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AESTHETICS OF TELEVISION: A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

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To my mother--  
with love.

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## ABSTRACT

Semiotics is a relatively recent method of analyzing plastic-arts media like film. It studies signs and their relationships which generate meaning. Semiotics is a viable method of studying the aesthetics of television, provided a theoretical basis for such study can be developed.

This study focuses mainly on developing a theoretical groundwork for semiotics of television. If TV programs are studied by clarifying the similarities in themes and imagery, they can be analyzed as genres. Each genre like situation comedy, domestic comedy, western or soap opera evokes a cultural myth, wherein the overall context is more important than the details of each program.

Semiotic concepts of iconic, symbolic and indexical signs are used since they help us understand the aesthetic aspects of communication. Also, semiological and structural definitions of paradigms and syntagms are defined and explained as part of semiotics of television.

This study proposes that space and time, two variables of plastic arts, can be studied as semiotic systems. The idea of diegesis explains the variations of space and time on television, which are different from the space and time in which the viewer is actually located. The diegetic time is experienced as the narrative time, i.e., the time used to construct a plastic art narrative. This includes the actual manipulations of time in which images are presented on the screen. The second subset of diegetic time is semiotic time. This

term indicates the significance of the variations in the time constructed in the narrative.

The diegetic space is also divided into the two subsets, narrative space and semiotic space. Narrative space indicates the space within the camera-frame and also the space outside the frame, the latter being suggested through editing between shots. The semiotic space is the total significance of spatial representations in a narrative. Spatial form is experienced in simultaneity whereas temporal form is suggested by succession or chronological progression of the narrative.

A brief discussion of how semiotic terms can be applied to TV genres like situation comedy, domestic comedy and soap opera is provided.

Future studies should involve actual analysis of TV programs by applying semiotic terms.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Problem in Perspective

Television has become the most pervasive mass medium of our time. It has influenced an entire generation with a culture that is created through its program fare. One can talk of television as a cultural institution, and a powerful one at that. What is most intriguing about this young medium is that, although its influences are felt in virtually all areas of life, very few of them are fully understood. Scholarly discussions and academic research programs have not been able to help us understand the complete potential--both positive and negative--of this medium.

Nevertheless, television has been studied through multi-pronged approaches and research strategies. One way to sum up the basic set of approaches is by means of Lasswell's theory of the communication process: who says what, in which channel, to whom and with what effect? A given study may investigate one or more of these aspects: source, channel, message, receiver or effect. Most studies of television seem to concentrate on its message and the process by which this message is communicated to the audience.

The most common methodology with which TV messages are studied is termed content analysis, and often includes an empirical investigation of a representative sample of TV programs. The objectives are to ascribe qualitative values to particular statements or ingredients of

the messages and to compare the words, statements and assertions in the respective categories of programs. In evening news programs, for example, one can find recurrent expressions of criticism of political actions, parties or persons. These statements can be evaluated as critical, neutral or supportive. According to the criteria previously established by the researcher, he/she can then assess the degree to which the content of the newscast is neutral or biased.

In other studies employing content analysis, TV programs are analyzed to discover how much violence is propagated through the medium. Both verbal suggestions of violence and pictorial incidences can be coded into predefined categories. If one assumes that one can perceive objective reality in society, content analysis helps us evaluate the extent to which TV messages portray social reality. Recent studies on sex and violence in TV programming have done much to influence this argument.

Though content analysis can provide insights into the cultural "meaning" of televised messages, this methodology possesses certain inherent limitations. First, it most often deals with only the manifest content of the messages--the obvious audio and the obvious video. Because words do contain meaning, the world can be constructed symbolically with words. Usually, it is the combination of words into phrases, clauses or sentences which make up the entity of the message with meaning. The meaning of such a "text," made up solely of constructed verbal messages, does not constitute the message in its entirety in an audio-visual communication process.

Often the meaning of the message is carried not merely by the words; it can be influenced by vocal talents, gestures and other body language. These include some literary and histrionic devices--the similes, the metaphors, the bits of irony, the raised eyebrows or the subtle intonations--which may contradict what the words alone seem to convey. Marc Antony's speech in Julius Caesar, for example, aroused citizens to action, even though the printed words we read seem to flatter Brutus.

These are some of the ingredients of what might be called the "latent" content in the messages. And equivalent devices exist in the "video language," a point which will be expanded later.

Suffice for now to say the most common content analyses frequently miss such intricate aspects of the communication process and concentrate only on the meaning that lies on the surface. In short, there is a need to go beyond the semantics of the verbal contents of the message, and to study syntactical aspects of the messages, both the aural and visual. This direction to move beyond the manifest meaning and towards latent meaning has already been pointed out by Berelson in his seminal study on content analysis (1952, p. 25) and by Fiske and Hartley in their study on television (1978, p. 21).

These authors suggest that semiotics can provide a valuable method with which to study the meaning contained within a given message. It can help us understand the rules of internal organization and the conventions of the printed as well as audio-visual messages.

The intention of this study, then, is to complement existing empirical studies by critical analysis of the unique qualities of the

television medium. This is not to suggest that content analysis be replaced by semiotics, but only to indicate that though content analysis is a useful method, it is not wholly sufficient for an audio-visual art form like television. Semiotics can be seen as a method (often termed science) to study messages as systems of signs. It regards languages (like English) as made up of signs (which are words). The meaning of such a language, or a system of signs, is generated through the interrelationships between the signs. Thus a system of signs means that a set of signs can be combined together in a particular order to construct a message for communication.

This notion of a "system of signs," or "languages," will be explained later. Semiotics, when applied to an audio-visual form of communication like television, considers a given program or group of programs as "text." It means that the program under study (text) consists of different kinds of signs and that these signs are organized in a particular manner which is characteristic of "television texts," or a language of television.

Thus semiotics provides a way of analyzing the parts of the message other than the usual methods of content analysis. In addition, it studies structures (paradigms, syntagms--see glossary), which offer clues as to how these signs are used to construct the given message.

#### Purpose of the Study

This study is meant to define some terms of semiotics, which may be applied to the analysis of the aesthetic and structural properties of television message. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To provide a basis for semiotic analysis by taking a genre approach to TV programs.

2. To define a set of terms for TV semiotics by regarding TV as a language, a system of expressions. These terms include Peirce's semiotic definitions of signs (icons, indexes, and symbols) and semiological concepts of paradigms and syntagms.

3. To consider space and time on television in terms of their semiotic significance. This study will attempt to explain how television uses/manipulates space and time on the screen and subsequently the significance of such articulations of space and time. This researcher has found no existing study of space and time in TV semiotics.

4. To discuss briefly the possibilities of applying the semiotic analysis to domestic and situation comedies and soap opera, typical genres of American TV.

### Glossary of Terms

We are defining a number of terms to be employed in this study. These terms are based on the vocabulary of structural linguistics. An attempt is made here to explain these terms in order to help the reader get familiar with the terminology used in the following discussions. Most of the terms have been appropriately modified for the plastic art medium of television. Their meanings, therefore, may differ slightly from their linguistic counterparts.

Formula: a conventional system for structuring cultural products. A simple, universal story form that can be repeated in a

number of programs, e.g., a boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy finds girl again.

Genre: a broadbased cultural story form that is found in a number of programs which share visual imagery and recurrent narrative. A genre evokes a cultural myth. Genre conventions indicate cultural conventions. A given genre may use one or more formulas in its story line, but it will always invoke the same myth. Westerns, detective stories and gangster films are some examples of genres.

Myth: a tale, a concept or an idea that people believe to be true. It is not necessarily a lie. It may have some historic truth distorted in a mythical form, e.g., the myth of a superman, the myth of a Camelot, the myth of a unicorn.

Self-reflexivity: when a given program makes references to its own genre, its own cultural context, e.g., a situation comedy that is set in the Korean War, M\*A\*S\*H, refers to the problems of war, the roots of our behavior which lead to such wars, etc.

Intertextuality: when a given program comments upon or makes a reference to another kind of genre, a different cultural context. If, for example, the characters in M\*A\*S\*H enact a soap-opera as part of their program, this is the device of intertextuality.

Semiotics: the science of signs. It considers everything under study as a sign, of one kind or another. Semiotics draws from the work of Peirce, an American behaviorist. The trichotomic concept of signs: iconic, symbolic and indexical, is used in semiotics.

Semiology: also the science of signs. The term "semiology" is used by French scholars and emphasizes the social meaning of signs.

It is based on the work of the Swiss linguist de Saussure. Semiology uses the concept of the signifier and the signified (see Appendix). It also uses the structural concepts of syntagms and paradigms.

Despite their wide and often synonymous use, semiology and semiotics are entirely different approaches based on different philosophical foundations. The actual process of their interaction or the choice of terms is part of an extensive argument; hence, it is not discussed here.

Sign: a sign is something that stands for something or somebody in some respects or capacity. A sign has three aspects, iconic, symbolic and indexical, which may be co-existent.

Iconic sign: an iconic sign offers some physical resemblance to the object it represents, e.g., a painting, a photograph of a person or a statue.

Symbolic sign: symbols do not physically resemble the object or concept they represent. Instead we are forced to attach meaning to the symbol through conventions, e.g., the word "elephant" is not an elephant. It is not a "tree" either because all of us agree on what it means. All words are symbolic signs.

Indexical sign: an index is a sign that has an existential bond between itself and its object/referent, e.g., a tennis racket is an index of the game of tennis. Smoke is an index of fire. Temperature is an index of heat.

Paradigm/paradigmatic relationship/paradigmatic category  
(similar terms): a paradigm involves association of selective signs/

images in a syntagm because of their similarity with each other or because of their common context.

Each image/sign in a paradigm is present by virtue of a choice in its favor against a number of possible choices/alternatives. The signs we associate for the purpose of analysis are in a paradigmatic relationship, while the signs included in possible choices are in a paradigmatic category.

Consider a restaurant menu. The categories of available items like appetizers, meat, seafood, drinks, dessert are paradigmatic. Each is a paradigm. The actual choice in your dish, that of tomato juice, beef, shrimp, coffee and custard are in a syntagmatic relationship.

Syntagm/syntagmatic relationship/syntagmatic category (similar terms): a syntagm involves combination of signs on the TV screen in successive images, provided that such a segment/sequence of that program is autonomous in meaning and contributes to the overall meaning of the program. The different shots/images in a syntagm have a syntagmatic relationship with each other. The meaning of each image derives from what it follows and what it precedes. If each image in a syntagm can be considered as independent, all such images are supposed to be classified into a syntagmatic category.

Code: any arrangement of signs which by its very nature carries a certain meaning. It is also the learned association of signs that carry meaning. There is a code of dress; with every culture that code is different. The traffic signals on highways are also codes. This term is not directly used in this study and its actual meaning varies

in the case of each study. A code, in cinematic terms, is that association of images/signs, which by consistent repetition carries a meaning that may or may not be specific to the medium.

Text: this term, too, is not used in the current study. A text is any given program or a group of programs (texts) which are amenable to semiotic analysis. Text is any message that purports to carry meaning.

A shot: for practical purposes, the basic component of a syntagm, a visual presentation between two transitions (cuts, dissolves, wipes, etc.).

Synchronic level: the socially significant, contemporarily related level of meaning.

Diachronic level: historically significant, the evolution of meaning.

Narrative time: time constructed between and among the images used in the narrative. It involves actual, mathematical distinctions between time segments, e.g., in a given sequence of a car chase the time of chasing is less if the cutting is quick, showing rapid progression of time than if the same chase is intercut with a slow moving sequence showing a murderer approaching a girl before the hero comes to her rescue. The construction of time in these sequences is narrative time.

Semiotic time: the significance of all temporal transitions/frameworks, taking into consideration the changes in the use of time in each segment in relation to a general/common frame of time

employed/constructed during the entire program. For example, a certain program may span over the entire life of a person, but will highlight only a few incidents, sum up some years of his life, and show a few years in the form of rapid transitions. In semiotic terms, the time given to a certain incident in that person's life has a significance in relation to the whole span of life available to the producer for picturization.

Narrative space: it is the space represented on the screen-stage, both within the frame and outside the frame, the latter being suggested through editing of shots.

Semiotic space: it is the significance of all spatial representations. It also indicates the use of space as a construction device in the program.

#### Television Aesthetics: Genres

There is a new trend in the criticism of television as a popular art form. This approach considers TV as a distinct art form that has come into being after other art forms like painting, photography, theatre and film. Like these media/art forms, television also possesses both aesthetic capabilities and limitations. Denying one common belief that television is merely a vehicle for other media and does not have any aesthetics of its own, this new approach concentrates precisely on TV's contributions to the popular arts which make them so pervasive in our society.

The idea that popular arts can have an aesthetics of their own was first stated by Kaplan (1966, pp. 352-64). He contends that

simplicity and stylization are the two basic ground rules for popular arts aesthetics. It is by means of these fundamentals that the formal nature of any given medium is most readily understood by the audiences. Television's vast audiences reflect the common appeal inherent in its stylized program types and in the simplicity with which they are presented.

