

## **Semiotics: Putting Theory into Practice**

by Rodolfo Barrett

In the early 1900s, two scholars wrote papers that laid the groundwork for the discipline of semiotics. Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist, published work on the nature of symbols using terms he called the “signifier,” the symbol, and the “signified,” what the symbol stands in for. Across the ocean, American logician Charles Peirce discussed the same concept of a symbol and “interpretant” (Chandler). Peirce even described a process he called “semiosis” by which new symbols and meanings come to be used in society. Scholars like Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, and others contributed significantly to the literature of semiotics until it was an established field of study.

Semiotics, often summarized as “the study of signs,” is a broad discipline that is closely related to the field of linguistics. Unlike linguistics, however, semiotic analysis is not limited to formal language and instead covers communication within any and all sign systems. In addition to textual symbols, semioticians study body language, signs found in nature, animal communication, patterns in cultural phenomena, cognitive processes, photography, film, and music that are independent of conventional language or have a language all their own. What semiotics seeks to uncover is different from linguistics as well; semioticians look exclusively at the systemic nature of signs, and the interplay between signs and other signs, signs and culture, or signs and cognition (Chandler). The three major branches of semiotics also divide along those lines. “Semantics” is the study of signs to the concepts they denote, “syntactics” studies patterns found within sign systems, and “pragmatism” looks at sign systems’ interactions with the individuals that employ them (Crow). Since semiotics provides the language and mechanisms to

look at such a diverse body of signs, it has practical application in almost every facet of everyday life. Semiotics has influenced computation, evolutionary biology, anthropology, psychology, and much more. The principles of visual semiotics can even be adapted for use in tasks as simple as time management.

For this visual project we put the semiotic principles we discussed in the course into practice by creating a unique sign system that would simplify our own lives. Like many people in the course, I chose to create a variation of a to-do list or schedule since it was late in the semester and time management was on everyone's mind. I chose to combine the to-do list and schedule into a chart that could give me an idea of my workload at a single glance and could provide more detailed information on request. I was inspired by the semiotic efficiency of board games that often convey a lot of information with just a few symbols. Therefore, I modeled my chart after the "Simon Says" color-matching reaction game and based it on a few simple symbols. The semiotic principle that inspired these decisions is called visual economy (Crow). Making economic decisions like having symbols that are circular, similar in design, and intuitive allows one to minimize the use of space while still conveying all of the intended information.

To create a sign system, the signs need to be distinct from one another while still being interconnected enough to inform the syntactic relations between the signs themselves. I gave each of my five courses a unique color and symbol to create the distinction. To show unity, the symbols were all monochrome and similar in art style. Additionally, the base pencil symbol was used for all of my WRTC courses and to differentiate them was an internal sub-symbol depending on the class. The pencil with a "1" stood for WRTC 200 since it was my introductory course, the "2" stood for WRTC 201 as the companion course that follows closely in conjunction

with 200, and the pipe was for my WRTC elective “Semiotics” as it alluded to the “This is not a pipe (this is a symbol of a pipe)” painting that is considered a semiotic commentary. Lastly, the Shinto torii gate symbol was for my Japanese language class, and the beaker was for my GISAT course since these symbols are connotatively associated with the subject matter.

The areas containing the symbols were colored differently to further the distinction among the signs and corresponded to the days of the week I had each class. My Monday, Wednesday, and Friday courses were color coded in primary colors, and my Tuesday and Thursday classes were in secondary colors. This is a distinction that many are familiar with, so it is used as an example of a cultural cue informing a symbol choice. The rest of the symbols I chose were similarly culturally determined: a waning moon to show how late in the day the class was for me, starting with my earliest as a full moon and shrinking down to a crescent moon later in the day; a red, yellow, or green “alert” beacon to indicate how urgent the homework is in my opinion, utilizing a common metaphorical concept that red is critical, yellow is less so, and green is safe; and a series of basic geometric shapes--stars, squares, or triangles--that acted as arbitrary signs for the type of assignments that were left in my classes. The squares were reminiscent of the shape of paper and represented essay assignments, the triangles were for tests, and the stars showed whether or not I had a final in the course. As a result, I could look at a course and see what was on my plate or click on the courses to get more in-depth information.

Finally, the icons for the files that contained my class documents corresponded to the symbols. Semiotic theory implies that the best way to pick up and understand a sign-system is to engage with it daily as we do with so many of our own sign system; I did that by keeping my classes’ documents in folders that shared the symbols I created, as shown in Figure 1.

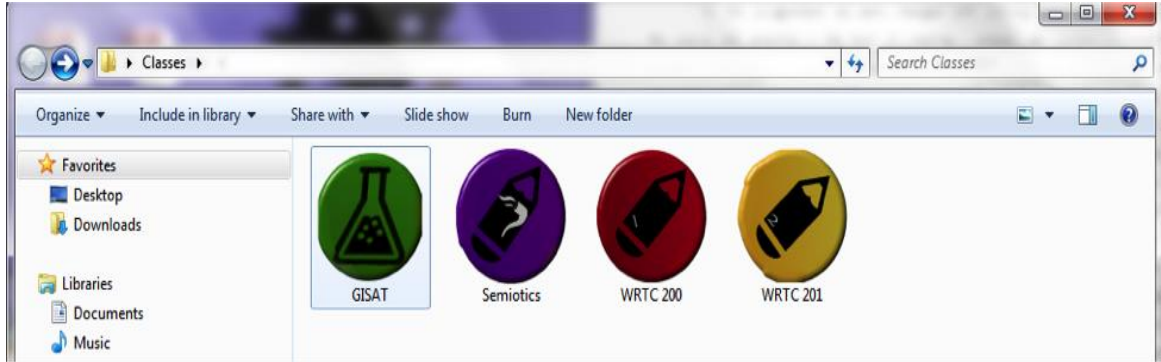


Figure 1. Folders as Symbols.

Essentially, this was my attempt at creating a practical use of semiotic theory on a smaller scale. The same application of semiotics to a simple day planner has been used in evolutionary biology. The function of religion and art in human survival have been studied by identifying how symbols have affected human culture, and have had great influences leading to many fantastic breakthroughs in other disciplines' research as well (Dissanayake). Semiotics signs are inescapable in human society and keeping them in mind and learning to better utilize them is an important skill to apply to create and navigate the myriad symbolic systems that envelop us.

### Works Cited

Chandler, Daniel. *Semiotics: The Basics*. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.

Crow, David. *Visible Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics in the Visual Arts*. 2nd ed. N.p.: Ava Academic, 2005. Print.

Dissanayake, Ellen. "Core of Art: Making Special." *Journal of the Canadian Association of Curriculum Studies* 1.2 (2003): n. pag. Print.