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Cigarettes and High Heels: The Universe of Signs

A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?
—Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

It's eight o'clock on a Saturday night. Two cool-looking people, both in their late twenties, are sitting across from each other at an elegantly set table in a trendy restaurant, located in the downtown area of a North American city. For convenience, let's call them Cheryl and Ted. Other couples are seated at tables in other parts of the eatery. The lights are turned down low. The atmosphere is unmistakably romantic, sustained by the soft, mellifluous sounds of a three-piece jazz band playing in the background. Cheryl and Ted are sipping drinks, making small talk, looking coyly into each other's eyes. At a certain point, they decide to step outside for a few moments and engage in a shared activity—smoking cigarettes in a secluded area outside the restaurant, set aside for smokers. Smoking is a tradition that this particular restaurant has decided to preserve, despite great opposition to it from city legislators, not to mention society. The scene overall is distinctly reminiscent of a classic Hollywood romantic movie.

What Cheryl and Ted do not know is that nearby is a semiotician, whom we shall call Martha, quietly and unobtrusively capturing their actions and conversations on a smartphone both inside and outside the restaurant. Martha is our research assistant, assigned to record our couple's words, facial expressions, body language, and other behaviors on her mobile device, so that we can dissect them semiotically. Her device transmits the images and sounds simultaneously to a remote monitoring computer to which we have access.

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Let's start by first examining the smoking gestures that our two subjects made. As the video starts, we see Cheryl taking her cigarette out of its package in a slow, deliberate manner, inserting it coquettishly into the middle of her mouth, then bringing the flame of a match towards it in a leisurely, drawn-out fashion. Next to Cheryl, we see Ted also taking his cigarette from its package, but, in contrast, he employs a terse movement, inserting it into the side of his mouth, and then lighting it with a swift hand action. As the two puff away, we see Cheryl keeping the cigarette between her index and third fingers, periodically flicking the ashes into an outside ashtray provided by the restaurant for smokers, inserting and removing the cigarette from her mouth, always with graceful, circular, slightly swooping motions of the hand. Occasionally, she tosses her long, flowing hair back, away from her face. Ted is leaning against a nearby wall, keeping his head taut, looking straight, holding his cigarette between the thumb and middle finger, guiding it to the side of his mouth with sharp, pointed movements. Cheryl draws in smoke slowly, retaining it in her mouth for a relatively longer period than Ted, exhaling the smoke in an upwards direction with her head tilted slightly to the side, and, finally, extinguishing her cigarette in the ashtray. Ted inhales smoke abruptly, keeping the cigarette in his mouth for a relatively shorter period of time, blowing the smoke in a downward direction (with his head slightly aslant), and then extinguishing the cigarette by pressing down on the butt with his thumb, almost as if he were effacing or destroying evidence.

Cigarettes and Courtship

Welcome to the world of the semiotician who is, above all else, a "people-watcher," observing how individuals and groups behave in everyday situations, always asking: What does this or that *mean*? Meaning is the sum and substance of what semioticians study, no matter in what form it comes, small or large, so to speak. So, let's start our excursion into the fascinating world of semiotics by unraveling what the various gestures and movements recorded by Martha might mean. But before starting, it might be useful to check whether there is some historically based link between smoking, sex, and romance.

Tobacco is native to the Western Hemisphere and was part of rituals of the Maya and other Native peoples, believing that it had medicinal and powerful mystical properties. As Jason Hughes has aptly put it, "Tobacco was used to appease the spiritual hunger, thereby gaining favors and good fortune."[1] The Arawak society of the Caribbean, as observed by none other than Christopher Columbus in 1492, smoked tobacco with a tube they called a *tobago*, from

which the word *tobacco* is derived. Brought to Spain in 1556, tobacco was introduced to France in the same year by the French diplomat Jean Nicot, from whose name we get the term *nicotine*. In 1585 the English navigator, Sir Francis Drake, took tobacco to England, where the practice of pipe smoking became popular almost immediately, especially among Elizabethan courtiers. From there, tobacco use spread throughout Europe and the rest of the world. By the seventeenth century it had reached China, Japan, the west coast of Africa, and other regions.

By the early twentieth century cigarette smoking became a routine activity in many societies. In America alone more than one thousand cigarettes per person each year were being consumed. American society at the time believed that smoking was not only highly fashionable, but that it also relieved tensions and produced physical health benefits. During World War II, physicians encouraged sending soldiers cigarettes in ration kits. However, epidemiologists started noticing around 1930 that lung cancer—rare before the twentieth century—had been increasing dramatically. The rise in lung cancer rates among the returning soldiers eventually raised a red flag. The American Cancer Society and other organizations initiated studies comparing deaths among smokers and nonsmokers, finding significant differential rates of cancer between the two. In 1964 the U.S. Surgeon General's report affirmed that cigarette smoking was a health hazard of sufficient importance to warrant the inclusion of a warning on cigarette packages. Cigarette advertising was banned from radio and television, starting in 1971. In the 1970s and 1980s several cities and states passed laws requiring nonsmoking sections in enclosed public and work places. In February 1990 federal law banned smoking on all domestic airline flights of less than six hours. Today, there are laws throughout North America that prohibit smoking in public places, buildings, and vehicles. The goal of society over the last decades has been to achieve a smoke-free world.