A repetitive use of simple aesthetic conventions and their stylization is manifested in what Kaplan calls a "formula." Cawelti expands the basic term when he defines formula as a "conventional system for structuring cultural products" (Newcomb, 1974, p. 22). It is a combination or a synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a universal story form. Consider John Ford's The Searchers. It conveys the story of a young girl in despair who has been taken far away from her village. John Wayne, the hero of the story, takes it upon himself to liberate her and fights against all the odds to bring her back to the village. He thus fights to help others regain their freedom. Put briefly, this is the formula used in many American films from Stagecoach to Star Wars; Casablanca gave us another formula, that of a shrewd, clever con man who falls in love with a girl. In a reversal of character, he gives up everything as he becomes kind, sympathetic and generous to her in order to preserve her best interests even at the possible sacrifice of his own.

One universal story line, then, can be used in many situations simply by couching it in different contexts. The conventional formula of manifest destiny can be the basis for a war film, adventure film or

a science fiction film. The construction and resolution of the formula is stylized through repetitive use of the fundamental message. Such simple and standardized products of popular arts are not to be belittled, but should be studied critically at least on the grounds that they bring a massive audience into direct contact with a particular way of organizing the content. Television, therefore, should be approached as a formulaic medium with conventions which guide its aesthetics (Newcomb 1974, p. 22).

In his work on formulaic TV, Newcomb proposes a study of comedies, adventure shows, mysteries and westerns as employing formulas which have stabilized cultural conventions on American television. The TV formulas provide links to programs and serials which share a number of cultural conventions among themselves. Understanding the commonalities of these formulas is a key to understanding television itself.

Formulas exist in different cultural situations with different cultural environments: the formula is presented with program conventions specific to that culture. In one culture the individual wins over man-made material obstructions, whereas in another he pursues his fight against supernatural, insurmountable problems like drought, disasters, etc. Also, formulas within programs are likely to be presented differently at different times in the history of a medium in its society. What we perceive here are groups of programs with formulas presented in a cultural context which possesses a certain significance for society.

A more definitive concept is, therefore, that of a genre. Genres are repetitive program formulas showing a culturally accepted

way of organizing material into distinct patterns. Whereas a formula offers a simplistic picture or a story line, genre suggests a specific frame of reference, with a cultural significance. The formula "boy meets girl" can be used in mystery, adventure or situation comedy. The story line suggesting "manifest destiny" may be used in westerns, adventure shows or the science fiction genre. Formula is a much more basic, simplistic presentation of stories. Genres suggest possible variations of formulas while retaining an overall cultural frame. Genres often exhibit distinguishable features; e.g., westerns are distinguishable from adventure shows, or mysteries and comedies. Each genre brings a distinct context within itself.

Genres have a formal and thematic unity common to a group of programs. Most often, they are presented with repetitive techniques of narrative, and have a continuous frame or "universe" within which that narrative takes place. A western is presented with similar locations, similar dresses and decors and has only a few types of characters who become the heroes and the villains. A domestic comedy always takes place within a house, most often in a living room and a kitchen, and involves the same characters who constitute a family. We discover a "genre" within a number of programs when we find a recurring pattern of organization and presentation of content.

This is close to the idea of sub-genres, which are particular variations within a genre. Westerns, for example, were set both in undefined time and in a specific historical context related to a real event. The crime series or detective series on TV underwent transformations from Sherlock Holmes and Perry Mason to group detectives or

even police squads, all of which essentially symbolize the fight against deviant or anti-social elements and preserve the peaceful foundations of a society. In this study, we will approach a group of programs as a genre because they consist of common imagery, and similar structural patterns.

A genre is a product of continuous interaction between the medium and the culture, as it is constantly changing and developing during the process of its evolution. Genres are therefore judged as universal movements; they are not rigid categories in themselves. Genres change and their limits are the limits of the arts themselves. This has been well illustrated by Northrop Frye's (1957) literary criticism. Frye argues that genres embody certain basic structures, which he calls archetypes, and which are common to all genres. These basic structures are universally observed. They are certain categories imposed on literary works that help us to understand them in large cultural contexts. The purpose of generic criticism, Frye says, is not so much to classify as to clarify "traditions, affinities, relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no contexts established for them" (Frye, 1957, pp. 247-48).

Our method of approaching genres as universal and flexible movements of art forms creates a framework that can be extended to the entire medium. According to this view, series are genres in both conceptual and structural terms. A new series that apparently does not belong to a specific genre will find it difficult to deviate from the set trends to the degree that it can cause appreciable shifts in the

perception of audiences. Consider a new situation comedy that is different from The Jeffersons, Taxi or Love Boat to the extent that it brings a radically different cultural context and characterization of personalities to the minds of the audiences: a comedy on Japanese family environment, for example. The relationships between parents and children and the place of family in individuals' lives will bring a different world into the viewers' minds, and they may assimilate the new "culture" only after a long exposure. This is an extreme case, however. But imagine a new series on police, in which the police themselves have gone berserk, becoming anti-social and adding to the disorder in society. In such a case, the new series is judged by comparing it with the old genres and the set patterns of cultural myths. It may establish itself as another genre with an apparently distinct mythology but this will take some time. Thus a medium like television that structures its content predominantly in genres will find it difficult to alter the conventions radically. Change comes in small degrees, to be perceived only after some time.

Another important characteristic of the genre approach to the study of the medium is the property of self-reflexivity. When a message reflects upon its own context or refers to its own generic qualities or attributes, that device is called self-reflexivity of genres. Mel Brooks' Blazing Saddles is a self-reflexive film, a western which satirizes westerns. It comments upon a genre by setting the story in the same mythical time with typical western characters. Godard's Breathless (Bout de Souffle) was a comment upon a gangster genre. Though it had the elements of crime and love as in any

Humphrey Bogart film, this film commented upon the influence of the gangster genre on French youth. It is often called a "generational" film, since it so intensely revolved around the conflicts and dramas of a younger generation under the influence of foreign gangster myth. Self-reflexivity is intentional, quite purposive, because self-references in a narrative add to the significance of the genre.

There is, however, an important condition for self-reflexivity, i.e., the reference must be made within the context of the same genre. If a reference is made to another genre having a different context, then that device is called intertextuality. Parody or metaphors can be constructed in this manner. If, for example, we see a parody of soap-opera characters in Three's Company, which is a situation comedy, we observe a relationship of intertextuality. The violence in Hill Street Blues can be considered as a metaphorical expression of "crises" in individuals' lives. It is also possible that these constructions may exhibit both the qualities of self-reflexivity and intertextuality at different levels. For example, a satire on westerns (e.g., Blazing Saddles) can make references to the western genre, but it may also refer to the contemporary comedy genre.

We have seen that a genre approach includes discovering a formal and thematic unity or continuity in a group of programs. This means that programs within a genre share visual imagery, literary style, spatial characteristics and so on. A detailed discussion of these aspects will follow in the next chapter. These similarities are what Newcomb calls the "intensifiers of meaning" (Himmelstein, 1981, p. 92).

Conventions or rules of a group of programs are established over a period of time when the audience conceives these programs as a genre. The basic perceptual and cognitive clues are provided by the similarities in the patterns. They create an identifiable universe of experience in TV viewing. Each genre creates its own universe; the variations occurring within a genre serve largely to reinforce the sameness and recurring experience. In the following paragraphs we will see how an uncritical participation in the spatio-temporal narrative of a genre amounts to creation of a mythological experience for the TV viewer.

Genres share similar imagery, setting and themes, but they also embody contradictions and conflicts from which they derive their dramatic content. In westerns, the gunfighter is opposed to homesteaders, a contrast showing individual independence versus social domesticity (Wright, 1975, p. 23). Situation comedies or soap operas center around basic social conflicts, e.g., rich versus poor, able versus lazy and happy versus unhappy characters. These contradictions and conflicts are basic to the structures of any genre, especially when they are perceived as widely accepted socio-cultural phenomena. As Wright also points out, the fundamental archetypal struggles between the villain and the hero, and between man and nature, are crucial conceptual patterns of the genres.

The "contradictions" mentioned above can be seen as oppositions or pairs of contradictory qualities/themes. Any plot is usually constructed by introducing a conflict between such oppositions (as good guys versus bad guys), but resolution of a conflict (again a

matter of plotting) in a repetitious manner belongs to the ritualistic content of a genre, far and above the content of any single plot. Naturally, if audiences are used to enjoying the repetitious resolutions of such conflicts, it would indicate that they have accepted the process and manner of these resolutions. In other words, these oppositions or contradictions are uncritically accepted by the audiences. This leads us to consider the experience of viewing programs in a genre as amounting to a ritual which indirectly celebrates and reaffirms the moral and social values presented on the screen.

Participation in a ritual is considered to be an ordinary, simplified process of accepting and believing in a myth. In fact, claims have already been made about the status of a genre as a "form of cultural ritual and as a contemporary myth" (Schatz 1977, p. 305). Genres on television present a unique conceptual system which simplify the overwhelming complexities and bring them within manageable reach. This view is supported by Carpenter (1969, p. 251) who contends that the dramatic form of ritualization (resolutions between oppositions and of conflicts) has become important to the aesthetics of television.

Gerbner and Gross, in their continuing study on TV violence, have made claims about the ritualistic nature of TV programs. They suggest that the messages on TV comprise a system of "cultural indicators"; i.e., the repeated violence on TV programs amounts to symbolic socialization and control which is enforced through common

rituals and mythologies. The patterns of TV, since they do not strive for originality, are efficacious as pure rituals. Gerbner and Gross relate the ritualistic programs to the consciousness of the audiences.

Television is likely to remain for a long time the chief source of repetitive and ritualized symbol system cultivating the common consciousness of the most far flung and heterogeneous mass publics in history.

(Gerbner, Gross, 1976, p. 341)

This brings us to a "ritual view of communication" which is called "the creation, representation and celebration of shared beliefs" (Carey, 1975, p. 177). Various supportive studies on the ritualistic nature of genres exist. Schatz's (1977, p. 306) study argues that genres resolve the tensions of cultural and social paradoxes. Kaminsky (1979, p. 4) says that genre films and television have to a great extent replaced more formal versions of our mythic response. Genres reflect our contemporary mythologies.

Genres create a "reality" of their own. We enter into a spatio-temporal universe, as it were. This ritualistic experience of uncritical participation reaffirms the mythology of genres. The task here is to probe into the ways in which this mythical universe is structured and conveyed to a mass audience.

The methods to be used in this study are those of semiotics. It has been suggested by McArthur (1972, p. 20) that genres are a priori province of semiotic studies, though in principle, semiotics can be applied even to individual programs. The foregoing discussion forms a theoretical framework for approaching the medium by way of genre criticism and also to prepare grounds for semiotic analysis, a method which has so far been extensively used in linguistics.

It is the concept of conventions that brings genres and language together. Genres come into being after a repetitive use of certain themes or techniques in a group of like programs. Once conceived, these conventions virtually condition the form of genres. The existence of language is similarly dependent on the conventions of its use. Any language exhibits recurrent rules of organization and stylization of content which are reinforced through its use. If we regard genres as a form of expression in television language, we can apply the terms and structures of semiotics to genres in order to understand the structure or patterns of organization of messages in that language system.

#### Television as a Language

Television provides a visual language system and therefore lends itself to semiotic studies. But before we see how TV is conceived as a language, it is necessary to find out how semiotics can be considered for another language system, that of cinema.

Cinesemiotics was advocated as a theory by Christian Metz (1974). He said that a prominent film genre became established around the 1930s. This one "film genre" was in effect a combination of many kinds of films like war movies, comedies, musicals or western films. The reason why he considered all these films as comprising one genre was his observation that all of them dealt with simple story telling, where stories had a beginning, a middle and an end. This kind of cinema became dominant in comparison with other films made specifically for audiences knowledgeable about and

concerned with cine-aesthetics. The Italian neorealist films or other "slice-of-life" stories did not attract large audiences as did the narrative film genre (the one that Metz was studying). Metz's purpose was to concentrate on a dominant kind of cinema that attracted large audiences to movie houses. He was faced with a question: Why are these narrative feature films, despite their complex way of constructing images, understood so well by the people? In other words, he proposed that since so many people understand these films without any conscious knowledge of film grammar, there must be what he called "an underlying pattern of intelligibility" in all these films.

Metz drew a parallel between language and film. Based on the principles of de Saussure's structural linguistics, he restated the fact that a language is made up of a few basic units like alphabets and words. The basic part of the language remains reasonably constant. Construction of a sentence indicates a disciplined arrangement of words. The basic mechanism of using a language is constructing a syntax, an arrangement of words into phrases, clauses and sentences.

However, when we use oral language, we also add gestures, intonation and expressions of many kinds. Thus a "language" is transformed into "speech." The former is a mechanistic expression; the latter expands it into a culturally significant expression. Speech includes social manners and a variety of aspects of its specific cultural environment. This explains why the English language and its use is different in Great Britain and America. What we confront in

our daily lives and in mass media is "speech," which is much more than the mechanistic expression of a language.

