SIGN
A concept drawn from semiotics, a sign is anything that stands for something else in the production of meaning. It may include words, photographs, sounds and gestures. A sign has three characteristics:
- it must have a physical form – you can see, hear, smell, and/or touch it;
- it must refer to something other than itself;
- it must be used and recognised as a sign; that is, it be an element in a shared cultural code or system.

According to Saussure’s theory of semiotics, a sign is made of two equal parts:
- **The signifier.** This works at the level of denotation. It is objective (a material thing). Using the oft-quoted example of a red rose, the flower itself is the signifier.
- **The signified.** This works at the level of connotation. It is subjective (a ‘mentifact’ not an ‘artefact’). The signified is the concept referred to by the signifier. In the instance of the red rose, what is signified may be love, passion or the Labour Party.

As you can see by this example, the signified of the sign can sometimes have more than one meaning (polysemy), but this is often tempered by the context within which the sign is represented. A red rose means one thing if given to a lover on Valentine’s day, another if given to a parent. In another semiotic system, a red rose means ‘the Labour Party’.

Signs function not through their essential nature but through their relative position in the ordering of other signs and codes. In fact Saussure argued that there is no intrinsic value in a sign, rather, its meaning arises from its difference from other signs within the system. So, in the above example, we know that the rose is a rose by distinguishing it from others in the paradigm of flowers – it is not a lily or a daffodil. Applying this idea to human relations, in the rules of gender, the sign ‘male’ only makes sense through differentiation from ‘female’ – there are no necessary positive content to maleness.

As the above examples demonstrate, the meaning of a sign is cultural. As such the sign is an unstable entity that relies not only on contextual knowledge but also on the knowledge of other available signs within that context.

SEMIOTICS/ SEMIOLOGY
Semiotics is the study of signs. It seeks to understand how language is made meaningful and how meaning can then be communicated in society. Semiotics is not to be found in the text itself, but rather it should be understood as a methodology. Accordingly, it is not a discipline in its own right, but its influence on institutionalised ways of approaching media texts has been considerable.

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is often considered to be the founder of semiotics, along with other figures such as the American philosopher of language C. S. Peirce, the Italian semiotic theorist Umberto Eco and the Soviet theorist of language Valentin Volosinov (who may have been the literary writer Bakhtin).

Saussure proposed an approach and terminology that was itself very influential on structuralism when his theory of language was taken up later on by such writers as
Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Saussurian semiotics approaches language ‘synchronically’, as a phenomenon existing in the here and now, rather than ‘diachronically’ (as did the then-ascendant discipline of philology). He was interested in its structure and the rules that allowed utterances to be generated, not in existing words. He proposed that language works as a system of difference, in which what any one element means (its ‘value’ in the system) is arbitrary, consisting precisely in being what the others are not.

This idea was taken up and applied in contexts going well beyond the realm of spoken language. Anthropologists looked at the structure of myths using Saussurian concepts. Barthes used them to analyse both literary and popular cultural texts, particularly via his Mythologies (1973). He led the way for those working in media and cultural studies to begin to apply semiotic terms to the analysis of everything from advertising (see for example Williamson, 1978) to ideology. In fact following developments in France in the 1950s and 1960s, in the 1970s semiotics was knitted together with Marxism and psychoanalytical approaches by intellectuals working in the Birmingham tradition of cultural studies and the Screen tradition of cinema studies respectively. It was from this conjunction that the emancipatory potential of semiotics was proposed: it could help to ‘demystify’ dominant ideologies and assist in the effort to understand how commonsensical representations of an apparently unarguable reality were in fact constructed, often in line with existing arrangements of power.

Fiske (1990: 40) argues that semiotics has three main areas of study.
- The sign: for example, an utterance, word or image. This is broken down into two components that make up the sign – the signifier and the signified – the former being sound, letters or image that make up the material form of the sign, the latter representing its associated mental meaning.
- The codes and systems into which signs are organised. Codes involve ‘choice and chain’ – paradigm and syntagm.
- The culture within which these signs and codes operate. Meaning is dependent upon shared structures of understanding. As Saussure put it, signs have a ‘life in society’.

Recognising that meaning was dependent on, for instance, shared cultural codes (which are also understood to be historically located and subject to change), meant that audiences could no longer simply be thought of as passive receivers. Semiotics gave them something to do. The reader of a text was active in the meaning-making process, bringing with them cultural experiences, discourses and ideologies for the process of making sense. Semiotics was a good technique for making this largely spontaneous, untutored activity more self-reflexive and critical.