

## THE SEMIOLOGY ANALYSIS IN MEDIA STUDIES

### - ROLAND BARTHES APPROACH -

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#### Abstract

Semiotics; also called semiology was first used by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth century. As semiology is concerned with the general properties of sign language and other signal forms, it would be obvious to say that semiotics is the science of signs that allowed the proliferation of a number of perspectives and paved the way to other cultural phenomena that raised the study of signs through its denotative and connotative meanings.

Linguists began to develop new theories of different kinds of signs and its connotative meanings. Roland Barthes was a key player in the French school structuralism semiotics .He developed his approach in denotation and connotation in relation to photographic images as a system of signs , Barthes also claimed that the semiology analysis can be applied to modes other than language . According to him the image has two layers: of what and how it is represented. He clearly describes that denotation is concrete while connotation is more complex and abstract concept.

Media studies need a new spirit like the semiological method from the Barthesian perspective in the qualitative analysis level to go beyond the text or the image which is open to an infinite number of interpretations. When applying the semiological method to analyze media within its messages whether verbal or non verbal in the case of the image, Roland Barthes suggests the sign as a combination of a signifier and a signified. Accordingly, connotation is not always a means to innovate meanings because it communicates and evokes ideas as in the case of the different semiotic modes for communication. Barthes works show new semiotics doctrine that allowed analyzing the signs system in media to prove how even nonverbal communications give connotative meanings.

According to Barthes, the image is related to the aesthetic and ideological factors that are opened to readings and interpretations at the connotative level in order to explain how meaning is created through complex semiotic interaction. Thus, semiotics in media studies uses a wide variety of texts including: images, adverts, and films to provide the recipients with knowledge they need to have the ability to analyze and produce meaningful texts and designs in the future. From this perspective, Barthes suggests the death of the author /the creator of the text to witness the birth of the recipient allowing him to interpret, read, and produce a wide range of meanings which are a form of semiotic production that is oriented to observation and analysis of media messages and discourses in order to open the senses of the semiological researcher to the complexity of semiotic interpretation and new methods of using signs within the social and cultural context in media .

In practice, Roland Barthes approach is highly applied in media studies that concentrate upon semiological analysis of such varied media domains as advertising, cinema, films, video clips, and caricature. In recent years the influence of Barthes works turned semiotists in communication and information sciences to study the different media images in order to investigate the symbolic interaction of verbal and nonverbal signs applying semiology as a qualitative method that viewed these signs as a text communicates significant meanings by rereading, giving interpretations and connotations to these media signs broader than its primary sense through frequent associations. Barthes made great contribution in this field i-e the textual image analysis in order to extract its connotations and the mediated significance which is accordingly based on functional order of culture and ideology.

**Keywords:** Semiology, image, connotation, Roland Barthes, media, analysis.

## Introduction

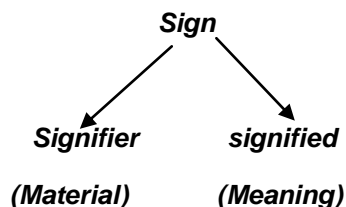
The media plays an important role in our everyday life; they affect us through their different functions and occupy a significant part for most people. Broadly speaking, the transformations in media world are so great this led to many academic serious researches by applying different approaches; empirical, conceptual, quantitative and qualitative .Semiology as a qualitative method of research was successfully transferred to media studies by researchers who needed more approaches to explain media phenomena. Barthes works show new semiotics doctrine that allowed analyzing the sign systems to prove how even nonverbal communication is open to interpretations through connotative meanings. The aim of this paper is to describe and explain how semiology as a method borrowed from linguistics is highly used in media analytical qualitative studies especially from Roland Barthes perspective, his approach studied semiotics with a new spirit within media messages/images that appear purposefully to the receiver.

## 1- What is semiology

Semiotics also called semiology was first defined by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure as 'the science of signs' (Sibhan Chappman, Christopher Routledge 2009). Semiology as a science is related to the word semiosis which is a term used in semiotics to designate the production and interpretation of a sign' (Hadumod Busmann 2006). Additionally, Roland Barthes proclaimed that semiology 'aims to take in any system of signs whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects' (Roland Barthes 1968) these signs constitute a system of significance. Although Saussure postulated semiology as a general science of signs of which linguistics would form only one part , Roland Barthes proclaimed that semiology is a mere subset of linguistics.

