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Reading Television

with a new Foreword by John Hartley

First published 1978 by Methuen & Co. Ltd

11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
29 West 35th Street, New York NY 10001

This edition first published 2003
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.

Foreword and Further Reading © 2003 John Hartley
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-203-35662-4 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-38730-9 (Adobe eReader Format)

ISBN 0-415-32353-3 (Print Edition)

3

THE SIGNS OF TELEVISION

Semiotics, simply defined, is the science of signs; how they work and the ways in which we use them. Semiology is another word for the same science, and currently each is used by different authorities with much the same meaning. We shall use semiotics, though semiology will appear in some of our quotations. The lack of agreement on terms by its main practitioners is symptomatic of the youth of semiotics as a discipline, and of its lack of a common origin. The need for such a science was predicted both by the Swiss linguist Saussure (1974), with whose work the term semiology is associated, and by the American philosopher Pierce (1931–58), who coined the term semiotics. Subsequent writers have developed their work with an increasing proliferation of terms; a much tangled growth which one can begin to unravel by referring to a companion volume in the *New Accents* series, Hawkes's *Structuralism and Semiotics* (1977).

However, although the terms may vary, the central concerns of semiotics may be stated simply. They are two: the relationship between a sign and its meaning; and the way signs are combined into codes. In this chapter we shall be concerned with signs, in the next with codes: in both we shall attempt to relate the theory of semiotics to the practical world of television.

THE SIGN, THE SIGNIFIER AND THE SIGNIFIED

Ferdinand de Saussure, who is commonly regarded as the European father of semiotics, was the first to elaborate the tripartite concept *signifier + signified = sign*. The *signifier* is a physical object, e.g. a sound, printed word or image. The *signified* is a mental concept (bearing no necessary relationship to the signifier). The *sign* is the associative total which relates the two together. We must stress that this sort of analytical breakdown is for convenience only. There can be no signifier distinct from a signified and neither of these can exist outside the construct we call a sign. All three elements of this composite construct, then, are determined by our culture, or are, in some sense, 'man-made'.

ICONIC, MOTIVATED SIGNS

In the iconic or motivated sign there is a natural relation between the signifier and signified. Thus a portrait or a photograph is iconic, in that the signifier represents the appearance of the signified. The faithfulness or accuracy of the representation, that is the degree to which the signified is re-presented in the signifier, is an inverse measure of how conventionalized it is. Thus a realistic portrait is lightly conventionalized: it relies for its ability to signify on our experience of the sort of reality that it re-presents. A photograph of a street scene communicates easily because of our familiarity with the sort of reality: if the photograph is taken from the top of a high building, we have to go through a more conscious interpretative process, referring to our memory of bird's-eye views. If, to take the illustration further, the photograph is one taken from a reconnaissance aircraft, it requires specialist decoding by people who have learnt the codes within which such signs operate. The more closely the signifier reproduces our common experience, our culturally determined intersubjectivity (see below, p. 30), the more realistic it appears to be. But we must be at pains to emphasize that the signified to which the signifier relates is itself arbitrary, for the way we see it, categorize it and structure it is a result of our culture's way of seeing, just as much as the way we reproduce it in verbal language. The signified is determined by our culture, not by some external natural reality.

Given this important gloss on the nature of the signified, it is still useful to recognize that in the iconic sign it exerts a strong influence or constraint upon the form of the signifier, and this constraint is called *motivation*. In general, the greater the motivation, the smaller the role played by socially based convention; and the weaker the motivation, the more constraining is the convention.

The form of the signifier, then, can be determined either by the signified or by convention. In highly motivated signs, the signified is the determining influence, in signs of low motivation, convention determines the form of the signifier. Thus the form that a photograph of a car can take is determined by the appearance of the specific car itself; on the other hand, the form of the signifier of a generalized car on a traffic sign is determined by the convention that is accepted by the users of the code. So the weaker the motivation, the more determining the convention has to be, until we reach a point where the motivation has disappeared and the sign has become *unmotivated* or *arbitrary*.

