

## POPULAR SIGNS

*Or, Everything You Always  
Knew about American Culture  
(but Nobody Asked)*

### Dawn of the Living Droid

“HARDER. BETTER. FASTER. STRANGER.”

With these words, Marvel Comics introduced its new series, *Avengers A.I.*, in 2013, the same year that *Iron Man 3* busted the box office, Daft Punk’s *Random Access Memories* topped the charts, and Google Glass became available in a \$1,500 version for selected consumers.

And so, even as *World War Z* and *The Walking Dead* continued to demonstrate that the reign of the undead was far from over, American popular culture began to show signs of the advent of a new empire of the unliving, of intelligent machines whose long-anticipated arrival would push the world ever closer to the apocalyptic event that futurists have called “the Singularity”: that posthuman moment when human intelligence will be surpassed by artificial intelligence and humanity itself will be replaced by robotic androids.

Now, whether the Singularity ever comes to pass (frankly, we are skeptical), it appears that after years of fascination with the living dead—first with vampires and then with zombies, who completed their migration from the margins of fantasy fiction to pop culture’s center stage in the first decade of the new millennium—American popular culture is now preparing a similar movement for the figures of the cyborg and the android. This emergence of the man-machine—as with the zombies and vampires before him—is not an overnight occurrence (Iron Man, for example, was created half a century ago, and the Six Million Dollar Man was a creation of the 1970s), but it is picking up steam as we write these words. While you might easily assume that this development is natural and inevitable and has no particular significance,

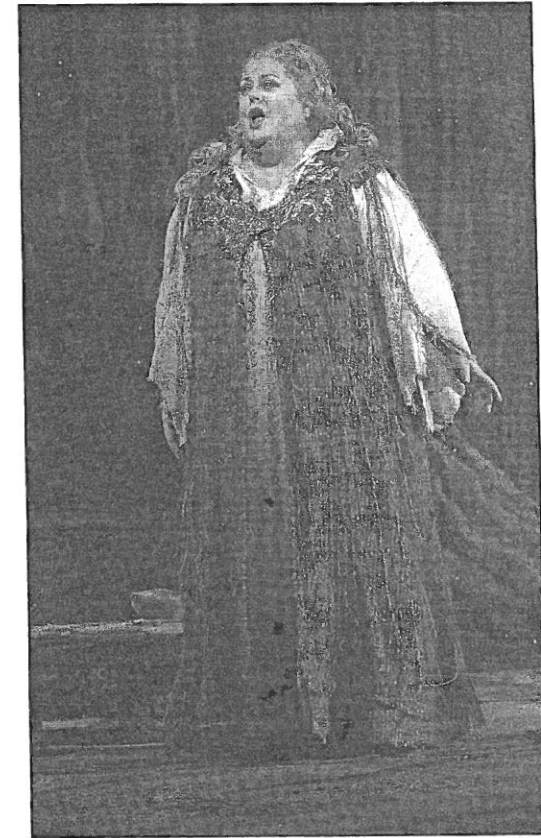
there is actually quite a lot of cultural meaning behind it. One of the purposes of this book is to help you find such meanings.

Indeed, the foundational principle of *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* is that human behavior has meaning and that popular culture is particularly meaningful and should never simply be taken for granted. Treating popular cultural behavior as a system of **signs**, this book will teach you how to read—or interpret—these signs, while at the same time teaching you the critical thinking skills necessary to write strong university-level arguments. Accordingly, each chapter in this book focuses upon a particular segment of American popular culture and, through readings, images, and assignments, guides you through the process that will help you analyze the significance of the full range of our everyday lives, behaviors, and entertainments. We will return shortly in this Introduction to the prevalence of such inhuman, or even posthuman, figures as androids, zombies, and vampires as a prominent example of a popular cultural sign, but first we will look at just what we mean by the term “popular culture” and why it is important to think critically about it.

### From Folk to Fab

Traditionally, popular or “low” culture constituted the culture of the masses. It was set apart from “high” culture, which included classical music and literature, the fine arts and philosophy, and the elite learning that was the province of the ruling classes who had the money and leisure necessary to attain it—and who were often the direct patrons of high art and its creators. Low culture, for its part, had two main sides. One side, most notoriously illustrated by the violent entertainments of the Roman Empire (such as gladiatorial contests, public executions, and feeding Christians to lions) continues to be a sure crowd-pleaser to this day, as demonstrated by the widespread popularity of violent, erotic, and/or vulgar entertainment (can you spell *Jackass*?). The other side, which we can call “popular” in the etymological sense of being of the people, overlaps with what we now call “folk culture.” Quietly existing alongside high culture, folk culture expressed the experience and creativity of the masses in the form of ballads, agricultural festivals, fairy tales, feasts, folk art, folk music, and so on. Self-produced by amateur performers, folk culture is exemplified by neighbors gathering on a modest Appalachian front porch to play their guitars, banjos, dulcimers, zithers, mandolins, and fiddles to perform, for their own entertainment, ballads and songs passed down from generation to generation.

