Lasn defend the role of the advertiser. Advertising, even though it is subject to ridicule and criticism provides an important purpose, according to Calfee, since it provide the consumer with information. This information is critical for the consumer to make informed choices among products and because of this, the consumer values the information provided by advertising. Lasn's point of view is that the individual is flooded with advertising, from the time he awakes till the time he goes to sleep. There are few places where the individual can go to avoid advertisements. In addition to written selections, this chapter also presents various picture ads for the student to evaluate.



# Video Dreams: Television, Music, and Cultural Forms

## Video Dreams: Television, Music, and Cultural Forms Summary and Analysis

This chapter provides the window on television that is probably the subject that most students feel the most comfortable with. When the student is working on a college level assignment about television, the student has to do more than explain why the show is or isn't his favorite. The student must learn to deliver cultural analyses of the topic. Television delivers a lot of material for the student to write about from kinds of shows, like detective or medical, to specific shows or episodes. There are also many other topics like the role of women in a cultural perspective. "But in college you will be asked to write critical interpretations of television, which is somewhat different from expressing an opinion about how entertaining something is. In interpreting TV, you still need to rely on your skills in description and summary, because you need to describe the show for your reader, but your purpose will be to go beyond these writing tasks towards the construction of interpretive arguments about the cultural significance of your topic" (Chapter 3, pg. 223).

The analysis of a television episode is much like the analysis of an essay or short story and the student should approach it much in the same manner. The student should decide how he/she feels about the episode - does he/she like it or not, and then find supporting evidence. The student must ascertain the cultural significance of the show and must determine the implicit message of the show, not just the explicit message: the two can differ. Compare the television series to the television system and then look at how the episode fits in. The student must consider the role of the protagonist and other characters on the show keeping in mind that the program is on television because of the advertising that supports it. The more popular the show, the higher priced the advertising is so the student must be sure to study the advertising. What kind of products are the sponsors selling? Usually they are dealing in fantasies by wanting the viewer to identify with the character of the show and then the products the advertisers are trying to sell. The student must also view the program within the context of the television schedule for the evening or whatever the relevant period is.

Signs of Life used to use the program Friends as an example because it reflected the concerns of Gen X. The characters were concerned with their futures in the economy of a changing America. The program changed as economic conditions changed showing the character with successful jobs. Then reality programs became popular in the year 2001. Some shows went under but many are still running. Reality shows can be said to have begun with Candid Camera where people were caught in various situations not knowing that they were on camera. This phenomenon is known as schadenfreude, the act of taking pleasure in the discomfort or misfortunes of others. Today, reality shows



have a game element where the winners receive huge cash prizes and the losers can suffer a great deal of humiliation as they try to stay in the running.

Any sign that resembles its intended meaning is referred to as an icon. Icons must also be interpreted but not in the same way as symbols and signs are. The icons are something that appears in videos that doesn't appear on the printed page. Videos and visual images can communicate across language barriers in terms of things like music videos. Video conveys the expression of concrete images that can affect people in ways that written works cannot.

Cable television has brought some changes with it. Cable allows for a narrower audience in terms of interests and targeting. In other words, they offer more viewer choice so ratings have smaller numbers. Nevertheless, it is easier for marketing campaigns to target customers because of they are watching the kind of program that interests them, not watching a program because it is on and there is nothing else to watch. Today, each specialized channel, like MTV, must appeal to the specialty group it is trying to attract. MTV does not have to worry about adults because its market is with teens. The pop music world is now associated with images and video. Next came downloading on the internet.

In "The West Wing in American Culture" Todd Davis analyzes the popular show The West Wing. He determines that the show is so popular because it is non-threatening, doesn't tackle controversial subjects, and provides the necessary surprises that are not scary or threatening to viewers. When the program first appeared, it represented something different because it was not the run of the mill medical or police program. The characters are well balanced and balance each other so viewers feel comfortable with them and with the political center, they tend to stay around with their views.

Steven D. Stark considers Oprah Winfrey and other talk show hosts to offer a form of group therapy in his selection "The Oprah Winfrey Show and the Talk-Show Furor". Stark looks at how Oprah became so powerful. The daytime talk shows became the rage in the 1980s and have been viewed in a very negative sense by critics, even though they are extremely popular with the public. These are the shows where people discuss their personal experience in activities that can be sexual and perverse. Oprah and her show were more refined than most of the other daytime talk shows, more along the lines of Phil Donahue but Oprah's was more like a ministry. People could cure some of their problems by talking about them. She didn't go in for the sensationalism as the other shows did and would cry with her guests and hug them, in addition to telling her own personal story. Oprah went on to become the most successful daytime talk show host in history. Even some of the politicians began to try to be like Oprah.

"Signs of Intelligent Life on TV" is the essay written by Susan Douglas in which she examines the ideology behind some of the television shows. Looking at shows like ER and NYPD Blue, Douglas still find cultural bias in the way women are treated and presented. All of the shows that Douglas examines present professional working women as main characters. In all of the shows, the women are involved in disastrous sexual relationships and in all of them, it is the fault of the women.



Amanda Fazzone also looks at the role of women in "Boob Tube" and concludes that the women derive their power from sex. One of the shows she analyzes is *Felicity* in which a woman follows her boyfriend to the big city where he attends college. The National Organization for Women gave this show high rating and recommendation. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dawson's Creek* also receive high ratings from NOW. Fazzone says the female leads are being rated for their sex appeal not for their brains.

In "You Can't Say That" Tad Friend looks at the attempts of the industry to police itself in terms of language and content that is aired. This is the function of the Standards and Practices staff who must approve the language and the situations that are presented. Their purpose is to keep the programs from having legal problems with the FCC and other bodies. They also see that he shows present both sides of controversial issues. A show cannot air unless it has been approved by the Standards and Practices staff and any parts that have not been approved cannot be a part of the show. Unapproved words are bleeped. Friend feels that if a viewer listens closely enough, he can tell which words have been deleted from the show and can figure out why certain terms and situations are not removed.

Tricia Rose looks at female rappers in her essay "Bad Siestas". Female rapping is done within the context of sexual courtship and Rose does not think it is possible for a female to rap within any other context. Female rappers are always concerned with the male-female relationship. Sometimes they are about the abuse and frustration that women experience in a relationship. Rose feels that the female rappers must come across as strong as they male rappers do and for this, they must have a strong voice. Overall, she doesn't feel that female rappers are doing such a bad job.

The next two selections are concerned with the ranking of music. David Schiff in "The Tradition of the Oldie" questions the selections of National Public Radio's selection of 100 of the most important musical works of the twentieth century. Schiff questioned what they did and didn't include in their list since there were only three from the 1980 - 2000 period. Listeners are now more interest in the oldie than they are in music as a form of art and culture. The oldie has its own appeal or tradition. Robert Hilburn writes of the number one song in his selection "The Not-so-big Hit Single". He is concerned with the cultural impact a number one song has. The meaning of number one today is not the same as during the days of the Beatles. It doesn't have the same cultural impact as it did in the days of the 45s or singles. Now the different categories of music all have their own number ones and the ratings are based by the number of times a radio station plays the song and by sales.

Television's response to the 9/11 attacks in the subject of "Resisting the False Security of TV" by Tom Shales. Americans tend to turn to their popular culture and television during period of crisis and this is what they did in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Television should not lull the population into a false sense of security as it may have tried to do following the attacks. It also should not try to scare.

Marnie Carroll provides the last essay entitled "American Television in Europe." She looks at the difference in television programming on the two continents. American



culture does not play in Europe; European culture does. The Europeans don't want their popular culture dictated or dominated by the Americans. They want their own brand of popular culture and even though American Pop culture does appear, the Europeans try to put their own spin on it. They have their own performers, their own languages, their own songs and their own cultures. CNN newscasts in Europe feature more European news than in America. MTV features European performers and songs. Cultural transmissions can flow in both directions, but most countries prefer to keep their own cultures and identities.



# The Hollywood Sign: The Culture of American Film

## The Hollywood Sign: The Culture of American Film Summary and Analysis

Fantasy flicks have been big box office draws and moneymakers since the turn of the century. The fantasy and futuristic movies represent an escape for the viewers and this represents a way of maintaining the status quo by detracting from it. "More recent analysts have been far less pessimistic. Indeed, for many cultural studies 'populists, the movies, along with the rest of popular culture, can represent a kind of mass resistance to the political dominance - or what is often called the 'hegemony' - of the social and economic powers-that-be. For such critics, the movies can provide utopian visions of a better world, stimulating their viewers to imagine how their society might be improved and so, perhaps, inspiring them to go out and do something about it" (Chapter 4, pg. 300).

Movie films can affect different people in different ways. In many ways, they are an escape from the problems of the real world. In some cases, they inspire people to look around and see what is wrong and to work to improve conditions. Film awards ceremonies are big events, both in a news sense and in an entertainment sense. Films are also big news events as every week we hear about the box office hits. Movies also have a cultural significance that can be subject to semiotic analysis just as television programs do and the student should approach the analysis of a movie in the same way that he/she approaches the analysis of television. With movies, the student can consider its popularity and find the figures on attendance and box office take.

When analyzing a movie, the student should look for its cultural signs and interpret them. The authors use four films as examples: Shrek, Monsters, Inc., Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, and The Fellowship of the Ring. All are fantasy films and among the most popular of 2001. Fairy tales are usually popular and have archetypal value. Used in this way, an archetype is a story that has been told repeatedly, from ancient times. An archetype would be something like the ugly duckling or the evil stepmother.

Fantasy films aren't only for children. Movies like Star Wars appealed to viewers of all ages, not just children. Star Trek was the same kind of hit on television and in the movies. Some people could find signs of the racial and cold war conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s as cultures clashed. There are varieties of essays for reading in this window on movies and they look at the different myths surrounding Hollywood and movies.