Film, like language, possesses certain basic means of expressions: images, sound, cuts, dissolves, a story line, etc. A filmmaker uses these means in many combinations to make this film. We "read" the film the way it is presented to us, and the film "speaks" through whatever means it has at its disposal. It is not a language like English or French, but film possesses language of its own kind. Metz points out: We understand a film not because we have a knowledge of its system; rather we achieve an understanding of its system because we understand the film. In his own words, "It is not because the cinema is language that it can tell such fine stories, but rather it has become language because it has told such fine stories" (Metz, 1974, p. 47).

If we compare the film to speech we may be closer to knowing the "film language." Semiotics was used to study the principles and structures of underlying intelligibility. People who speak a language understand its structure by using the language. Similarly, Metz said, those who understand the film follow its intricate structures. This was, in brief, Metz's argument about film semiotics. We need to establish a limited but valid comparison between language and television.

By "language" we mean an orderly manner of applying symbols to communicate meanings. Any form of expression is a language if it uses symbols according to its accepted rules. Visual imagery, painting,

photography, print are all languages because each observes a sequence of symbols which carry particular meanings within that language.

Language is a limited instrument to express and store all the human experience. This is essential for communication, but in the process, a different reality is constructed. Our experience is mediated through language at least to the extent of the limitations inherent within that language. It is impossible to communicate the whole or the absolute experience, and so language provides an "edited" version of that experience.

Similarly, if visual imagery is also a kind of language, it must possess certain limitations in expressing the reality of experience. All visual media have their own rules of organization. Language functions according to the rules of its grammar, a fact which imposes a certain discipline on its common use. We risk failure in communicating with language if its grammatical rules are not observed. Similarly, visual media ought to have their rules of composition and succession. Learning the language of visual media is to become acquainted with its rules of internal organization.

To summarize the concept of language, we may say that the instrument (or medium) of communication that can mediate reality by observing certain intrinsic laws of organization and by becoming aware of its inherent limitations in conveying the total, absolute reality is a language itself.

The visual media languages have evolved progressively over the years. Theatre, radio (which combined the technologies of telephone

and telegraph to communicate over distance), film, and television are coexistent today, but each medium followed another in its process of evolution as a language. And so we must briefly review the concept of how these media languages have succeeded each other.

It can be seen that we have continuously improved over the previous media by inventing new media. Oral communication was followed by print communication (we could communicate over space and time by using print medium). When radio came, we essentially used speech to communicate instantaneously over space. At this stage, we realized what print could do and what it could not. Radio had an advantage over print in making communication personal; the stress was on auditory senses rather than visual. Similarly, when film came, we realize that theatre was unable to present "reality" by manipulating space and time as easily as film. When a new medium came into being, it used the old one for its growth. The old one realized its limitations in the light of the advantages of the new medium. Thus the old medium tried to use its limited capabilities in varying ways to compete with the new medium.

This was essentially McLuhan's (1964) idea of rear-view mirrorism. He contended that we see the old medium in the new medium much as we see the path already travelled in the rear-view mirror. This concept is important if we have to study a medium like television which has superseded radio, theatre and film.

We know that print, visual and audio media complement each other's capabilities to mediate reality. McLuhan (1964) pointed out

that we often use a hybrid of many media in communication. Television enjoys a unique place in the history of media in that it offers visual, verbal and other auditory aspects which give it some distinct advantages over older media in terms of communication over space and time. Thus some of the methods (semiotics) used to study the language predecessors of television can be applied to TV itself.

### Review of Television Semiotics

Semiotics has not been systematically applied to television. Its applications to films are varied, however, often combining semiotic and semiological approaches. But none of the works on film semiotics can be directly applied to television because of conflicting concepts in semiotics and semiology (see Appendix) and also due to increasing reliance on the methods of structural linguistics. TV semiotics needs to have its own foundations, with due importance paid to the aesthetic qualities of the medium itself. The following review of TV semiotics is an attempt to sketch out the earlier efforts in a chronological order.

Umberto Eco, himself a leading semiotician, outlines a possible methodological inquiry into television message (1972, pp. 103-21). He uses semiological premises to argue for TV semiotics. His work deals with methodological problems but not with the applications of these methods to television. His study can be summarized as follows:

If communication is a process between the sender and the receiver, a message is conveyed in that process by presupposing a code common to both participants. The concept of code incorporates spoken

and written languages, non-verbal and visual messages. Eco defines the TV message as a system composed of signs entailing two kinds of codes: the iconic code and the linguistic code. Signs making up these codes convey meanings in syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships; i.e., the iconic messages are related to each other in the order that they are presented (syntagmatic) and by individual contexts that these images communicate with (paradigmatic).

Based on semiological definition, a sign has two aspects, the signifier and the signified. The former is the object-sign (photographic image, for example) and the latter is the concept (the image of soldier signifies army, strength, courage, etc.). Semiologists argue that "signified" is a culturally determined meaning in communication. It is this meaning that is more important in semiology, as Eco suggests. Given these definitions, he proceeds to prepare a three-phased research program (p. 100) which is a direct contribution to semiotics in terms of methodology but it has not yet been applied to television; perhaps because it also has some drawbacks.

The first phase, according to Eco, is to define such terms as "codes," "texts," and "levels of meaning" (denotation and connotation). Once a semiotician applies these terms to a given program he can follow the second phase of testing the meanings of these terms with a sample audience. The purpose is to follow only those concepts which are widely accepted among the viewers and change those terms which a semiotician finds are not accepted by the viewers. This phase is called field research. In the third and final phase, Eco suggests, a

semiotician has to make appropriate modifications in his concepts and apply them to a large number of TV programs.

Eco uses field research to overcome the problems of positivism (the assumption that the reality in the viewers' minds corresponds exactly to the one in the analyst's mind). He believes that three-phase research can give us the correct meanings of terms and their categories.

The problem in Eco's phased research lies in defining a set of terms beforehand which the common viewers are not aware of. Essentially, therefore, field research would be a test of the preconceptions in the analyst's mind rather than the discovery of an actual "code" that works through the process of communication. We are arguing that the message is constructed through aesthetic and cinematic techniques of the medium. The meaning of the message is a function of how that message is constructed and it is not defined only by the consciousness of the viewers as Eco believes.

The next study in TV semiotics comes from Teresa de Lauretis (1979, pp. 97-117). Her work is descriptive and semiological in character. In her analysis of Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author, she translates the syntagmatic and paradigmatic categories into self-reflexivity and intertextuality, respectively.

Self-reflexivity, she says, includes a deliberate choice and use of social codes and genre conventions in a TV message. In soap-operas, for example, the values of fidelity are tied in with wealth and social status of the individuals. Unfaithfulness is considered as a consequence of loss of wealth or failure of a person in society.

The values of love go hand in hand with those of money and power. The conflicts are routinized and they reinforce their acceptance through repetition. De Lauretis further states that intertextuality, on the other hand, associates two apparently different texts together. If we regard any medium as a "text," a language with some meaning, then two such texts are brought together to construct reality and also to convey meaning. To illustrate this point, we may consider Michelangelo Antonioni's Blow Up, which deals with a crisis in a photographer's life about the thin dividing line between illusion and reality. Antonioni is comparing and contrasting the two media of film and photography to say that the reality presented in both these media is, in fact, an illusion.

Thus Antonioni brings two different contexts together to make his point. Similarly, de Lauretis says that in soap opera the cultural values (of friendship, loyalty, love) are presented along with equal emphasis on material wealth, social customs and strength of social institutions (like marriage, family). These inclusions, she argues, are deliberate in order to use TV as an ideological apparatus.

De Lauretis's analysis is too brief and deals only with soap-opera. Moreover, she does not provide a set of terms which can be applied to different TV programs.

A comprehensive study on TV semiotics has been done by Fiske and Hartley (1978). They argue that television is a cultural bard of the society, invoking popular myths in society. TV, according to them, performs a bardic function of preserving and celebrating the culture and participates in a social ritual.

The merits of Fiske and Hartley's work lies in their particular attention to TV medium. They define and employ a number of terms like syntagms, paradigms, the signified and the signifier (see Appendix). They do not consider aesthetic qualities of the medium (especially space and time) as important in determining the expression of a message.

Most of the studies done to date on television are semiological in their approach, though these terms are used almost synonymously (see Appendix). A significant attempt to apply semiotics to American TV programs has been done by Kellner (1980). A few relevant ideas from his work will be mentioned here.

Iconic images, Kellner says, are pictorial, stylized cultural forms. Icons are culturally important. The Statue of Liberty and the cross of Jesus Christ are icons, whereas photographs of a boy or a flower are not, because the former have a cultural meaning and a historic significance behind them. The latter do not, since they are too generic to be icons.

It is clear that Kellner's definitions are different from those of semiotics or semiology. He further states that symbols are holistic constructs of iconic images. Iconic images are dialectically related to symbolic images. A Hindu temple is a symbolic construct, made up of a number of significant icons. Each icon contributes to the meaning of the whole, which is greater than the sum of its parts.

Kellner extends this idea to TV imagery. A soap opera, he says, is a symbol. It is a "culture" in itself, made up of icons of

love, wealth, social status, success in an individual's career, etc. It is because of such a unique way of constructing symbols that TV becomes a medium propagating the values of culture.

Kellner, as we have seen, uses different concepts from those of semiotics or semiology. His idea of icons indicates something specific (the icon of Joan of Arc) which is static. This terminology can be misleading in a study of semiotics.

The most recent study on TV semiotics in general has been done by Arthur Asa Berger (1981, pp. 91-192). He provides a set of definitions which could be applicable to TV. However, he uses Propp's Morphology to analyze TV programs. His study, therefore, is a structural analysis (in terms of "structuralism") and thus not useful for our purpose.

### Significance of the Study

The genre approach to TV programs creates a possibility of incorporating all kinds of programs on TV, since the medium conventionalizes the presentation of its content. An individual program, therefore, need not be studied in isolation, but from the point of view of its similarity/difference/continuity in relation to other programs of similar kind.

Semiotics will provide a method to complement the studies of content analysis by inquiring into the patterns or structures of organization of content in TV programs. The different aspects of signs indicate how reality is mediated to us through sign-communication.

More importantly, we are considering the use of space and time on television as an important factor in semiotic studies of the medium. The variables of space and time are used as structural devices in plastic arts like film and television. Their study will be essential for the understanding of the most widely spread medium.

Finally, semiotics is a way of studying structures and signs of language system. Television is only one of the modern language systems like film, photography and advertising. The approaches of semiotics will provide a foundation to analyze these media at a later date.

#### Delimitations of the Study

Semiotics embodies a different approach to the understanding of television. Its methods lead to a posteriori criticism. Semiotics cannot suggest any prescriptive characteristics for the structures of TV programs.

Our approach is restricted to an aesthetic study of the medium. We believe that semiotics cannot provide any causal relationship between the signs, structures and the so-called "effects" of television.

Also, this study is limited to TV's role as a creative medium. It cannot be applied to television when it is used as a vehicle of transmission for other media like film. Such an investigation lies outside the scope of this particular thesis.

## CHAPTER II

### SIGNS AND STRUCTURES OF TELEVISION

#### Signs of Television

Semiotics, simply defined, is the science of signs, how they work and the ways in which we use them. The central concerns of semiotics may be stated in simple terms. First, the relationship between a sign and its meaning, and secondly, the way signs are combined with each other to construct messages. We will define the kinds of signs which are used in television communication and then make an attempt to sketch out the structural combinations of these signs.

According to Peirce, who first developed semiotics, a sign is "something that stands for something in some respects or capacity" (Eco, 1975, p. 15). In other words, representation of reality requires mediation by some kind of sign. Words are our familiar signs. We communicate with words because they have acquired meanings through their common use. Signs need not be verbal; they can be visual and auditory as well. A process of communication, then, will require the use of signs in their different aspects.

Peirce's definition of sign implies a tripartite relationship between a sign, its object and its interpretant. Eco (1975, p. 15) states that every sign has all these aspects and none of these has an existence exclusive of others. Consider signs of television itself. Here we watch pictorial signs, or hear auditory signs; the objects are

non-existent on the screen, but their presence is communicated through the signs they represent. The interpretant is the "medium," the large body of producers, actors, writers, viewers and others who contribute to the production of TV programs. It is through their talents and their cultural background that they communicate with us, through the TV screen, about the reality outside our living room.

We have come to accept the TV image as a conventional reality in itself. Like other art forms, such as painting, theatre and film, television suddenly creates its own environment. "The image" of each of these media may be representing the same object, but its "interpretant" is different and hence the viewer's experience of that image is different for every medium. Our experience of the reality of the TV image occurs because of our entire experience with the medium. The viewer perceives the TV image as visually less well defined and less than life size. We cannot go into the details of the process of perception here, but it should be stressed that every sign is perceived strictly within the conventional perception of the medium by the viewer. In other words, the aesthetic qualities of media like film and television may be similar, but the aesthetic experiences derived from these media are entirely different.

