



# IS THIS HOW THEY SEE ME

MASSES, MESSAGES AND MEANINGS

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# The Ubiquity of the Media Environment

- Our lives are saturated with media technologies and images.

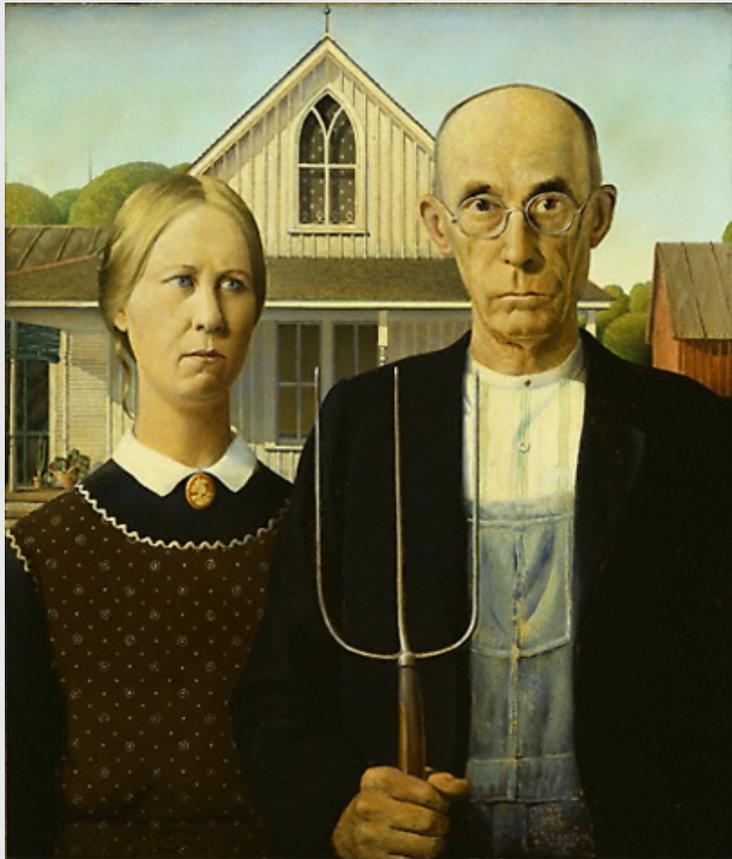


## *The Mass Society Questions:* What happened to American Culture and Politics? (1865-1939)

- How did we get to the point where the public—or rather, the “masses”— can have their hearts and minds shaped by mass mediated propaganda?
- How did we get to the point where the new, powerful means of mass communication have become polluted with mindless “mass culture”?

**The Answer: The Transition from  
Rural Community to Urban Mass Society.**

# Rural Community (Gemeinschaft)



- Social stability.
- Strong collective values.
- Reliance on traditional authorities.
- Folk culture: organic, participatory.

# Urban Mass Society (Gesellschaft)

- Atomized individuals without social ties pour into city.
- Cut off from traditions, values, folk customs.

***The new urban masses:  
isolated, anonymous individuals crammed  
together in the new industrial city.***

# *Semiotics:* The Study of Signs (Symbols)



- **Signs** – are *things* (objects, words, images) that have a *meaning*.
- How do **roses**—a physical object—communicate **meanings** (such as...)?

# Sign = Signifier + Signified

**Signified** → **The meaning itself.**

- The abstract “concept” carried by the signifier.

**Signifier** → **The physical carrier of  
meaning.**

- Word (sound), Word (written), Image, Object.

# Sign = Signifier + Signified

Signifier	+	Signified	=	(Sign)
	+	Love/Passion	=	(Roses=I Love You)
Writing on Card Love You) ("I Love You")	+	Love/Passion	=	(Words = I

*Signifieds (meanings) must be associated with, or "carried" by, signifiers (physical carriers) in order to be communicated from one person to another.*

# Sign = Signifier + Signified

## Two Important Points:

1. You cannot communicate abstract concepts without physical carriers (images, words on a page, the sound of my voice).

# The Arbitrary Nature of Signs

## 2. The relationship between signifiers and signifieds is arbitrary.

- There is nothing *inherent* in the roses that requires us to associate them with “passion.”



*Could you fix my Dodge Dakota?*

# But, if Signs are Arbitrary, How Did (S)he “Get” What I Meant?

## Cultural Codes and Conventions

- (S)he “got” the meaning because (s)he and I shared the same cultural codes and conventions.
- These codes and conventions tell us both to associate the *signifier* of a bunch of roses with a particular *signified* or meaning – “I love you.”

# So What Does Semiotics Have to Do with Cultural Studies?

- The job of the analyst is to determine how a media **text** links up **signifiers**—that is, certain images, certain forms of language, and certain sounds—to communicate particular **signifieds** (ie, particular social and cultural meanings).

# Cultural Studies: Textual/Semiotic Analysis

- *What meanings (signifieds) did the author intend to communicate by selecting and combining these particular signifiers -- these particular words, images, or narratives?*
- *How is the text, and others like it, encouraging us to think about ourselves, others, and the society we live in?*

# Denotation and Connotation

## Two Levels of Meaning



*What is he handing you?  
(denotation)*

*What does it mean, at a cultural  
level? (connotation)*

- **Denotation** → The Surface, Literal Meaning of a Sign.
- **Connotation** → The Implicit, Expressive, Cultural Meaning of a Sign.
- *A single sign can express **both** denotative and connotative meanings.*

# Stuart Halls Encoding Decoding Model

## Encoding

Producers Assemble signifiers and arrange them to communicate particular meanings. The intended Meaning is the preferred meaning.

## Text

The carrier of the producer's meaning.

## Decoding

Audience actively interprets the text, drawing on their own personal experiences to produce a particular reading of the text (i.e. to associate the signifiers with specific signifieds).

## Three outcomes of decoding

**Dominant reading** = audience decodes meaning of the text in line with the producer's intentions (viewer reproduces the "preferred meaning")

**Oppositional reading** = Audience rejects totally the social and political meanings and values "preferred" by the producer.

**Negotiated reading** = audience endorses some elements of the message, while rejecting other parts.



# References

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