"The Thematic Paradigm" by Robert B. Ray looks at the ways films have treated different characters as heroes. Heroes can be on both sides of the law: there are official heroes and outlaw heroes. The outlaw hero represented a part of the imagination that relied on self-determination and a freedom from entanglements as opposed to the



official hero who was based on the legal difference between right and wrong. Most of the outlaw heroes represent a flight from maturity in that the appeal to the childlike nature in the viewers. Official heroes, on the other hand, represent adulthood and being comfortable in the society in which they live and willing to make sacrifices for what they believe in. The outlaw hero, for the most part, doesn't feel comfortable in society. Both kinds of heroes are popular in American pop culture with the outlaw hero usually being a little more familiar. The view is not forced to make a choice between them.

Linda Seger in "Creating the Myth" looks at how characters are created based on archetypes. People have similar experiences when they live in the same culture and movies are based on these similar universal experiences. The stories that come out of these experiences are referred to as myths and it is a story that everyone can relate to. Most heroes are introduced as having humble beginnings until a catalyst triggers some action that begins the story. The hero is drawn in whether he wants to be or not and he usually receives a great deal of help in achieving his goal. There is usually a transformation of the hero into an extraordinary character as he overcomes the obstacles required to achieve his goal. Heroes also usually reach a nadir from which they recover somewhere along the way. He fights his way back successfully to his new laurels as a hero. This is the typical pattern in a hero story. In addition to the hero, there may be a shadow figure who opposes the hero. There may also be animal archetypes that may be negative or positive characters and there is usually a trickster who causes confusions and mayhem throughout the story. These are all of the characters that are created on the basis of archetypes.

In "The Western" Gary Johnson examines this form of entertainment. He looks at the cowboys that have become myths a la John Wayne. The cowboy and the American West are American myths and American culture and it doesn't matter what form the Western is in - book, film, television, etc. The American West represented the last of the American frontiers. Many Westerns became nostalgic. By the 1980s, it looked like the Western wouldn't survive. Yet, it did and limped through the 1990s. The Western is now another genre of movie.

In "Braveheart, Babe and the Contemporary Body" Susan Bordo looks at what she calls the just do it culture. What does it take to succeed? This aspect of popular culture leads viewers to believe that one stops whining, puts on his sneakers and moves on, tackling whatever. The message is that everyone can buy what everyone else is buying. The characters are gutsy as they do whatever they have to do to accomplish their goals. They don't bemoan their fate or situation or feel sorry for themselves. The message is that all the consumer has to do is buy certain products or work out at the gym and the sky is then the limit.

Todd Boyd studies the role of the gangster in "So You Wanna be a Gangsta?" The role of the gangster is just as important as the role of the cowboy in American film genre. Ethnicity was a factor in the gangster genre whether it was Irish, Latino, Italian or African. America has always been fascinated with the underworld partly because they take the role of the European revolutionary in our society. They defy society and its norms, values and laws. Witness the popularity of the Godfather films and others. Some



gangsters, like John Gotti, were looked on as folk heroes. Then the gangsters became Afro-American and the word 'gangsta' came into being in the 1970s as the black gangsters fought the white. Eventually black gangsters emerged in their own right, just as Latino gangsters did. Many of these films send a political message.

The presentation of Asian women is examined by Jessica Hagedorn in "Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck". She asks why films always portray them as tragic figures in terms of history and fate. Most films reinforce the age-old view of the helplessness of Asian women. The author wants a different view of Asian women. She wants them to be shown as in control of their own destinies and not helpless subjects of the situation. She uses Nancy Kwan's roles in *The World of Suzie Wong* and *Flower Drum Song* to show how Asian women were portrayed, as well as drawing examples from other films. Every film that Hagedorn looks at presents Asian women as helpless victims of circumstance and decorative.

"The Return of Doris Day" by Sandra Tsing Loh looks at the good girl character of Doris Day in the movie culture. Bad girl images were in vogue in the 1980s and then the good girl returned with Sandra Bullock. Good girls are nothing new and they are a threat to the status quo with the virginity, energy and engagement in useful activity. The good girl dominated in the 1940s and 1950s. She became a little braver and risqué in the 1960s and were hard to find by the 1970s and 1980s. By the 1990s, the good girl had returned in terms of news show hosts, sports figures and singers. It is no longer fashionable to be a bad girl who was usually portrayed as out of control and dealing with a society that had problems. Sex was a tool to be used to obtain whatever was desired. Loh lists ten things that are the credo of modern good girls; no promiscuity, drugs, or anorexia or plastic surgery. They feel nostalgic about the 1940s and 1950s, are close to their parents and traditional things, and are good to their pets. This credo defines the modern good girl.

The next selection, "Class and Virtue" by Michael Parenti looks at the modern cinema. He looks at some of the codes and morals involved in some films like *Indecent Proposal* where a billionaire offers a woman one million dollars to spend a night with him. The outrage of the situation is overcome by the woman falling in love with the billionaire. Parenti claims that Hollywood is always on the side of the class privilege, that Hollywood more or less represents the elite, as in *Pretty Woman*. Accents are also an issue with virtue being associated with those accents that are clearly upper class.

In "The Postmorbidity Condition" Vivian C. Sobchack looks at the issue of violence on the screen. Hollywood has a duty to make sense of violence in movies. Hollywood dehumanized people when violence became senseless and this is the subject of Sobchack's essay. The violence began to change in the 1960s and 1970s. Films are more involved with the violence than with the meaning of the violence and this may be a function of the technology. The body is just another machine that is smashed and blown up and the violence doesn't seem to bother any of the characters much. Neither does the pain seem to have much of an impact on them. The times changed with movies like *Pulp Fiction*.

The final selection is "The Time to Get Serious Has Come" by Patrick Goldstein who looks at how Hollywood should have responded to the 9/11 attack. Modern day Hollywood does not try to deal with real world issues, according to Goldstein. Hollywood claims that it is making the kinds of movies that people want to see as most of the movies in the post 9/11 era were based on escapism.





# Popular Spaces: Interpreting the Built Environment

## Popular Spaces: Interpreting the Built Environment Summary and Analysis

Space. How do we use space? The spaces we live in and move through are not empty. They are filled with items that are codes of where we can and can't go and what we can and can't do. You can't walk through somebody's private yard or house but you can walk into the stores in a shopping center. You can't go into a museum or theater without paying the admission. At other places, there are security checkpoints that you must go through to enter. Spaces have rules that tell us what we can and can't do. Some are written and some are unwritten just as the rules are for your own personal space. Some people can get close to you. Others have to keep their distance. This is your individual decision.

"The spaces of everyday life, both public and private, personal and architectural, are packed, in short, with complex codes that we violate or ignore at our peril. These codes all originate in the way that human beings define their territories. A territory is a space that has been given meaning through having been claimed by an individual or group of individuals. Unclaimed, unmarked space is socially meaningless, but put up a building or a fence, and the uncircumscribed landscape becomes a bounded territory, a human habitat with its own rules for permitted and unpermitted behavior. No one unaware of those rules can survive for long in human society" (Chapter 5, pg. 392). Animals have territorial space also but human beings have more complex codes that define their space. These codes differ from culture to culture. People get closer to one another physically in a Mediterranean culture than in English society. The Japanese remove their shoes before entering a house. This is unheard of in America.

People can learn a lot about a culture by learning the rules that define spatial relationships in that culture. The use of public spaces can reveal information about that society's power structure and the same applies to a business organization. The higher ups have the biggest and best-situated offices. Those lower down in the corporate structure work out of cubicles. The social structure of a home is also revealed by its use of space. The master bedroom is where the man of the house sleeps; the kitchen is the woman's space. As time went on, the kitchen then became a place where the whole family could congregate.

Space is more important to Americans than to people in other cultures. The availability of open spaces on the frontier shaped the American identity and space is a part of the American culture. The American preference for the single-family dwelling distinguishes them from people of other cultures who prefer to live in urban apartments with perhaps a country home away from the city. The American preference is for a house with a large lawn and this is tied to the days of the expanding frontier.



How do you interpret space if you have an assignment to do so? Visit the space, if possible, such as a shopping center, and look around and note what you see. Note the kind of people, their age group, and what they are doing, if they are walking around and socializing or if they are actually shopping. If they are just socializing, try to ascertain why they chose this particular space. It will help here to consider alternative spaces where they might congregate and compare the pros and cons of each with the shopping center. The answers will depend on whether the location is in an urban or rural area. Many urban areas were redeveloped as recreation area for the middle and upper classes by displacing the lower classes.

Many shopping centers resemble indoor public parks with seating and running water. They provide a place for people of all ages to meet and it is warm in winter and cool in summer. A big difference though, is that the shopping center is privately owned and in business to make money. The park is part of the public sector where profit is not the primary motive. When you look around at the shopping center, look at its design. It can be birdcage style, like Water Tower Place in Chicago or it can be a promenade style as in Santa Monica with the Third Street area. Also look at the area surrounding the shopping center as this will tell you a lot about the chosen design of the shopping center.

In a birdcage mall, the shopper goes where the designer wants the shopper to go. Staircases and crossovers are few and far between and designed so the shopper has to pass the stores to get from one place to another. This is an inducement to spend money and shop at stores the shopper wouldn't normally enter. Many promenade style shopping centers also have the theme park atmosphere of a birdcage mall.

Now that the student has spent some time making all of these observations, and asking and answering questions, the student is ready to being to write the essay. Look for patterns in the data you have collected and build an essay around the patterns. If you don't think that the built environment conveys a message to the rest of the world, then think of the attacks on the World Trade Center. The twin towers symbolized American life to many people in other parts of the world.

The reading selections on space begin with Malcolm Gladwell and "The Science of Shopping." Gladwell looks at the use of space in shopping centers and within stores themselves. Certain stores, like the Gap, have set patterns for their displays. The hottest fads are located on the right fifteen paces from the door. They have determined that this is the best location because the shopper has entered the store and had a few seconds to adjust to the environment of the store. Gladwell points out that retail stores hire experts to provide this sort of information for them to use to increase their sales. The proper location and cant involve the determination of the walking speed of the shopper. Visual cues must be situated in such a way that they attract the fast walker. They also note that shoppers require twelve to fifteen feet to slow down so never locate your shop next to a bank since people tend to speed up when passing banks and by the time they slow down, they are past your business located next to the bank. The longer a consumer spends in the stores and the deeper into the stores the consumer goes, the more likely the consumer is to buy something.



