

Semiotic/cultural analysis brainstorming

Semiotics is the study and interpretation of cultural signs: words, objects, images, or behaviors. For example, a red light is a sign, but signs derive their meaning from the context in which we find them, so to understand the meaning of a red light, we must place it in a wider context. A red light at a busy intersection means one thing, and a red light in the window of an Amsterdam brothel means something else. Use this tip sheet as a tool once you have selected a sign:

- Using questions, place the sign within a context of similar things.
- Using questions, identify what social values the sign represents.
- Write a claim about how the sign shows cultural values, and where cultural power is concentrated.

Discovering the context, or system, of a sign

First ask yourself questions about the word, object, image, or behavior you wish to examine. You want to place it in an appropriate context, or *system*, of similar things.

Some questions to ask	Example brainstorming...
What is the cultural sign (word, object, image, behavior)?	My ceramic coffee cup
What is it like? What things are similar?	Other coffee cups: travel mugs, Styrofoam cups, porcelain tea cups, my handmade pottery cup
Among those things, what things are different? How are they different? How different are they?	My mug is less delicate than a <i>teacup</i> , so I'm not afraid of breaking it. It isn't as rugged as a plastic or metal <i>travel mug</i> . It looks nicer and makes less waste than <i>Styrofoam</i> . It is more technically perfect but less artistically interesting than <i>handmade pottery</i> .
What is the social context of this thing? What is/was going on in the country? In the world? What is/was going on in politics? In the economy? What is/was going on in families? In schools?	<i>Teacups</i> = pre-modern, Victorian times. <i>Styrofoam</i> was popular when disposability was considered a virtue. <i>Travel mugs</i> appeared later, with awareness of climate impacts and landfill overflow.

Discovering the value system, or cultural mythology, of a sign

Next, identify a *value system* represented by the sign. Signs always encode a particular value system and suggest *where power lies in a culture*. Are youth and strength valued more or less than age? Is individual effort valued more or less than cooperation and helping? Is intuition valued more or less than logical inquiry? Based on this, where does the power seem to lie in this system? With mystics or scientists? With young "influencers" or with elder statesmen? Here are some values that may be either promoted or devalued in a society:

The value of relationships & roles

Individuality, independence, personal responsibility?
Cooperation, community?
Nuclear families, extended families?
The roles of men and women?
The roles of children and youth? The value of youth?
The roles of the elderly? The value of aging?

The value of work & rest

Money—earning, spending, saving, sharing it?
Work, industry, business, technology?
Efficiency, method, results?
Perfection, uniformity, excellence?
Impatience, hurry?
Relaxation, recreation?

The value and limits of reason and rules

Logic, reason, practicality?
Law, justice, rules?
Punishment, retribution?
Compassion, kindness?
Forgiveness, rehabilitation?

The value of ethics

Freedom, self-determination?
Cooperative, communal governance?
Bondage, slavery, dependence, entrapment?
Cheating, opportunism?
Honesty, candor?
Education, teaching, learning?
Self-indulgence, self-discipline?

The value of religion & science

Religion, spirituality, mysticism?
Faith, acceptance, determinism?
Science, secularism?
Progress, evolution?
Investigating, questioning, problem solving?

The value of art & effort

Art, music, craft?
Creativity, process?
Intuition, instinct?
Imperfection, variation, flaws?
Patience, effort, waiting?

Matching up the sign with societal values

Ask yourself how the sign you are examining signals a particular set of values. In the case of the ceramic coffee mug (above), this writer makes some connections:

- My coffee mug is mass produced in a factory, not made by an individual artist or craftsman (*values industry and technology*).
- My mug is the result of various technical, science-assisted, mechanized processes. Mechanization is part of industrialization. It illustrates scientific and industrial progress toward better, more uniform, and cheaper things (*values science, progress, industry, efficiency*).
- My mug is mass-produced on an assembly line. It is perfectly symmetrical and smooth, so it is pleasant to use and easy to wash (*values convenience and uniformity*).
- My coffee mug has little colored hearts in a checkerboard design. They must have expected a female to buy it; females are supposed to like little colored hearts (*trivializes and devalues femininity*).
- My mug is decorated, but by machine, so it is kind of pretty, but has no real artistic merit (*devalues art, creativity, patience, and effort*).
- My mug is practical. If I break it, I can easily get another one. It is microwave safe, so when I'm in a hurry I can reheat things quickly. It is washable and reusable, so it doesn't create a lot of trash (*values efficiency and practicality*).

Making a claim: what does the object represent? What does it say about society?

Finally, boil down what you have discovered into a claim, using only your strongest reflections:

My mass-produced ceramic coffee mug is a sign of a system that believes in technological progress, efficiency, and convenience. Even the decoration is machine-produced, suggesting that this system does not value the slow, intuitive process of human artists and craftsmen. The decoration furthermore suggests that femininity is trivialized and feminine power marginalized, while the power of mass production and technology are most likely wielded by males. This culture values speed, convenience, and masculinity over patience, craftsmanship, and femininity.

As with any brainstorm, develop only your strongest points instead of trying to fit everything in. What you bring to the analysis—your personal history, your values, your interpretations—will make it unique.

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



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