Folk culture, of course, still exists. But for the past two hundred years it has been dwindling, with increasing rapidity, as it becomes overwhelmed by a different kind of popular culture, a commercialized culture that, while still including elements of both the folk and the vulgar traditions, represents the outcome of a certain historical evolution. This culture, the popular culture that is most familiar today and that is the topic of this book, is a commercial, for-profit culture aimed at providing entertainment to a mass audience. Corporate



Traditional high culture: Deborah Voigt in performance at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

AP Photo/Richard Drew

rather than communal, it has transformed entertainment into a commodity to be marketed alongside all the other products in a consumer society.

The forces that transformed the low culture of the past into contemporary popular culture arose in the industrial revolution of the late eighteenth century and its accompanying urbanization of European and American society. Along with the rise of corporate capitalism and the advent of electronic technologies, these four, essentially interrelated, historical forces—industrialization, urbanization, capitalism, and electronic technology—shaped the emergence of the mass cultural marketplace of entertainments that we know today. To see how this happened, let's begin with the industrial revolution.

Prior to the industrial revolution, most Europeans and Americans lived in scattered agricultural settlements. While traveling entertainers in theatric

troupes and circuses might have visited the larger of these settlements, most people, especially those with little money, had little access to professional entertainment and so had to produce their own entertainment. But with the industrial revolution, masses of people who had made their living through agriculture were compelled to leave their rural communities and move to the industrial towns and cities where employment could increasingly be found. Populations began to concentrate in urban centers as the rural countryside emptied, leading to the development of mass societies.

With the emergence of mass society came the development of **mass culture**. For just as mass societies are governed by centralized systems of governance (as the huge expanse of the United States is governed by a federal government concentrated in Washington, DC), so, too, are mass cultures entertained by culture industries concentrated in a few locations (as the film and TV industries are concentrated in Hollywood and its immediate environs). Thanks to the invention of such technologies as the cinema, the phonograph, and the radio at the end of the nineteenth century, and of television and digital technology in the mid to late twentieth century, the means to disseminate centrally produced mass entertainments to a mass society became possible. Thus, whether you live in Boston or Boise, New York or Nebraska, the entertainment you enjoy is produced in the same few locations and is the same entertainment (TV programs, movies, DVDs, or Netflix series) no matter where you consume it. This growth of mass culture has been fundamentally shaped by the growth of a capitalist economic system in America, which has ensured that mass culture would develop as a for-profit industry.

To get a better idea of how the whole process unfolded, let's go back to that Appalachian front porch. Before electricity and urbanization, folks living in the backwoods of rural America needed to make their music themselves if they wanted music. They had no radios, phonographs, CD players, iPods, iPads, smartphones, or even electricity, and theaters with live performers were hard to get to and expensive. Under such conditions, the Appalachian region developed a vibrant folk musical culture. But as people started to move to places like Pittsburgh and Detroit, where the steel and auto industries began to offer employment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the conditions under which neighbors could produce their own music decayed, for the communal conditions under which folk culture thrived were broken down by the mass migration to the cities. At the same time, the need to produce one's own music declined as folks who had once plucked their own guitars and banjos could simply turn on their radios or purchase records to listen to professional musicians perform for them. Those musicians were contracted by recording companies that were in business to turn a profit, and their music, in turn, could be heard on the radio because corporate sponsors provided the advertising that made (and still makes) commercial radio broadcasting possible.

Thus, the folk music of the American countryside became *country music*. An amalgamation of the traditional songs that a predominantly Scots-Irish immigrant population brought over from the British Isles with such American



Traditional folk culture in transition: Bill Monroe is known as the father of bluegrass music.

AP Photo

traditions as “white” gospel music, cowboy songs, and rock ‘n’ roll, contemporary “country” preserves the rural working-class perspective of folk music even as it is performed by wealthy professionals. (Country music’s working class roots explain why it is so often filled with the broken romances and broken-down cars of the poor.)

So the performance of folk music, which had once been an amateur do-it-yourself activity, became a professional, for-profit industry with passive consumers paying for their entertainment either by directly purchasing a commodity (for example, a CD) or by listening to the advertising that encouraged them to purchase the products that sponsored their favorite radio programs. It is still possible, of course, to make one’s own music, but most people find it easier and perhaps more aesthetically pleasing to listen to professional recording. Today we are, in effect, constantly being trained to be the sort of passive consumers who keep the whole consumer-capitalist system going. Without that consumption, the economy might totally collapse.

This is hardly an exaggeration, for postindustrial capitalism is making popular culture all the more dominant in our society with every passing year. With the American economy turning further away from industrial product

and increasingly toward the production and consumption of entertainment (including sports), entertainment has been moving from the margins of our cultural consciousness—as a mere form of play or recreation—to its center as a major buttress of our economy. A constant bombardment of advertising (which, after all, is the driving force behind the financing of digital media, just as it was for radio and television a generation or two ago) continually prods us to consume the entertainments that our economy produces. That bombardment has been so successful that our whole cultural consciousness is changing: We are becoming more concerned with play than with work, even while *at work*. (Tell the truth now: Do you ever tweet, or post something to Tumblr or Instagram, during class?)

The result of the centuries-long process we have sketched above is the kind of culture we have today: an *entertainment culture* in which all aspects of society, including politics and the traditional elite arts, are linked by a common imperative to entertain. Indeed, as traditional high culture shrinks in social importance and becomes part of what might be called a museum culture (which is quietly marginalized and mostly ignored), popular culture itself has assumed its own “high” and “low” strata, with television programs like *Mad Men* and *Game of Thrones* enjoying a kind of high cultural status, while *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* profitably entertains at the low end.