Anna McCarthy and Susan Willis study the effect of product placement in the next two selections. In "Brand Identity at NikeTown" McCarthy studies product placement at the Nike retail outlet store. McCarthy feels that Nike is not as concerned with the particular product as they are with the promotion of the Nike name. This is described as theme marketing. Willis examines this kind of phenomena in "Disney World: Public Use/Private State." Disney World is like a paradise where every want and desire of the visitor is addressed. It is a programmed environment, a fantasy environment that seems very real to the visitor. The visitor must do everything in the proscribed way in order to get his money's worth at the theme park. The programmed environment is combined with the economics of consumption and its use as a value system by the park. Families act in a certain way, such as wearing Mickey Mouse shirts and the differences between them become based only on age and size. Buying souvenirs is a part of the culture and experience of Disney World where everything is based on the Disney logo. There is no magic behind the scenes where marketing and business are based on efficiency.

Lucy R. Lippard, in "Alternating Currents" looks at where people choose to live. Most Americans reside in urban areas but desire the space consistent with rural areas. Lippard looks at how they use their space. The American needs the vibrancy of the city that represents the new. This is balanced with the relaxation of the country that represents the old. Because of these needs, Americans alternate back and forth between city and country environments. Many people, especially women who were raised in the country, come to the city to break away from family. In some ways, this represents a break with the family values. The city represents more of a heterogeneous environment than the country does.

Continuing the study of space and the use of space, Karen Karbo looks at the use of the dining room in her selection entitled "The Dining Room". Most of the family activity centers on this room even though it is not emphasized by real estate agents. Many times the dining room table is the only table in the apartment so it is the site of main activities in addition to eating. This is usually true until the family purchases its first house at which time the dining room table becomes more formal and is used only for holidays and special occasions. Now the children aren't allowed to leave anything on the dining room table and the dining room becomes associated with good meals like roast beef and turkey that are served on special occasions or with the people who are visitors and diners on the special occasions.

The role of gender in office space is examined by Daphne Spain in "Spatial Segregation and Gender Stratification in the Workplace." An individual's status in the organization is determined by his workspace. A private office represents the highest level of status. Most of the employees work in an open space in which there are no doors that can be closed. Men tend to have the doors that can be closed with most women confined to the open space areas. This arrangement inhibits the transfer of knowledge from men to women in the workplace. In 1990, one third of all working women worked in teaching, nursing or secretarial occupations, with the largest category being secretarial and clerical work. Most of these women had little professional contact with men or the decision-making process. The workplaces were designed to enhance these distinctions in status.



Rina Swentzell looks at what the imposition of European American culture did to the Pueblo Indian community in "Conflicting Landscape Values: The Santa Clara Pueblo and Day School." A European American school building was built for the education of Santa Clara Pueblo Indian children who were raised on the tradition of harmony between environment and structures. This building was not consistent with beliefs of the community and was therefore a source of confusion to the children who attended school in the building. A difference in the two cultures was represented by the building that violated the consistency of the Pueblo environment in New Mexico. The school building represented different expectations than existed in the Pueblo community. The students who always had freedom in the selection of activities and choices and acted responsibly were put in a different environment. The fence around the school did this as did the movement from class to class which represented upward mobility in American society. The wide spaces sent a message of don't interact to the children. The school building and grounds represented a clash of cultures.

The urban ghetto is the subject of Camilo Jose Vergara in "The Ghetto Cityscape." Vergara looks at the ghetto and the people who live in it. He defines different kinds of ghettos based on who lives there and how they came to live there. A green ghetto results from people leaving the area and moving to other places when they can afford to. Institutional ghettos are places like the public projects. They are designed to contain low-income groups and are paid for by government. The new immigrant ghetto are places where immigrants settle and are usually based on nationality. These communities have businesses that help the immigrant acclimate and are characterized by restaurants and stores selling imported items. In many ways, these kinds of neighborhoods help the immigrant retain his native culture.

The final selection is Eric Boehlert's "New York's Most Disliked Building" in which he discusses the World Trade Center buildings. These building weren't just architectural structures for the world. They symbolized the American way of life and to some everything that they hated about America that is why they were the object of a terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. The Twin Towers opened in 1972 and were always the subject of discussion and fascination because of their size. The builders were looking at cleaning up the neighborhood and making money from the rentals, not at building a symbol of American life.



# We've Come a Long Way, Maybe: Gender Codes in American culture

## We've Come a Long Way, Maybe: Gender Codes in American culture Summary and Analysis

This window examines the role of gender codes in America. An example of a gender code is an unmarried woman. She was the subject of commiseration and pity at one time as people tried to arrange dates for the poor woman who couldn't find a husband. The image of the stuffy spinster has changed. The spinster has now become a singleton or a swinging single and is not, for the most part, envied by many and is certainly not pitied. Witness the popularity of shows like *Sex and the City* where all of the single women are protagonists but not in the same manner as Eve Arden was on *Our Miss Brooks* in the 1950s. *Sex and the City* represented the new sexual mores.

The important shows that did this are *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Laverne and Shirley*, *Murphy Brown* and *Sex and the City*. "But while the popularity among women viewers of these four straight-talking New York singletons (singletons, that is to say, in the inaugural episodes of the series) has been without question, the ideological significance of its post feminist message is far more complicated. For while the show presents itself, and is often viewed, as a revolutionary challenge of the gender codes that govern American life, a semiotic reading of the program can reveal a striking contradiction that may well undermine its claims to gender subversion" (Chapter 6, pg. 476).

A gender code is a belief and values system that defines the roles of men and women in society. Girls receive dolls as gifts and boys receive baseballs. This result of gender coding determines what roles the individuals will play as adults. The woman's movement of the 1970s proved that gender codes were social constructs, not natural constructs. There is no natural reason why a woman should not be good at math or science. Gender roles are a part of culture and the challengers to them are known as unnatural.

*Sex and the City* was popular and important because it challenged the gender codes. It wasn't just the males that were sexually active or aggressive or with important careers of their own. The four protagonists became heroines and role models for millions of American women. The post feminist period is characterized by the fact that a woman can use her body to obtain what she wants, having an out-of-wedlock child is a sign of independence and independence and beauty are part of being a female.

Gender coding itself makes it uncomfortable to analyze gender codes. One of the roles of semiotics is to examine gender codes and to ascertain their influence on life. Gender coding means the boy drives and pays for the date even though there is no reason for this to be so. Sex is different from gender. Sex is being born male or female while gender refers to the role that the individual plays. The roles of men and women are



changing in society is a part of the examination of gender coding. For example, men are now concerned with scents and fragrances. That is the result of a change in the pop culture.

Gender codes define sexual orientation in the culture. Many feel sexual orientation to be cultural and not natural and a lot of stars bucked the prevailing gender codes when they came out of the closet, so to speak. These values involved religious and moral beliefs that are a part of the political system. When studying gender codes, the student must also consider the social and political ramifications.

In the first selection, "Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes", Holly Devor looks at how men and women manipulate the signs that are used to communicate gender identity. The signals that define boys as boys and girls as girls aren't always as clear-cut as we would want them to be. They are cultural signs, not natural signs. Aggressiveness in males and gentleness in females is only considered natural because of cultural beliefs. The collections of these characteristics is what is known as femininity and masculinity. Men and women then use these characteristics to communicate based on the group they belong to which is defined by these characteristics. Manipulation of these signs involves using the characteristics of the other group, such as tough speech and aggressive behavior on the part of women.

Kevin Jennings selection, "American Dreams" examines the experience of growing up gay in America. Individuals in this category defy the given norms and codes and live in a state of denial, as Jennings indicated that even leads to suicide attempts. His parents had the American dream for him and he promised his mother that he would fulfill the American Dream for her, but he knew he was different. He was embarrassed by his family and knew that he was gay. He hated himself for his behavior of being overly aggressive with girls. When he finally faced the fact that he was gay and felt he could not live the American Dream, he tried to commit suicide. In college at Harvard, he learned that he accepted the fact that there was something wrong with him as long as he hid the fact that he was gay. This is how he learned what real freedom meant.

"The Gender Blur: Where Does Biology End and Society Take Over?" is Deborah Blum contribution in which she advocates considering both the cultural and the physiological determinants of human behavior. In other words, both nature and nurture are important in understanding the role of gender differences and behavior. Boys don't choose to play with dinosaurs just because of culture. They are naturally more aggressive than girls are. Blum attributes this to testosterone. Children learn their gender roles from their families. In traditional families, children become aware of their girl or boy instincts at two to three years of age and in families where chores are shared, this might not occur until six years of age. A look at their choice of playmates shows this is also where there are periods where the boys group with boys and the girls group with girls. Testosterone is important in determining the male and female roles and in the choice of a career.

Jennifer Scanlon writes about an interesting subject. In "Boys—R- Us: Board Game and the Socialization of Young Adolescent Girls", she looks at how gender identities of teenage girls come about from playing children's board games. She feels that board





games contribute to girls feels that boys are important and that intelligence isn't. The least gender specific toys are the toys for babies where primary colors predominate. As age increases, toys become gender specific with dolls for girls and trucks for boys. Girls' toys are distinguished by the use of pastel colors whereas boys' toys are characterized by camouflage colors of greens and browns. Scanlon looks at four board games designed for young girls: Heart Throb: The Dream Date Game, Sweet Valley High: Can You Find a Boyfriend in Time for the Big Date? Girl Talk: A Game of Truth or Dare and Girl Talk: Date Line. They teach the girls how to be consumers and how to obtain boyfriends. These kinds of games internalize the role model and the idea that women shouldn't achieve as much as men do. They also teach girls that they need boys to complete the definition of themselves. The games are teaching the girls to conform to the stereotypes of woman's role. Look at the skills these games are teaching the players to develop.

Andre Mayer writes "The New Sexual Stone Age" in which he looks at the roles of pop stars in pop culture and finds them to be rather traditional. Pop music male stars are assuming testosterone driven masculine roles while the female are assuming roles as sex objects and ornaments. Look at the choice of clothing and the actions they engage in. Look at how they present themselves and act. This is the sign of the roles they are playing. Neither the males nor the females dispute the roles that either of them is playing.