ARBITRARY, UNMOTIVATED SIGNS

In this type of sign the signifier relates to its signified by convention alone, by an agreement among its users that this sign shall mean this. Words are, of course, our commonest arbitrary signs: there is no necessary relation between a word and its meaning. Hence we may not understand a French-speaker's arbitrary verbal sign for CAR, but we can understand their motivated road signs in so far as they are iconic. The primacy of the iconic sign on television can tempt us to ignore the arbitrary nature of much of the medium's signification. There are a few clearly arbitrary signs, such as a 'dissolve' which signifies a remembered scene is to follow, or a slow-motion shot which signifies either analytical appreciation when used in sports programmes or lyrical beauty when used in drama or advertisements. But the arbitrary or conventional dimension is often disguised by the apparent natural iconic motivation or realism of the sign: hence a shot from ground level of a tall building *conventionally* signifies that the next scene will take place in an office or flat in that building; a man in a detective drama showing the inside of his wallet is *conventionally* a sign of a policeman identifying himself and not, for instance, of a pedlar of dirty postcards.

In this last example, the sign clearly started life as iconic and motivated: police officers really do do this, but by frequent repetition its motivated dimension has decreased and its arbitrary, conventional dimension has increased.

Even the most iconic signs must have an arbitrary dimension: or, to put it another way, the apparently motivated quality of the television sign must not blind us to the equally central role of convention in conveying its meaning.

THE THREE ORDERS OF SIGNIFICATION

This sort of discussion of signs can only go so far towards explaining how they convey meaning, for it has concentrated on the sign as a self-contained construct. A photograph or a road sign can both be signs of a car, but the photograph, semiotically, can go further; it can also be a sign of virility or of freedom, and in certain contexts it can even be used to signify an industrial, materialist and rootless society. We are clearly involved with a far more complex idea of 'meaning' than the simple relationship between the photograph and the car itself. There are different levels of meaning or, to use the semiotic term, different *orders of signification*.

The first order of signification is the one we have discussed so far. In this order the sign is self-contained, the photograph *means* the individual car. In the second order of signification this simple motivated meaning meets a whole range of cultural meanings that derive not from the sign itself, but from the way the society uses and values both the signifier and the signified. In our society a car (or a sign for a car) frequently signifies virility or freedom. The range of cultural meanings that are generated in this second order cohere in the third order of signification into a comprehensive, cultural picture of the world, a coherent and organized view of the reality with which we are faced. It is in this third order that a car can form part of the imagery of an industrial, materialist and rootless society.

Barthes, in *Mythologies* (1973) and *Elements of Semiology* (1968), discusses in some detail the way signs work in these different orders of signification. To follow his ideas we must introduce some more technical terms. According to Barthes, signs in the second order of

signification operate in two distinct ways: (1) as *myth-makers* and (2) as *connotative agents*. We shall study both in some detail because they are crucial to an understanding of the way television conveys its full meaning.

Second-order signs I: myths

To explain Barthes's theory of 'myth' we can turn to a news-film from the ITN programme *News at Ten*, of 7 January 1976. (We will be making extensive reference to this bulletin throughout the rest of the book.) Illustrating an item of news about troop reinforcements in Northern Ireland, it shows British soldiers in Belfast patrolling the streets, defending their sandbagged positions, and operating with a helicopter and armoured troop carriers. This film will enable us to explain the second order of signification and how it derives from the first.

When a sign carries cultural meanings rather than merely representational ones, it has moved into the second order of signification. In this movement the sign changes its role; the sign of the particular soldier becomes the *signifier* of the cultural values that he embodies in this news-film. The 'cultural meaning' of the soldier is what Barthes calls a *myth*.