Congressman Paul Ryan poses with *Duck Dynasty* stars Willie and Korie Robertson at the 2014 State of the Union address.



## Pop Culture Goes to College

Far from being a mere recreational frivolity, a leisure activity that our society could easily dispense with, popular cultural entertainment today constitutes the essential texture of our everyday lives. From the way we entertain ourselves to the goods and services that we produce and consume, we are enveloped in a popular cultural environment that we can neither do without nor escape, even if we wanted to. To see this, just try to imagine a world without cloud computing, TV, movies, sports, music, shopping malls, or advertising. The study of popular culture has accordingly taken a prominent place in American higher education—not least in American composition classrooms, which have taken the lead in incorporating popular culture into academic study, both because of the subject's inherent interest value and because of its profound familiarity to most students. Your own expertise in popular culture means not only that you may know more about a given topic than your instructor but that you can use that knowledge as a basis for learning the critical thinking and writing skills that your composition class is intended to teach you.

*Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*, then, is designed to let you exploit your knowledge of popular culture so that you may grow into a better writer, whatever the subject. You can interpret the popularity of a TV program like *The Walking Dead*, for example, in the same manner as you would interpret, say, a short story, because *The Walking Dead*, too, constitutes a kind of sign. A sign is something, anything, that carries a meaning. The familiar red sign at an intersection, for instance, means exactly what it says: "Stop." But it also carries the implied message ". . . or risk getting a ticket or into an accident." Words, too, are signs: you read them to figure out what they mean. You were trained to read such signs, but that training began so long ago that you may well take your ability to read for granted. Nevertheless, all your life you have been encountering and interpreting other sorts of signs. Although you were never formally taught to read them, you know what they mean anyway. Take the way you wear your hair. When you get your hair cut, you are not simply removing hair; you are making a statement, sending a message about yourself. It's the same for both men and women. Why was your hair short last year and long this year? Aren't you saying something with the scissors? In this way, you make your hairstyle into a sign that sends a message about your identity. You are surrounded by such signs. Just look at your classmates.

The world of signs could be called a kind of text, the text of America's popular culture. We want you to think of *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* as a window onto that text. What you read in this book's essays and Chapter Introductions should lead you to study and analyze the world around you for yourself. Let the selections guide you to your own interpretations, your own readings, of the text of America.

In this edition of *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*, we have chosen seven "windows" that look out onto separate, but often interrelated, segments of the American scene. In each chapter, we have included essays that help you think about a specific popular cultural topic and guide you to locate and analyze related

examples of your own. Each chapter also includes an Introduction written to alert you to the kinds of signs you will find there, along with model analyses and advice on how to go about interpreting the topic that the chapter raises.

We have designed *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* to reflect the many ways in which culture shapes our sense of reality and of ourselves, from the products we buy to the way culture, through such media as television and the movies, constructs our personal identities. This text thus introduces you to both the entertainment side and the ideological side of popular culture — and shows how the two sides are mutually dependent. Indeed, one of the major lessons you can learn from this book is how to find the ideological underpinnings of some of the most apparently innocent entertainments and consumer goods.

*Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*, accordingly, begins with a chapter called “Consuming Passions.” Because America is a consumer culture, the environment in which the galaxy of popular signs functions is, more often than not, a consumerist one. This is true not only for obvious consumer products like clothes and cars but for traditionally nonconsumer items such as political candidates, who are often marketed like any other product. It is difficult to find anything in contemporary America that is not affected somehow by our consumerist ethos or by consumerism’s leading promoter, the advertiser. Thus, the second chapter, “Brought to You B(u)y,” explores the world of advertising, for advertising provides the grease, so to speak, that lubricates the engine of America’s consumer culture. Because television and film are the sources of many of our most significant cultural products, we include a chapter on each. Chapters on the digital cloud, American heroes and villains, and personal identity round out our survey of everyday life.

Throughout, the book invites you to go out and select your own “texts” for analysis (an advertisement, a film, a fashion fad, a TV show, and so on). Here’s where your own experience is particularly valuable, because it has made you familiar with many different kinds of popular signs and their backgrounds, as well as with the particular popular cultural system or environment to which they belong.

The seven “windows” you will find in *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* are all intended to reveal the common intersections of entertainment and ideology that can be found in contemporary American life. Often what seems to be simply entertainment, like an action-adventure movie, can actually be quite political (consider the Native American response to *The Lone Ranger*), while what *is* political can be cast as entertainment as well — as in *House of Cards*. The point is that little in American life is merely entertainment; indeed, just about everything we do has a meaning, often a profound one.