Because of a tri-relative concept among a sign, its object, and interpretant, television realism becomes intrinsically subjective. Each of these three parts changes its relationship to each other; i.e., a sign interpreted by a viewer is not perceived similarly by the same viewer a second or third time. This is because it becomes part

of his perception, and can further delineate the object which the sign represents. This is to point out that viewers interact with the messages which become parts of their experiences. Also, the same sign may not be given an empirical proof to find out whether all viewers perceive a sign with the same meaning. This illustrates the ill-defined area of intersubjectivity (Fiske and Hartley, 1978, p. 46). Semiotics acknowledges this problem. The best it can do is to articulate how the process of sign-communication occurs within a particular medium.

Peirce formulated another trichotomic concept of signs (Wollen, 1969, p. 122). Signs, according to him, are divided into three categories: iconic, symbolic, and indexical. The icon signifies by resemblance, the symbol by convention and the index by organic connection.

Iconic signs show physical resemblance to the object they represent. Portraits, pictures, sculptures, and cartoons are icons. Consider a pencil sketch of a tree and a painting, a photograph and a film of the same tree. All are icons because they denote the tree by pictorial resemblance. Iconicity is therefore a matter of degree (Morris, 1964, p. 16); i.e., a given iconic sign may resemble its object to a different extent, in different degrees. Iconic signs can also be considered as spatial because of their visual or pictorial nature.

The symbol has no intrinsic relation to the object it represents, but it is a type, a model linked to the object by means of a

relationship governed by a normative convention. Symbolic signs are thus arbitrarily linked to their objects. Their meaning is forced through a law, a convention upon which there is a common agreement among the users. The word "tree" has no significance until we agree on what it means. Auditory signs are also symbolic; they arouse meaning only on the basis of a commonly held convention (Hawkes, 1977, p. 124). The symbol, according to Peirce's definition, is different from "symbol" in semiology. This is a matter of different viewpoints. Part of the explanation which is relevant to this study is provided in the Appendix.

An index is a sign by virtue of an existential bond between itself and its object/referent. Clocks and sun-dials are indexes of time. A rolling gait is an indexical sign indicating the presence of a sailor. Indexes direct "the attention to their objects by blind compulsion" (Peirce, 1936, p. 306); i.e., indexes and their objects have a kind of physical, organic, part-to-the-whole relationship, which is accepted by us because of the force of their connection. Examples: a graduated scale, a signal, a shout, a demonstrative pronoun. Wollen (1969, p. 122) suggested that technical signs like dissolves, fades, cuts, wipes and inserts can be termed as indexical signs because they are associated with spatio-temporal transitions.

The categories of icons, symbols and indexes are not mutually exclusive. Often, they coexist. A diagram can be iconic if it resembles the object, but can also be symbolic if the representation is not physical but one forced through convention; e.g., schematic

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COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATIONS

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are cordially invited to a reception

Wednesday, October 14, 1987

7:00 p.m.

Communications Auditorium

Refreshments will be served

Herbert H. Howard  
Assistant Dean for Graduate Studies  
College of Communications

\* \* \* \* \*

diagrams, graphics and maps have iconic as well as symbolic aspects. Peirce considered that the greatest perfection in a sign would be obtained where the three typical aspects (iconic, indexical, and symbolical) were "amalgamated, almost if possible, in equal proportions" (Russell, 1968, p. 10). For our purposes, it will be sufficient to identify the predominant aspects present in television communication.

Peirce's concept of trichotomic signs is important for the aesthetics of television. Let us now see how television uses these signs to communicate with its audiences.

The strength of an icon, i.e., an image that resembles the object which is part of a viewer's experience, is of great importance on television. First, TV is a visual medium. It presents us the images of "reality." What it does in fact is a mediation of reality, presenting a kind of filter between the objects and the viewers. It is necessary for us to "understand" that the images presented on the screen do have a physical existence in the form of their objects. Since we have this "belief" that icons resemble real, physical objects, the images on TV appear to be "real."

Secondly, icons on television are "transient," the images are too fleeting to have any real existence. To explain this point, let us compare a photographic icon with a TV image. A photograph, besides being a representation of an object, is a "thing;" it has a material existence. It does not quite become part of our memory, because as an object we can possess the photograph. What may be a part of our

memory is the "moment" captured in that photograph. A photographic icon is, therefore, an icon with physical existence of its own and can be seen or read in varying contexts (you can see a photograph every day, once a month, whether your feelings require you to do so). A TV image, on the other hand, has no physical existence; it merely passes before your eyes. It is true that the film image is also "transient," quite like the TV image. But as a phenomenon, a viewer has a different conception of film medium. He watches film with a purpose of watching it. He does so in a theatre and can possibly return to it after some time.

The reason we have elaborated on the "transient" quality or "temporal existence" of the TV icon is because this concept more or less governs our way of perception of the TV medium. We experience TV viewing as a temporal experience; it gains a kind of immediacy. Whether a program is a live telecast or not, a viewer experiences the iconic world as part of his world, in an ever recurring "now" of the present. In short, the TV icon brings not only the physical resemblance with the object, but also forces a certain kind of temporal connection or existence between the object and the iconic image.

The property of an indexical sign, that of indicating the whole by showing parts which have existential or organic relationships among them is also uniquely employed by the TV medium. What TV images always "refer to" is a world of images. The relationships among these images are usually established by the context of the

medium itself. Thus when we see a football player, he reminds us of the whole football game and in particular the images of that game on TV. The opening sequences of a situation or domestic comedy, which will be discussed later, are associated with the distinct world of the people or characters in these programs. Sex and violence are usually represented indexically on the TV screen. A brief sexual-anecdote, a weapon, one murder or even a small skirmish all are brought in as partial representations, but their real impact lies in the connection they can establish with the larger context.

It has been mentioned earlier that words are our most common symbols, but the concept of symbol can be applied to any sign that means almost the same to most of us. A recurring icon can then acquire symbolic value. Thus guns and knives are symbols of violence. The decor of a domestic comedy, Too Close For Comfort, indicates that it is a middle-class family. Thus symbolic need not always be verbal or auditory.

The distinctions between the three aspects of sign are thus a matter of convenience for a semiotician; they are by no means rigid definitions that can be used in TV criticism. These dimensions of signs also suggest how a given program uses a particular way of representation. A documentary on a glass factory can just be iconic. A biographic film on a political leader or a famous actress may require more narration, thus greater symbolic dimension. A fiction film on World War III could be only suggestive: The iconic cannot be highly pronounced; the symbolic or indexical would be. Sometimes we can turn

off the picture on TV and yet do not miss much. One way to put it is to say that it is like a radio. Another way is to indicate that the iconic dimension of the narrative is not very important.

### Structures of Television

Television mediates reality by using the iconic, symbolic and indexical dimensions of signs. These signs are organized in a particular manner, i.e., they are arranged in certain "structural" patterns in TV messages. These categories or structures are fundamental to the way in which any system is organized (Fiske and Hartley, 1978, p. 50). These basic structural patterns found in any TV program are called syntagms and paradigms.

A syntagm involves combination of signs to form a contiguous unit, itself conveying significance, in which each sign derives its value from what precedes and what follows (Nichols, 1976, p. 631).

A paradigm involves the range of signs that are potential substitutes for a given sign within a particular message (Nichols, 1976, p. 631). It is defined by a certain similarity between its units.

These concepts can be explained by a few examples. All letters of the alphabet comprise the category we call paradigm, just as all the meat dishes listed in a menu comprise the paradigm cited in the glossary. When the communicator makes specific choices from the paradigmatic category, then arranges these choices into a sequence, he/she has created a syntagm. If this is done according to pre-determined conventions or rules, then meaning is communicated.

The phrase "the family meal time" constitutes a syntagmatic arrangement of paradigms: the, family, meal, and time. One chooses from among the 26 letters to create each word. Then he/she chooses to arrange them in this order to convey meaning. Should he/she have chosen to arrange them in this order--time the family meal (as in "time the 100 meter race") the meaning will be quite different.

Thus the idea that choices are always available in an environment, that each has a distinct nature, a different character, and that these chosen units (words or whatever they may be) are arranged in a certain order to create meaning is important in semiotics. A semiotician sees paradigms as vertical structures--each has its own existence--and syntagms as horizontal structures, constructed to create a meaning.

Consider an image of two children leaving school. If we place it in a particular family album, it belongs to a paradigm of family members, a collection of their memories. If we use it on a poster for road safety, it becomes generalized. Now these children represent all school children. What one observes here is a paradigm change. In effect, it is a change of "context;" i.e., the group from which the choices are to be made changes. The concept of paradigm is thus specific to a certain range of choices. The image mentioned above does not represent a paradigm of all boys and girls because we have made choices for a specific purpose, from a well-defined context.

If this is how we construct paradigms, how does the viewer or a reader perceive them? In fact, it is not important to know how a paradigm is constructed; rather one should know how it may be

perceived. It is usually the amount of exposure, mental ability and perception that a viewer brings to viewing that make paradigms significant.

There are a number of domestic comedies like Father Dear Father, Father Knows Best or Too Close For Comfort. When a young girl in a certain house is watching one of these shows, the character of the father in the TV program constitutes a paradigmatic relationship with her own father or her experience of her friend's father or just any idea of a similar person. If the character of the father on TV is that of a strict, rude and tough person with no sense of humor at all, the viewer-girl is likely to compare/contrast that character with the images of fathers in mind having same/different qualities. In this way, she is creating a paradigm, a network of relationships among similar objects/images.

The concept of paradigms can be specific to media as well, as in the case of the image of children leaving school. Here, the images are read in a paradigm of family album or in a poster. The meaning of that image changes with the medium. Similarly, there can be media paradigms: If Mike Connors in Today's FBI has a crisis in his family his role as a father is presented to us. In this context, he represents the problems of his colleagues, policemen who cannot pay total attention to their family lives because of the urgency of their duties. One sees another kind of father in Too Close For Comfort, who handles petty problems in the house after a hard day's work with a few smiles and a lot of jokes. This is probably his

way to ease the tension. In both these cases, the characters mentioned represent their genre paradigms. They basically represent similar persons, in similar occupations with similar problems in different environments.

Each individual shot, too, is amenable to paradigmatic analysis. When a film maker chooses a particular shot, let us say a mid-close-up, he is consciously or otherwise choosing from among a number of other possibilities, e.g., a long shot, a close-up, a two-person shot and so on. Thus, if he chooses a certain shot, its meaning has to be considered from the point of view of selection of one shot and elimination of other choices.

Paradigms, in semiotic studies, are associative constructions, made by the semiotician for the purposes of analysis. There are problems of positivism in this approach, and a semiotician has to recognize them, conceding the fact that the subjective interpretations of paradigmatic analysis could be different in viewers' minds.

A syntagm is a visual syntax, or for our purposes, a film sentence. It is an arrangement of shots in a sequential manner to convey meanings. The successive shots combine with each other for understanding. The meaning of an individual shot derives from what precedes and what follows. A syntagm, in other words, follows some internal rules of organization.

Sol Worth (1981) called a syntagm an "image-event" (p. 11), wherein a system of organization of images helps us comprehend the meaning of the message. Metz (1964) calls it an "autonomous sequence of shots which has independent temporal existence" (p. 82).

The emphasis is on the "comprehensible" arrangement of shots without prescribing the rules that would make such comprehension possible. A language like English requires strict grammatical rules for construction of sentences. If one wants a required meaning, one has to arrange words in the prescribed manner. However, in film, a given sequence can be constructed in many ways, with different arrangements of successive shots, provided all this is comprehensible to the viewer. Film, it can be seen, has no grammar. But it is impossible to be ungrammatical in film (Monaco, 1977, pp. 142-43). It is a paradox, but it is true.

In written/spoken language systems, syntax deals with only the linear aspects of construction. A syntagm, on the other hand, can deal with spatial composition as well as temporal movement. We cannot write several things at the same time, nor can we denote many spatial qualities in single sentences, but this is possible in plastic arts like television. We will study spatio-temporal meanings of syntagms in the following chapter.

The basic unit of a sentence is a word; it is difficult to define the basic unit of a syntagm. If word is the smallest convenient unit of meaning, sufficient in itself, a shot is a complex entity. There are a few reasons why a shot cannot be compared to a word.

First, a shot, a photographic representation, is a "continuous message." It is not always a quick and definite slice of time. The image is a manifestation of a long process that goes on in film-makers' and scriptwriters' minds. It is also a manifestation of a complex process of representation, camera angles, colors, lighting

and so on. By the statements "He is angry," "He is disgusted," we achieve definite meaning (well achieved within the limitations of the language). We cannot achieve a similar effect of words like "anger" or "disgust" by single shots because each shot is a combination of messages and "continuous" in the flow of the narrative.

Second, various elements in a shot can contribute to its total meaning. It can be almost like a sentence. Consider a young woman lying motionless in her bed, her eyes closed, her clothes untidy. Next to her bed is a small table. One can see a photograph of an old man, some money, pills in a bottle and a few papers scattered around. Each sign conveys something, but all of them are in a syntagmatic relationship with each other. This shot, even if it lasts for a short time, is unlike a single word.