Yet in spite of the health dangers and all the legislative and practical obstacles, a sizeable portion of the population continues to smoke. Although there has been a dramatic shift in how tobacco is perceived across the world, many still desire to smoke.[2] Why do people smoke, despite the harm that smoking poses and despite its prohibition virtually everywhere? People smoke, or at least start smoking, because it is socially meaningful (or at least fashionable). To the semiotician, this comes as no surprise, since cigarettes have, throughout their history, been perceived as signs of something desirable or attractive. Let's consider what these might be.

The smoking scene that Martha captured on video is identifiable essentially as an ersatz courtship display, a recurrent, largely unconscious, pre-mating ritual rooted in gesture, body poses, and physical actions that keep the two

sexes differentiated and highly interested in each other. As Margaret Leroy has suggested, such actions are performed because sexual traditions dictate it.[3] Let's scrutinize Cheryl's smoking gestures more closely. The way in which she held the cigarette invitingly between her index and middle fingers, fondling it gently, and then inserting it into the middle of her mouth, slowly and deliberately, constitutes a sequence of unconscious movements that convey sexual interest in her partner. At the same time, she exhibits her fingers and wrist to her suitor, areas of the body that have erotic overtones. Finally, her hair-tossing movements, as she simultaneously raises a shoulder, constitute powerful erotic signals as well.

Ted's gestures form a sequential counterpart to Cheryl's, emphasizing masculinity. Her movements are slow, his movements are abrupt; she puffs the smoke upwards, he blows it downwards; she holds the cigarette in a tantalizing dangling manner between her index and middle fingers, he holds it in a sturdy way between his thumb and middle finger; she puts out the cigarette with a lingering hand movement, he crushes it forcefully. Overall, her gestures convey smooth sensuality, voluptuousness, sultriness; his gestures suggest toughness, determination, and control. She is playing the female role and he the male one in this unconscious courtship display—roles determined largely by culture, and especially by the images of smoking that come out of classic Hollywood movies, which can be analyzed in exactly the same way.

Smoking in contexts such as this one is essentially romantic fun and games. Moreover, because it is now socially proscribed, it is probably even more fun to do (at least for some people). The history of smoking shows that tobacco has, in fact, been perceived at times as a desirable activity and at others as a forbidden one.[4] But in almost every era, as Richard Klein[5] has argued, cigarettes have had some connection to something that is erotically, socially, or intellectually appealing—musicians smoke; intellectuals smoke; artists smoke; and to this day romantic partners smoke (despite all the warnings). Movies have always told us that cigarettes are meaningful props in sex and romance, as do advertisements for cigarettes. Smoking is, in a word, a sexual language, which, as Michael Starr puts it, is designed to convey "certain qualities of the smoker."[6]

Ever since it fell out of the social mainstream, smoking has entered the alluring world of the *verboten*. Anytime something becomes taboo it takes on powerful symbolism—the more forbidden and the more dangerous, the sexier and more alluring it is. Smoking communicates rebellion, defiance, and sexuality all wrapped into one. No wonder then that regulations aimed at curbing the marketing and sale of tobacco products to young people have failed miserably in deterring them from smoking. As Tara Parker-Pope has aptly put it:

"For 500 years, smokers and tobacco makers have risked torture and even death at the hands of tobacco's enemies, so it's unlikely that a bunch of lawyers and politicians and the looming threat of deadly disease will fell either the industry or the habit."[7]

The smoking gestures that Martha recorded are performed in parallel situations throughout many secular societies as part of urban courtship rituals; they form what semioticians call a *code*. Codes are systems of *signs*—gestures, movements, words, glances—that allow people to make and send out meaningful messages in specific situations. Codes mediate relationships between people and are, therefore, effective shapers of how we think of others and of ourselves. The smoking routines caught on Martha's video are part of a courtship code that unconsciously dictates not only smoking styles, but also how individuals act, move, dress, and the like, in order to present an appropriate romantic persona.

The particular enactment of the code will vary in detail from situation to situation, from person to person, but its basic structure will remain the same. The code provides a script for social performances. No wonder, then, that teenagers tend to take up smoking, early on in their tentative ventures into adulthood.[8] In several research projects that I undertook in the 1990s and early 2000s, I noticed that adolescents put on the same type of smoking performances that our fictional restaurant protagonists did, using cigarettes essentially as "cool props," albeit in different situations (in school yards, in malls, at parties).[9] Cigarette smoking in adolescence is, in a phrase, a coming-of-age rite, a ritualized performance designed to send out signals of maturity and attractiveness to peers.

Smoking performances raise key questions about ritualistic behaviors. In biology, the word *sex* alludes to the physical and behavioral differences that distinguish most organisms according to their role in the reproductive process. Through these differences, termed *male* and *female,* the individual members of a species assume distinct sexual roles. Therefore, sensing the other person's sex is an innate or instinctual biological *mechanism*, as it is called. This mechanism is sensitive to mating signals emitted during estrus (going into heat). However, at some point in its evolutionary history the human species developed a capacity and need to engage in sex independently of estrus. Other animals experience chemical and physical changes in the body during estrus, which stimulate desire. Humans, however, often experience desire first, which then produces changes in the body.