## **The Semiotic Method**

To find this meaning, to interpret and write effectively about the signs of popular culture, you need a method, and part of the purpose of this book is to introduce such a method to you. Without a methodology for interpreting

signs, writing about them could become little more than producing descriptive reviews or opinion pieces. Although nothing is wrong with writing descriptions and opinions, one of your goals in your writing class is to learn how to write academic essays—that is, analytical essays that present theses or arguments that are well supported by evidence. The method we use in this book—a method known as **semiotics**—is especially well suited for analyzing popular culture. Whether or not you're familiar with this word, you already practice sophisticated semiotic analyses every day of your life. Reading this page is an act of semiotic decoding (words and letters are signs that must be interpreted), but so is figuring out just what a friend means by wearing a particular shirt or dress. For a semiotician (one who practices semiotic analysis), a shirt, a haircut, a TV image, anything at all, can be taken as a sign, as a message to be decoded and analyzed to discover its meaning. Every cultural activity leaves a trace of meaning for semioticians, a kind of blip on the semiotic Richter scale that remains for them to read, just as geologists “read” the earth for signs of earthquakes, volcanic activity, and other geological phenomena.

Many who hear the word *semiotics* for the first time assume that it is the name of a new and forbidding subject. But in truth, the study of signs is neither new nor forbidding. Its modern form took shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the writings and lectures of two men. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) was an American philosopher who first coined the word *semiotics*, while Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was a Swiss linguist whose lectures became the foundation for what he called *semiology* (which was later developed under the rubric of linguistic *structuralism*). Without knowing of each other's work, Peirce and Saussure established the fundamental principles that modern semioticians or semiologists—the terms are essentially interchangeable—have developed into the contemporary study of semiotics.

Reduced to its simplest principles, the semiotic method carries on Saussure's argument that the meaning of a sign lies, in part, in the fact that it can be *differentiated* from any other sign within the **system**, or **code**, to which it belongs. For example, in the traffic code, being able to distinguish the difference between green, red, and amber lights is essential to understanding the meaning of a traffic signal. But that's not all there is to it, because it is only within the code that green, red, and amber signify “go,” “stop,” and “caution.” So in order to interpret a traffic signal correctly, you need to be able to *associate* any particular red light you see with all other red traffic lights under the concept “stop” that the code assigns to it, and any green light with all other green lights under the concept “go,” and so on.

But outside of the traffic code, the same colors can have very different meanings, always depending upon the system in which they appear. For example, in the codes of American politics, green signifies not only a political party but an entire worldview in support of environmentalist policies, while red, rather paradoxically, can signify either communist sympathies or the conservative politics of the so-called “red states,” depending upon the context. Amber, for its part, has no significance within the codes of American politics.

The fact that the color red has gained a new significance in the codes of American politics demonstrates the fact that systems, and the meanings encoded within them, can change—an important principle when you are interpreting popular cultural signs, because their meanings are constantly changing, unlike the more or less fixed signs of the traffic code. Here is where Peirce's contribution comes in, because while Saussure's structural semiology is static in its interpretational orientation, Peircean semiotics is dynamic, situating signs within *history* and thus enabling us to trace the ways in which meaning shifts and changes with time.

But neither Saussure nor Peirce applied their methodologies to popular cultural signs, so to complete our description of the semiotic method, we must turn to the work of French semiologist Roland Barthes (1915–1980), who, in his book *Mythologies* (1957), pioneered the semiotic analysis of everything from professional wrestling to striptease, toys, and plastics. It was Barthes, too, who established the political dimensions of semiotic analysis, revealing how phenomena that may look like mere entertainments can hold profound political or ideological significance. Since “politics” is something of a dirty word in our society, Barthes's politicization of pop culture may make you feel a little uneasy at first. You may even think that to find political meaning in popular culture is tantamount to reading something into it that isn't really there. But consider the way people responded to *Batman: The Dark Knight Rises* in 2012. Many conservative commentators were upset that the villain of the movie was named Bane—they insisted that this was an allusion to Bain Capital, the former employer of then-presidential candidate Mitt Romney. For them, the movie was a piece of liberal propaganda. Conversely, liberal commentators saw Bane's revolution as an insidious allusion to the Occupy Wall Street movement and complained that it demonized a legitimate desire for greater economic equality.

In other words, the political interpretation of popular culture, even when it is not conducted under the name of semiotics, is already a part of our culture. The semiotic method simply makes it explicit, pointing out that all social behavior is political because it always reflects some subjective or group interest. Such interests are encoded in the ideologies 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 where the interests of those who belong to it constantly compete with one another.

While not all popular cultural signs are politically controversial, careful analysis can uncover some set of political values within them, although those values may be subtly concealed behind an apparently apolitical facade. Indeed, the political values that guide our social behavior are often concealed behind images that don't look political at all. But that is because we have to look beyond what a popular cultural sign **denotes**, or directly shows, to what it **connotes**, or indirectly suggests. The **denotation** of a sign is its first level of meaning, and you have to be able to understand that meaning before you can move to the next level. The **connotation** of a sign takes you to its political or cultural significance.



Take, for instance, the depiction of the “typical” American family in the classic TV sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s, which denoted images of happy, docile housewives in suburban middle-class families. At the time, most viewers did not look beyond their denotation, so to them those images looked “normal” or natural—the way families and women were supposed to be. The shows didn’t seem a bit ideological. But to a feminist semiotician, the old sitcoms were in fact highly political, because from a feminist viewpoint the happy housewives they presented were really images designed to convince women that their place was in the home, not in the workplace competing with men. Such images—or signs—did not reflect reality; they reflected, rather, the interests of a patriarchal, male-centered society. That, in effect, was their connotation. If you disagree, then ask yourself why programs were called *Father Knows Best*, *Bachelor Father*, and *My Three Sons*, but not *My Three Daughters*. And why did few of the women characters have jobs or ever seem to leave the house? Of course, there was *I Love Lucy*, but wasn’t Lucy a screwball whose husband, Ricky, had to rescue her from one crisis after another?