Third, a shot can exist in time. It can span over a considerable amount of space and may cover much action. Consider a shot that follows an angry policeman when he is trying to get hold of a suspect who is walking around in a crowd. The shot lasts for about three minutes and covers an entire chase, right from the traffic lights to the antique shop where the suspect is finally caught. This shot, too, is not comparable to a single word; in fact, in this case, it is a syntagm.

This brings us to another paradox of television's syntagm. A syntagm is an autonomous, comprehensible constituent part of the TV program, but it has no basic unit itself. There are no sharp, distinguishable break points either in a single shot or in a set of

successive shots. This paradox is strange, but it is important in the semiotics of plastic arts.

Monaco (1977, pp. 128-29) says that "any science of film would develop on one being able to define the smallest unit of construction." But he quickly points out, "The fact is that film, unlike written or spoken language, is not composed of units as such but is rather a continuum of meaning" (p. 129). Quoting Metz, he says, "Film is too intelligible, which makes it too easy to understand" (Monaco, 1977, p. 130). Thus film/TV has to be analyzed without attempting to break it down into divisible parts.

However, for practical purposes, a shot can be regarded as a basic unit of a syntagm, provided it contributes to the meaning of a syntagm. Also, a single shot is amenable to semiotic analysis. We can study the syntagmatic relationships between various signs in a shot. This has already been explained above.

In any semiotic study of television, both the syntagmatic as well as paradigmatic relationships should be studied with equal attention. A generalization can be made that syntagmatic analysis is more an aesthetic study while paradigmatic analysis is a kind of cultural/social criticism. In due time, both areas of study should develop.

It has often been emphasized here that syntagms and paradigms are structural terms. They show us a manner of organizing signs in a message. These terms are borrowed from linguistics. While they do exist in television language, there are two important variables of

space and time in television. These variables distinguish TV/film from other arts like painting and photography. Therefore, a study of space and time on television is important because our aesthetic experience of this medium is largely dependent on these variables.

## CHAPTER III

### SEMIOTICS OF SPACE AND TIME ON TELEVISION

#### The Idea of Diegesis

A plastic-art medium like television can manipulate the variables of space and time. The narrative is constructed with space and time different from the space and time of the actual physical experience of the viewer. There is a relationship between space and time in the narrative; one can be expressed by another. A travel in space is indicated by movement in time. A story spanning over somebody's entire life can be covered in two hours, compressing the time and showing rapid transitions in a person's life. A story on television can move from one place on the earth to another in a flip of time. Numerous variations are possible and these have been a subject of fascination for students of the plastic arts.

The responses of the viewer to the space and time variations in a narrative are also a subject of interest. A viewer can traverse space rapidly or cover time in a speedy manner. He almost forgets his physical existence. He becomes immersed in a spatio-temporal universe that is different from the one of his own experience. The manipulations of space and time can change viewer's emotions. A car chase, or a suspenseful murder brings a certain excitement. Sometimes the time on the screen "runs fast," sometimes it "drags on." There are, again, numerous psychological studies regarding how to control people's responses and how to study them. For our purposes, it is necessary to

note that viewers respond to a metaphysical world on the screen by believing it to be real. Their responses, emotions or reactions, all can be learned in the way a narrative uses space and time to construct its message.

This process in which a viewer feels happy, gets tense or reacts nervously is a hypothetical process, not a verifiable experience. It is an abstract process of "entering" another spatio-temporal universe, of expressing a metaphysical reality. This process, an abstraction, a hypothetical realm between the narrative and the viewer's mind is called diegesis. The experience is said to be diegetic in nature. This is a convenient semiotic idea which attempts to articulate how a medium constructs an experience of reality and how a viewer comes to perceive it. The spatio-temporal variations are part of the diegesis. The significance of all signs, the perception of syntagms and paradigms, are all parts of the diegetic process. Diegesis can also be seen as the sum of all "semiotic experiences," the structures of which are explained by a semiotician.

Both space and time are experienced in the diegetic process according to how they are used in the narrative. It would be appropriate to study the actual variations of time and space in a narrative and then study their significance. Diegetic time is what a viewer experiences. It has two subsets: narrative time which indicates how time is used in narrative and semiotic time which shows what these variations in narrative time mean. Similarly, the term narrative space indicates how space is actually represented on the screen. A second subset of

diegetic space is semiotic space, which indicates the significance of narrative space. These concepts will be explained in the process of this discussion. The distinctions used here are only for methodological purposes, though existing studies employ these terms (Nichols, 1981, p. 8 and Heath, 1981, p. 27).

### Narrative Time

Narrative time is defined as a framework of temporal relationships bound together by the techniques of editing and cutting. These relationships are in a mathematical mode and can be studied in isolated segments/sequences/shots. A movement of time (forward or backward) can be measured or perceived; a distinction between two different temporal references can be drawn. Time may move fast between and within two sequences or it may just be stationary. These temporal transitions can be explained by using Burch's (Burch, 1973, p. 9) concepts.

Burch has proposed five types of temporal articulations between two shots.

1. The two shots may be absolutely continuous. Although the term "straight match-cut" refers more to spatial continuity, it is also another example of temporal continuity; for example, two shots between interviewer and interviewee are continuous.

2. A second possible type involves the presence of a gap between them, constituting what might be called a temporal ellipsis or time abridgement. This involves an omission of a time-span that is not only perceptible, but measurable as well; e.g., consider a

person being followed by police, who enters into the elevator and is immediately shown leaving the building.

3. A third type of temporal articulation and a second type of abridgement are possible, the indefinite ellipsis. It may cover an hour or a year, the exact amount of the temporal omission being measurable only through the aid of something "external," a line of dialogue, a title, a clock, calendar or the like. It is closely related to the iconic aspects and to the actual narrative, but it nonetheless performs a genuine temporal function.

4. A time reversal constitutes another type of possible temporal articulation. It is worth noting that time reversals, like time ellipses, are commonly used on a very small scale, involving the omission or repetition of only a few frames, as a means of preserving apparent continuity. What happens here is not a simple mental deception, but the actual deception of the eye. Godard used jump cuts in Breathless using almost similar shots, which could be a good example of time reversal. Also the actual time may be stretched into longer segments; i.e., there may not be any time elapsed between two shots; the frames may be repeated to expand the temporal context.

5. The fifth and last type of temporal articulation is the indefinite time reversal, which is analogous to the indefinite time ellipsis (e.g., flashback).

In short, these articulations relate to the following broad categories. Beyond Burch's definitions, they could be applied not only to shots, but also to syntagms.

- a. Continuous time,
- b. Time abridgement,
- c. Time reversal.

These temporal articulations do not form absolute rules. These are the broadest possible variations. In TV as in film, these rules (like the one regarding the imaginary axis) can be broken, but that does not question the validity of the rules.

### Semiotic Time

The second aspect of diegetic time has semiotic and aesthetic qualities. Most semiotic studies of film ignore this aspect, though Houston and Kinder propose a study in this direction (Houston, Kinder, 1980, pp. 345-461). They have analyzed Nicholas Roeg's The Man Who Fell to Earth, a film about an extra-terrestrial individual with high intelligence who tries to influence the world while also trying to cope with its moral and social demands. The "time" involved in that individual's struggle for economic survival through intellectual means, they say, is "economic time." Thus the time frame conveying a particular content bears a close relationship with the subject matter itself.

Based on their analysis, we suggest that the overall "time" in which the genres are framed is important in semiotic criticism beyond the mathematical distinctions of pure temporal dimension. The time in which a western is shown to exist has little historic significance; it is mythical.

The characters were created there (in westerns) not in actuality but in conception, and events took place that gave rise to a legend.

(Newcomb, 1974, p. 66).

Thus, a western has a strict temporal dimension of narrative time which can be analyzed, but the overall time of the western is frozen. This is the semiotic aspect of time, a significance in totality and synchronically important. It is this mythical realm of a western that allows for numerous variations on themes and concepts which are actually relevant to the contemporary social time.

Similarly, in a popular TV series M\*A\*S\*H, the time of the Korean War was in the minds of the viewers, awakening a historic reference. The actual variation of cinematic time in a single program matters little because the context that it fell back upon was alive in viewers' perception. Identification with that memory of war is crucial. Moreover, the background of this series, like the westerns before it, offered an excellent opportunity to comment upon contemporary situations like the Vietnam war.

Viewers experience the time of a series or genre as part of a metaphysical universe. In terms of their experience of time, it is a temporal universe. Viewers would be able to tell us that a particular program is part of a certain genre. It is true that there are various ways one can recognize a western or a gangster, but time is also an important factor. What is more significant is that time is not used as a structural or dramatic element; i.e., viewers hardly have to raise the question with curiosity: what will happen next? Generally, there is virtually no temporal progression in a given series (which

are parts of a genre). Since time is not used as a dramatic element, there is little active involvement on the part of the viewer. His diegetic responses are more or less steady to the entire temporal context of a series (a genre).

It can be argued that genres are distinct art forms which can successfully construct a convenient temporal context to lend themselves an opportunity to perform a dual role. They offer both a socially and historically relevant context for enjoyment and participation. They can safeguard themselves under this mythical reality against the claims of controversiality as they sometimes comment on the contemporary scene. For example, the detective or crime movies of the thirties reflected upon a generally unpleasant topic of the Depression.

There are thus two levels of temporal significance at work in TV genres. The first is a social synchronic level which reads time solely from the perspective of the function of that genre in a given culture. Westerns are socially stabilizing stories in the United States, reinforcing the same values and norms in that society. In a different culture (in India, for example) westerns invoke a radically different mythical world that forms the knowledge of the audience about America. The force of iconic imagery and its mythical setting make a foreign viewer accept the genre without its historical roots. For him, it is an immediate experience of the unknown.

The second level is diachronic or an historical one. Genres, as we have discussed before, may become self-reflexive; i.e., they come to refer to their own history and contexts. It is unlikely that

a genre film can fully carry its message without the presence (however low-key it may be) of a viable conception in the viewers' minds.

Thus the semiotic time is equally, if not more, significant than the narrative time. Because of the semiotics of time, we can see how the experience of time contributes to the viewers' experience of the narrative and also to a semiotician's understanding of the diegetic process.

### Narrative Space

Narrative space is defined as the space represented by the camera (or the camera-eye) on the TV screen. It consists essentially of two "kinds" of space: the space within the frame and the space outside the frame (Burch, 1973, p. 17). This is explained as follows.

Space within the frame. The space on the screen comes into the spectator's immediate knowledge. He perceives the iconic signs on the screen, arranged or represented in what can be called the screen space. The iconic image on the screen, as we have seen, is photographic in nature, but unlike a photograph it is "transient," not a "thing" in itself. A "photographic" image is one which is read in the same manner as photographs, which are the central perspective images. The vanishing point lies within the frame, beyond the two dimensions of the screen. Also, this way of recording images is very close to our natural way of looking at things--essentially from the point of view of one person at a time. The rules and conventions of spatial

composition are the same in photographic images on the screen as they would be in any other perspective image. This is what Ivins (1964, p. 108) explains by his statement: "If another system (other than that of central perspective view) were applied to photographs or to painting, one could believe that one was living in a bilingual country." In other words, the effect of adopting only one system of reading the images is that all photographic media (film, TV) will create a scenographic space, space set out as spectacle for the eye of the spectator. The vanishing point is beyond the plane of the image and thus the spectator's perception will be centered "into" the image; his experience of seeing that image will be dependent upon the qualities of that perspective view.

This point, though it appears trite on the surface, has valuable consequences for television. Olson (1966) has already argued that the same conventions of reading images are carried through painting, photography, cinema and television. It is unlikely, indeed impossible, that different conventions of reading images and in particular, the sequences of images, can be applied to cinema and television. If the conventions were different for these media, the audience would have to be trained to "read" TV differently than film.

It is the editing process that creates continuity and/or relationships between successive photographic images. This requires a discussion of concepts like "spatial continuity in match cuts or eye-line matches" (Burch, 1973, p. 9). The simplest form of such continuity can be explained in the case of a two-person interview. It is

necessary that the direction of each person's view or the "eye-line" (an imaginary line drawn in the direction the eyes are looking) suggests that they are looking at each other. Thus in two successive shots, person A may look at the right of the frame, whereas person B must look at the left of the frame. Such explanations can be numerous but for the sake of brevity we will not go into the details of such problems, rather, we will cite two important examples regarding the effect of conventions of cutting.

Consider a situation where a young lady has just been given a telegram regarding the death of her husband. She is standing at a window with curtains fluttering with the wind. We get closer to her face and in her moment of grief, she looks outside the frame (suggested in the direction of the window). The next shot looks out of the window, shows a melancholy in everything it captures. This is one example of a "point-of-view" or subjective shot, the camera becomes a person. This can be explained by another example when a person arguing with his friend suddenly looks out of the frame. The next shot shows a fist coming straight into the camera. We experience something from the point of view of the person being hit on his face.