"The Beauty Myth" by Naomi Wolf considers the fact that no matter how liberated women are, they are still trapped in their own bodies. Thin became so popular that many women became anorexic or bulimic to fit the role. Wolf feels that the term beautiful is a cultural myth and the effect of this myth is to keep women trapped. Women can be controlled by their desire to be beautiful. Even with all of the gains women have made, they still do not feel as free as they want to because of this phenomenon and many are ashamed to admit this fact. This has taken its toll on women psychologically.

Deborah Tannen in "There is no Unmarked Woman" looks at how women are marked in society. Everything a woman does and everything about a woman's manner of dress sends a code and marks her. Being a man and what he does is unmarked. They are the norm. A male that doesn't wear makeup means nothing. However, what about a female who doesn't wear make-up? This sends a message, whether or not the woman wants it to. Suffixes like *ess* and *ette* mark a word as being feminine. Men can choose styles of dress that do not mark them. Women cannot. It may also be that the males in business choose to conform to the norm easily. Women do not have a norm to conform to so have no choice in the matter but to be marked by whatever they do. A woman cannot choose clothes that do not send a message.

"Warrior Dreams" the contribution of James William Gibson looks at the warrior fantasies that many men have, especially since the advent of the feminist movement and the defeat in Viet Nam. The revision of codes that resulted from the feminist movement brought about many dream of fantasy in men along the lines of Dirty Harry and Jack Ryan. Gibson begins his essay by relating the events of the Soldier of Fortune magazine's annual convention in Las Vegas with re-enactment of a fictitious battle. The





good guys easily won the battle against the Communists. New heroes were appearing in movies at this time with Dirty Harry and Charles Bronson's Death Wish character. Rambo also appeared during this time and eventually Jack Ryan appeared as the Tom Clancy main character and hero. Many warrior type magazines also appeared on the scene during this period. Concurrently, military weapons sales also skyrocketed since warriors had to have certain things in their arsenal. A new game of tag came into being eventually being played with paint balls. The only way this paramilitary fascination can be explained is within the context of the Viet Nam war.

The final selection in the chapter is by Laura Miller and is entitled "Women and Children First: Gender and the Settling of the Electronic Frontier." In this essay, Miller wonders why women need special protection on the internet. This implies that the internet is a masculine space that women wander into and because of this, they face all kinds of dangers. Miller feels that women don't need any form of special protection and that they can take care of themselves. The internet is seen as a frontier, just as outer space is seen as a frontier and women must be protected on any frontier, seems to be the view of society. If not they will be subject to harassment and other terrors. This assumes that women are weak and not capable of defending themselves on the internet. Women can take care of themselves in online discussions and in other kinds of online situations



# Constructing Race: Readings in Multicultural Semiotics

## Constructing Race: Readings in Multicultural Semiotics Summary and Analysis

The chapter begins with a list of blacks who are famous in different areas. The black superstars are evident of a multicultural and make one think about the meaning of the terms dominant culture. Even though the NAACP and others claim that blacks are under-represented, society is still increasingly multicultural. "Multiculturalism refers to that scholarly, political, and educational movement that contests the traditional monocultural perspective on America. That perspective regards American culture as a product of European history, the extension of a tradition that began in Greece and Rome and which was brought to America by the English. Multiculturalists challenge that perspective by exploring the contributions of such historically marginalized Americans as Africans, Asians, Latins, and Native Americans in the creation of American culture. And nowhere has this contribution been more prominent than in the realm of popular culture" (Chapter 7, pg. 550).

The above passage shows that multiculturalism refers to more than just black and white. There are many opportunities for all nationalities and ethnic groups when it comes to popular culture. Mohammed Ali who began as an outlaw has gained such standing that after the 9/11 attacks, he publicly avowed that the war on terrorism was not a war on Islam. As Ali became a national hero, so did many others.

In terms of multiculturalism, semiotics always involves questioning the cultural identity because this is how value systems are constructed. People don't all value the same things in the same way. The first question a student should ask when examining multiculturalism is who is he/she? What is the student's background? Your background determines what you think and what you value, whether you believe it or not. The melting pot is different depending on who you are and what perspective you are viewing it from. The melting pot is important to some people and totally irrelevant to others. The fact that this is overlooked causes some problems in America. Students and others must remember that the melting pot itself is the object of different viewpoints so not everyone is starting from the same point.

This is the problem with deciding that everyone should just view themselves and other as Americans and ignore the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of others. Many people take exception to this approach and consider trying to ignore ethnic differences to be racial. The authors point out that the 9/11 attacks did not make any cultural distinctions so how do we view the social construction of racial identity? This is the subject of this chapter, or window.



Michael Omi writes an essay entitled "In Living Color: Race and American Culture." This essay looks at how race signs in popular culture. Even though many people think that racism is gone, look again. Racism is very pervasive in our culture. It is still a factor in judging character and still results in stereotyping. Blacks are still underrepresented in the entertainment industry, even though those who are entertainers make a lot of money. A distinction is made between overt racism and inferential racism. Overt racism refers to an explicitly racial event, policy, or view. Inferential racism refers to representations of facts or events that come from the basis of racism. In spite of everything, race is one of the first things that people notice about a person. Racial beliefs account for differences in human nature because they result in difference in explanations, comprehension and actions. Popular culture has been an important place for racial ideologies and movies and television are the media where the images are established. They create the stereotypes that the rest of the world comes to judge America on. Sometimes the ethnic portrayals are accurate; sometimes they are grossly incorrect like Shanghai McNuggets with teriyaki sauce. Tradition itself may need to change to combat the problem of racism.

In "Put on a Happy Face: Masking the Differences Between Blacks and Whites," Benjamin DeMott looks at the history of race relations and the face presented by blacks and whites. According to the movies, relations between blacks and whites are great. There are few, if any, problems. DeMott's point of view is that the real situation has been concealed and misrepresented by Hollywood. The issues of infant mortality, murder rates and poverty are not addressed as such. The scenes in the movie do not portray what is happening in the streets and in real life. Leaving the movie theater and driving through the streets, they see the homeless and the poverty. Gains have been made since the passage of the Civil Rights legislation in 1966 and much of the progress since then has been carried forward by the media. The problems that remain are because of what happened in the past.

Paul C. Taylor is one of the three authors who address the issue of whites crossing over into black identified cultural activities in "Funky White Boys and Honorary Soul Sisters". Can white singers really sing the Blues? This cultural form is traditionally black. Taylor feels that many blacks are not comfortable with white performers doing what is traditionally a black cultural form and he dubs this feeling the Elvis Effect. Taylor lumps them into what he calls the Funky White Boys Club (FWB). He also has a club for the females called the honorary soul sisters. There is a form of nationalism among blacks and interest in subjects such as black English and black art. Underlying this nationalism is the metaphysical principle of essentialism that means that the nationalism is of the nature of the black people. Certain forms of culture contain what it means to be black and this is why blacks gravitate to these forms of culture. The principle of authenticity gives them the authority to do so based on being black since there is an obligation to black nationalism. Taylor now wants no part of the metaphysical nationalism that he describes. He finds it too restrictive and racial and believes that it is more prudent to take a serious approach to history and culture.

The next two selections are also concerned with the crossover issue. Jack Lopez writes of his experiences as a Mexican American surfer in "Of Cholos and Surfers". Lopez



grew up in the Los Angeles barrio and writes of his experiences walking around the area carrying a surfer magazine in the 1960s. He finally talks his father into buying him the magazine that he wants. Lopez writes of how he learned that he could do anything that he wanted in spite of his upbringing. He could even be a surfer if he wanted. Neil Bernstein's "Goin' Gangsta, Chosin' Cholita" looks at suburban and inner city teens and how many of the suburbanites choose to imitate their inner city counterparts. Identity is determined by what they want to wear and how they want to act, not where or what they come from or who they are. They claim what they want to be.

"Baby" is the selection of Bell Hooks who writes about the dolls she played with in her childhood. Dolls are the traditional gift for girls and they help mold the child's future behavior. What if the dolls are of a different race? Hooks preferred a brown doll as a child and wouldn't play with white dolls. The brown doll was like her. Does this send a different signal?

Melissa Algranati writes about her experiences growing up as a Puerto Rican Egyptian Jew in "Being an Other". This was her fate growing up in an America that required clear-cut identities. Because of her unique heritage, she was always in the category of 'other. She was raised in a balance of Puerto Rican and Sephardic cultures and never questioned who she was until she was entering college. Most of the essay is devoted to a history of her family and how her father's relatives left Egypt and her mother's left Puerto Rico. Both parents came from different cultures and worlds and this is what Algranati describes and how these worlds were combined when her parents married. She tries to maintain a cultural balance in her own life.

"The Classroom and the Wider Culture" Identity as a key to Learning English Composition" is the selection of Fan Shen. Shen grew up in mainland China where the group is more important than the individual. In America, it is the opposite and he had to learn to relate to the importance of the first person in life and in English composition. Shen had to learn to think and write in the first person, instead of always using the pronoun "we". For Shen, freshman English composition in college brought about a clash in his background of being raised Chinese. It was the beginning of a battle that would last for several years. His cultural background had shaped his ideological identity that had to be reshaped in English composition. Shen had to develop new values due to English composition, the "I" instead of the "we". The use of the word "I" signifies individualism that is frowned upon in a communist society. Shen was told 'be yourself' in his approach to writing. This meant that he had to find an American self since he couldn't be his Chinese self. He did this by constructing lists of features of his Chinese self and what he wanted in his non-Chinese self. Being English required a different set of rules than being Chinese did and a totally different approach to issues and topics.

"The Haves and the Have-Nots" is LynNell Hancock's selection that looks at the role of the internet in race relations. Not all schools have access to the internet to offer their students the advantages of the world wide web. The schools that don't are disadvantaged and put their students at a disadvantage. Students must be digital in order to survive in today's world. Those who come from economically disadvantaged homes don't have home personal computers. They need to have access to a computer



at school so they can learn about them. Technology changes at such a rapid pace that it is impossible for schools to keep up with the pace. They do not have the financial resources to do so. Schools that have technology also have students with higher test scores than the schools that don't have computer technology.