## 2- The nature of the sign according to Roland Barthes

Within the rise of linguistics, semiotics became an important field that studies the life of signs within society. Roland Barthes analyzed the signs within two main semiotic concepts: the signified and the signifier from the Saussurean perspective as shown in the following drawing:



De Saussure 's emphasis on the sign and its components has greatly stimulated Roland Barthes as a principal background of structuralism .Barthes identified the semiotic sign with the system of language , and it is related to language in order to create meaning like the sign of fashion which is associated deeply to the verbal language system . De Saussure defined also the linguistic sign as 'not a thing and name but a concept and a sound image' (Ferdinand de Saussure 1915) and the two components are intimately united.

The sign occupies an important place in the conceptual field and belongs to a series of converged concepts. Barthes called the semiotic signs as the function signs which are related to the use context because they use and carry significance at the same time.

Barthes pointed that many semiological systems are objects of everyday use as an example of this idea ; food is used for nourishment , clothes for protection even they are signs , he said : ' we purpose to call these semiological signs , whose origin is utilitarian and functional ; sign functions ' ( Roland Barthes 1868). The sign as we have seen is a combination of a signifier and a signified, that is the union between the dress as a signifier and fashion as a signified, the newspaper in this sense does not offer this sign frankly; in other words, it does not say that the accessory is a signifier of spring as a signified. Barthes proposed the rhetoric analysis of fashion sign reveals the hidden sign behind the use and function, so, there is an exchange between signs and functions.

As a consequence, Roland Barthes did not come out too much from de Saussure's perception of the sign and its two main components (the signifier and the signified). For him, the semiological sign compounded of a signifier and signified.

**The nature of the signifier:** the signifier has a material nature whether sounds , objects , or images his concept of the signifier is an extension of what de Saussure explained despite he disagrees with him in some respects , also it is impossible to separate it from the signified i-e they have an associative nature .

**The nature of the signified:** signified on the other hand is not a thing but the mental representation of things and the outside world, it has a psychological and abstract nature that is given through denotation. We can summarize the previous ideas in the following table:

**Table n 01: the nature of the sign**

The sign	The nature
Signifier	Material
Signified	Mental representation/psychological

### 3- The nature of media research

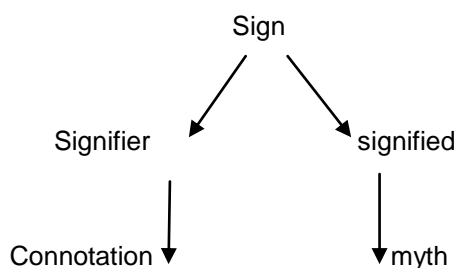
The area of media research is very vast , this field of research is a heritage of diverse scientific disciplines, media research involves ' the application of systematic methods to solve a problem or to understand it better than in the past' ( Joseph Turow, 2009) , because media cannot be studied out of the socio-cultural context , the researcher can use quantitative or qualitative approaches to study the media phenomena .The main difference between the two is that the quantitative research deals mainly with data collected in numerical forms like the questionnaires and surveys , whereas the qualitative one refers basically to making sense of reality asking on how the different parts of the phenomenon fit together? , what does the media text really mean?. Semiotics or semiology is one of the major branches of media analysis materials or what is called the non-verbal communication /image, it has been successfully transferred to media qualitative researches taking the inspiration from the linguistic tradition as a type of analysis.

### 4- Why semiology analysis in media studies?

Undoubtedly, media are an important part in our life, and many academic and empirical studies around the world suggest the great influence of media. There is an infinite chain of messages especially in the form of visual image which is a language can be analyzed. Thus, there is a need to study and analyze those media images semiologically in order to understand how those signs work within the meanings behind them. Barthes suggested that' the denotative and connotative' levels of meanings' apply also to the analysis of visual signs (Clause Bruhn Jensen ,2002)

Thus, semiology analysis is a key element to understand, decode the significant visual messages used by the media, and to generate meanings that refer to the socio-cultural and personal associations in the second level of signification which is connotation. Semiology can be applied in the context of media to analyze any media texts; films, television programs, cartoons and adverts. In addition, the semiotic reader as a receiver plays an important role in the interpretation and the eruption of meanings behind the media texts that are open to many interpretations.