Applying these principles to TV, let us see how an anchorperson on the network news gives us a subjective view of the news story. The anchorperson usually introduces a news story and mentions that a certain correspondent would give the details. At this time, he looks out of the frame (probably to the monitor, but this does not matter because we do not see the monitor). What follows is a correspondent who is

narrating the story by looking straight into the camera. This is undoubtedly a point-of-view shot; the correspondent is in effect talking to the anchorperson. Thus the news is not read out to the viewer, it is "mediated" through the anchorperson. This point is supported by Nichols (1981, pp. 176-77).

Also, consider the field interviews which are inserted by the correspondents. The interviewees speak with a slight angle to the camera, very rarely looking "into" the camera or facing the audience. They speak to the reporter, who then adds the bits and pieces of the news story together. The act of mediation is strengthened; we are further separated from the direct experience of any event.

These examples indicate how the techniques of continuity are the same for film and television, though in television the conventional meaning of a technique is transformed into something particular.

Space outside the frame. Editing between shots creates a network of relationships between the objects or between the space shared by these objects. A scene in a living room may not show us every corner and surface in the room, but in a short time we realize in which "space" the drama is taking place. Of course, one "establishing shot" in the beginning does the same thing, but this situation does not necessarily exist in all presentations. The space of this kind can be termed as "theatrical space." It can be defined as the total (or sum) perception of all spatial representation between the successive shots.

This brings us to a discussion of how theatre, film and television differ in terms of their representation and use of "theatrical space." We will briefly review how theatre and film use these concepts and then see how these are applied to television.

The first important distinction between theatre and film in terms of space outside the frame, comes with the spectator's point of view. This can be illustrated by Balazs's (1972) basic formal principles of theatre.

The first basic formal principle is that the spectator always sees the whole of the space. The second principle states that the spectator sees the stage from a fixed distance. The third basic formal principle of the theatre is that the spectator's angle of vision does not change.

Consider the first principle Balazs mentions with respect to space on theatre-stage. Film usually fragments the theatrical space. If a scene in a church is to be picturized, it is not necessary that the entire interior of the church would be shown, instead space is indexically represented. We see a few icons like the Holy Cross or the altar. Television, too, fragments the space and indicates the whole space in between the editing of shots.

The second principle states that the spectator sees the stage from a fixed distance. In film and television, the distance between the camera-eye and the stage varies according to the requirements of fluidity and flexibility of representation. In fact, in earlier film theories, especially in Panofsky's (1977) discussion of theatre and

film, one sure way of achieving a "filmic" representation was to have greater flexibility of shooting. The rigidity of distance between the stage and the spectator was interpreted as an "impurity of theatricality" (Sontag, 1977, p. 76). Television also achieves a greater flexibility in representing space between the actors/stage and the camera-eye of the spectator. However, we will point out some differences between film and TV after our discussion of the third basic formal principle of theatre.

In theatre, the third basic formal principle says, the spectator's angle of vision does not change. In film and television, however, this angle can change depending upon the requirements of a particular scene. In this case, too, film and TV are flexible and numerous variations of angle of vision are possible. But it has to be seen in what respects film and television differ, or do they differ from theatre?

Before this can be discussed, it is necessary to clarify certain points about television programs. First, it does not really matter if a given program is telecast live or if it was videotaped before a live audience. It is important to see if that program is presented/picturized/shot as if it were a live program. This is to underline the differences between theatre on television and film on television. It is clear that shooting Hill Street Blues is much more complex when compared with videotaping The Jeffersons. The former appears to be a "filmed" sequence whereas the latter is presented as live studio theatre. This distinction is not merely a

matter of presentation, it more or less defines the concept of theatrical space on television.

The Jeffersons, Too Close For Comfort or Three's Company are taped/produced with multiple cameras. Cutting in these programs occurs as if they were presented live. To illustrate our point, it can be noticed that we have only one wide view of the living room in Three's Company. We are almost always on one side of the room and that side is presumably the one towards which the audience is situated. The door that usually opens with some kind of surprise or suggests the beginning of some funny sequence is always shown from one side. If this program had any liberty of eliminating the rigidity of a fixed distance between the audience and stage (cameras do get close, but the overall effect is that the audience is farther away from characters), it might add to the dramatic effect by showing a few reactions from the other side of the door. This is obviously not to prescribe how the program may be shot but to point out that the techniques employed in certain kinds of programs (like domestic comedies and some situation comedies) make that program more like studio theatre on TV. The presentation of space is restricted. The differences between theatre and TV, then, have to do with the mobility and flexibility of camera-views and the comparatively rapid transition between two successive scenes. If one grants these differences, television merely puts a "fourth wall" on theatre.

It must be conceded that these are only a few observations and may be rather limited in pointing out differences among theatre,

film and television. But these points will open up further inquiries into the use of space on TV. Moreover, it should be noted that most often television becomes merely a medium of transmission for film. It may be suggested that future studies should concentrate on the distinct potentialities of each of these media.

It is necessary to indicate at this stage that experience of spatial representation on screen is not independent of our experience of time of the narrative. In fact the temporal articulations mentioned by Burch have spatial significance, too. For example, two successive shots maintain both a spatial continuity and at the same time a temporal continuity. Any movement of time, if that creates a dramatic sequence, is accompanied by movement in space. Thus Hill Street Blues appears more like a film because the scenes have dramatic transitions and space is not rigidly presented as if it were a theatre show.

Another significant observation can be made about live television. Consider a football game. It shows images from all sides of the stadium, giving an illusion of participation. It is closer to obtaining a "cubist" view of a set of objects. Though such illusion of multiple viewpoints can be given even in a film of a football game, what matters most is the simultaneous or near simultaneous temporal existence of the successive images. The viewer is at many places at once, because he is aware of watching live television.

There is another valuable distinction among the images of theatre, film and television. This has to do with the concept and use of "close-up" in these media. In theatre, spotlights, sensitive faces

and elastic voices can give us the "effect" of close-up. With spotlights we can concentrate only on the face of one person; the background is "dissolved" by dim stage lights. This is the best that theatre can do to accomplish the effect of a close-up. Film close-up, on the other hand, becomes possible because of the proximity and flexibility of the camera-eye. Balazs compares the film close-up to a silent soliloquy on stage. Film close-up increases the intimacy between the viewer and the actor/actress. It is used to discover the "hidden life or drama" in a character. The use of the close-up in film is thus specific and its effect is usually to capture the attention of the audience in its larger-than-life, closer-than-ordinary image.

With television, the close-up lost its poetic sensibility, its specific uses. It became an essential part of TV aesthetics, not an artistic device. Small size screen, limited pictorial fidelity, and rapidly moving images make it necessary to regard the close-up as too "casual;" it doesn't bind the viewer to the image as it did in film. If we tend to "look around," away from the TV close-up, it is because the TV close-up is too common an image; the experience of viewing is casual; and above all, it does not bind the viewer to the screen.

### Semiotic Space

The spatial representations discussed before do give us an experience of space. A distinction between space as representation and space as an experience was given by McLuhan (1972). For example, visual space is a representation; it is filled with objects. Visual space is perceived as the space in between various objects. The

"experience" of this space is associated with our emotions, feelings, etc. Some place may appear to be gloomy if a sad experience is associated with that space. Also, the auditory space, i.e., space perceived through auditory senses, McLuhan said, is continuous. It has no division. If someone is talking to you from another room, you believe that space between you and that person is "continuous."

This concept can be applied to arts as well. Painting represents space, often with a perspective view. As we have seen before, the vanishing point lies beyond the canvas but within the spectator's view. It is an inward journey, as it were. The symbolic arts like poetry, music do not represent space within themselves as a pictorial art of painting does. The symbols, words or sounds evoke spatial images in our minds. We experience "space" through our imagination. The space is not laid out for you; you have to seek a vanishing point through the pictures of your own imagination. This is, then, an outward journey. If a given art form uses both the pictorial or symbolic aspects, that art would create a continuous interaction of the journey between two vanishing points, within viewers' perception. Semiotic space is this "experience" of space that is represented in the narrative. Use of space as a structuring and dramatic element would, then, give us a spatial form, the semiotic meaning of space in the narrative. The concept of spatial form is explained as follows.

Any narrative is constructed in a progression of time, events following each other in the narrative over a period of time. Accordingly, the typical narrative is essentially temporal in nature.

However, it is possible to reduce the degree of temporalness by using various literary techniques. Decreased temporality suggests emphasis on spatiality in the narrative. A self-reflexive text, for example, that dwells upon its own context tends to invoke a spatial form (Frank, 1963, p. 12). Emphasis upon sets and locations, as opposed to sequential action, also creates more spatiality than temporality (Klinkowitz, 1981, p. 42).

A set of simultaneous events or a multiple storyline can also create spatial form. Consider Love Boat, for instance. Although each episode involves linear plots, the fact is that there are several separate stories taking place at the same time. When we weave out of one story into another, the former stands still in time, thus losing its temporalness. Much the same can be said of Fantasy Island. And in both instances the grand setting/locale adds much to the spatiality of the series.

Finally, for our purposes, spatiality is more pronounced in those stories where chronology is eliminated or at least severely attenuated (Michelson, 1981, p. 68). Bergman's film, Cries and Whispers, is a good example of how space can be critically important when temporality or chronology is inhibited. Three sisters come together in a palatial building to divide their parents' estate and also to be close to one of their sisters who is terminally ill with cancer. A story that takes place only in the short span of a fortnight relies much on the interiors to bring about the metaphoric representations about their lives. On the other hand, ABC's docudrama Roots is

essentially a chronological narrative, and space makes only a minor contribution to the dramatic revelation.

It is quite possible that in some productions neither spatiality nor temporality may be emphasized so as to make evident the spatial or temporal nature of the narrative. In such cases, the spatial form or temporal nature does not exist and as a result space and time do not significantly affect the construction of the narrative. Subsequently, the viewer's experience of space and time in this narrative is insignificant.

So far, we have elaborated on theoretical discussions, developing and explaining the concepts in semiotics and defining a certain method of inquiry into the television message. This in itself attempts to cover a research gap, found generally in most aesthetic and semiotic studies on other media. Our discussion of space and time in particular attempts to emphasize the aesthetic criticism of television, going beyond the mere significations and structures of the television message. We believe that the concepts and terms discussed in this study will be useful for a systematic study of television aesthetics at a later date.

However, the following chapter will discuss only some possible applications of semiotics to the TV genres of situation comedy, domestic comedy and soap opera. Because of the limitations over the scope of this study, we have to restrict ourselves to a general discussion and not conduct analytic work with TV programs. A framework of generalities is inevitable but these generalities pertain to particular genres and not to the entire medium.

## CHAPTER IV

### SEMIOTICS OF THE TELEVISION MESSAGE

#### Situation Comedy and Domestic Comedy

This discussion will pursue a sequence of explanations which would be useful even in case of actual analytic work with TV programs. The order of their explanation is only a matter of convenience. For example, the discussion of narrative time in a syntagm does not exclude a study of how images are arranged in that syntagm, though both terms are separately discussed. Such interrelations will have to be discussed in detail in case of actual analytic work with TV programs. Wherever required, we will attempt to make a mention of such points.

The most typical genres of contemporary television are situation comedy, domestic comedy and soap opera. These genre forms are characteristic of the medium in that they differ from similar genres on radio or film. Radio genres did not use iconic aspects of communication and film genres were not presented in the form of serials every week. Soap opera occupies more time on TV than any other genre on that medium. It is because of the uniqueness of these genres that we have chosen to discuss their semiotics. Similar studies may be conducted with regard to other TV genres like westerns, crime series, and even sports and news programs as genres.

As a matter of convenience for this discussion, we will follow Newcomb's (1974) suggestion to bring both situation comedies and

domestic comedies together for their criticism. Both are comedy forms, hence expect similar responses of laughter from the audiences. The differences between these two comedy genres can be studied separately but few of the relevant and broad-based distinctions can be mentioned here. Both comedy genres exhibit different spatial qualities. The domestic comedy takes place within the living room and/or kitchen whereas the situation comedy takes place in a particular locale (office, newsroom, a common meeting place of working people, etc.). The actual "stage" space is the same in all domestic comedies, but situation comedy often shifts this "stage" to a different place, though this is done quite temporarily. The domestic comedy is centered around only a few paradigms; those of the family members, the father, the mother and the children. Outsiders or "external elements" as such have less importance in relation to the main characters. In situation comedy, however, the outsiders are involved in almost all the programs and the main characters are not necessarily the dominant paradigms of a family. The third area of difference is in construction of humorous plots, the domestic comedy relies on personalities or "issues" to create humor whereas the situation comedy involves creating humor in a "situation." These differences, again, are broadbased and not strict. They need a deeper study at a later date. These differences are discussed here with the help of semiotic terms. The soap opera genre requires a different discussion.

Icons, indexes and symbols. Domestic comedy brings "home within a home." The families of Too Close for Comfort and The Jeffersons appear again and again on the screen, with their familiar personalities

and settings. The image on the screen requires no effort to be perceived. We are mostly within the confines of the house; most of the objects in the house are a part of our memory. The visual aspects are largely known, the verbal content changes in every program. In domestic comedies, the same encounters are repeated within the walls of the home.