The biologist Charles Darwin (1809–82) called courtship displays "submissive," because they are designed to send out the message, *Notice me, I am attractive and harmless*. In effect, Cheryl's coy glances are opening gambits in

courtship. Her shoulder shrug and her head-tilting are examples of submissive gestures. However, human courtship is not controlled exclusively by biological mechanisms. Smoking has nothing to do with biology. A cigarette is an imaginary prop, not a biological mechanism. Smoking unfolds as a *text*—literally, a "weaving together" of the signs taken from a specific code. Together with the gestures, bodily postures, and other actions shown on Martha's video, smoking constitutes a *courtship text*—an unconscious script that is performed at locales such as restaurants.

Therefore, the human story of courtship has many more chapters in it than a purely biological version of it would reveal. Nature creates sex; culture creates gender roles. This is why there are no gender universals. Traditionally, in Western society, men have been expected to be the sex seekers, to initiate courtship, and to show an aggressive interest in sex; but among the Zuñi peoples of New Mexico, these very same actions and passions, are expected of the women. Recently a society-wide process that can be called "degendering," or the tendency to blur and even eliminate traditional gender roles, has been occurring in many contemporary cultures. Moreover, today transgendered individuals, that is, those who identify with a gender other than the biological one, have made it obvious that gender, rather than sex, is indeed a human construct.

The views people develop of gender shape feelings and guide their attempts to make sense of a kiss, a touch, a look, and the like. These are products of a culture's history. This is why there is so much variable opinion across the world, and even within a single society, as to what is sexually appropriate behavior and what body areas are erotic. The people of one culture may regard legs, earlobes, and the back of the neck as sexually attractive. But those of another may find nothing at all sexual about these body parts. What is considered sexual or appropriate sexual behavior in some cultures is considered nonsense or sinfulness in others.

Enter the Semiotician

Now that we have identified the smoking gestures made by Cheryl and Ted as signs in a courtship code, our next task is to unravel how this code came about. The association of smoking with sexual attractiveness can probably be traced back to the jazz night club scene of the first decades of the twentieth century. The word *jazz* originally had sexual connotations; and to this day the verb form, *to jazz*, suggests such connotations. The jazz clubs, known as "speakeasies," were locales where young people went to socialize and to smoke, away from the eyes of social elders during Prohibition. The latter was intended

to curtail sexual and obscene behaviors, in addition to prohibiting alcohol consumption. As mentioned, anything that is forbidden becomes attractive. And this is what happened in the 1920s, when speakeasies became the rage at night. The cigarette-smoking courtship code was forged then and there. Although smoking is diminishing in the face of a society-wide onslaught on it, it still goes on because, as in the 1920s, it is part of a code that is perceived to be enjoyable, sexy, and subversive against systems that want to prohibit it.

Certainly, the movies and advertisers have always known this to their great advantage. Director Gjon Mili, for instance, captured the night club allure of smoking memorably in his 1945 movie, *Jammin' the Blues*. In the opening segment, there is a close-up of the great saxophonist Lester Young inserting a cigarette gingerly into his mouth, then dangling it between his index and middle fingers as he plays a slow, soft, style of jazz for his late-night audience. The makers of Camel cigarettes strategically revived this scene in their advertising campaigns of the early 1990s, with ads showing images of a camel, dressed in an evening jacket, playing the piano in a club setting, a cigarette dangling suggestively from the side of his mouth. Those ads were clearly designed to evoke the cool smoothness and finesse embodied by jazz musicians of a bygone and now mythical era.

The sexual subtleties of the jazz club scene were captured as well by Michael Curtiz in his 1942 movie, *Casablanca*. Cigarettes are the dominant props in Rick's café. There is a particularly memorable scene at the start of the movie. Swaggering imperiously in his realm, with cigarette in hand, Rick (Humphrey Bogart) goes up to Ingrid Bergman, expressing concern over the fact that she had had too much to drink. Dressed in white, like a knight in shining armor, Bogart comes to the aid of a "damsel in distress," sending her home to sober up. As he admonishes her, Bogart takes out another cigarette from its package, inserting it into his mouth. He lights it, letting it dangle from the side of his mouth. So captivating was this image of coolness to cinema-goers, that it became an instant paradigm of masculinity imitated by hordes of young men throughout society. In a scene in Jean Luc Godard's 1959 movie, *Breathless*, Jean-Paul Belmondo stares at a poster of Bogart in a movie window display. He takes out a cigarette and starts smoking it, imitating Bogart in *Casablanca*. With the cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth, the tough-looking Belmondo approaches his female mate with a blunt, "Sleep with me tonight?"

The "Bogartian cigarette image," as it can be called, has found its way into the scripts of many movies. For instance, in the car chicken scene of Nicholas Ray's 1955 movie, *Rebel without a Cause*, James Dean, one of two combatants, can be seen behind the wheel of his car, getting ready for battle, with a cigarette dangling in Bogartian style from the side of his mouth. In Michelangelo

Antonioni's 1966 movie, *Blow Up*, Vanessa Redgrave swerves her head excitedly to the jazz rock music that David Hemmings, her paramour, has put on his record player. He then gives her the cigarette he had in his own mouth. She takes it quickly, eager to insert it into her own mouth. But, no, Hemmings instructs her, she must slow the whole performance down; she must go "against the beat," as he puts it. Leaning forward, Redgrave takes the cigarette and inserts it slowly and seductively into the middle of her mouth. She lies back salaciously, blowing the smoke upwards. She gives Hemmings back the cigarette, giggling suggestively. He takes it and inserts it into his own mouth, slightly to the side, in Bogartian style, visibly overcome by the erotic power of her smoking performance.

