Dear Students,

In the summary below, I lay out the basic structural concepts of semiotic analysis followed by instructions on implementing the semiotic method of analysis.

As it applies to popular culture, *semiotics* is the study of symbols and their meanings. Semiotics has its origins in the study of language, *linguistics*, but extends the concept to all media forms and other aspects of culture.

Semioticians (those who theorize and practice semiotic analysis) conceive of human understanding as structured by symbols which determine how we perceive reality. This follows from the well-known "Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis," which asserts that language forms the basis for all human thought. Without language, we only have feelings and emotions, but language permits us to analyze, evaluate, and ultimately modify reality by labeling different aspects of our experience and imagining potentials and affordances that we can share with others.

**Saussure**

In *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure put forth a structural conception of language. The defining feature of structuralism is that differences or oppositions are used to understand how the components of a system relate to one another. For example, Saussure made note of the difference between Langue (the rules of language) and Parole (the way language is used). For Saussure, words did not correspond to meaning directly, rather words gained meaning based on their context in a sentence (syntagmatic organization) and their differences from other words (paradigmatic organization).

For our purposes, however, Saussure's most important contribution is his model for the linguistic sign:
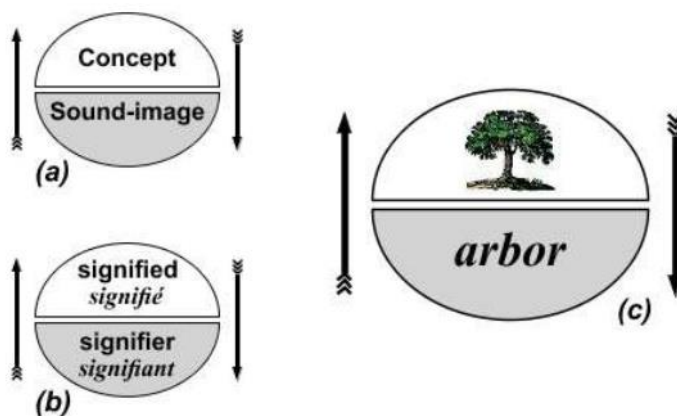
As demonstrated visually in the diagram above, the circles represent the unified "sign," which is anything capable of communicating meaning. The bottom portion of the circle is the "signifier," which is the physical representation (e.g. spoken or written words) of the sign. The top portion of the circle is the "signified," which is the conceptual representation of the sign in the mind of the perceiver. The arrows indicate that signifier and signified each refer to the other, but that there's no natural or essential connection between these elements. For example, the word *arbor* is the Latin word for *tree*. The word could just as easily be *Baum* (in German). These words are very different but they all mean the same thing, therefore, signs are arbitrary (there's no natural connection between the signifier and the signified), ambiguous (there's no fixed meaning between signifier and signified), and abstract (there's no physical correspondence between signifier and signified).

**Barthes**

Roland Barthes extended this structural approach beyond language to all aspects of culture. Barthes understood the relationships among signs as denotative or connotative. Denotative signs refer to literal or "original" meaning whereas connotation refers to the subtle implications that point to the new associations that the word has developed over time. Connotations that have been naturalized to the extent that they are taken for granted associations are part of what Barthes refers to as "myth," or ideology posing as "common sense" reality:

Denotation → Connotation →Myth → Ideology

However, because symbols are abstract and their relationships to different meanings are arbitrary and ambiguous, language and other cultural symbols transform over time in a process Barthes refers to as "unlimited semiosis," wherein signs become signifiers in future linguistic or symbolic constructions. For example, consider how the word "gay" has evolved from meaning "happy" or "joyful" to "male homosexuality" (with a negative connotation attached), to "people of either sex who are attracted to others of their own sex" (without a negative connotation).

To extend this notion of "unlimited semiosis" to narrative analysis, consider the composite model of adaptation: The relationship between the distributional functions in the *source material* and the distributional functions in the *adaptation* demonstrate this process of change that fluidly incorporates old signifiers into new constructions of meaning.

**Method**

When approaching any media text, it is important to follow some specific steps: (1) Identify the media text(s) under investigation, e.g. *Huffington Post* (website), *Conan the Barbarian* (film), *Bates Motel* (tv program), *World of Warcraft* (video game), *Wonder Woman* (comic books), *Aenima* (musical album) etc.. (2) Identify your theoretical perspective, e.g. gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, political economy, psychoanalysis, metaphysics, etc.. (3) Identify your method of analysis, e.g. narrative (including adaptation), semiotic, aesthetic, etc.. (4) Apply your selected method to your selected media text.

As you perform step four, you should consider the media text from your selected theoretical perspective, but also keep in mind competing and overlapping perspectives that may not have been immediately apparent. Step four also requires *iterative* (repeated) reading/viewing/playing/listening. It is essential to experience the entirety of the media text multiple times without taking notes before beginning a formal analysis of it. This is meant to improve external validity.

Once familiar with the media text, you must develop a rigorous and consistent format for recording your evidence. How this is done will depend to some extent on the media text itself and the method you choose to employ. The information that is recorded will ultimately depend on your theoretical perspective, though, as previously mentioned, competing perspectives should be considered if they are relevant to your analysis.

**Semiotic Analysis**

In a semiotic analysis, you are investigating the symbols of a given media text. If those symbols are situated in the context of a narrative, it is necessary to situate your analysis from within the context of that narrative as well. This means you will need to provide enough information about the story so that the reader understands the context of the symbols being investigated.

**Where do I find symbols in a media text?**

While its technically true that anything may be read as a symbol, it is helpful to provide a basic structure for grounding your semiotic analysis. As *signifiers*, symbols must have some physical aspect, so the basic components of a *narrative event* provide a good foundation for seeking out symbols that are meaningful to your analysis. As you may recall, a narrative event is defined as follows:

> "A continuous span of time and space that occurs in a setting, which may involve one or more characters and/or objects, but must feature one or more actions. A setting is a physical place, a character is a person in the setting, an object is an inanimate entity within the setting, and an action is a physical occurrence within the setting" (First Summary).

According to this model, a (1) setting, (2) character, (3) object, or (4) action may qualify as symbolic. Consistent with Saussure's theory, each of these components can be understood as paradigmatic, which is to say, for example, that the choice of one particular setting/character/object/action instead of another is meaningful. Remember the example of the young mother in the *84 Lumber* Superbowl commercial and how differently the commercial would be interpreted if it had been the grandfather who was making the journey to the United States.

Conversely, changes in these components that occur over the course of the narrative may be read as syntagmatically meaningful. Consider, for example, the character of Walter White in *Breaking Bad* and his transformation from a naïve chemistry teacher at the start of the series to a hardened drug-dealer and murderer by the end. Similarly, the daughter's American flag in the *84 Lumber* ad was constructed syntagmatically over the course of the narrative and had specific meanings associated along the way.

In the next summary, a full analysis of the *84 Lumber* ad based on our discussions will be provided as an example.