Thus, the image in our film of a soldier clipping a magazine on to his rifle as he peers from his sandbagged bunker fortress in Belfast can activate the myth by which we currently 'understand' the army. This myth, as we shall show, is that the army consists of ordinary men, doing a professional and highly technological job. In order to trigger this myth the sign must be robbed of its specific signified, in this case, perhaps, of 'Private J. Smith, 14.00 hours, January 4, 1976'. The sign loses this specificity and becomes now the second-order signifier; so the signified becomes 'one-of-our-lads – professional – well-equipped' (not Private J. Smith), and the sign in this second order activates or triggers our mental 'myth chain' by which we apprehend the reality of the British soldier/army in Northern Ireland.

The myth is validated from two directions: first from the specificity and iconic accuracy of the first-order sign, and second from the extent to which the second-order sign meets our cultural needs. These needs require the myth to relate accurately to reality out-there, and also to bring that reality into line with appropriate cultural values.

The myth of the British army that is in fact being appealed to is what we may call the currently established one – the army as ‘our lads, as professional, and as technologically well-equipped’. The ITN news reporter-cameraman chooses three main signs to activate this myth chain by which the army is apprehended. First, the camera dwells in close-up on individual soldiers peering out of the fort or dug-out at an undefined, unillustrated enemy. We look over the soldiers’ shoulders, we share their position, and thus their role as one-of-us, defending us and ours, is immediately identified. Basically the same sign occurs frequently in popular war films or in the traditional western, where ‘white hat’ defends the fort/homestead/wagon train against ‘black hat’ or Indians. News reporting and fiction use similar signs because they naturally refer to the same myths in our culture.

The next aspect of the myth is that of the soldiers as the professionals – well-trained, special people. This is the myth the army itself propagates in its recruiting campaigns. One sign activating this myth is a shot of soldiers issuing from the heavy double gates of the fort into a sub-urban street. They move in a ritualistic, crouching glide, in a predetermined order to predetermined positions. Here, again, the image of the soldier as a specially trained person, identified by special behaviour, can be seen operating in other aspects of our culture such as films or children’s play.

This second aspect of the myth is closely linked to the third, which is that of the army’s technological expertise and glamour – again, a familiar image. The camera dwells on a helicopter rising over an urban skyline for no other reason than that it is an army helicopter. The camera shows us more of the visual thesaurus of war – automatic rifles, troop-carriers, armoured Land Rovers.

These three visual signs then cohere into an overall myth of the army as our lads, professional and well-equipped. But this coherence is perhaps better expressed as a *conceptual movement*, for the myths of the army are not apprehended in their totality in a single moment of awareness, but rather in a chain of concepts along which our responses move. The sign which starts our responses along this chain is acting like a *metonym* (see below); it is a part which stands for the whole.

The other characteristic of myths that we must stress is their dynamism. They are constantly changing and updating themselves, and

television plays an important role in this process. It constantly tests the myths against reality and thus shows when their explanatory power has decreased and the need for change becomes more pressing.

Our news-film from Belfast provides us with a particularly clear example of the way television can hint at the inadequacy of our present myths and thus contribute to their development. The sequence of army shots is followed immediately by a sequence showing the funerals of some of the victims of the violence. The last shot of the army sequence is of an armoured troop-carrier moving right to left across the screen. There is then a cut to a coffin of a victim being carried right to left at much the same pace and in the same position on the screen. The visual similarity of the two signifiers brings their meanings into close association. The coffin contains the death that should have been prevented by the soldiers in the troop-carrier. Thus the myth of the army that underlies the whole army sequence has been negated by television's characteristic of quick-cutting from one vivid scene to another. We may well see this as a small contribution to changing the myth of the British army by bringing to it the concept of gallant failure, if not defeat.

Second-order signs II: connotation

We have already noted that there are two second-order sign systems: myth is one and connotation the other. Let us begin to explain this connotative order of signs with a simple example. A general's uniform denotes his or her rank (first-order sign), but connotes the respect we accord to it (second-order sign). We could, for instance, conceive of a uniform that became steadily more ragged and poverty-stricken as the rank of the holder increased: a general's ragged uniform would still denote his or her rank, but the connotative meaning would have changed radically. In the connotative order, signs signify values, emotions and attitudes.