Such images have become emblazoned in the collective memory of our culture, even though starting in the mid-1990s, Hollywood became politically correct, producing fewer and fewer movies with cigarettes in them. Nevertheless, the "history of smoking," as captured by the movies, explains why, in situations that call for romance, a skillful use of the cigarette as a prop continues to be perceived as enhancing romance. All this reveals something truly extraordinary about the human species. People will do something, even if it puts their lives at risk, for no other reason than it is *interesting.* Smoking in modern-day societies makes courtship interesting. A colleague of mine once quipped that semiotics can be defined as the study of "anything that is interesting."

Cigarettes Are Signs

As the foregoing discussion was meant to suggest, cigarettes are hardly just cigarettes (nicotine sticks). As mentioned, the cigarette is a *sign* that conjures up images and meanings of sexual cool. It also has (or has had) other meanings. When females started smoking in the early part of the twentieth century, the cigarette was perceived as a threatening symbol of equality and independence to the patriarchal culture at the time. A particular brand of cigarettes, *Virginia Slims*, has always played precisely on this meaning, equating cigarette smoking with female power and women's liberation. From the outset, the brand has emphasized that smoking, once considered a "male thing," has empowered females, providing them with a symbolic prop through which they can tacitly communicate their independence from social patriarchy. For women to smoke "their own brand" of cigarette has, in fact, been promoted by the company as a subversive social act. It is relevant to note, however, that

women in previous centuries smoked things such as cigars and pipes, not cigarettes. As Hughes puts it, cigarette smoking was likely the result of male smokers' attempts "to distance their forms of tobacco use from that of women."[10]

The basic goal of semiotics is to identify what constitutes a sign and to infer, document, or ascertain what its meanings are. First, a sign must have distinctive physical structure. The shape of a cigarette, for example, allows us to differentiate it from other smoking materials such as cigars and pipes. This is called vicariously the *signifier*, the *representamen*, or even just the *sign*. The term *signifier* will be used in this book simply for the sake of convenience. Second, a sign must refer to something. In the case of the cigarette, it can be sexual cool, jazz clubs, Humphrey Bogart, and the like. This is designated the *referent*, *object*, or *signified*. The term *signified* will be used in this book. This is more precise than the term "meaning," because it entails an inextricable psychological connection between the form (signifier) and what it encodes (signified). Finally, a sign evokes particular thoughts, ideas, feelings, and perceptions differentially in people. This is called, alternately, *signification*, *interpretation*, or simply *meaning*. All three terms will be used in this book. Cigarettes are clearly signs because they have all three aspects—they have physical structure, they refer to specific ideas, and, of course, they evoke different interpretations in different people.

A sign carries within it a slice of a culture's history. Take Salem cigarettes as a case in point. In the late 1990s the makers of the cigarettes created an abstractly designed package, imitative of symbolist or expressionist style. The company mailed out a sample package along with four gift packages—a box of peppermint tea, a container of Chinese fortune cookies, a bottle of mint-scented massage gel, and finally a candle—throughout the country. Each package came with a coupon for a free pack of cigarettes. The package's new design, along with the occult nature of the gifts, were designed to impart a mystical aura to the cigarettes. It is no coincidence that the name of the brand itself is suggestive of the occult. The Salem witchcraft trials—the result of the largest witch hunt in American history—were held in 1692 in Salem, a town in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The cigarette's name is, in effect, a signifier that suggests an emotionally charged period in American history (the signified), no matter what interpretation we assign to the cigarette and its eponymous historical event.

The scholar who coined the terms *signifier* and *signified* was the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). For Saussure, the meanings of a sign were fixed socially by convention. Moreover, he believed that the choice of a particular sign to stand for something was largely an arbitrary process; that is, he did not think that it was motivated by any attempt to make it

replicate, simulate, or imitate any perceivable feature of the entity to which it referred. For Saussure, onomatopoeic words—words that imitate the sound of the concept to which they refer (*chirp*, *drip*, *boom*, *zap*, and so on)—were the exception, not the rule, in how language signs are constructed. Moreover, the highly variable nature of onomatopoeia across languages suggested to him that even this phenomenon was subject to arbitrary social conventions. For instance, the sounds made by a rooster are rendered by *cock-a-doodle-do* in English, but by *chicchirichì* (pronounced "keekeereekee") in Italian; similarly, the barking of a dog is conveyed by *bow-wow* in English but by *ouaoua* (pronounced "wawa") in French. Saussure argued that such signs were only approximate, and more or less conventional, imitations of perceived sounds.

However, Saussure, a brilliant historical linguist, appears to have ignored the historical nature of sign-making processes. While the relation of a word to its referent can be argued logically to be arbitrary, the historical record often reveals a different story. It seems that the inventors of many words have, in fact, attempted to capture the sounds of the things to which they referred. Thus, even a word such as *flow*, which means "to run like water or to move in a current or stream," has phonic qualities that clearly suggest the movement of water. It is unlikely that a hypothetical word such as *plock* would have been coined in its stead, for the simple reason that it is counterintuitive in referential terms.