Racial profiling is the subject of Randall Kennedy's selection "Blind Spot". Kennedy feels that both supporters and opponents of racial profiling encounter problems with affirmative action programs. He claims that supporters promote the rights of the community over the rights of the individual with racial profiling yet with affirmative action, they promote the rights of the individual over the rights of the group. Opponents of racial profiling do the opposite. Racial profiling occurs when race determines who is subjected to surveillance or searches. Many claim that race is only one of the factors in making these determinations. Supporters claim that it is easier and cheaper to use race as a determining factor because it limits the search to population groups where certain kinds of problem makers are. Opponents say that allowing the use of race is dangerous because it subjects innocent people to the profiling that causes fear and anger. Both sides in this debate need to recognize the position of the other side and to listen to themselves and to each other. They both have something important to say about the issue.



# It's Not Just a Game: Sports and American Culture

## It's Not Just a Game: Sports and American Culture Summary and Analysis

Sports used to be an unpaid leisure activity. People played sports because they liked to play. We've come a long way from those days since sports is now big business and sports figures are among the highest paid people in the world. Many of the rules were changed, like the time between pitches, in order to accommodate television. Rules are changed to keep the game exciting for the viewers and sports is just another form of entertainment due to the miracle of television. "The real competition in sports now is the competition for markets, and to reach those markets, American sport has been compelled to behave like all those other competing entertainments in an entertainment-saturated society" (Chapter 8, pg. 634).

Sports teams have big bills to pay with all of those big salaries that top athletes command. In order to pay those big salaries, they have to enter into big lucrative television contracts: they can't pay those salaries based on ticket prices alone. Advertising is now an integral part of sports shows, like the Super Bowl. The sport can't exist without the advertisers. The sponsors now advertise their advertisements for the Super Bowl weeks in advance of the game. In spite of this, American sports still have its cultural significance in American society even though that significance has changed over the years. Sports like golf and sailing were the leisure activities of the upper class. Now they are professional sports engaged in for money. Many college athletes enter the ranks of the professionals early instead of finishing their college career.

Some sports, like boxing and baseball have working class connotations since that was the class that many of the participants came from. However, baseball does not have the same connotations as boxing, whose many participants were immigrants who saw boxing as a way to a better life. Baseball is more universal with its roots going to sandlots and suburban little leagues. This is why baseball is considered to be known as the national pastime. Baseball and other sports had to break the color barrier because they were closed to blacks and other groups for many decades. Today, race isn't the issue that it used to be. Many of the players are black but the majority of coaches and managers are white.

Many children idolize athletes, who act as role models for them. Many children want to grow up and be like the sports idol that they worship but this distracts them from careers that are more intellectual. Many kids spend a lot of time trying to be something that they can't be. Many ambitious white kids want to be doctors and lawyers because they aren't subject to the distractions that the black kids are. Girls were pretty much left out of the sports picture especially in college where there wasn't much funding available for woman's sports. Woman played only because they liked to; they weren't supposed to be



professionals. It stayed like this until the Title IX legislation required college to spend equal amounts of money on men and women's sports.

Semiotic analysis of sports is important because of the cultural significance of sports and because of the change that have taken place. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a window on sports and on the semiotic analysis of sports. The various selections have this intention in mind.

D. Staley Eitzen writes "The Contradictions of Big-Time College Sport" in which he examines the role of big-money sports and what it means to colleges. NCAA Division I activities are a form of big business that is ruining many college programs by interfering with the educational goals of the school. The programs draw students who are not college material and have little chance of succeeding academically but they are there because the college needs good players in order to qualify for television contracts. College sports gives the disadvantaged players a chance for a college education that they wouldn't have had without the sports but many schools have athletic programs that are not consistent with the overall academic goals of the school. Many schools provide tutors for their athletes, steer them into easy courses, and still have low graduation rates for most athletes.

College sports are a form of big business and Eitzen presents some facts about the lucrative multi-million dollar deals that various schools have. Many athletic departments are run like big business and those that lose money must have their losses covered by school funds. The successful ones bring in millions of dollars for their school and one of the ways to be successful is to have a winning team. This is why there have been numerous scandals involving college athletics. In spite of Title IX requiring equal spending on male and female sports and requiring that men and women must have the same opportunities, women sports do not bring in the same amount of money that male sports do. Even though the sports are big business, they are a form of extra curricular activity for the student and there is a discussion as to their educational contribution and value.

Frank Deford in "Athletics 101: A Change in Eligibility Rules is Long Overdue" looks at the fact that the college athlete is an amateur taking part in the multi-billion industry of college sports. He is not allowed to share in that wealth. Deford feels that the college player should be allowed to be a professional meaning that he should be allowed to receive pay. Many athletes who turn professional give up their chance at an education. The system forces the young athlete to make a choice between college and an athletic career. They should allow a drafted player to remain in college and finish his education. The student can work in other professions while attending college. Why not in sports?

"America's Spaz-Time" by David Kamp looks at the history of soccer. The game is known as football in the rest of the world and was late in catching on in American. When soccer became popular in America, it became a suburban sport. Professional soccer leagues were tried several times and failed in the 1970s. That soon changed and soccer has a lot of appeal at the grass roots level with children. Kamp describes the relationship with soccer in the United States as spazzy. It emphasizes fun over





competition and is concerned with social and psychological needs of the children. The approach is different in the U.S. than it is in Europe.

Michael A. Mesner looks at the role that sports plays in shaping a masculine identity in "Power at Play: Sport and Gender Relations." It is generally accepted that sports help to building the character of boys and that all boys should play sports. They help to develop the males need to win and in such a context the boy comes to view his body and the bodies of others as a machine. Some studies view sports as an institution designed to accentuate the male-female differences and maintain a social definition of gender roles. Many boys go into sports because of the contact it offers them with other males and it nurtured their need for competition. In addition, in pursuing this goal, many suffer physical injuries but this doesn't dissuade others from playing the sport. The differences in the make-up of the boys makes the sports experience different for each of them. Many gay athletes keep their sexual orientation a secret that seems to contribute to the masculinity of sports. They don't seem to feel the oppression in sports that they feel in other aspects of life. The meaning of sport is defined in terms of multiple masculinities and the role of power. Gays now have a competition known as Gay Games.

The role of the female athlete is examined by Mariah Burton Nelson in "I Won. I'm Sorry." Nelson defines winning as the goal of athletic competitions. This requires aggressiveness and a desire to dominate, which are traits usually attributed to males. The codes for women do not include these traits. Women who win cover them up by emphasizing beauty products and smiling a lot. These female athletes have to go out of their way to appear feminine. The killer instinct required for a successful athlete is not compatible with femininity is the message given here. All female athletes must play the femininity game.

Henry Jenkins writes "'Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama" in which he looks at the role of wrestling and concludes that it functions as a form of fantasy for the views. Jenkins terms it as a muscle bound soap opera or as some kind of morality play. There is more acting and stage play involved in a wrestling match than there is fighting. The sports event must allow for enjoyment and at the same time keep emotions under control. The melodrama of wrestling does this when it combines with the reality of sports. Sports competitions are usually impersonal but wrestling brings the competition to a more personal level, which is where the melodrama comes in. To be successful the wrestler must evoke some emotional commitment and it doesn't matter if it is negative or positive. Wrestling reinforces the view that the only way to be upwardly mobile is to stomp on those in your way. The emotional release comes through the melodrama.

E.M. Swift and Don Yaeger co-authored the selection entitled "Unnatural Selection" which looks at the possibility of genetic engineering in sports. They feel that it would result in quite an uproar given the outrages that come from being found to use steroids. The authors feel that scientists are not far from being able to genetically engineer a superior athlete and there will be no urine test that will be able to detect anything. Gene therapy can speed up the healing process for tissues. The East German use of steroids

is well known along with the toll it took on their athletes. When genetic engineering occurs, it will have to be dealt with by sports officials.

"The Boys on the Bus" by Gary Smith questions the role and meaning of sports in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The author takes his son to a high school sports event following 9/11. They ride on the bus with the players and talk about the relevance of sports games given what happened on 9/11. While riding, they all talked about their feelings in the aftermath of the terrorist attack and questioned whether sports games should go on. They decided they should because they are a rallying point for people. The games are something that parents can do with their kids and with each other.



# American Icons: The Myth Characters of Popular Culture

## American Icons: The Myth Characters of Popular Culture Summary and Analysis

America has many different kinds of heroes in popular culture. Some of these heroes are fictional, others are real. The 9/11 terrorist attacks resulted in the New York police and fire fighters becoming icons and heroes, as Americans and the world watch the effects of the terrorist attacks. They were represented at the many concerts and other benefits held by celebrities. The police and firefighters demonstrated what heroism meant and Americans accepted them as the new icons immediately. Nevertheless, Americans did not drop their sports stars or entertainment stars as heroes. These people led the benefits in different parts of the country. Some events, like the Emmys were postponed while others like the World Series took place. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, many Americans found solace and consolation in entertainment and sports. One can figure out how much these entertainment icons mean to Americans if we try to imagine life without them.

Elvis Presley is defined as one of the most popular cultural icons that there is in America. In many ways, he is bigger in death than he was in life. Very few other cultural icons compare to Elvis because Elvis was a pioneer in the development of Rock and Roll. Elvis was also the Dionysus of American culture. Elvis, like Marilyn Monroe, was a sex symbol. Both traveled the route from lower class beginnings to superstar and sex symbol and both died young. Jean Harlow was a sex symbol of an earlier era in the 1930s.

"That so many of America's cultural icons have been subsumed, or even created, to serve commercial interests is a sign of just how profoundly America has embraced the values of a consumer culture. And few icons have been left out of the consumer stampede" (Chapter 9, pg. 728). Many of America's cultural icons serve a commercial interest. This reveals the depth of America as a consumer culture. The reading selections in this chapter look at the roles of these icons. Not all of them have served a marketing purpose and some are fictional. Others are not fictional, like Michael Jordan.