Barthes, in an essay entitled 'The Rhetoric of the Image' (1977), argues that in photography the denoted meaning is conveyed solely through the mechanical process of reproduction (denotation is visual transfer), while connotation is the result of human intervention in the process – camera distance/angle, focus, lighting effects, etc. Connotation is expressive, involving subjective rather than objective

experience, and is essentially the way in which the encoder transmits their feelings or judgement about the subject of the message. Metz (1974) takes a similar view:

In American gangster movies, where, for example, the slick pavement of the waterfront distills an impression of anxiety and hardness . . . the scene represented (dimly lit, deserted wharves, with stacks of crates and overhead cranes) . . . and the technique of the shooting, which is dependent on the effects of lighting in order to produce a certain *picture* of the docks . . . converge to form the signifier of connotation. The same scene filmed in a different light would produce a different impression; and so would the same technique used on a different subject (for example, a child's smiling face).

(p. 97)

Television uses much the same methods as film to connote meaning: camera angle, lighting and background music, frequency of cutting are examples. Music in particular is used to clarify and sometimes create the connotative meaning of a shot. A sign of a man about to open a door can connote suspense and anxiety by the addition of conventional suspense music, or a shot of an empty room can be made to connote either eeriness or peace by the music and lighting. Berger, in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), has shown how the connotative meaning of a televised painting can be changed by the background music accompanying it. The connotative dimensions of signs in a conventional medium like television tend to be more limited and explicit, some would say crude, than in the more aesthetic media like the art film or even poetry. But they are still an important part of the way television signifies. We discuss the role of connotation more fully in our analysis of an extract from *Cathy Come Home* with which we end this chapter.

The third order of signification

In considering both second orders of signification we have moved away from a view of the sign as an independent entity, and have entered the realm of subjective responses. Though these responses occur in the

individual, they are not, paradoxically, individualistic in nature. Since they are invoked by signs which mean what they do only through agreement between the members of the culture, they are centred in that ill-defined area we call intersubjectivity. This is the area of 'subjective' responses which are shared, to a degree, by all members of a culture. We can no more decide that the lighting and style of representation of Metz's water-front connotes joy and freedom rather than anxiety and hardness, than we can decide that the word *banana* refers to a four-legged animal, or that the myth of the British army activated by the signs of the soldiers in Northern Ireland is the myth of triumphant conquerors freeing the world from a tyrant. This intersubjectivity is culturally determined, and is one of the ways in which cultural influences affect the individuals in any culture, and through which cultural membership is expressed.

The myths which operate as organizing structures within this area of cultural intersubjectivity cannot themselves be discrete and unorganized, for that would negate their prime function (which is to organize meaning): they are themselves organized into a coherence that we might call a *mythology* or an ideology. This, the third order of signification, reflects the broad principles by which a culture organizes and interprets the reality with which it has to cope.

Elsewhere (Hartley and Fiske 1977) we have shown how the mythology which organizes the *News at Ten* bulletin from which our Belfast news-film is taken has to do with the relationship between major social institutions and the individuals within them. A number of institutions are presented during the course of the programme: the British army (in Belfast); the navy (in the 'Cod War' with Iceland); the government (throughout, but especially as financier of the housing programme and as employer of National Health Service doctors); major employers (in this case the British Steel Corporation); and foreign governments (American, Spanish and Italian). All of them are shown to be responding to crises bravely enough. But their efforts ultimately seem inadequate and are presented as being doomed to failure. However, the individuals working within these institutions are shown to be acting as positively and as effectively as their institutional contexts will allow. Hence disillusionment with major institutions as such, coupled with an undiminished respect for the individual, would appear on the evidence

of this typical bulletin to be a crucial part of our contemporary mythology.

METAPHOR AND METONYMY

Barthes's theories concentrate on how signs relate to the culture that uses them, and while this is obviously a crucial relationship, we must balance it by a more detailed look at how signs convey meaning and the ways in which they relate to each other.