Similarly, the phallic form of a cigarette and its association with sexuality is hardly an arbitrary matter—at least to human perception. It is what stands out in Rick's Café, in which it clearly suggests masculinity, and in *Virginia Slim* ads, where it subverts this meaning. The view that signs are forged initially to simulate something noticeable about a referent was, in fact, the one put forward by the American philosopher Charles Peirce (1839–1914), who argued that signs are attempts to resemble reality, but are no longer perceived as such because time and use have made people forget how they came about. For example, the cross in Christian religions is now perceived largely as a symbolic, conventional sign standing for "Christianity" as a whole. However, the cross sign was obviously created as an attempt to resemble the actual shape of the cross on which Christ was crucified.[11]

Most people, whether or not they speak English or Italian, will notice an attempt in both the words described earlier, *cock-a-doodle-do* and *chicchirichì*, to imitate rooster sounds. The reason why the outcomes are different is, in part, because of differences in the respective sound systems of the two languages. Such attempts, as Peirce suggested, can be easily recognized in many words, even though people no longer consciously experience them as imitative forms.

Binary Versus Triadic Models of the Sign

There is one more technical matter to discuss here before proceeding. Saussure's model of the sign is called *binary*, because it involves two dimensions—form and meaning. And, as discussed, the connection between the two is seen as arbitrary. Nevertheless, it is a theory of mind, since it suggests that the particular thoughts that come to mind are evoked by the particular forms we have created to encode them and, vice versa, if a specific thought comes to mind then we instantly search for the appropriate word that encodes it. So, if we see a particular plant in our line of vision and we have the word *tree* in our mental lexicon, the image in our mind and the word form a blend. Vice versa, when we use the word *tree* the image is also evoked simultaneously.

Although this seems to be a simple model of cognition today, it is still interesting and useful on several counts. First, it does make a connection between form and meaning in a concrete way. A signifier cannot exist without a signified, and vice versa. Plants are perceived as indistinct impressions. They cone into mental focus when we have a word that makes a selection among these impressions. This is what happens when we use the word *tree.* It selects from among an infinite set of possibilities and thus allows us to focus specifically on a particular domain of reference. Putting aside the fact that the connection may not be arbitrary, as Saussure maintained, it is still a remarkable yet simple theory of cognition. Binary structure is manifest in many artificial systems as well, such as alarm systems with their "on-off" structure, binary digits, digital computers, and others.

Peirce's model of the sign is called *triadic* because, essentially, it adds a third component to the binary model—interpretation. As we shall see, there is much more to the Peircean model. For the present purpose, suffice it to say that it suggests an inherent connection between form and reference—the two interact dynamically with each other, as we saw with the word *flow*. So, rather than being called arbitrary, the model is called motivated. This means essentially that when we create signs we are attempting to reproduce some sensory aspect of their referent (which Peirce called *object*) into their structure. The word *flow* is an attempt to simulate the sound that moving water makes to our ears. Because of this, interpretations of the sign will vary considerably, as we shall also see. Peirce called these *interpretants*, which are the meanings that a sign accrues in some context, at some point in time. Although the distinction between binary and triadic may seem somewhat irrelevant at this point, it is really critical, especially today within disciplines such as cognitive science. The triadic model suggests that we come up with signs not arbitrarily, but by

amalgamating the body and the mind; in the binary model we can easily separate the two (given the arbitrary nature of the connection). The triadic one describes human intelligence rather nicely; the binary one describes artificial intelligence much better instead.

High Heels Are Signs Too

Martha's video of the restaurant scene has captured many more interesting things for us to examine semiotically. At one point, Martha zeroed in with her device on Cheryl's shoes. As you might have guessed, Cheryl was wearing high heel shoes. Why? In prehistoric times people went barefoot. The first foot coverings were probably made of animal skins, which the peoples of the Bronze Age (approximately 3000 BCE) in northern Europe and Asia tied around their ankles in cold weather. Such footwear was the likely ancestor of the European and native North American skin moccasin and the leather and felt boots still worn by many throughout the world. The original purpose of such footwear was, no doubt, to protect the feet and to allow people to walk comfortably, or at least painlessly, on rough terrain. Now, consider high heel shoes. They are uncomfortable and awkward to wear, yet millions of women wear them. Obviously, the semiotic story of such shoes has parts to it that have little to do with protection and locomotion. Similar to cigarettes, they are signs, as are all kinds of shoes—the strength of the Roman army was built practically and symbolically on the walking power symbolized by the soldier's boots; many children's stories revolve around shoes or boots that magically enable some hero to cover great distances at great speed; Hermes, the Greek god, traveled in winged sandals; and the list could go on and on.

High heel shoes are elegant, stylish, and sexy. The perception of high heels as stylish footwear dates back to fourteenth-century Venice when aristocratic women donned them to set themselves apart socially from peasant and servant women. In the sixteenth century, Caterina de' Medici (1519–89), the Florentine-born queen of France, donned a pair of high heel shoes for her marriage to Henry II in Paris in 1533. The event engendered a fashion craze among the French aristocracy (male and female), encouraged by Louis XIV of France, who apparently wore them to increase his modest height. The high heel shoe was, semiotically speaking, a signifier of nobility, and the higher the heel the higher the rank of the wearer. It was in the mid-nineteenth century that heeled shoes—low-cut, laced or buttoned to the ankle—became the fashion craze among all classes of females, who wore them to keep up their dresses from dragging along the ground. During that period, known as the Victorian

era, the shoes became, for the first time in their history, gendered signs of female beauty and sexuality. The reason for this is obvious to this day—high heels force the body to tilt, raising the buttocks and giving prominence to the breasts. They also give glimpses of the woman's feet in a tantalizing manner, thus accentuating the role of female feet in the history of sexuality, as the social historian William Rossi has documented.[12] In fairy tales, the "lure of the shoe" is found in stories such as *Cinderella* and *The Golden Slipper*.