Such an interpretation reflects what the English cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1932–2014) called an *oppositional* reading. Such a reading of a cultural text like a sitcom challenges the “preferred reading,” which would simply take the program at face value, accepting its representation of family life as normative and natural. The oppositional reading, on the other hand, proposes an interpretation that resists the normative view, seeking to uncover a political subtext that often contradicts any particular intended “message.” The fact that so many cultural signifiers *appear* normative and natural, as transparent images of an apolitical social reality, can make oppositional reading look

The popular television show *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963) exemplified traditional family values of the 1950s.



The Kobal Collection at Art Resource, NY

“unnatural,” or like “reading into” your topic a meaning that isn’t there. After all, isn’t a sitcom simply a trivial entertainment that distracts viewers from the concerns of everyday life? But given the commercial foundation of our popular culture, the fact that something is entertaining is itself significant, because only those scripts that are calculated to be popular with a mass audience make it to the screen (whether digital, “silver,” or TV). In other words, popular culture appeals to audience desire, and so the fact that something is entertaining raises a fundamental semiotic question: *Why* is it entertaining, and what does that say about those who are entertained by it?

### **Abduction and Overdetermination**

You may think that a semiotic analysis resembles sociological interpretation, and indeed cultural semiotics and sociology do not significantly differ. The differences are largely methodological. Sociology tends to be highly statistical in its methodology, often working with case studies, surveys, and other quantifiable evidence. Cultural semiotics primarily works by looking at broad patterns of behavior and seeking what Charles Sanders Peirce called *abductive* explanations for them. **Abduction** is the process of arriving at an interpretation by seeking the most plausible explanation for something. No one can absolutely prove a semiotic interpretation, but the more material you can bring into your systems of related and differentiated signifiers, the more convincing your movement from denotation to connotation will be.

As you build up your interpretation of a cultural signifier, you can often find more than one explanation for it. Is that a problem? Are you just having trouble deciding on a single argument? No, because cultural signs are usually **overdetermined**: That is, they can have more than one cause or explanation (another word for this is *polysemous*). This is especially true for what we consider “rich” cultural signs, ones that have had a long-standing effect on our tastes and habits. As we will see in the analysis that follows, the popularity of the “unliving” is especially overdetermined, with many interpretive explanations converging. Indeed, the more causes behind a cultural phenomenon, the more popular it is likely to be.

### **Interpreting Popular Signs: Androids and Zombies and Vampires, Oh My!**

The essential approach to interpreting popular cultural signs is to *situate signs within systems of related phenomena with which they can be associated and differentiated*. Being attuned to the history that provides the background for a sign is also essential. To see how this works in practice, let’s return now to those unliving protagonists of so many currently popular entertainments.

Now, the fact that vampires peaked in the first decade of the twenty-first century and were overtaken by zombies (who are very likely to have

peaked and similarly declined by the time this book is published) not only is *not* a reason to dismiss them as yesterday's fad but, quite conversely, raises a number of interesting questions in itself: Why *did* vampires become so popular in the 1990s and 2000s? Why did zombies take over? And why does it appear that androids are next in line?

To answer such questions, let's first ask another very basic one: What do vampires, zombies, and androids all denote? There is a very simple answer to this question: *unliving humanoids* (there are, of course, some differences between them that we will return to shortly, but this is their basic common ground). The task of a semiotic interpretation is to move from such a denotational significance to a connotational one, and in order to do that, we must determine whether the popularity of all three of these beings reveals any pattern or system.

The fact that vampires, zombies, and androids all denote unliving humanoids provides us with the basis for such a system because it enables us to *associate* them together in a single category. So in what kind of stories do we find unliving humanoids as characters? This one is easy: in *fantasy* stories—stories that, like fairy tales, are about things that are not found in ordinary reality. Ordinary reality is the subject of a very different variety of story called *literary realism*, and this *difference* is highly significant. To see this significance, however, we have to turn to some history.

A little research will reveal that until the latter part of the 1960s, fantasy stories in America (including fairy tales, science fiction, cartoon superheroes, and horror tales) were regarded as kid's stuff: something for B movies, comic books, Sunday matinees, and children's literature. Literary realism, on the other hand, was for grown-ups. This distinction effectively marginalized fantasy as nonserious and trivial; thus, the relation between fantasy and literary realism was not unlike the traditional relation between low culture and high culture.

But with the appearance of Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* in 1966, along with the popular revival of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit* at the same time, the hierarchical relationship between realism and fantasy began to change. Add to this the appearance of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and the makings of a cultural revolution were at hand, a revolution that was sealed in the 1970s with the enormous successes of George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977) and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976). Suddenly fantasy wasn't mere kid's stuff anymore.

This shift of fantasy from marginal to central cultural status has only intensified in the decades since it began, with realism being increasingly marginalized in a popular culture dominated by the many descendants of Tolkien, Roddenberry, Romero, Lucas, and Rice. Thus, we now have a striking historical difference to consider.