In his semiological approach Barthes considered the analysis of concrete sign vehicles –text and images – as vehicles of culture and ideology or myth, Barthes identified a myth as a type of speech but of course not any type because 'language needs special conditions in order to become a myth '(Roland Barthes 1972). For Barthes a myth is a message that belongs to the communicative system, he considered it as a mode of significance. With hindsight, we can say that a myth represents the second order- meaning of the signified while connotation is the second-order of meaning of the signifier as shown in the following drawing:



Semiology as a qualitative method applied in media research helps the researcher to discover the hidden meanings of the visual texts: films, adverts, posters... within the socio-cultural context, it means the analysis of media phenomenon as a system through the manifested signs whether verbal or non-verbal that can be studied as Barthes proposed in his approach according to the two levels of signification i.e denotation and connotation. Media messages/visual ones are studied by using this analytical approach as texts need deep reading in order to develop the different interpretations of this message.

## **5- The applications of Barthes semiological approach in media studies**

### **Media semiosis**

In practice, Roland Barthes approach is highly applied in media studies that concentrate upon semiological analysis of such varied media domains as advertising, cinema, films, video clips, and caricature. In recent years the influence of Barthes works turned semiotists in communication and information sciences to study the different media images in order to investigate the symbolic interaction of verbal and nonverbal signs applying semiology as a qualitative method that viewed these signs as a text communicates significant meanings by rereading, giving interpretations and connotations to these media signs broader than its primary sense through frequent associations.

Semiology as a method presents a new challenge for media and communication studies through the analysis and interpretation of connotative data in order to explain empirically how media generate meanings from the sign system. The image refers to many patterns of existence one of them is semiological significance which is linked to media through the application of this analytical method in which Barthes made great contribution in this field i.e the textual image analysis in order to extract its connotations and the mediated significance which is accordingly based on functional order of culture and ideology.

### **6- Rhetoric of the image – the image as a visual sign-**

The image holds an important position in Barthes work mythologies; it plays a pivotal role in stimulating the receiver mentally and emotionally. The image as a nonverbal language makes connotation, it is like an interior negotiation with the viewer and these connotations are heavily influenced by the cultural and mythic factors. Barthes mentioned that 'photography has a power to convert which must be analyzed' (Roland Barthes 1972). for example in elections candidates adorn their prospectus with a portrait as a means to establish a link between them and the voters , so photography here tends to suggest the physical climate and an ellipse of language .

According to Barthes, the image is characterized by a structural independence associated to what is aesthetic and ideological in order to address the recipient who is able to read it on the connotative level through his cultural and symbolic background. In addition, Barthes was able to study the photographic signs through the interpretation of the social worlds whether things, text, advert; he established a new method to analyze the image on the denotative and connotative level. Then the photographic image as a myth is a semiological system as a sign combined of the signifier and the signified, therefore, the image is a language /non verbal which is opened to many interpretations, readings and significance. In photography the scene is captured mechanically and man's interventions in photograph (framing, distance, lighting, focus, speed) all effectively belong to the plane of connotation '(Robert E. Innis 1985).

The semiological analysis of the visual signs/image deals with reading, explaining, analyzing the image and explaining its significance in the sign system. This process represents a symbolic interaction between the denotative and the connotative meanings. Barthes expressed that the photographic image contains two co-existent messages: the first without a code which is denoted and the second with a code which is connoted.

We have mentioned previously that a sign is a combination of the signified and the signifier , the media visual communication as in television , newspaper , and films are able to stimulate the fundamental conditions of being i.e time and space. The power of the image as a significant non-verbal communication is the ability to create meanings, representing the world as it is .Furthermore, the visual image ' can give an impression of concreteness , they can appear as a true representation of contextual events' (Harry Jamieson 2007).

