Media Language

Key Concepts

Essential Theory / Theorists for Media Language: Barthes, De Saussure & Pierce
Barthes was an influential theorist who explored the way in which texts make meaning. Building on linguistics, he considered that all cultural forms; including media, are essentially made up of a system of signs. Barthes identifies two interrelated theoretical perspectives:

1. **Semiotics** - the study of individual signs
2. **Structuralism** - the study of the relationships between those signs

He argues that the organisation of these relationships encodes particular ideologies.

**The Theory**

**The Active Audience** - Barthes considered texts to be open to many possible interpretations (readings) from many different perspectives. To consider different possible readings, he pulled texts apart, to look at the pieces (semiotics) and how they fit together (structuralism).

Rather than having a meaning determined by the producer, or one which is somehow ‘in’ the text, Barthes considered the meaning of the finished text – a book, song, film or advertisement – is to be created by the audience, therefore a text always remains open.

**Myth and Ideology** - The term myth has two everyday meanings:

1. A **traditional narrative** which explains symbolically the origins of the world and natural phenomenon and is passed down through generations, for example, creation myths explain how the world began
2. Something which is **untrue although it is believed to be true** such as ‘it is a myth that students can leave after fifteen minutes if their teacher doesn’t turn up’.

**Influences on Barthes**

- Ferdinand de Saussure (Linguistics)
- Vladimir Propp (Russian Formalism)

Drawing on Marxist theory, for Barthes myth works at the level of ideology. Representations created in the mass media, through signs (semiotics) and the structures between them (structuralism), naturalise a particular view of the world. These representations may ‘mask’ reality. The construction of myths in representations and narratives therefore determines the text’s ideological perspective.
Narrative codes - Barthes suggested meaning is made in fiction texts by the use of these five codes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The enigma code</th>
<th>Narratives set up puzzles to be solved; these enigmas delay the end of the narrative &amp; maintain audience's interest &amp; anticipation. The answers to the puzzles are satisfyingly resolved later in the text.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The enigma code</td>
<td>narrative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>a.k.a. the hermeneutic code</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>The events and actions code</td>
<td>a.k.a. the proairetic code</td>
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<td></td>
<td>a.k.a. the proairetic code</td>
<td>chapter titles</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>The symbolic code</td>
<td>The process of representing an object, idea or feeling by something else (a visual metaphor). Often used to symbolise opposition which exists in the narrative (ref Levi-Strauss)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The semic code</td>
<td>Refers to the use of connotation to give the audience an insight into characters, objects or settings that we learn to read through our understanding of narratives.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>The cultural code</td>
<td>Concerns the culturally specific knowledge from outside the text which is used to make meaning in a text. Media Language &amp; Audience</td>
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Glossary of Terminology you should use to analyse texts using Barthes ideas:

- **Structuralism**: Approach to media analysis which borrows its principles from linguistics (the study of language). Structuralism considers the relationships (structures) between signs to be more important than what a sign may mean on its own.
- **Myth**: Artificial representations and invalid beliefs about society that circulate in cultural products, such as the mass media.
- **Paradigm**: A group of similar signs from which a selection is made to make a text (i.e. a selection may be made between a paradigm of colours, a paradigm of fonts, and a paradigm of sizes to produce red point 12 typography in Times New Roman).
  - **Syntagm**: The combination of signs selected from different paradigms. In the example above, red point 12 typography in Times New Roman is a syntagm.
- **Semiotics**: The study of signs
  - **Sign**: A unit that makes meaning (Media Language)
    - **Icon (Denotation through close resemblance)**: A sign which visually corresponds to that which it represents.
      - The thing looks like the thing it represents
    - **Index (Denotation through cause & effect)**: A sign which refers in some way to that which it represents.
      - Smoke is an index of fire. An echo is an index of space. Footprints are an index of a person walking ahead.
    - **Symbol (Connotation)**: A sign which is used to represent something to which it bears no logical relationship.
      - For example, there is no reason why green should symbolise jealousy. A rainbow may be symbolic of hope.
**Ferdinand de Saussure** was a linguist and a semiotician, this means he studied language and how language communicates meaning. Media Studies has borrowed many of his ideas, to try to describe how the media, as a type of language also communicates meaning. De Saussure was primarily interested in written language; however his analytical tools can also be used to describe texts, which use images, editing and sounds as well as the written word.

**THE BASICS**

De Saussure considered language to be a series of signs, which refers to real world objects, places, feelings, thoughts... (the referents). Language encodes complex meanings and ideas by combining signs to build up layers of denoted and connoted meaning.

A sign, de Saussure suggested, was made up of two parts:

1. The **signifier** is the physical sign in the text.
2. The **signified** is the implied meaning it carried.

De Saussure was trying to explain was how human beings, through language, describe their world, their experiences & their ideas. He enabled the study of and literature to become more formalised and scientific. It is important however to remember that whilst we use semiotics to study distinct and individual features of a text, de Saussure was clear that **the whole is greater than the sum of its parts** and that we need to look at how signs combine to communicate ideas.

*So for example the colour green doesn’t always mean envy, we need to look at other elements of the sign to consider what the overarching meaning is (Barthes called this syntagm).*
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Charles Sanders Pierce was an American thinker, who amongst many other things thought about how to bring logic to bear on language. He took de Saussure’s ideas of signifier and signified and tried to describe how extra meaning (the signified) becomes associated with particular signs (signifiers).

He suggested three ways:

1. **The Icon:** the signified encodes meaning through a close resemblance to the referent – this is particularly relevant in photography / cinematography, less so in written language; although onomatopoeia is an example of an icon word, as it when spoken, it sounds like the sound to which it refers.

2. **The Index:** The signifier is linked to the signified though cause and effect. If we hear thunder we know it is caused by lightening, if we see a character sweating and out of breath this is an index of exertion (exercise).

3. **The Symbol:** A sign that has no direct link with what it signifies, the associations are conventional, which must be learned. So a white dress on a woman walking into a church is a symbol of marriage / the bride. However, in oriental cultures this would be a symbol of a funeral / mourning; in the orient red is the colour of marriage, white is the colour of death.

   - These signs are cultural in origin and require shared cultural experience in order to understand them.

Glossary of terms to use in your analysis

- **Encoding** – Texts are encoded with meaning by their producers
- **Decoding** – Texts are decoded by their audiences, where meaning is read / interpreted
- **Denotation** – The literal or primary meaning of a sign, in contrast to the feeling or ideas that it suggests
- **Connotation** – The suggested and implied meaning of a sign, in contrast to its literal meaning
- **Sign** – a unit of meaning in a text (these can be cultural, technical or linguistic)
  - **Signifier** – The physical sign itself (a sound, word, image...) as distinct from its meaning
  - **Signified** – The meaning or idea suggested or implied by a sign, as distinct from the physical form in which it is expressed.
    - **Icon** - a sign whose form directly reflects the thing it signifies
    - **Index** - an indicator of another event / action
    - **Symbol** – a sign which relates, by cultural convention, to an idea or meaning