So let's ask: Is there any possible significance in this shift from realism to fantasy? To answer this question, we can go back to the years in which it all began, the decade when America's baby-boom generation first began to come of age. The first generation in history to be raised on television, the boomers were provided with a source of constant daily entertainment heavy

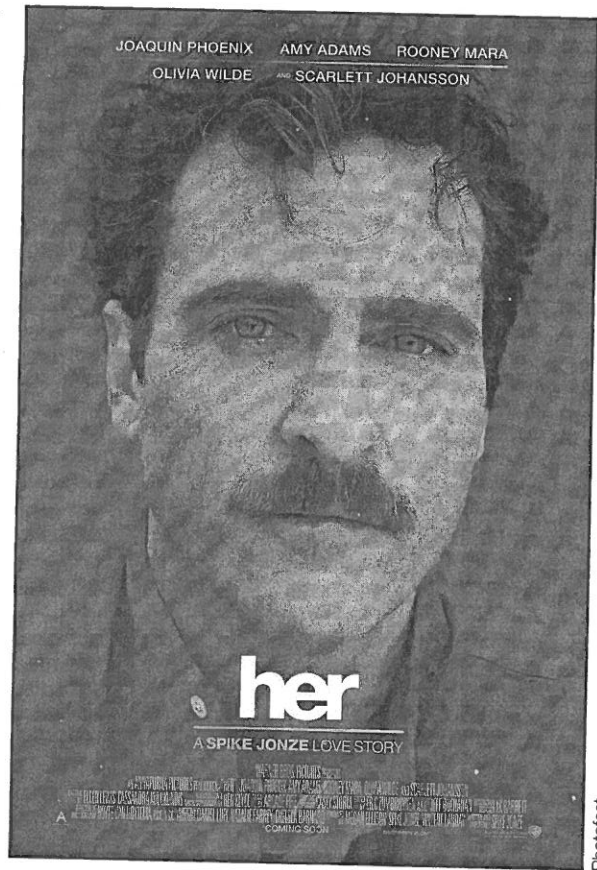
on children's fantasy. As a result, they were responsible for the creation of the *youth culture* that has been inherited, and enhanced, by every succeeding generation in America, from Gen X to the millennials. And it is within the context of an emerging youth culture that we can situate the rise of fantasy.

The values of a youth culture include not only a preference for prolonging childhood and clinging to the physical appearance of being young, but also a desire to maintain the tastes of childhood, which include a strong attraction to the sort of fantasies with which the young have been traditionally raised. These fantasies provide an alternative to the realities of adult life: the dull grind of making a living, of raising families rather than having adventures, of not being free to do whatever one likes. In other words, we can abductively argue that the triumph of fantasy connotatively signifies a culture-wide rejection of the realities of everyday life in America, a disillusionment (or simple boredom) with what ordinary experience has to offer and a desire to escape into the imaginative fairylands of infancy.

But while this can explain why such fantasy figures as vampires, zombies, and androids are so popular today in mainstream entertainment, it doesn't explain why zombies surpassed vampires in popularity in the second decade of the new millennium, or why androids are a likely contender to supplant zombies in the near future (with such films as *Her* and a remade *Robocop* leading the way, along with TV's *Almost Human*). And here is where overdetermination comes in, because the popularity of vampires, zombies, and androids is not *solely* explained by the rise of fantasy in American youth culture; there are other determinants as well, specific to each. The way in which an overdetermined set of phenomena can branch out into further systems with their own meanings is one of the key elements of a semiotic analysis.

It would be beyond the scope of this Introduction to provide a separate interpretation of all three of these figures (a full analysis of vampires, for its part, would focus on their transition from hideous monsters to romantic and sympathetic lovers and high schoolers, and you can find an interpretation of zombies in Chapter 3). But to show how the differences within a system lead to further semiotic meanings, let's return to androids for a moment. The key difference between androids and the other fantasy figures we have looked at is that androids are machines while the others are, in some way or another, biological. That is, if vampires and zombies denote the "living dead," androids aren't alive at all—they are only "powered on or off." But there is a more important difference to consider here: Unlike zombies and vampires, who don't exist and won't ever exist, androids are actually close to existing. What is science fiction or mere fantasy today could be reality in some not so very distant future.