## 7- Levels of signification according to Barthes

### 7-1 Denotation

Denotation is the first level of signification, it means the permanent sense of a word excluding all subjective evaluations (dictionnaire de la langue Francaise 1993), it describes the literal or obvious meaning of the sign, thus , denotation of the visual image refers to what all people see without association to their culture , ideology or society . Roland Barthes expressed that the denoted message bears analogical properties and it is primary to connotation in the process of signification.

In this level of signification, we deal with the sign as the basic meaning that is independent of context and subjective interpretations as in connotation, for example , the image of sunrise denoted as the beginning of the day , and the end of night, while in connotation the sunrise can be described if a new day full of hope , the end of darkness , may be light ...etc and many other interpretations.

### 7-2 Connotation and the multiplicity of meaning

Before discussing connotation from the Barthesian perspective we should first know the meaning of this word,' connotation is an idea suggested by a word in addition to its main meaning' (Oxford advanced learner's dictionary 2000). It is the implication evoked by words or statements and images over what they actually denote, also' connotative signs can be personal and individual or general and universal '(J.A Cuddon 1998).

Connotation is a term used by Roland Barthes to explain the way signs work 'it describes the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values of their culture '(John Fisk 1992). It is, in this sense, influenced by the subjective factors that open more interpretations to the text. He suggested that 'connotation being itself a system comprises signifiers, signifieds, and the process which unites the former to the latter (signification) '( Roland Barthes 1968).

The Barthesian approach does not recognize the oneness of meanings because the text needs deep reading in order to blow multiple meanings which turn out into an infinite number of connotations , therefore, the text in this sense becomes great linguistic body related to significance. For Barthes 'connotation relies upon the prior existence of denotation, it always works in the borrowed territory of the denoted' (Harry Jamieson 2007). We can say that connotation is built on denotation. Thus, connotation for Barthes is a reproduction of the message whether linguistic or visual; also it is a product of mental abilities responsible on reading between the lines.

### Tools for analyzing an image through the Barthesian approach

Researchers have developed a variety of ways and tools to analyze media materials scientifically, applying the Barthesian semiological approach in order to study an image, the researcher needs to choose the appropriate sample for his semiological analysis: films, cartoons, TV programs, adverts and to determine the size of this sample within the need of the research, finally, describe the image on both levels of significance ; denotation and connotation.

### Analyzing an image

The image below can be used to describe what we see on both levels of signification according to Barthes approach:

### Image as a sign system





## Denotative level

In this level we shall read the photograph according to the common sense meaning of the sign, and give the obvious description of what we see in this image.

Characters: We see many African black children; one of them holds a dish in his left hand. They look to someone

The colors: Many colors appear in this photograph, related basically to the children's clothes; pink, yellow, blue, green, white

Background (space): The photograph has been taken in Africa.

## Connotative level

This image is open to many interpretations that are mainly associated to the social and cultural background of the semiotic reader.

The children are suffering from famine; they are so hungry, looking for someone to feed them, may be they are ashamed in front of those who came to help them.

These children are like any human being in Europe or in America, they have the right to survive, at least to eat and live like any other children in the world.

I read in this image: innocent eyes, poverty, oppression, famine, ignorance, no human rights, and the main meaning is that these African children have lost their childhood. They do not ask for miraculous things, food is all what they need.

The colors: We see many colors as shown in the photograph through the children's clothes, this reflects the African nature.

## Conclusion

we have dealt in this paper with the application of semiology in media studies according to Barthes approach, in the way that emphasizes the non verbal communication /the visual image /the photograph as a sign system .Additionally, the process of semiology in this field refers to signs in all their manifestations, linguistic or non linguistic, which involve the signifier and the signified as the main components of media signs according to the cultural phenomena including : films,photographs,fashion,advertising...etc .On the other hand, Barthes semiological approach is highly applied in media analysis as a qualitative approach that can be applied to media texts in which the reader/receiver as a key aspect plays an important role in the construction of meanings and giving interpretations in association to his experiences and socio-cultural background .Thus, Barthes works makes valuable contributions in understanding media signs that are expressed by two messages the first is denoted and the second is connoted in the process of significance.

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