Situation comedy brings a new situation, or a "crisis," into our living rooms each week. The characters of either Three's Company or Mary Tyler Moore belong to one central place, a private apartment or a newsroom in a TV station, respectively. Sometimes the characters in these comedies get involved with "outsiders" at another place. Jack in Three's Company gets into trouble with his girlfriend in a restaurant or Mary goes shopping and meets her colleague's friends. Whenever a new element/character/setting is introduced, the narrative slows down to give enough time to a viewer to "get to know" the external element. If a new element is brought in quickly so as to surprise the audience, it still requires a slowing down in subsequent scenes. What is significant to note is that the drama shifts to a new locale only temporarily and the main characters return to their central place to maintain familiarity of the show. Mary goes for an award ceremony with her colleagues, but after that situation is tackled, the whole cast returns to the office or to a party at her apartment from where the action "originates."

After this brief introduction to the comedy genres, let us consider sign-aspects of these genres. Whatever is visual is primarily iconic, it represents some object, some person. But here

the process of referring the images to the objects has a force of convention in the universe of domestic comedy. We refer to the homes, the living rooms and the kitchens by our mental images which are based on our immediate experiences. We "identify" with the domestic environment on TV. Since it is received within a domestic viewing situation, the identification is quicker and long lasting.

In fact, we always perceive objects by associating their images to our mental conceptions. Consider a film on an adventure in the Alps, for example. The visual imagery is not part of our experience, but it is perceived by whatever associations about the Alps we can bring into our minds. In theatre, the iconic sign has a force of physical presence: It represents what it is. But television's domestic comedy and to some extent situation comedy, bring a world which is strikingly similar to the world in which we live.

The icons of the domestic comedy are perceived on a synchronic level. Their resemblances are all around us, very much present in the society. They do not require any strain on the memory (no diachronic level of perception) to be perceived by the audience. Because of this, the context of domestic comedy or the background of that genre is familiar. The sign is "domesticated," and communication occurs at the level of acceptance, with no active involvement in perception.

With situation comedy, the iconic aspects are slightly varying. It changes locales (from office to supermarket, for example), and we need a kind of exploration in our mind to locate the iconic signs.

The stress is on communication that requires some effort in order to accept the iconic signs. It is usually for this reason that considerable time has to be given for audience identification of signs, before the plot moves further. We have slow paced or elaborate shots giving more time for identification. The domestic comedies can afford to be a little faster paced as they have already "set the stage" for the drama.

Having established a familiarity with the iconic or visual aspects of the program, the domestic and situation comedies have to emphasize the symbolic aspects to structure their contents. The creation of humor depends on verbal means. Since the audience already has a "fix" on the iconic, the symbolic has to vary, thus things are made easy for the audience. The facial expressions or the gestures may help to create humor, but their role is secondary to verbal gags.

Indexes can be visually represented. Indexical images take us away from the image, to something where its object/concept belongs. The interior of a house usually indicates that person's social and financial successes. The living rooms and kitchens in domestic comedies thus become extensions of middle-class homes.

Syntagms and paradigms. Nearly all comedies, both domestic and situation, open with sequences of images carefully selected from earlier programs. Intended to capture viewer attention and arouse interest, this edited potpourri will probably introduce each episode in the series for the duration of the season. With this brief introduction, the viewers enter into the world of comedy, where everyone is known and some excitement of laughter is expected.

This first sequence is the cliché of all TV programs. It does not have to have a meaning; rather, its function to introduce the program and the characters supersedes its meaning.

A semiotician has to identify the syntagms by taking into account the segments or sequences which are autonomous in meaning. This has to be done with the program tapes themselves. However, an argument can be made that the commercial breaks almost force the producer to split the sequences in such a way that a segment between two consecutive commercials is autonomous, an image-event in itself. On the other hand, it can also be argued that it is rather wise to construct a syntagm in such a way that at the time of commercial break, it constitutes an incomplete image-event, resulting in keeping the attention of audience so that they do not switch off the channel. We leave this question open for further investigations and believe that a general study of the effects of commercial breaks on the construction of programs can be made.

With a general consideration of a group of programs in both the situation comedy and domestic comedy genres, we can say that though syntagmatic relationships between images change in every program, the paradigmatic relationships remain fairly stable within the genre. This would be our central argument in the following paragraphs.

Any comedy is based on the possibilities of humor in a "situation" or with persons. The domestic comedy requires that the issue be created between or among members of the family. Consider one episode in the series, Too Close For Comfort. In this program, the youngest

daughter of Henry wants to take a job as a weather-girl at a TV station. Henry gets upset with this, saying that such a job is not good for a girl in a respectable family and certainly not suitable for his daughter. A long and tense argument ensues, Henry's wife doing her part as a pacifier. Humor is created through father's opinions about what weather girls are like and how they dress. The mother has sympathies for both the husband and the daughter and this creates more possibilities of comedy. Syntagms are essentially constructed between these events or "crises." This particular program resolves the problem when both Henry and his daughter change their minds for each other's affection and speak to each other about it. Nothing has changed in this program. The characters or the paradigms of father, mother, girl and even weather-girl are the same from the beginning to end. The relations between these paradigms have also not altered at all. Of course, a radical change is not expected in any one program, especially since that series runs for several weeks or months. But these programs reassert the paradigms.

In Three's Company, there are three main characters, each of them represent a "kind of a person," often comparable with our own friends or acquaintances. These characters, too, therefore, represent paradigms of such personalities in society. Their landlord, Mr. Farly, represents a middle age person, often poking fun at his own absurdities with an everlasting eagerness to go along with young girls. In one of the programs of this comedy series, one of the women, Janet, starts behaving differently with the idea of becoming mod and staying away from her apartment-mates, often trying to look down upon them.

This causes some estrangement or misunderstanding, but in the end, everything is resolved, restoring the good relations among the main characters. Janet is not after all going to be different from her friends, neither is she going away from them.

Situation comedies do not always restrict their dramatic presentations only to the main characters. In Three's Company, for example, Janet's uncle visits from Iowa. He disapproves of her lifestyle and also the fact that she is sharing an apartment with a young man. He represents a conservative Midwestern gentleman and appears only in one program. Thus situation comedy can introduce new paradigms; the possibilities are more dependent upon how long the series is running.

Domestic comedy, since it is confined only to the members of the family, shows greater consistency in representing paradigms. As a result, domestic comedy retains a rigid character whereas situation comedy can afford to be liberal, dealing with different paradigms. Also, in situation comedy, the supporting characters can be slowly brought into the general framework of the programs to effect a change in that genre.

Narrative and semiotic time. There is hardly any perceptible change in time from beginning to end in both comedy genres; i.e., a clear temporal transition or movement is not indicated in the series or programs. Consider a humorous episode in Three's Company. The central character of a young man, Jack, gets involved in a dating confusion; his own girl is replaced by someone he doesn't

know. The second sequence indicates that Jack is waiting to explain to his girlfriend, who is apparently annoyed at him. In the third, we learn that Jack, being the good boy that he is, does not go on a date with the other girl. Instead, he is able to clear up the confusion and "makes up" with her. In real life, each of these sequences, or the events therein, would likely take place at least a day apart. But there is no such indication within the program. There is no movement of time and no transitions shown. If such indications do not matter, it is because the construction of the narrative is too simplified.

Such representation of time, along with no apparent indication that time has lapsed between two programs, results in a mythical representation. Time becomes secondary to symbolic and iconic aspects of the narrative. This accentuates the paradigmatic generalizations and consistencies that we have dismissed. When TV programs eliminate any deliberate indications of transitions of time, these programs underline the way TV aesthetics brings the interpretive faculties of the viewer to a rest.

Domestic comedy genre constructs what Eliade (1968) calls the "sacred" time of rituals. We often know when a particular ritual is to be performed, but we participate mechanically, almost uncritically in the ritual. The ritual time passes as "sacred" time, in which feelings are important, details are insignificant. The domestic comedy invites our participation in the values (of authority, love, family relationships) of family which are reaffirmed in every program.

The time of both domestic and situation comedies can be studied at the synchronic and diachronic level. Synchronically, we can

associate the representations of family on the screen with contemporary families. This is done largely through iconic representation, like dresses, decors, etc. The TV families are socially significant. If they are portraying old values (i.e., diachronic significance), it is usually indicated by old stereotyped manners, dresses, symbolic means, i.e., dialogues, etc. If Archie Bunker behaves like a person holding old values, then his character can be said to be diachronically (from the historical point of view) represented.

Narrative and semiotic space. It has already been pointed out that domestic comedy is presented like live studio theatre, whereas situation comedy (like Mary Tyler Moore) presents a less "rigid" space; the scenes may shift from the central place.

Most often, the domestic and situation comedy genres are characterized by an unobtrusive, non-participatory role of the camera. The main role of the camera is to reveal the "setting" in domestic comedy and the locale of the "situation" in situation comedy. The limited space in these genres restricts camera movements. This point will be particularly clear if we compare situation comedy, soap opera (where camera has limited shots) and westerns (where the use of camera is more liberal and shots are plentiful in a wide setting).

Newcomb (1974, pp. 25-58) has already indicated that the static spatial qualities in these genres and in domestic comedy in particular suggest that our actual experiences in similar environments (like homes) are also limited. This is not to say that a continuous change in spatial qualities is desirable, but the fact that this does not happen restricts our world of experience.

Let us consider one final idea regarding spatial form. In comedy genre, as we have noted, both space of time do not change, there is no significant progression in time or any movement space. Also, if simultaneous action occurs (between living room and kitchen, for example), it is restricted and within the walls of the house, the space which is already a "familiar" one. Thus neither the spatial nor the temporal form of the narrative is pronounced in comedy genres.

As a result of the limitations on time, iconic presentation and screen space the emphasis of the messages in comedy genre is naturally placed on the verbal aspects of the message and on syntagmatic combinations of a limited number of paradigms. In terms of structural understanding, TV thus simplifies the given program to the maximum extent possible, reducing the possibilities of multiple use of television's expressions to a few stylized conventions.

### Soap Opera

The daytime soap opera programs are found exclusively on American television. Primarily designed for housewives or others who stay at home during the daytime working hours, and also to sell products which are particularly useful for this audience, the soap opera has become a readily available substitute for daydreaming. Any exploration into the psychology of the soap opera audiences can be very enlightening for someone trying to understand the functions of television in our society. It is a curious world, this world of soap operas. It exists in the afternoon hours until five o'clock, five days a week and enjoys a loyal and dedicated audience. And so, it is with considerable curiosity that we begin an aesthetic study of this genre.

The soap operas in the afternoons are of particular interest to us. These lengthy, deliberative presentations differ from the prime time soap operas which are "polished, expensive" productions (Newcomb, 1974, p. 163). As Newcomb says there is a loss of elegance in the daytime soap operas. They remain one of the most characteristic presentations of television, and without a parallel in any other media.

Secondly, the sole consideration of time as a structuring device makes the daytime soap different from the primetime soap operas. Numerous subplots and the slow progress of the storyline are not merely the results of techniques per se, but also from a need to produce an atmosphere of intimacy and sustaining emotional involvement in the selective audience that is cut off from the active world outside the walls of the house. The following discussion is, therefore, applicable only to the daytime soap operas.

Icons, indexes and symbols. It is not very difficult to distinguish the soap opera from any other kind of TV program. Virtually motionless camera movements, tightly held frames and predominantly "close" visuals are some of the predominant distinguishing marks of this TV narrative. The viewer is drawn into a world of intimate images, which are presented as iconic signs, each being stylistically represented. Soap opera concentrates on the presentation of iconic signs, where iconicity is closely related not to a world of familiar objects, but to a universe of imaginary conceptions. What we imply here is that the iconic presentation of soap opera narrative does not represent concrete objects, but ideas, or concepts, none

of which has any material manifestations. This will be explained as follows:

The close-up of a face or of a tightly framed, static view of a room are not the images of things themselves. They are parts of a larger whole, whose "role" or involvement in the narrative is expressed by these smaller fragments. The close-up of the face becomes a whole person; a bedroom becomes a stage (or a "world") for all sexual problems; a business office usually is indicated merely by a desk, diaries, pens, and telephones which become representative of the entire business activities of that person.

As we will argue later, action or movement in space is not very significant for soap opera. In fact, soap opera deliberately eliminates spatial movement to permit closer scrutiny of the details not used as signs for their aesthetic qualities, i.e., to reveal details, to get near the object. Rather, close-ups are the chief means of portraying images in a slow-paced narrative.

Two aspects of iconic signs of soap opera are clear from the foregoing discussion. First, the iconic signs are used by concentrating on the parts of the whole and secondly, their choice is deliberate, often at the exclusion of portraying/adapting the possible alternatives (of spatial movement, enlarged frames, etc.). What is essentially implied here is that the iconic sign in soap opera has a greater indexical value, wherein the actual image suggests an existential contact with larger objects. A face becomes an index, an embodiment of the whole character. A closer shot of a room becomes an index of the close, contracting world of the individuals in it.