This history would explain why high heels are often perceived to be *fetishes*—signs that evoke devotion to themselves, rather than what they stand for. In some cultures, this devotion results from the belief that the shoes have magical or metaphysical attributes, as is evidenced by cross-cultural narratives in which shoes are portrayed as magical objects. In psychology, the term *fetish* refers instead to objects or body parts through which sexual fantasies are played out. Common fetishes are feet, shoes, stockings, and articles of intimate female apparel. Psychologists believe that fetishism serves to alleviate feelings of sexual inadequacy, usually among males. However, in a fascinating book, Valerie Steele[13] has argued that we are all fetishists to an extent, and that the line between the "normal" and the "abnormal" in sexual preferences and behaviors is a blurry one indeed. Fashion designers, for instance, steal regularly from the fetishist's closet, promoting ultra-high heels, frilly underwear, latex suits, and the like. The appropriation has been so complete that people wearing such footwear, garments, and apparel are generally unaware of their fetishist origins.

The high heels worn by Cheryl in our fictitious scene allowed her to send out various interpretants connected to their semiotic history—stylishness, fetishness, and eroticism—all meanings that are reinforced in media and pop culture representations of various kinds, from movies to ads. It would appear that the human mind is fundamentally a historical sensor of meanings, even when these are buried somewhere deeply within it. High heel shoes are part of fantasy. Claire Underwood, as the ruthless political wife in *House of Cards*, would be perceived as less alluring and thus dangerous without her killer heels. On the screen and in ads, high heels can make a woman look more powerful.

The System of Everyday Life

Cigarettes and high heel shoes provide human beings with unique kinds of tools to act out their constantly varying roles on the stage of everyday life. The sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–82) drew attention to the idea that everyday

life is very much like the theater,[14] because it involves a skillful staging of character according to social context. The two protagonists in our imaginary scene are indeed "character actors" who employ gestures, props, and conversation to impress each other for a specific reason—romance. The Latin term for "cast of characters" is *dramatis personae*, literally, "the persons of the drama," a term betraying the theatrical origin of our concept of personhood.[15] We seem, in a phrase, to perceive life as a stage.

The question of how this perception came about in the first place is an intriguing one. The scientific record suggests that life in early hominid groups revolved around duties associated with hunting, crop-gathering, and cooking. These were shared by individuals to enhance the overall efficiency of the group. As the brain of these early hominids developed, their ability to communicate their thoughts increased proportionately. Plaster casts of skulls dating back approximately one hundred thousand years, which allow scientists to reconstruct ancient brains, reveal that brain size was not much different from current brain size. Cave art starts appearing shortly after, and linguists speculate that human speech had also emerged. About ten thousand years ago, plants were domesticated, followed shortly after by the domestication of animals. This agricultural revolution set the stage for the advent of civilization.

The first human groups with language developed an early form of culture, to which archeological scientists refer as the *tribe*, a fully functional system of group life to which even modern humans seem instinctively to relate. The basis of such cultures was ritual—a set of actions accompanied by words intended to bring about certain events or to signify such critical events as birth, the coming-of-age, matrimony, and death. Ritual is the predecessor of theater. In complex societies, where various cultures, subcultures, countercultures, and parallel cultures are in constant competition with each other, and where the shared territory is too large to allow for members of the society to come together for salient ritualistic purposes, the tendency for individuals is to relate instinctively to smaller tribal-type groups (communities, clubs, and so on) and their peculiar rituals. This inclination towards *tribalism*, as the communications theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911–80) emphasized, reverberates constantly within humans, and its diminution in modern urban societies may be the source of the sense of alienation that many people who live in complex and impersonal social settings experience.

Archaeological evidence suggests that as the members of the early tribes became more culturally sophisticated, that is, as their expressive capacities and technological systems grew in complexity, they sought larger and larger territories in order to accommodate their new and growing social needs. The tribes thus grew in population and diversity, cooperating or amalgamating with other tribes in their new settings. The anthropologist Desmond Morris has

called the complex tribal systems that came into existence *super-tribes*, because of expansion and amalgamation.[16] The first super-tribes date back only around five thousand or so years, when the first city-states emerged.

A modern society is a super-tribe, a collectivity of individuals who do not necessarily trace their ancestral roots to the founding tribe, but who nevertheless participate in the cultural rituals of that tribe as it has evolved over time. Such participation allows individuals to interact in both spontaneous and patterned ways that are perceived as "normal." Unlike tribes, however, the mode of interaction does not unfold on a personal level because it is impossible to know, or know about, everyone living in the same super-tribe. Moreover, a society often encompasses more than one cultural system. Consider what people living in the society known as the United States call loosely "American culture." This culture traces its origins to an amalgam of the cultural systems of the founding tribes of European societies who settled in the U.S. American society has also accommodated aboriginal and other parallel cultural systems, with different ways of life, different languages, and different rituals. Unlike their tribal ancestors, Americans can therefore live apart from the dominant cultural system, in a parallel one, or become members of a subculture; they can also learn and utilize different semiotic codes, each leading to the adoption of different communication and lifestyle systems.