Metaphor and *metonymy* are terms that will be relatively familiar to students of literature. Traditionally, a metaphor is a word (signifier) which is applied to an object or action (signified) to which it is not literally or conventionally applicable. For instance, New Yorkers often call their city 'The Big Apple'. The connection between 'New York' and 'apple' is not natural, it is *asserted*. Of course, asserted metaphors may themselves become conventional, as in the expression 'New York *appeals* to me'. A metonym is the application of a mere attribute of an object to the whole object. For instance many Londoners call their city 'The Smoke'. Smoke used to be a characteristic part of the London scene, resulting in the smogs which were called (metaphorically) 'pea-soupers'. It came to signify the city as a whole, but this time the relationship between the signifier (Smoke) and its signified (London) is *contiguous* rather than asserted.

The way we use the terms metaphor and metonymy in this book derives from (though it is not quite the same as) Jakobson's theories of poetics rather than from traditional literary criticism.¹ Jakobson (1958) and Leach (1976), among others, broaden the scope of the two terms. They see metaphor and metonymy as the two fundamental modes by means of which the meanings of signs are conveyed. According to this broad view, metaphor involves a transposition or displacement from signified to signifier, together with the recognition that such a transposition implies an equivalence between these two elements of the sign. Clearly, then, *all* signifiers are by that token

¹ We have in fact conflated into our usage of the term metonymy another very similar function described by the rhetorical term *synecdoche*. This is the figure of speech in which part is named but whole is understood, or vice versa.

metaphorical, to the extent that at the first order of signification they involve a constructed equivalence between the sign and the reality it represents. Hence we can extend the notion of metaphor to non-verbal signifiers, and think in terms of 'visual metaphors'. These are constructed, as opposed to asserted. Thus, a portrait of a person is constructed in such a way as to convince us that the two-dimensional visual representation is equivalent to its three-dimensional reality. Similarly a map, or a scale model, signifies the reality to which it refers by constructing an equivalent form in whose features we can recognize those of the object itself. Thus both verbal and non-verbal, arbitrary and iconic signs can be metaphorical. When we come to discuss television realism in chapter 11, it will be important to remember that an apparently direct or iconic representation of reality is more accurately a metaphorical reconstruction of that reality in the terms of the television medium. The similarity we perceive between signifier and signified should be thought of as a *constructed equivalence*; the metaphoric real world shown on television does not *display* the actual real world, but *displaces* it.

In metonymy, on the other hand, the signification depends upon the ability of a sign to act as a part which can signify the whole. For instance Victorian entrepreneurs got into the habit of referring to their wage-labourers as 'hands'; taking a significant attribute of the people involved to signify those people. You can see that metonymy, like metaphor, is capable of modifying its user's perception of the signified. If an employer reduces people to their hands, being the attribute s/he values in them, it is perhaps more difficult for the employer even to perceive other attributes which they may have.

Metonymy is also capable of making physical objects signify quite abstract concepts. For instance, a crown is an object, part of the regalia associated with monarchs. The 'crowned heads of Europe' are often said to be gathered together on great occasions: we can safely assume they are accompanied by the remaining items of their bearers' anatomies. However, the crown is also a metonymic sign for sovereignty. Its signified includes not only the rest of the royal regalia but also extends to the more abstract notions of the monarchy, imperialism and a particular form of social order.

Television signs can operate simultaneously in both the metaphoric

and the metonymic mode, but each mode performs a different function. In the first order of signification, the iconic or denotative function of the sign is metaphoric. It involves the transposition from reality to representation, so that on the level of manifest content (i.e. the denotative order), a shot of a city street is a constructed metaphor of the specific street itself. But it is also and predominantly a metonym of the whole city or of 'city-ness', for the realism of much television drama results from the metonymy of its setting at the level of manifest content.

However, in the second order of signification, in latent content, it is the metaphoric mode which tends to dominate. We can now see that the over-portrayal of white-collar jobs on television is simply a metaphor of their place in our culture's hierarchy of esteem. Here the transposition is from one plane, that of social values, to another, that of frequency of representation. The equivalence is constructed (though disguised and not foregrounded for inspection as is the case in asserted metaphor), and is connotative, not denotative.

