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COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES 444/544 [3 sh]

SEMIOTICS AND THE STUDY OF MEANING

Semiotics is the study of signs and sign systems. Signs are things which stand for other things (much as a rose represents romanticism, a heart represents love, a cross Christianity, and so on) in our consciousness and behavior, that is, in the world of meaning we share through communication. This course is an introduction to the methods and theories of semiotics and its concern with the “life of signs” — signs as individual entities, as they operate within larger groups of signs called codes, and as codes, in turn, operate within cultures. The creative side of our existence ensures that we are sign makers, speakers, concept and object makers, storytellers and the product of stories, and artists in every genuine sense of the term. We spend our lives sending messages generated by signs about ourselves and interpreting messages that others send about themselves — in language forms, myths, art works, rituals and related theatrical performances, artifacts, body-centered displays that range from facial expressions to hair styles, tattooing, dance, and the other meaningful forms and expressions that constitute social life. Exploring the field of semiotics helps us understand the role that signs play in our lives, how we use them and interpret signs sent by others in nonverbal communication, speech, written texts, and combinations thereof, and how the codes in these processes figure into the shared mentality that defines for us the nature of the world and our place in it. The course provides examples from such meaning-rich domains of experience as circus culture, the world of professional wrestling, strip tease, Xmas, McDonald’s, cannibalism, cross-species communications with chimpanzees and other animals, the subcultures of surfers and gays, the story of Little Red Riding Hood, Disneyworld, tourism, road signs, the language of wine-tasting, scientific writing, and language itself as a semiotic system. Working at the interface of nature and culture, semiotics provides a perspective on the whole of human experience and, ultimately, on the nature of consciousness itself. It is foundational to our understanding of knowledge and experience for there is nothing in thought which is not first possessed as a sign and not ultimately communicated as a sign. By addressing knowledge and experience this way, semiotics goes to the heart of foundations for all of the sciences and the humanities. By asking about the roles played by signs in our lives and in contemporary culture, we open up nearly every aspect of communication to study. Students from all disciplines are invited to attend.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Undergraduates:

Cobley, Paul, Litza Jansz (illustrator), and Richard Appignanesi. *Introducing Semiotics*. New York: Totem Books, 1997.
Danesi, Marcel: *Sign, Thought, and Culture: A Basic Course in Semiotics*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 1998.

Graduates:

Cobley, Paul, Litza Jansz (illustrator), and Richard Appignanesi. *Introducing Semiotics*. New York: Totem Books, 1997.
Danesi, Marcel and Paul Perron. *Analyzing Cultures: An Introduction & Handbook*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Graduate Projects (choose ONE only):

Burton, John W. *Culture and the Human Body: An Anthropological Perspective*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 2001
Lutz, Catherine and Jane L. Collins. *Reading National Geographic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.