Michael Jordan is the subject of "Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire" by Michael Eric Dyson. Dyson tries to define Jordan's spot in social and cultural history since Jordan is probably one of the best-known figures in the world. Athletics has resulted in specialized communities organized around highly skilled performance. Sports also produce a subculture based on the accomplishments of the individual and the group. Sports are a way of promoting the desire for mastery of the environment and a way of reinforcing certain values. Sports also provide a way for male bonding. With blacks in sports, it is a way of showing the superior physical status of the black athlete's body and the inability to perform in sports that required mental concentration. Jordan's



style reflected spontaneity and his own style that is referred to as the stylization of the performed self. This involves the projection of a sports persona. The use of edifying deception focuses around the space/time concept. This is like his ability to appear to be suspended in mid-air on his jumps. He can't really defy the laws of gravity even though he appears to do so. He represents the embodiments of black culture and the commodification of black culture with all of his endorsements. Dyson feels that all of these things come together in the sneaker, since Jordan is famous for his Nike endorsement.

In the next selection, "What Makes Superman so Darned American", Gary Engle looks at the role of Superman in pop culture. Superman has been with us since 1938 and has always been popular. Superman was the ultimate immigrant and fulfilled the need for moving around. He switched back and forth between his Clark Kent and Superman figures. Engle relates this to the concept of the frontier. Superman fulfills many different roles as a cultural icon. He does things that other idols like John Wane could never do and because of this, he will always be popular.

Andy Medhurst looks at the relationship of Batman and Robin in "Batman, Deviance, and Camp". The Caped Crusader was always a part of the Dynamic Duo. Medhurst offers a homosexual interpretation of the Batman - Robin relationship. He finds Batman interesting because Batman is the first fictional character to be criticized as being homosexual, even though the character is a symbol of masculinity. Frederic Wertham is the entity who paints Batman and Robin as being gay and is concerned about the potential harm to children. Medhurst defines Batman and the camped crusader whereas camp is a term that connotes homosexuality as critics commented on Batman's relationship with Robin. Fans of the Dynamic Duo always defend them against any kind of attack, including this one.

"Lara Croft, the Bit Girl" by N'Gai Croal and Jane Hughes examines the role of Lara Croft who is a virtual icon and part of the videogame culture from the game Tomb Raiders. Lara is computer generated and is an action hero. Some of her fans do not realize that Lara Croft is a computer-generated icon, believe that she is a real person, and want to know information about her personal life. The creators of the game at Core are surprised at the popularity of the character but are looking for other ways to exploit the phenomena.

Two of America's most famous dolls are the subject of the next two articles. The Barbie doll is the subject of "Our Barbies, Ourselves" by Emily Prager. This is the doll that all girls dream about in terms of looks and figure. Little girls grow up expecting to look like Barbie; little boys grow up expecting their girlfriends and wives to look like Barbie. Barbie is large breasted and wears high heels, something that dolls before her did not do. The author also notes the lack of male organs on the Ken doll and that Barbie would never be able to turn Ken on. Gary Cross writes on "Barbie, G.I. Joe, and Play in the 1960s". Toys are a way to learn about American culture since they signify American culture and the changes therein. Barbie is described as the ultimate fashion consumer who still has that distinction today. She apparently was created from the models of paper dolls that little girls used to play with. The doll was a break with tradition and



taught little girls to be consumers. Eventually Barbie had a little sister doll and boyfriend and girlfriend dolls, all of whom required clothing and accessories. G.I. Joe began as an infantryman and then became an action-figure until he disappeared from the scene. He could wear the uniforms of any of the military services and was surrounded by a variety of accessories. G.I. Joe eventually shed his strict military image and became an action figure. He disappeared in the early 1980s.

"The Assault on Martha Stewart" by Mark Caldwell examines the role of Martha as an icon. Martha Stewart not only became an icon, she became an institution working up from her beginnings as a Connecticut caterer. She now has books, articles, TV shows, and product lines produced on different kinds of media. She was always a fierce competitor and today promotes affordable decorating ideas and products. The houses featured in the ads may be out of reach of most people, but the products being sold are not. Martha came from humble beginnings and represents the American success story to many with the empire that she has created.

Products need to be sold or hyped by pitchmen, and this is the subject of Roy Rivenburg's article "Snap! Crackle! Plot!" Pitchmen can become icons in their own right like Tony the Tiger and the Energizer Bunny and Rivenburg writes a parody about trying to find out more about their personal lives. He finds that Mrs. Butterworth and Mrs. Paul were never married and that Aunt Jemima didn't really have any nieces and nephews or any other relatives. Charlie the Tuna and the Ty-D-Bol man are single. Tony the Tiger has a son Tony Jr. but there is no Mrs. Tony. When questioned about this Kellogg said there was once a Mrs. Tony that appeared in a commercial and a daughter Antoinette that appeared in 1974. The article is informative and written in a humorous style.

Jenny Lyn Bader looks at the heroes of her generation in "Larger Than Life". She wonders if the present generations have heroes in the same way that past generations did. She suggests that people might be better off with role models who are not heroes. These might be easier for people to relate to. The heroes the author grew up with were, she says, the subject of three-hour movies, like Helen Keller, Albert Einstein, and Nelson Mandela. Heroes, she says, didn't all have to be real or famous like Superman. Heroes had to do good so it didn't matter what nationality or race they were. Bader feels that these kinds of heroes were killed off by the generations who thought they were doing a good thing in ending hero worship. Kids don't imitate literary works. They imitate the characters that the literary works are all about. They pick-up on the qualities. Role models are probably better than heroes. They are more reliable and can be anyone, even relatives.

"A Patriot's Tale" by Tim Layden considers a family of New York firefighters and how the New York firefighters became heroes after 9/11. The firefighters he writes about are the brothers of an NFL starting player for the New England Patriots, Joe Andruzzi. Their father was a New York City policeman. The brothers served at the World Trade Centers on the day of the attacks. They all survived the attack and lived to tell their stories. They lost friends in the attack.



# Characters

## Paco Underhill

Underhill is a retail anthropologist. This means that he studies the behavior of shoppers. He is a consultant used by many retail businesses that have locations in shopping centers since he determines things like where to place displays that will have the best chance of resulting in sales. He also makes recommendations to retail stores on where to locate in a shopping center based on the speed of the shopper's walk. Based on their speed, there is a period of adjustment time when shoppers enter a store and Underhill defines this area as the Decompression Zone. Stores should never put anything important in this area because the shopper's will never notice it, no matter how big or gaudy it is. He uses hidden camera in his study of shoppers and their behavior. He is the founder of Envirosell, which is his consulting firm. He has worked for some of America's biggest firms.

## Oprah Winfrey

The popular talk show host is the subject of an article. Oprah is probably the most famous black woman on television and certainly one of the richest. She is honest with her television audience discussing the abuse she suffered as a child. Her show is tasteful and her interviews are done with tact and feeling. She can cry with her guests at some of the experiences they have had. Her shows, even though she deals with some controversial issues, are done with tact. She does not engage in sensationalism or yellow journalism. Many claim that her talk show is more like a ministry and a form of group therapy. Oprah began her career as a newscaster in Baltimore.

## Gloria Steinem

Gloria Steinem is one of the originators of the feminist movement that was concerned with the image that women presented. Steinem's career has been concerned with woman's issues. She is a co-founder of MS magazine that was one of the leading magazines and forums of the feminist movement. Needless to say, Steinem is concerned with the codes that are sent and received by women. Steinem is the author of many books and articles, most of which have to do with the woman's movement.

## Elvis Presley

Elvis has become a legend, probably bigger in death than he was in life. He was born in the South and worked as a truck driver. His love of singing and his talent propelled him into the celebrity life, as he became one of the early forces behind Rock and Roll and starred in many movies and television shows. Famous for his bumps and grinds he was known as the "King". Elvis is one of the biggest and most important cultural icons.



## **Michael Jordan**

Michael Jordan began his career as a basketball player and became one of the most celebrated black athletes in history. His body functioned like a finely tuned machine and earned him much fame and fortune. The former Chicago Bulls player is also popular for the many products that he endorsed and the different entrepreneurial activities he engages in. He is a true cultural icon.

## **Martha Stewart**

Martha Stewart began her career as a caterer working in Connecticut. Due to her drive and ambition and entrepreneurial ability, she built a multi-million dollar empire that consists of all facets of home decoration. She has numerous books, articles, magazines, television shows and product lines that carry her name. Martha Stewart is now a cultural icon and institution.

## **Charles Sanders Peirce**

Peirce was an American philosopher and physicist who lived from 1839 until 1914. He is credited with the founding of the word semiotics.

## **Ferdinand de Saussure**

De Saussure was a Swiss linguist in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He laid the basis for semiology in his lectures.

## **Roland Barthes**

Barthes, 1914-1980, applied semiotics to almost every aspect of French culture and wrote a book called *Mythologies* that was published in 1957. He used the methodology to analyze cultural significance. He was the first to find political insinuations in many different aspects of culture, basically forms of entertainment. Barthes gave the methodology of semiotics its political dimension.

## **Jack Solomon**

Jack Solomon is not only one of the authors of the book, he is also a contributing essayist. Solomon has also authored *Discourse and Reference in the Nuclear Age* and coauthored *California Dreams and Realities*. Solomon is a Professor of English at California State University at Northridge.



## Alexis de Tocqueville

De Tocqueville was a French aristocrat who wrote on the subjects of economics and philosophy. He visited New York in May of 1831 and commented on the contradiction he detected in American society - everyone is equal but trying to become a member of the elite class. His interpretation of the American dream is the value system that advertisers seek to appeal to.



# Objects/Places

## Sign

A sign is an important object. A sign is something that sends a message or a meaning. Signs can be political or commercial or can have some other meaning.

## Popular Culture

Popular culture is a term that is more or less synonymous with American culture. The term refers to what is around us in terms of entertainment and sports. As such, pop culture contains cultural icons, which are part of the subject of the book.

## Consumerism

Consumerism is one of the windows or parts of popular culture. The term applies to the process of consuming or purchasing items. All of these items are sending a message of who we are.

## Advertising

Advertising is a very important part of pop culture and consumerism. Its purpose is to persuade consumers to buy various items, whether they need them or not. Successful advertising results in increased sales for the company.