Television advertisers are particularly adept at exploiting both metaphoric and metonymic modes in order to cram as much meaning as possible into a thirty-second slot. The sign of a mother pouring out a particular breakfast cereal for her children is a metonym of all her maternal activities of cooking, cleaning and clothing, but a metaphor for the love and security she provides. In this case, the transposition or displacement is from an affective plane to a material one. (In the case of the over-portrayal of white-collar jobs the transposition is from the plane of representing values to that of representing facts.) The metonym, on the other hand, involves contiguity – giving breakfast is actually part of the set of maternal activities.

The structural relationship between these two modes can be visualized as operating on two axes, one 'vertical' and the other 'horizontal' in character:

selective/associative (or paradigmatic) dimension
(metaphor)



combinative/syntagmatic dimension
(metonymy)



PARADIGMS AND SYNTAGMS

You will observe that we have introduced two new terms into the above diagram: *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic*. Briefly, a paradigm is a 'vertical' set of units (each unit being a sign or word), from which the required one is selected. A syntagm is the 'horizontal' chain into which it is linked with others, according to agreed rules and conventions, to make a meaningful whole.

Paradigms and syntagms are fundamental to the way that any system of signs is organized. In written language, for instance, the letters of the alphabet are the basic vertical paradigms. These may be combined into syntagms called words. This example illustrates other properties of the terms. The units in a paradigm are distinct and separate from each other (the letter 'a' is not like the letter 'b'), but when combined into a syntagm they can be modified according to their relationship with other units. Thus a letter can have its sound changed by the letter following it (witness the 'o' in the words 'shop' and 'show'), or it can even change its form in some languages (Welsh mutations are a good example). On the next level of organization, we can see that the words of a language form a paradigm which we call its vocabulary. These words can then be formed into syntagms called phrases or sentences according to the rules of grammar.

These are formal paradigms and syntagms, but the same dimensions of analysis can be seen in less formally defined situations. There are, for instance, paradigms of words appropriate to a 'legal document', a 'family meal time' or even a 'night out with the boys'. These paradigms, which in linguistics are called *registers*, are established by convention and usage, and are thus relatively more flexible than the paradigm of the words of the language itself (which changes very slowly).

A paradigm itself is defined by a certain similarity between its units – for example, words appropriate to 'a family meal time'. But within the paradigm, the units are clearly distinguished from each other. Thus, a unit in a paradigm has two dimensions of meaning: its relationship with and at the same time distinctiveness from its fellow units. The second dimension is the more crucial; a unit's meaning is defined in opposition to others in its paradigm, and we therefore understand a sign by contrasting it with what it is *not*.

Thus, to understand fully the signs of the myth of the British army which we discussed earlier, we must contrast them with signs and myths that they are not. Some examples of the paradigm we must refer to, that of other 'signs and myths of an army', are juxtaposed in *Scoop, Scandal and Strife*, a collection of news photographs edited by Baynes (1971). They include the British soldier in World War I, sitting outside a French cottage with a bouncing baby on his knee; the dead machine gunner lying twisted beneath a belt of bullets, his shirt open to reveal a white chest with a streak of blood across it; the citizen of Prague baring his chest before the muzzle of the gun of an advancing Russian tank; the South Vietnamese general about to pull the trigger of a pistol at the head of an adolescent Vietcong suspect; Americans pushing Vietcong suspects from helicopters to their deaths – these are all signs from battlefields that activate different myths within the overall army paradigm.

