

Semiotic/cultural analysis brainstorm questions

Semiotics is the study and interpretation of cultural signs: words, objects, images, or behaviors that bear meaning. For example, a red light is a sign. But signs derive their meaning from the context in which they are found, so to determine the meaning of a red light, we must first place it in a wider context. A red light at a busy intersection means one thing, and a red light in front of a brothel means something else.

1. First ask yourself questions about the word, object, image, or behavior in order to place it in an appropriate context, of *system*, of similar things.

Discovering the *context*, or *system*, of a sign:

Some questions to ask	Example brainstorming...
What is the cultural sign (word, object, image or 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?	<i>Styro</i> was popular when everyone was in a hurry and disposability was considered a virtue, before global warming became a serious issue. <i>Travel mugs</i> appeared later, with awareness of global warming and landfill overflow. <i>Teacups</i> remind me of pre-modern, Victorian times. <i>Pottery</i> has fingerprints in it!
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?	

2. Next, identify a *value system* represented by the sign by asking more questions. 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 youth? With age? With individuality? With the group? With the mystics or with the scientists?

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

Some questions to ask

Example brainstorming

What does this thing suggest about the relative values of--

Individuality, independence?
Cooperation, community?
The roles of men? The roles of women?
Children and youth?
The elderly and aging?
Money—spending, saving, sharing it?
Work, industry?
Business, technology?
Relaxation, recreation?
Law, justice, rules?
Compassion, kindness?
Freedom, self-determination?
Bondage, slavery, entrapment?
Religion, spirituality, mysticism?
Science, secularism?
Progress, evolution?
Cheating, opportunism?
Honesty, candor?
Perfection, uniformity, excellence?
Imperfection, variation, flaws?
Art, music, craft?
Efficiency, method?
Intuition, instinct?
Impatience, hurry?
Patience, waiting?
Logic, reason, practicality?
Education, teaching, learning?

My coffee mug is mass produced in a factory, not made by an individual craftsman.

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.

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.

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.

My mug is decorated, but by machine, so it is kind of pretty, but has no real artistic merit.

It is not as beautiful as a teacup, but it 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.

My mug represents a belief in progress, technology, & convenience. Femininity seems trivialized. Art seems less important than convenience. Power lies with males & makers, who use science & technology (applied science) efficiently and profit from producing inexpensive consumer items in large numbers.

What ideology or worldview does this thing represent?

Where does this sign suggest power is to be found?

What is this thing really saying?

3. 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 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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