## Television/Video

Television and video are forms of media that result in the use of images. They offer a way of influencing people that goes beyond words.

## Space

The term space refers to the area around us, from our personal space to the outside space. What we do with the space send signs and makes statements about our culture.

## Gender Codes

Gender codes are the signals that are sent to men and women that tells them how to act and behave. For example, playing with dolls as children sends girls the message that they are training to be mothers. For boys the signals of aggressiveness and competition comes from sports.



## **Multiculturalism**

The term multiculturalism refers to the fact that society is comprised of many different cultures and ethnic groups. These groups have their own heritage and send their own signals.

## **Sports**

Sports is the medium by which males are taught aggression and competitiveness. Sports sends signals that are contrary to female gender codes, and females must work out the conflicts. Many sports figures are cultural icons for people.

## **Mythical Figures**

Mythical figures like Superman, Barbie, Batman and G.I. Joe are also a part of popular culture and function as cultural icons.

## **New York City**

New York City is the site of the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, which are mentioned throughout the book.



# Themes

## Role of Popular Culture

Popular Culture is an important part of American life and permeates and defines the existence of most people. Popular culture refers to what we do in terms of entertainment and sports. This includes shopping, movies, television, sports and the cultural icons and heroes are the characters that are active in these areas. Pop culture is an integral part of American culture, if not synonymous with.

Popular culture is what we do everyday. It is not something that we do once in a while. If we sit with a friend at Starbucks, this is a part of pop culture. We watch our little sister playing with her Barbie doll. That Barbie doll is a part of Pop culture. We spend the evening with friends hanging out at the shopping center. This is a part of pop culture, whether we buy anything or not.

There are other components of culture such as mass culture and high culture and low culture. High culture is a term that usually refers to the arts, like ballet, art, classical music and the like. Mass culture includes things like popular entertainment like movies or television programs. Low culture is a term that incorporates what is called pop culture. It used to be that using pop culture in college classroom discussions and assignments was taboo, until the 1980s when it became quite popular to use popular culture in English composition classes.

## The Need for Critical Thinking and Writing Skills

One of the needs and functions of college is to teach critical thinking and writing skills. Critical thinking involves teaching students to analyze and evaluate problems on their own. It involves their defining a problem and learning how to approach the problem. There are different approaches and forms of analyses required for different problems and the student must learn what to do for each type of problem. This is the functions of teaching critical thinking in the classroom.

Once the student learns how to approach a problem and learns what questions to ask and how to interpret the problem, he must be able to write about the problem. This is where the area of critical thinking and writing skills comes from. Students learn how to define and approach a problem, they learn how to analyze the problem and then to draw conclusions from their analysis. The student must also be able to communicate all of this in some way and the most common way is through writing.

Until the 1980s, popular culture was a taboo subject in college classrooms. In the 1980s, it became a popular way of teaching English composition, which is one of the places where students learn to develop their critical thinking and writing skills. The theory was the students are already experts on various aspects of pop culture, like pop music, television, movies, etc. Since they are already experts in these areas, let them



use the areas they are familiar with to develop their critical thinking and writing skills. It requires much less research for the student to write about an area they are already knowledgeable about. They are also more interested in pop culture subjects than they are, say, in opera.

The purpose of this book is to teach students to develop their critical thinking skills in writing about pop culture. The theme throughout the book is how to analyze the different forms of pop culture and what questions to ask. Each chapter looks at a different aspect of pop culture and shows the student what to look for and what to analyze. It shows them what signs to look for and what meanings should they try to uncover. This is called critical thinking.

## The Semiotic Method

This book uses the semiotic method to teach critical thinking and writing skills. This semiotic method is also a theme that runs throughout the book since it is the approach used for each of the different components of popular culture. The semiotic approach is based on finding and interpreting meanings. Every cultural activity, whether it is a hairstyle or a song, has a meaning and sends a message. The semiotic method means finding the sign and ascertaining its message.

Since there is a sign or message attached to every cultural activity, the student must learn to determine what these signs are and what they mean. Signs are usually commercial or political, but they can be making other kinds of statements about the world and the individual's place in that world. These signs define male-female relationships and roles. How is the little girl always taught to be passive and gentle? How is she taught to be a consumer by playing with Barbie dolls?

Once the signs and their meaning are determined, one can look at the roles that males and females play. How are women portrayed in various media and why? Where does the gender coding come from? What are the codes attached to various objects like the Volkswagen Beetle? The student has to do a little research on the history of the Beetle to learn this information. How do these signs change over time and why is another interesting subject. The semiotic approach is used for all of these forms of analysis.

# Style

## Perspective

The book is arranged with the beginning of each chapter containing an introduction and discussion by the authors Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon. Both of these authors are academics who are involved in the development of critical thinking skills and writing skills in their students. They have gathered a selection of essays for each of the nine categories that they cover in the book.

The intended audience is obviously in academia. There is the teacher who must teach critical thinking and writing skills and there is the student who must learn the material and technique. The author's are basically suggesting using subject matter, popular culture, which the student is already familiar with. It cuts down on the amount of research time and contains subjects that the student finds enjoyable and because they are familiar and enjoyable for the student, he is better able to concentrate on the analysis and content.

The many articles in this book should result in some enjoyment for the student. The variety of different topics should result in the student finding quite a bit that he can relate to and analyze. This should make the analysis and writing part less painful for the student. The built-in interest in popular culture should make the teaching part easier on the instructor also because of more interest on the part of the student. Both should find the class more enjoyable due to the object of the study being popular culture or some aspect of it that they can all find to relate to.

## Tone

The tone of the book is academic. The mood is for the most part objective, although there are more than eighty different authors involved in the overall book. Each author writes about something that he is knowledgeable about, and most of the authors are academics or professional writers. Even though there are nine different components of popular culture that are studied, there are about ten selections per component. Each article is written in a professional manner about some aspect of popular culture and from them, the student learns to develop critical thinking skills and writing skills.

The effect of the selections is to stimulate interest in the reader. Since students are all interested in popular culture and are somewhat of an expert in different aspect of it, they should enjoy reading the different selections in the book. They already have some knowledge about the topic so they don't have to learn that part of it and this kind of book allows them to concentrate on the thinking and writing by making it easy for them with questions and assignments included.

Both the student and the teacher should appreciate this book because of the above points. The book makes it easier for both of them.

## Structure

The book has a simple structure. There is an Introduction followed by nine chapters. The Introduction explains the purpose of the book and the method it employs. Then each of the nine chapters is about a different component, or window, on popular culture and contains a written introduction by Maasik and Solomon and then a selection of essays for the student to read. Each chapter also contains a selection consisting of a picture. All selections have questions and discussion section called "Reading the Test" and Reading the Signs". The purpose of these sections is to help the student understand the material and interpret it.

The book also contains a Table of Contents in the front of the book. This tells the exact selections that appear in each chapter and provides the length of each. There is also a Glossary that defines the important terms that are used in the book. There is a section on "Citing Sources" and an Index of Authors and Titles.

The overall structure works well for this kind of book with the information grouped by category of popular culture. There are many pictures throughout the text and there are boxed areas with assignments for the students.



## Quotes

"But recognition of the important place that popular culture has assumed in our society has not been restricted to the academy. Increasingly, Americans are realizing that American culture and popular culture are virtually one and the same, and that whether we are looking at our political system, our economy, or simply our national consciousness, the power of popular culture to shape our lives is strikingly apparent." (Preface, pg. vii)

"Given the importance of popular culture to our lives and the life of our country, it may seem surprising that until recently its study was largely excluded from university curricula. Equated with 'low' or 'mass' culture, popular culture was subordinated to the 'high' culture that academia was charged with preserving and propagating. Not until the advent of cultural studies, which was first pioneered in English universities and which came to America in the late 1980s, did the study of popular culture become a common, and accepted topic for university study" (Introduction, pg. 2)

"So you shouldn't feel alarmed it at first it feels a little odd to search for a political meaning in an apparently neutral topic. You may even think that to do so is to read too much into that topic. But Barthes's point - and the point of semiotics in general - is that all social behavior is political in the sense that it reflects some personal or group interest. Such interests are encoded in what are called ideologies, or worldviews that express the values and opinions of those who hold them. Politics, then, is just another name for the clash of ideologies that takes place in any complex society in which the interests of all those who belong to it constantly compete with one another." (Introduction, pg 7)

"The point is that when you interpret a cultural sign, the actual object is not what is meaningful in a semiotic analysis. What matters is the overall cultural system, the social context, in which that object appears. A highly portable, wireless communication box is not a sign in itself. It becomes a sign only when seen in relation to other objects and other signs." (Chapter 1, pg. 51)

"Addicts need to go back for more in order to feel good again. The addictive substance or activity takes away the emotional discomfort of everyday life, and also releases the built-up tensions of craving. The goal is to get back to a place of perceived power and carefree abandonment. The drinker suddenly becomes loose and uninhibited, certain he's the funniest man in the world. The gambler feels the elation of risk and possibility - putting it all on the line so Lady Luck can find him. The addicted shopper seeks the high she felt a few days earlier, when she bought a dress she still hasn't taken out of the box." (Chapter 1, pg. 72)



"As the historian Ronald Steel once pointed out: It was never the Soviet Union but the United States itself that is the true revolutionary power. We believe that our institutions must confine all others to the ash heap of history. We lead an economic system that has effectively buried every other form of production and distribution - leaving great wealth and sometimes great ruin in its wake. The cultural messages we transmit through Hollywood and McDonald's go out across the world to capture and also undermine other societies. Unlike more traditional conquerors, we are not content merely to subdue others: We insist that they be like us. An of course for their own good. We are the world's most relentless proselytizers. The world must be democratic. It must be capitalistic. It must be tied into the subversive messages of the World Wide Web. No wonder many feel threatened by what we represent." (Chapter 1, pg. 137)

"Advertising: It's not just show and tell. In effect, it's a form of behavior modification, a psychological strategy designed not only to inform you about products but to persuade you to buy them by making associations between the products and certain pleasurable experiences that may have nothing to do with the product at all, like sex or a promise of social superiority, or simply by making you laugh." (Chapter 2, pg. 141)