The Science of Signs

Semiotics has never really caught on widely as an autonomous discipline in academia (or in society at large), as have other sciences of human nature, such as anthropology and psychology. There are various reasons for this, but perhaps the most understandable one is that it is difficult to define semiotics and to locate it within the traditional academic landscape. Yet, to a large extent, everybody is a semiotician, whether they know it or not. As we have seen earlier, semiotic method is something we engage in all the time. When we instinctively pose the question of what something means, in effect, we are engaging in basic semiotic thinking. In addition, as mentioned, we find this *interesting*. Semiotics constitutes a "questioning form" of investigation into the nature of things that is not unlike the type of reasoning used by detectives, fictional or real-life. In fact, detective stories are really semiotic investigations in disguise. This is probably what makes them so popular. In 2003, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* became a runaway international bestseller and pop culture phenomenon in large part because it was based on semiotic method, and certainly not on historical fact. The hero, a Harvard professor named

Robert Langdon, attempts to solve a historical mystery connecting Jesus and Mary Magdalene by using his knowledge of "symbology," which the novel defines as the study of signs and symbols. A large part of the allure of that novel comes, arguably, from the hero's ability to interpret the signs of the mystery in the same tradition of other fictional detective "symbologists," from C. Auguste Dupin to Sherlock Holmes and Poirot. "Symbology" is Dan Brown's rendering of "semiotics."

The term *semiotics* was applied for the first time to the study of the symptoms produced by the body. Hippocrates (c. 460–c. 377 BCE), the founder of Western medical science, defined a symptom as a *semeion* ("sign" or "mark" in Greek) of changes in normal bodily functions and processes. He argued that the visible features of the semeion help a physician identify a disease, malady, or ailment, calling the technique of diagnosis *semeiotike*. The basic analytical concept implicit in *semeiotike* was extended by philosophers to include human-made signs (such as words). The Greek philosopher Plato (c. 427–c. 347 BCE), for instance, was intrigued by the fact that a single word had the capacity to refer not to specific objects, but to objects that resemble each other in some identifiable way. For example, the word *circle* does not refer to a unique thing (although it can if need be), but to anything that has the property "circularity"—a particular circle can be altered in size, but it will still be called a *circle* because it possesses this property. Plato's illustrious pupil Aristotle (384–322 BCE) argued that words start out as practical strategies for naming singular things, not properties. It is only after we discover that certain things have similar properties that we start classifying them into categories (such as "circularity"). At such points of discovery, Aristotle argued, we create abstract words that allow us to bring together things that have the similar properties: *plants*, *animals*, *objects*, and so on.

It was St. Augustine (354–430 CE), the early Christian church father and philosopher, who provided the first detailed "theory of the sign." St. Augustine argued that are three types of signs. First, there are natural signs, which include not only bodily symptoms such as those discussed by Hippocrates, but also the rustling of leaves, the colors of plants, the signals that animals emit, and so on. Then there are conventional signs, which are the product of human ingenuity; these include not only words, but also gestures and the symbols that humans invent to serve their psychological, social, and communicative needs. Finally, St. Augustine considered miracles to be messages from God and, thus, sacred signs. These can only be understood on faith, although such understanding is partly based on specific cultural interpretations of them.

Interest in linking human understanding with sign-production waned after the death of St. Augustine. It was only in the eleventh century that such

interest was rekindled, mainly because of the translation of the works of the ancient philosophers. The outcome was the movement known as Scholasticism. The Scholastics asserted that conventional signs captured practical truths and, thus, allowed people to understand reality directly. But within this movement there were some—called nominalists—who argued that "truth" was itself a matter of subjective opinion and that signs captured, at best, only illusory and highly variable human versions of it—a perspective that is strikingly akin to some modern theories of the sign. At about the same time, the English philosopher and scientist Roger Bacon (c. 1214–1292) developed one of the first comprehensive typologies of signs, claiming that, without a firm understanding of the role of signs in human understanding, discussing what truth is or is not would end up being a trivial matter.

For some reason, Bacon's proposal to study signs separately elicited little or no interest until 1690, when British philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) revived it in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke was, in fact, the first ever to put forward the idea of an autonomous mode of philosophical inquiry called *semeiotics*, which he defined as the "doctrine of signs." However, his proposal too garnered little interest, until the nineteenth century when Saussure used the term *semiology*, instead, to suggest that such a doctrine or science was needed.[17] Today, Locke's term, spelled *semiotics*, is the preferred one—the term that Peirce used and put into broad circulation. Modern practices, theories, and techniques are based on one, the other, or both of the writings of Saussure and Peirce—that is, on binary or triadic semiotic methods. Following on their coattails, a number of key intellectuals developed semiotics in the twentieth century into the sophisticated discipline that it has become today. Only a few will be mentioned in passing here. The monumental treatise on the development of sign theory by John Deely, *The Four Ages*, is recommended as a resource for filling in the gaps.[18]