Media paradigms

We move on now to consider the medium itself as a sign that derives meaning from the way it differs from the other media in its paradigm. Thus a sign of two children leaving school could exist in one medium as a 'photograph in a family album'. That same photograph could, however, appear in another medium as a 'poster on a national safety campaign'. Here it would become less specific and more generalized. The relation between signifier and signified would change: the signifier would remain the same, but the signified would change from 'Matthew and Lucy coming home from school, July 1978', to a more generalized sign of 'children leaving school'. The more the children appear to be culturally typical on this poster (the more, that is, they exhibit what Barthes calls 'canonic generality'), the wider would be the acceptance of this new sign. Television as a medium is particularly well suited to taking a specific iconic sign like a photograph and generalizing it into a broader sign, which means giving the original sign a new level of culturally determined meaning.

Thus the very same visual image will mean slightly different things, or convey different kinds of meaning, depending on the medium through which that image is channelled. Just as there is a set or

paradigm of letters from which to choose to make up words, so there is a set or paradigm of different media. An image can be presented on television or in a cinema, in a poster or a magazine, in a family photograph album or an art gallery. Television, as a 'unit' within this media paradigm, will establish its meanings in relation to other units: it emerges as more public, for instance, than the family photograph, more domestic than the poster, more casual than the art gallery.

Genre paradigms

But even within a single medium the sign will vary according to its context or *genre*. Hence a television shot of the children leaving school could, for instance, occur:

- 1 In a documentary film on their family: this would give it the specificity of a family photo modified by some of the generality of television.
- 2 In a fictional play: this would give it a different sort of specificity in that the children would be acting and not being (an additional order of signs would have been inserted), and the generality would be moved towards universality by the art of the dramatist.
- 3 In a safety propaganda film or an advertisement: this would de-specify the sign and refer it to the myth order of signification entirely.

So both the medium and the genre have paradigmatic attributes. The sign is different in each of the three genres above, for although the signifier remains the same, the sign itself is altered by the change of genre within the medium, in the same way as it is by a change of medium itself.

Syntagms

The units selected from the various paradigms are then combined into a meaningful whole called a *syntagm*. Syntagms, like sentences, which exist in time, are easily thought of as a chain. But syntagms of visual signs can exist simultaneously in space. Thus a sign of two children leaving school, in black silhouette, can be syntagmatically combined with a red

triangle on a road sign to mean 'School: beware of children'. (We may note, incidentally, how this sign contains both arbitrary and iconic features.) Here there are only two units of meaning to be combined.

The safety poster, however, containing a photograph of the children leaving school, would be far more complex. It would contain more information, more units of meaning. Greimas (1966) uses the word *seme* to refer to the smallest units of meaning in a sign or word. The word *children*, according to his theory, is actually composed of the semes *young* and *people*, and is thus a unit in two paradigms – 'the ages of people' and 'young creatures'.

To analyse our poster as a syntagm of semes, we need first to establish the paradigm from which the poster itself is selected. This is the paradigm of signs of 'children in potentially dangerous situations' and not of 'children enjoying their holidays'. (The road sign, on the other hand, is selected from the paradigm of 'potentially dangerous situations for the motorist'.) The next task is to identify the semes, which turn out to be: two/excited/children/male and female/seven and six years old/leaving school. Each seme is itself a unit in a paradigm and derives its meaning partly from what it is not. If we change one seme, for instance if we change the ages of the children to fourteen and four, we can see what a difference would be made to the whole syntagm: it would signify a greater responsibility on the part of the older child and thus imply a less urgent need for caution from us. A full analysis of the poster would indicate the paradigms of each seme and hence the potential alternatives that were not selected. Such an analysis would look like this:

<i>Syntagm</i> →	two	excited	children	male and female	seven and six years old	leaving school
↑	six	sad	adults	two males	fourteen and four	playing with fire
	three	angry	teenagers	two females	eight and eight	swimming
	one	sulking	babies	female and male	five and nine	climbing trees
<i>Paradigms</i>	etc.	etc.	etc.		etc.	etc.

Changing any one seme for another in its paradigm will change the meaning of the whole syntagm without altering the paradigm of which the poster itself is a member. This shows us the potential range of alternatives from which the photographer or advertiser has made his or her selection, and it is only by looking at what was rejected that we can gauge the full significance of the poster as it has finally emerged.