"The parable of the Democracy of Goods always remained implicit in its negative counterpart. It assured readers that they could be as healthy, as charming, as free from social offense as the very 'nicest' (richest) people, simply by using a product that anyone could afford." (Chapter 2, pg. 152)

"For the semiotician, the contradictory nature of the American myth of equality is nowhere written so clearly as in the signs that American advertisers use to manipulate us into buying their wares. 'Manipulate' is the word here, not 'persuade'; for advertising campaigns are not sources of product information, they are exercises in behavior modification. Appealing to our subconscious emotions rather than to our conscious intellects, advertisements are designed to exploit the discontentments fostered by the American dream, the constant desire for social success and the material rewards that accompany it. American's consumer economy runs on desire, and advertising stokes the engines by transforming common objects - from peanut butter to political candidates - into signs of all the things that Americans covet most." (Chapter 2, pg. 161)

"These rippling effects from health claims in ads demonstrated the most basic propositions in the economics of information. Useful information initially failed to reach people who needed it because information producers could not change a price to cover the costs of creating and disseminating purse information. And this problem was alleviated by advertising, sometimes in a most vivid manner." (Chapter 2, pg. 215)

"The West Wing is also well liked because it invokes controversies in non-threatening ways. Popular shows historically have relied upon appealing actors playing comfortable characters who project traditional values, and Sorkin's creation provides such characters in droves." (Chapter 3, pg. 239)



"We look to television for cues, but this is new to television, too. As usual, it's easier to carp about what TV is doing than to come up with an alternative course of action. I do think there's an intrinsic reassurance in the fact that TV just keeps going, keeps pouring out the sitcoms and the dramas, the huff and the fluff, the schlock and the slop."  
(Chapter 3, pg. 285)

"Many Europeans are concerned about the possibility of American culture dominating other cultures. Many Americans believe that their culture is indeed the dominant culture in the world. The increasingly common terms 'cultural hegemony' and 'monoculturalism' seem by default to refer to American culture and its presence outside of America. In Europe and other places, American culture appears in many forms, such as movies, music, clothing, and television. But does the presence of these kinds of American pop cultural items mean that a cultural takeover is happening, or happening unproblematically?" (Chapter 3, pg. 288-89)

"Whether you believe that films distract us from the real world or inspire us to imagining a better one, their central place in contemporary American culture demands interpretation. For the impact of film goes well beyond the movie theater or video screen. Far from being mere entertainments, the movies constitute a profound part of our everyday lives, with every film festival and film award becoming major news stories, and each major release becoming the talk of the country, splashed across the entire terrain of American media from newspapers to television to the Internet. Just think of the pressure you feel to be able to discuss the latest film sensation among your friends. How, if you decide to save a few bucks and wait for the video release, you would lose face and be seriously on the social outs." (Chapter 4, pg. 300)

"The Western has left an indelible mark on the world. Thanks to Hollywood, virtually everyone knows the ingredients of the Western - the lassos and the Colt .45s; the long-horned steer and the hanging trees; the stagecoaches and the Stetson hats; the outlaws and the lawmen; the gamblers and the gunfighters. And virtually everyone knows the Western - the red rock monoliths of Monument Valley; the jagged, snowcapped peaks of the Teton Range; the treeless expanses of the prairie. The iconography of the Western is the largest and richest of all the film genres, and Hollywood has burned in into the minds of moviegoers from Dodge City to Timbuktu."  
(Chapter 4, pg. 326)

"Change is overdue. In the past decade, Hollywood has metamorphosed into a soulless popcorn machine, creating middles dreck designed to pay off at every stop on the global gravy train, from moving theaters to cable TV to DVDs. The studios have largely abandoned any pretense of grappling with real-life issues of the modern world."  
(Chapter 4, pg. 385)

"The answers to these questions all point to a cultural meaning, from the reasons America has changed from being an urban society (as it was in the 1930s and 1940s) to



a suburban society )as it increasingly has been since World War II), to the ways in which spaces tied to private property rights are replacing public parks as places of recreation. These are facts that can be associated with some of your conclusions about American's current attitude toward its urban centers, because here is a relation between suburbanization, commercialization, and privatization, on the one hand, and the decay of such public spaces as the urban park, on the other." (Chapter 5, pg. 397)

"Should we be afraid of Paco Underhill? One of the fundamental anxieties of the American consumer, after all, has always been that beneath the pleasure and the frivolity of the shopping experience runs an undercurrent of manipulation, and that anxiety has rarely seemed more justified than today. The practice of prying into the minds and habits of American consumers is now a multibillion-dollar business. Every time a product is pulled across a supermarket checkout scanner, information is recorded, assembled, and sold to a market-research firm for analysis." (Chapter 5, pg. 408)

"Yet today's ghettos are diverse, rich in public and private responses to the environment, in expressions of cultural identity, and in reminders of history. These communities are unchartered territory; to be understood, their forms need to be identified, inventoried, and mapped." (Chapter 5, pg. 462)

"Gender values take us to the core of our sense of ourselves as individual and social beings and involved religious and moral beliefs that have recently become a central component of our country's political system, as in the 'family values' movement. And this too is a sign of the essentially political nature of our social codes or mythologies, for if our values weren't political, they wouldn't be entered into the electoral process. So the analysis of gender codes in America isn't simply an academic exercise: it is a social and political activity that will affect you well beyond the classroom." (Chapter 6, pg. 482)

None of this is true. 'Beauty' is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves." (Chapter 6, pg. 518)

"The terrorist attacks of 2001, which were an assault on all Americans, made no such tribal distinctions, however. In the post-9/11 world, which has caused many Americans to experience their common national and cultural destiny, a new kind of multiculturalism may be emerging. Rather than exploring cultural differences alone, we may also come to explore the multicultural identity that is modern America. Leaving behind the melting pot metaphor that assumed the assimilation of many-into-one, we may discover a new metaphor for a culture that the many have constructed. Then, it would be time to rephrase our question, not longer asking 'Who are you' but 'Who are we?' (Chapter 7, pg. 555)



"My clubs started with some rough but fairly reliable generalizations about race and culture. Here's one: By and large, black people tend to participate jointly in distinctive forms of life. This is a claim that sociology can bear out and that history can explain. More important, it is a claim that is neither contradicted nor undermined by the remarkable variety of lives and styles that black people can inhabit." (Chapter 7, pg. 581)

"The rules of English composition encapsulate values that are absent in, or sometimes contradictory to, the values of other societies (in my case, China). Therefore, learning the rules of English composition is, to a certain extent, learning the values of Anglo-American society. In writing classes in the United States I found that I had to reprogram my mind, to redefine some of the basic concepts and values that I had about myself, about society, and about the universe, values that had been imprinted and reinforced in my mind by my cultural background, and that had been part of me all my life." (Chapter 7, pg. 614)

"An important element of the racial semiotics of sports has precisely to do with their professionalization. In an era when athletes are, in effect, highly paid entertainers who perform for passive, non-participating audiences, the fact that so many of those entertainers are African American has created certain self-perpetuating stereotypes. That is, while once black athletes were forbidden to perform alongside white ones, black athletic superiority is now something of a social stereotype. Similar to the image of the tough, cool, and violent black urban gangster that the entertainment industry sells to audiences of all ethnicities, professional sports defines the black males as an athlete and sells that image back not only to white fans but also to young black males." (Chapter 8, pg. 638)

"Whether as amateurs or professionals, spectators or participants, we love sports for the sense of thrill and competition they provide, for the relatively safe way they allow us to experience both vertiginous highs and black troughs of despair - emotional states that in real life would get us into serious trouble. It's bumpy, harrowing, exhausting terrain, and we're up for it, even as kids, especially as kids. But the tenor of soccer in the United States is, to use an inelegant but nevertheless appropriate word, spazzy." (Chapter 8, pg. 664)

"How can you win, if you're female? Can you just do it? No. You have to play the femininity game. Femininity by definition is not large, not imposing, noncompetitive. Feminine women are not ruthless, not aggressive, not victorious. It's not feminine to have killer instinct, to want with all your heart and soul to win - neither tennis matches nor elected office nor feminist victories such as abortion rights. It's not feminine to know exactly what you want, then go for it." (Chapter 8, pg. 680)



"In the final analysis, his big black body - graceful and powerful, elegant and dark - symbolizes the possibilities of other black bodies to remain safe long enough to survive within the limited but significant sphere of sport, since Jordan's achievements have furthered the cultural acceptance of at least the athletic black body. In that sense, Jordan's powerful cultural capital has not been exhausted by narrow understandings of his symbolic absorption by the demands of capital and consumption. His body is still the symbolic carrier of racial and cultural desires to fly beyond limits and obstacles, a fluid metaphor of mobility and ascent to heights of excellence secured by genius and industry. It is this power to embody the often conflicting desires of so many that makes Michael Jordan a supremely instructive figure for our times." (Chapter 9, pg. 736-737)

"Oppenheimer dwells relentlessly on what he sees as Stewart's pathological ambition and cutthroat business competitiveness, but - hostile though his portrait is - he never questions the sincerity of her dedication to raising the aesthetic tone of American domestic life. Stewart has a reputation for fussy and expensive elegance, but her interests span cooking, gardening, decorating, entertaining, even family relations and finance. And her dominant theme is not costly luxury, but rather studious care - taking pains to make one's daily life pleasant, artful, dignified." (Chapter 9, pg. 776)

"We require a new pantheon: a set of heroes upon whom we can rely, who will not desert us when the winds change, and whom we will not desert. It's unsettling, if not downright depressing, to go through life embarrassed about the identity of one's childhood idols." (Chapter 9, pg. 792)



## Topics for Discussion

Is popular culture synonymous with American culture? What is its significance?

What is the semiotic method? Why are signs important?

What are the questions the student is urged to ask in using the semiotic method to analyze popular culture events?

How is advertising a form of pop culture? What are some of the signs of advertising and what do they depend on?

What is the difference between advertising based on populism and elitism? How can they appeal to the same people?

How does an icon differ from a symbol or a sign? Why must it be interpreted differently?

How does the use of space makes a cultural statement? What are some of the cultural differences between countries and how is this revealed?

Who is Paco Underhill and why is he important?