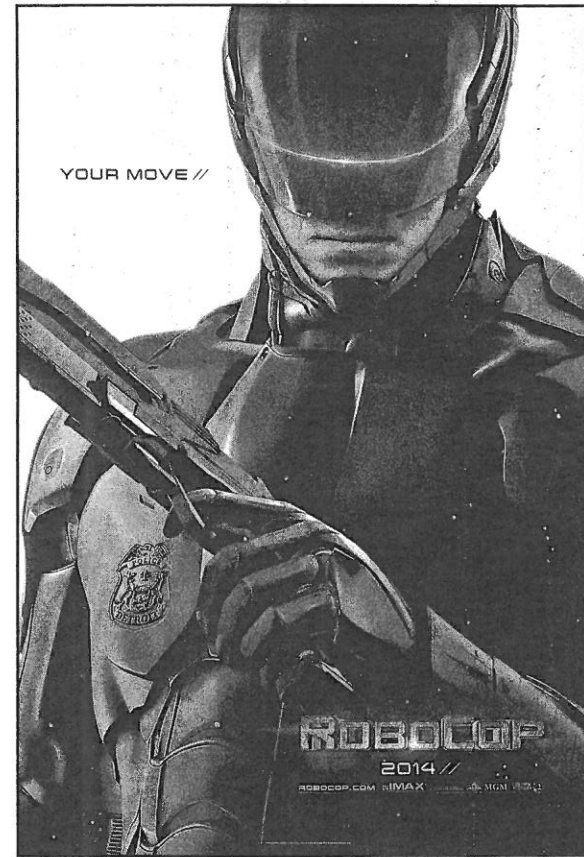
The development of androids was a lot farther off in the days of R2-D2, C-3PO, HAL 9000, and Roy Batty, as was the prospect of real biomechanical men like Iron Man and the Six Million Dollar Man. But now, with Google Glass portending the arrival of real-life vision-enhanced Riddicks (the protagonist in a series of Vin Diesel films), and AI researchers coming ever closer to the creation of independently functioning intelligent machines by downloading human



The poster for the film *Her* (2013).

minds into computers, the android/cyborg is transitioning from fantasy to real possibility, a prospect at once glamorously exciting and naggingly worrisome.

In short, when we situate the android in the larger context of the growing dominance of technology in our lives, an abductively plausible interpretation emerges. That is, as “socializing” becomes “social networking,” university classes become massive open online courses (MOOCs), cars become self-propelled robots, and the Singularity comes ever closer to arrival, the line between human and machine is becoming blurred. With our lives increasingly being conducted via cloud computing, just who we are as human beings is becoming less and less clear. In such an environment, we should not be surprised to see a host of androids storming the center stage of popular culture both as superheroes and as perplexed not-quite-humans who resent their



The poster for the film reboot of *Robocop*.

subservience to their creators, signifying at once a fascination with a looming brave new world of posthuman existence and a nervousness over what it all may lead to.

### **The Classroom Connection**

This analysis of androids in popular culture could be extended further, but we will leave that for you to consider for yourself. The key point is that while the popularity of any particular fantasy characters, like androids or zombies, is evanescent, what such characters *signify* is not. The vampire fad is still significant, even if vampires today are old hat. The zombie fad is significant and will remain so after it has passed. All the fads of an ever-shifting popular

cultural terrain remain significant, just as all the historical events in an ever-changing world are significant. In fact, performing a popular cultural analysis is essentially equivalent to writing interpretive history, but it is an interpretive history of the present.

Thus, semiotic analyses of popular culture are not different from the more conventional interpretive analyses you will be asked to perform in your college writing career. It is in the nature of all critical thinking to make connections and mark differences in order to go beyond the surface of a text or issue toward a meaning. The skills you already have as an interpreter of the popular signs around you—of images, objects, and forms of behavior—are the same skills that you develop as a writer of critical essays that present an argued point of view and the evidence to defend it.

Because most of us tend to identify closely with our favorite popular cultural phenomena and have strong opinions about them, it can be difficult to adopt the same sort of analytic perspective toward popular culture that we do toward, say, texts assigned in a literature class. Still, that is what you should do in a semiotic interpretation: You need to set your aesthetic or fan-related opinions aside in order to pursue an interpretive argument with evidence to support it. Note how in our interpretation of the android story we didn't say whether or not we like it: Our concern was with what it might mean within a larger cultural context. It is not difficult to express an aesthetic opinion or a statement of personal preference, but that isn't the goal of analytic writing and critical thinking. Analytic writing requires that you marshal supporting evidence, just as a lawyer needs evidence to argue a case. So by learning to write analyses of our culture, by searching for supporting evidence to underpin your interpretive take on modern life, you are also learning to write critical arguments.

"But how," you (and perhaps your instructor) may ask, "can I know that a semiotic interpretation is right?" Good question—it is commonly asked by those who fear that a semiotic analysis might read too much into a subject. But then, it can also be asked of the writer of any interpretive essay, and the answer in each case is the same. No one can absolutely *prove* the truth of an argument in the human sciences; what you can do is *persuade* your audience by including pertinent evidence in an abductive reasoning process. In analyzing popular culture, that evidence comes from your knowledge of the system to which the object you are interpreting belongs. The more you know about the system, the more convincing your interpretations will be. And that is true whether you are writing about popular culture or about more traditional academic subjects.

## Of Myths and Men

As we have seen, in a semiotic analysis we do not search for the meanings of things in the things themselves. Rather, we find meaning in the way we can relate things together through association and differentiation, moving from objective denotation to culturally subjective connotation. Such a movement commonly takes us from the realm of mere facts to the world of cultural

values. But while values often *feel* like facts, from a semiotic perspective, they derive from cultural systems that semioticians call *cultural mythologies*.

A cultural **mythology** is not some fanciful story from the past; indeed, if the word *mythology* seems confusing because of its traditional association with such stories, you may prefer to use the term "value system" or "ideology." Consider the value system that governs our traditional thinking about gender roles. Have you ever noticed how our society presumes that it is primarily the role of women — adult daughters — to take care of aging and infirm parents? If you want to look at the matter from a physiological perspective, it might seem that men would be better suited to the task: In a state of nature, men are physically stronger and so would seem to be the natural protectors of the aged. And yet, though our cultural mythology holds that men should protect the nuclear family, it tends to assign to women the care of extended families. It is culture that decides here, not nature.