AN ANALYSIS OF A TV SYNTAGM

To conclude this chapter, we would like to analyse a brief extract from *Cathy Come Home*, a documentary drama about the plight of the homeless in London, shown on British TV in 1966. The extract is a sequence of five shots of children in a large institutional home:

- Shot 1 A close-up of a girl standing against a brick wall, looking seriously at, rather than eating, a sandwich (3 secs). Cut to
- Shot 2 (a) A wire cage covering the stairwell of the building, the camera pans diagonally upwards following children running and laughing upstairs; (b) the camera is 'too close' to them, so we get blurred images of legs, bodies, faces, against the iron balustrade of the stairs (7 secs). Cut to
- Shot 3 The children running, laughing along a dim corridor towards the camera, backlit (2 secs). Cut to
- Shot 4 Children outside, against a brick wall, they run away from it towards the camera which zooms back to accommodate them (6 secs). Cut to
- Shot 5 A child standing against a brick wall, seriously putting a bullet into a toy gun, close up, visually very similar to shot 1 (4 secs). (Total time: 22 seconds)

The iconic nature of the signs and their denotative meaning are clear, but the connotative and mythic meanings will repay closer inspection. In this 'children' syntagm, the signifiers in the denotative order become the signs in the connotative order of a crowded, constricting environment which contains but cannot dampen the resilience of the children. In the connotative order the signs express emotional attitudes. These are conveyed by camera distance, angle, the lighting

effects and so on. The camera distance is close up in shots 1, 2, 4 and 5, and in 1, 4 and 5 the child is tight against a wall, constricted between camera and wall. In shot 2 the camera itself is too close, it cannot back away enough to take a 'good' picture. In shot 3 the constraint is provided by the enclosing corridor and the back lighting, which gives the impression of the children running into an enclosed environment, away from the light and freedom. The cage and iron bars of the balustrade, and the grained bricks in shots 1, 4 and 5, denote 'cultural' objects which in their turn also connote constriction.

Paradigmatic analysis requires us to compare the effect of close-up with that of long shot, of dim back lighting with that of bright front: we have to imagine how the same 'reality' could have been shot differently in order to understand why it was shot as it was. Similarly, in shot 5 for example, we can only understand the significance of the boy's gun by contrasting it with other toys he could have had, say a bubble pipe, a lump of plasticine or a fire engine. The fact that the gun is a relatively realistic one that can be loaded with 'bullets' is also significant. The child may be only playing aggression now, but the hint of real violence to follow is clearly contained in the sign.

In syntagmatic analysis, on the other hand, we relate each shot to the others. We note that shots 1 and 5 are visually similar, that they are of contemplative, still, children, who look almost cowed by the system. These 'contain' the active shots, in the way that the constricting environment contains and constrains the energy of the children. This enables us to show how the syntagm is constructed and unified, how its components affect each other, and how it operates as a coherent unit in the larger discourse of the play.

But the double order of signification is not entirely explained by reference to denotation and connotation. We have already noted that signs in the denotative order can also become, in the second order, signifiers of a myth; that is they lose their iconic specificity of reference and acquire their significance from, in this case, two culturally located myths – the myth by which we apprehend childhood as a free, unconstrained, happy experience, and the one by which we evaluate the urban and institutional environments as unnatural, constricting and hostile. The signs activate these two myth structures in the viewers, and it is their conflation that is the final significance of the

signs. The second-order systems of myth and connotation support and depend on each other for they both derive from the same first-order system.

We can see how these myths and connotations are triggered, by looking more closely at the central shot of the syntagm. In this the running and laughter of the children is a *metonym* (in the first order) of happy, unrestrained childhood, it is an actual part of it. The corridor, however, is a *metaphor* in the second order (connotative), for the restrictive nature of the institution, and the way it dominates and encloses the children in it. The children are running happily away from the light into the institutional dimness, and this also is a *metaphor* in the second-order (myth), for their innocent ignorance of how their institutional childhood will blight their lives.