A woman tormented by a divorce shows her agony by highly emotional, often exaggerated gestures. Her face wants to tell the story, it becomes an extension for a larger experience.

Newcomb (1974) asserts that soap opera is too "wordy." Its excessive emphasis on verbal language as a vehicle to carry the substance of the TV narrative suggests an overall approach to depict symbolic dramas. By wordiness, we are taken into a perpetually imaginary world. Here, image is not presented in its entirety, nor is any physical world. The main aim of this narrative is to bring the viewer into an imaginary world of people, ideas, concepts and conflicts. Other dramatic presentations attempt to depict the "real world," but soap opera takes us into its own world, superficial and "fictitious." The experience of viewing is solely based on our ability to identify and understand the conventions. Once the gap between the sign and the convention is narrowed, and soap opera offers a simplistic rehash of the same discourse.

Syntagms and paradigms. Unlike the comedy genre, the soap opera makes it difficult to isolate episodes with a beginning, a middle and an end. The characters of a comedy program can come back the following week to solve another humorous crisis, but in soap opera they are continually involved in slow moving dramatic conflicts. Conflict resolutions are very apparent, and often these same resolutions sow the seeds of new conflicts.

Events are constantly occurring in these daytime dramas. A fairly large cast, involved in many problems at different places,

allows the series to construct numerous subplots. But action or movement is so insignificant even in these subplots that it is easy to identify an image-event or a syntagm by its spatial characteristics alone. Often a sequence in someone's bedroom is left incomplete and another one is presented from a different place. These movements are so varied that they do not tie together in an ever-growing narrative. And as such these movements have little significance.

Newcomb (1974, p. 170) notes two types of movements in soap operas. The first is a lateral movement developed by "an almost constant extension of subplots." The drama deals with a few people or a core group or family, but it extends outside to other people or their networks with whom the individuals of the core group are involved. We have noted that this creates subplots. Newcomb mentions another movement which he terms as "vertical movement." This, he says, is due to constant addition of new characters, resulting in additional subplots. What Newcomb is implying here are paradigmatic relationships in the narrative.

In sum, the consideration of syntagmatic and paradigmatic categories tells us that soap opera is a form characterized by a flux, a change, the possibilities of which are numerous. It is a continuously growing and extending form which gives us an experience of perpetual involvement. In the world of soap opera the road does not end, but that is precisely why it should be travelled.

This is not to suggest that the form of soap opera is not definable, or that it is abstract. On the contrary, soap opera is

identified only as an undefined movement; its abstract, fuzzy nature itself is unique as a typical genre of TV.

Moreover, it is the time and space frame that brings rigidity to this form. Soap opera uses these variables in such a way that the diegetic experience of soap opera can be very intense or emotionally involving.

Narrative and semiotic time. It has been noted that the only TV genre that gives an experience of time almost close to our real experience is soap opera. Its episodic, slow-paced narrative that runs for nearly a week takes into account the pace of life. Soap opera indulges in complicating problems and tosses them over for a long time so that the viewer has less trouble in following temporal transitions. Instead, he/she comes to regard the soap opera drama as "real" and less cinematic (without many spatio-temporal manipulations). This invites the viewer to get closer to the narrative itself, nearer to the story line as if it were a part of his/her life.

The movement of time within the narrative is accentuated by dissolves and slow camera movements. We move from scene to scene and one plot to another by these yawningly slow movements. Here again, the purpose is to soften the shock of temporal transitions. Slow moving time is likely to have a soothing effect since the narrative is full of extreme situations, complicated by high-pitch emotions.

This slow-paced narrative extends over a period of months or even years. The characters can get old and still remain on the scene. They build up a kind of familiarity, which in a higher degree can

create personal attachment of the characters to the viewers. It is only with soap opera that TV can come close to the life of the individuals.

However, it should be mentioned that this long movement from the beginning to the end is so slow that it is hardly noticed within a few programs. There is no marked temporal progression. It is not necessary that it should be so, but the absence of any significant change of time only supports the requirements of the narrative which deals with rehashed, stereotyped problems of everyday life.

Narrative and semiotic space. We have already noted that soap opera uses close-up shots as its predominant visual presentation. Close-ups eliminate action and direct our attention to details. It was also mentioned that space has an indexical value in soap opera. Parts are shown to indicate the whole. We will now discuss the off-camera space, i.e., space represented outside the individual frame between editing. Soap opera is shot as if it were a theatre show. The choice of shots is almost predictable, for they are limited. Once the presence of characters is established, it becomes too easy, often mechanical, to show the transitions from one person to another. Lateral pans, if used, are extraordinarily slow, with the aim to soften the shock of transitions.

Newcomb (1974) mentions the "physical flimsiness" of soap opera productions. The iconic images of the grass, the door panels or even a doctor's office, are more indexical in value, only suggestive of what "the real things" are. The space is often laid out to support the symbolic aspects of narratives.

Because of its insistence on developing and expanding subplots, soap opera often constructs action in simultaneous places. When one scene is abruptly cut short, we move to another one. Since a viewer is involved at many places and with many characters, this simultaneity gives soap opera a spatial form.

#### Summary and Recommendations for Further Investigations

The principal purpose of this thesis was to develop a theoretical basis for aesthetic study of television by explaining some terms in semiotics and their applications and by restricting our study only to those programs which constitute a genre because of their thematic and aesthetic continuity. This was also to provide empirical grounds to apply structural terms like syntagms and paradigms. Also, we have placed emphasis on the aesthetic nature of the sign and not merely on what it signifies.

Semiotics, which has thus far been a method of discussing structures of languages, tends to adopt its concepts from linguistic terms. This study not only redefined some semiotic terms in a way appropriate to a plastic-art medium like television, but also added a vital dimension by studying space and time as semiotic systems. A critical and analytical study of space and time on television will make a semiotic approach more suitable for this plastic-art medium. This thesis has attempted to develop some terms for the study of space and time on TV by drawing from various observations regarding the preceding media of TV, those of painting, photography, theatre and film.

Because of the limitations of this particular study, it was not possible to conduct semiotic analysis of a certain number of TV programs in different genres. Such a study, however, could have been extremely crucial in explaining the applications of the terms and concepts developed in this thesis. We have, on the other hand, made an attempt to provide a general discussion of the semiotic study of three typical genres of American television. This discussion is limited to the genres which in themselves are not highly varied as the gangster or western genre on film. Moreover, in the absence of actual analytic work, we do not deal with distinct aspects of study like analysis of particular signs, construction of syntagms, space represented in shots, effects of commercial breaks on the construction of programs, etc.

Future studies can consider the following broad objectives, which, given the sound foundations of semiotics of television from this thesis will be helpful in developing a comprehensive understanding of television aesthetics.

1. Analytic work with a representative collection of programs in a TV genre. This should involve a general but extensive discussion about the nature of that particular genre including a brief history of its evolution to the present form.

2. Analysis of syntagms (image-events) in every program. This includes semiotic study of each shot/image in terms of iconic, symbolic and indexical nature of the signs.

3. Analysis of syntagms to see how paradigms are represented and if these paradigms are typical/characteristic in that genre/culture.

4. Analysis of space and time constructions in each program, including narrative and semiotic space and time.

5. A comparative study of semiotic approaches and semiological studies to determine their usefulness in understanding the nature of television medium.

This study has attempted to develop a convenient and relatively less complicated method of semiotics to study television aesthetics. The terms used here will be more applicable to plastic-art media than the linguistic terms used elsewhere in works of semiotics. In these areas, the present study will have made a valid contribution.

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## APPENDIX

## THE BASIC PREMISE OF SEMIOLOGY AND SOME RELEVANT EXPLANATIONS

Semiology is the science which studies sign systems: languages, codes, social behavior, sets of signals, etc. All cultural processes are included in semiology. Any medium of expression is a kind of language and therefore part of semiology.

Semiology was first developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. The term semiotics was coined by the American philosopher C. S. Peirce. These terms are used almost interchangeably in many countries. Fundamentally, though, there are some differences between their basic concepts of a sign. Even though Peirce's definitions are more applicable to our present needs, it is worthwhile to understand semiological terminology as employed by de Saussure.

De Saussure defined sign as a bipartite concept, the signifier and the signified. The signifier has a physical existence that carries the meaning. The signifier is the idea, the mental concept associated with the signifier. The sign is a signifying construct of the two. These two aspects of sign cannot really exist independently of each other, but they are divided into the signifier and the signified for methodological convenience.

Consider the word "horse," which is merely an arrangement of five symbols, h-o-r-s-e. We have, by convention, attached a meaning to it. It signifies a four-legged animal that is different from a donkey, a bull, a lion, or a tiger. The word "horse" is the signifier; the mental image of that animal which we all share is the signified.

If we take into account a cartoon of a horse from a comic book, a painting, a photograph and a film of a horse, we can compare these signs. First, we are successively bringing the signifier and the signified close to each other: There is a greater resemblance of the sign "horse" in photograph or in film than there is in the case of a cartoon or the word "horse." Thus we are slowly overcoming the force of convention as we move from more symbolic to more iconic (see Chapter II for Peirce's definition of these terms). Secondly, we are transforming a generic sign into a particular one. In film, the image of horse is not that of any horse, but that of a specific horse, but the word "horse" implies any animal that can be called horse.

This leads us to the concepts of iconic and arbitrary signs. The signs which speak for themselves because they resemble the object are called iconic signs, whereas signs which acquire meaning mainly through convention are arbitrary signs. Film is a system of iconic signs; spoken and written languages are systems of arbitrary signs.

Every sign communicates in two modes: denotative and connotative. When a sign stands for the physical properties of the object or to its closest non-physical properties, i.e., to a concept or an idea. The sign of a gun denotes that it is a representation of a gun, but it connotes something else: the strength of force of velocity, penetration by speed, self-defense, a murder, a sound and/or a host of other things. Denotation is a primary function of the sign; connotation, on the other hand, results from the history and context of a sign: its expressive richness, the social tradition that

characterizes the sign, the mental capacity of the communicator and the receiver, and everything that can contribute to its meaning which transcends the basic level of denotation.

We will now briefly review the semiological understanding of the concept of "the signified." The signifier is a human construct, a material device; i.e., a photograph or a film or a sculpture is a "thing;" it has material existence. The signified is the relationship between the sign-object (the signifier) and the actual object or an idea or concept. This implies a human intervention, rather, a social convention that mediates the signification of a sign. The signified is, therefore, the social meaning of the sign, a culture mediating between the signified and the signifier. This is a difficult concept to understand and has to do with how semiologists conceive of an "ideology." We will make an attempt to explain the concept.

Consider a photograph of a car. The signifier is the photograph of the car; the signified is the mental image or the kind of objective resemblance we have in our mind. This photograph signifies, at a connotative level, a certain lifestyle, luxury, characteristic of a materialistic outlook of the people in that society, and a status symbol. Semiologists argue that because of cultural influence on the "signifieds," no sign has a pure connotation; it is always a mediation, a kind of representation of ideology.

Thus the use of signs depends on the social codes, which are a result of the relationships between people. The study of the "signifieds," then, is invariably a study of cultural "myths" in a society.

Two additional concepts are those of diachronic and synchronic levels of meaning. Diachronic level is the one that refers to the historical movement of a particular idea, or its origin and evolution. Synchronic time is one that is relevant from the perspective of its contemporary significance in a given culture.

Consider the sign of the swastika. The signifier is the image. The signified, however, can exist at two different levels. At synchronic level, this sign was used by Hitler to symbolize the Third Reich. This meaning, assimilated in the contemporary social codes in Germany in the 1930s, is different from the diachronic meaning (the terms signification and meaning are the same for the purpose of this study), which relates to the ancient symbol of Aryan culture. Diachronically, it represents one of the revered symbols of a race in Europe and Asia.

John Ford's Grapes of Wrath revealed in its synchronic significance, the problems and sufferings of some families during the Great Depression. But its diachronic significance lay in the history of American social conditions which led society to the stage of economic collapse.

After reviewing some basic concepts of semiology, we will state the reasons for not adopting them for the purpose of this study. The following points are the most urgent and relevant ones. In due time, it should be possible to distinguish clearly between semiotics and semiology which are, in fact, two different schools of thought.

1. Peirce's tripartite concept of signs is illustrative and helps us understand the aesthetic qualities of a sign. De Sassure's

concepts, on the other hand, regard signs as having only significations without considering "how" the sign signifies.

2. We have not considered the concept of connotation, because signs derive their meanings through syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships. Peirce's concept can accommodate the idea of connotation and in fact offer a more precise direction for it. For example, consider again the sign of a gun. It derives its meaning on TV in syntagmatic category, i.e., in relation to the signs preceding and following it and also the overall context of the program. We have already discussed in Chapter II that paradigmatic associations can be subjective in the minds of the viewer depending upon what he or she "brings to" the experience of viewing.

We have attempted to make certain distinctions clear for a systematic study of semiotics of television. Both semiotics and semiology are comparatively new methods of study, especially for visual media like television. This study is expected to contribute to a distinct understanding of semiotics to study the aesthetics of television.

## VITA

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