But while cultural mythologies guide our behavior, they are subject to change. You may have already experienced a transitional phase in the myths surrounding courtship behavior. In the past, the gender myths that formed the rules of the American dating game held that it is the role of the male to initiate proceedings (he calls) and for the female to react (she waits for the call). Similarly, the rules once held that it is invariably the responsibility of the male to plan the evening and pay the tab. These rules are changing, aren't they? Can you describe the rules that now govern courtship behavior?

A cultural mythology or value system, then, is a kind of lens that governs the way we view our world. Think of it this way: Say you were born with rose-tinted eyeglasses permanently attached over your eyes, but you didn't know they were there. Because the world would *look* rose colored to you, you would presume that it *is* rose colored. You wouldn't wonder whether the world might look otherwise through different lenses. But in the world there are other kinds of eyeglasses with different lenses, and reality does look different to those who wear them. Those lenses are cultural mythologies, and no culture can claim to have the one set of glasses that reveals things as they really are.

The principle that meaning is not culture-blind, that it is conditioned by systems of ideology and belief that are codified differently by different cultures, is a foundational semiotic judgment. Human beings, in other words, construct their own social realities, so who gets to do the constructing becomes very important. Every contest over a cultural code is, accordingly, a contest for power, but the contest is usually masked because the winner generally defines its mythology as the truth, as what is most natural or reasonable. Losers in the contest become objects of scorn and are quickly marginalized and declared unnatural, deviant, or even insane. The stakes are high as myth battles myth, with truth itself as the highest prize.

This does not mean that you must abandon your own beliefs when conducting a semiotic analysis, only that you cannot take them for granted and must be prepared to argue for them. We want to assure you that semiotics will not tell you what to think and believe. It *does* assume that what you believe reflects some cultural system or other and that no cultural system can claim



absolute validity or superiority. The readings and Chapter Introductions in this book contain their own values and ideologies, and if you wish to challenge those values, you can begin by exposing the myths that they may take for granted.

Thus, everything in this book reflects a political point of view. If you hold a different view, it is not enough to presuppose the innate superiority of your own perspective—to claim that one writer is being political while you are simply telling the truth. This may sound heretical precisely because human beings operate within cultural mythologies whose political invisibility is guaranteed by the system. No mythology, that is to say, begins with “This is just a political construct or interpretation.” Every mythology begins, “This is the truth.” It is very difficult to imagine, from within the mythology, any alternatives. Indeed, as you read this book, you may find it upsetting to see that some traditional beliefs—such as “proper” roles of men and women—are socially constructed and not absolute. But the outlines of the mythology, the bounding (and binding) frame, can be discerned only by first seeing that it is a mythology, a constructive scaffolding upon which our consciousness and desires are constituted.

## Getting Started

Mythology, like culture, is not static, and so the semiotician must always keep his or her eye on the clock, so to speak. History and the passing of time are constant factors in a constantly changing world. Since the earlier editions of this book, American popular culture has moved on. In this edition, we have tried to reflect those changes, but inevitably, further changes will occur in the time it takes for this book to appear on your class syllabus. That such changes occur is part of the excitement of the semiotic enterprise: There is always something new to consider and interpret. What does not change is the nature of semiotic interpretation: Whatever you choose to analyze in the realm of American popular culture, the semiotic approach will help you understand it.

It's your turn now. Start asking questions, pushing, probing. That's what critical thinking and writing are all about, but this time you're part of the question. Arriving at answers is the fun part here, but answers aren't the basis of analytic thinking: Questions are. You always begin with a question, a query, a hypothesis, something to explore. If you already knew the answer, there would be no point in conducting the analysis. We encourage you to explore the almost-infinite variety of questions that the readings in this book raise. Many come equipped with their own “answers,” but you may (indeed you will and should) find that such answers raise further questions. To help you ask those questions, keep in mind the elemental principles of semiotics that we have just explored:

1. Cultural semiotics treats human behavior itself—not what people say about their behavior but what they actually do—as **signs**.
2. The meaning of signs can be found not in themselves but in their relationships (both differences and associations) with other signs within a

- system.** To interpret an individual sign, then, you must determine the general system to which it belongs.
3. Things have both **denotative** meanings (what they *are*) and **connotative** meanings (what they *suggest as signs*); semiotics moves beyond the denotative surface to the connotative significance.
  4. Arriving at the connotative significance of a sign involves both **abduction** (a search for the most likely explanation or interpretation) and **overdetermination** (the multiple causes behind a cultural phenomenon).
  5. What we call social "reality" is a human construct, the product of cultural **mythologies** or value systems that intervene between our minds and the world we experience. Such cultural myths reflect the values and ideological interests of their builders, not the laws of nature or logic.

Perhaps our first principle could be more succinctly phrased, "Behavior is meaningful," and our second, "Everything is connected," while our third advises, "Don't take things at face value." More simply, always ask yourself, whenever you are interpreting something, "What's going on here?" In short, question *everything*. And one more reminder: Signs are like weather vanes, they point in response to invisible historical winds. We invite you now to start looking at the weather.

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