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) suggested that signs were pictures of reality, presenting it as if it were a series of images. This view continues to inform a large part of semiotic theory and practice today. The American semiotician Charles Morris (1901–79) divided semiotic method into the study of sign assemblages (which he called *syntax*), the study of the relations between signs and their meanings (*semantics*), and the study of the relations between signs and their users (*pragmatics*). The Russian-born American semiotician Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) studied various facets of sign construction, but is probably best known for his model of communication, which suggests that sign exchanges are hardly ever neutral but involve subjectivity and goal-attainment of some kind. The French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915–80) illustrated the power of using semiotics for

decoding the hidden meanings in pop culture spectacles such as wrestling matches and Hollywood blockbuster movies. French semiotician Algirdas J. Greimas (1917–92) developed the branch of semiotics known as *narratology*, which studies how human beings in different cultures invent similar kinds of narratives (myths, tales, and so on) with virtually the same stock of characters, motifs, themes, and plots. The late Hungarian-born American semiotician Thomas A. Sebeok (1920–2001) was influential in expanding the semiotic paradigm to include the comparative study of animal signaling systems, which he termed *zoosemiotics*, and the study of *semiosis* in all living things, which has come to be called *biosemiotics*. Semiosis is the innate ability to produce and comprehend signs in a species-specific way. The interweaving and blending of ideas, findings, and scientific discourses from different disciplinary domains was, Sebeok claimed, the distinguishing feature of biosemiotics. Finally, Italian semiotician Umberto Eco (1932–2016) contributed significantly to our understanding of how we interpret signs. He also single-handedly put the term semiotics on the map, so to speak, with his best-selling novel, *The Name of the Rose* published in the early 1980s.

An interesting definition of semiotics has, actually, been provided by Eco himself, in his 1976 book, *A Theory of Semiotics*. He defined it as "the discipline studying everything that can be used in order to lie," because if "something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot, in fact, be used to tell at all."[19] Despite its apparent facetiousness, this is a rather insightful definition. It implies that signs do not tell the whole story, or the whole "truth," as the nominalists claimed. Humans, in fact, talk convincingly all the time about things that are entirely fictitious or imaginary. In a sense, culture is itself a big lie—a break from our biological heritage that has forced us to live mainly by our wits. As Prometheus proclaimed prophetically in Aeschylus' (525–456 BCE) drama *Prometheus Bound*, one day "rulers would conquer and control not by strength, nor by violence, but by cunning." In a similar vein, the ancient Chinese sage Confucius (c. 551–479 BCE) wrote: "Signs and symbols rule the world, not words or laws."

Semiotic method has been defined as *structuralist*, because of its focus on recurring patterns of form and meaning that are captured and expressed by recurring structures in sign systems (as will be discussed in the next chapter). In the 1960s, however, the late influential French semiotician Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) rejected this structuralist premise, proposing a counter-approach that came to be known widely as *post-structuralism*, by which he denounced the search for universal structures in human sign systems. According to Derrida all such systems are self-referential—signs refer to other signs, which refer to still other signs, and so on ad infinitum. Thus, what appears stable and

logical turns out to be illogical and paradoxical. Many semioticians have severely criticized Derrida's radical stance as ignoring veritable discoveries made by structuralism. It has nevertheless had a profound impact on many different fields of knowledge, not just semiotics, including the sciences. Today, semioticians continue to endorse structuralist principles exploring new domains of inquiry, such as cyberspace, artificial intelligence, and the Internet. Some of their ideas are discussed subsequently in this book.

The view of semiotics as a *science* is not the traditional one. Traditionally, this term has designated the objective knowledge of facts of the natural world, gained and verified by exact observation, experiment, and ordered thinking. However, the question as to whether or not human nature can be studied with the same objectivity has always been a problematic one. Indeed, many semioticians refuse to call their field a science, for they believe that any study of the human mind can never be totally objective, preferring instead to characterize it as a doctrine—a set of principles—or a method. In this book, semiotics will be considered a science in the broader sense of the term—namely, as the organized body of knowledge on a particular subject.

Principles of Semiotic Analysis

Three general principles underlie semiotic analysis. These will inform the discussion in the remainder of this book. The first is that all meaning-bearing behaviors and forms of expression have ancient roots, no matter how modern they may appear to be. The first task of the semiotician is, therefore, to unravel the history of signs, just as we did in the case of cigarettes and high heel shoes.

The second principle is that sign systems influence people's notions of what is "normal" in human behavior. The second task of the semiotician is, thus, to expose the sign-based processes behind perceptions of normalcy. In North America it is perceived as "normal" for women to wear high heels and put on lipstick, but "abnormal" for men to do so. In reality, the classification of a clothing item or a cosmetic technique in gender terms is a matter of historically based convention, not of naturalness or lack thereof. In the sixteenth century, high heels, as we saw earlier, were the fashion craze for both female and male aristocrats. This principle is, clearly, a corollary of the first.

The third principle is that the particular system of signs in which one has been reared influences worldview, which is yet another corollary of the first principle. Consider the case of health. In our culture we say that disease "slows us down," "destroys our bodies," or "impairs" body functions. Such expressions reflect a mechanistic view of the body. Tagalog, an indigenous language

of the Philippines, has no such equivalents. Instead, its expressions reveal a holistic view of the body as connected to spiritual forces, to social ambiance, and to nature. People reared in English-speaking cultures are inclined to evaluate disease as a localized phenomenon, within the body, separate from the larger social and ecological context. On the other hand, Tagalog people are inclined to evaluate disease as a response to that very context.

The foregoing discussion does not imply that there are no objectively determinable symptoms or diseases. Humans the world over possess an innate physiological warning system that alerts them to dangerous changes in body states. Many of the symptoms produced by this system have been documented by the modern medical sciences. However, in daily life the human being's evaluation of, and response to, the body's warning signals are mediated by culture. In a perceptive book, *Illness as Metaphor*, the late writer Susan Sontag (1933–2004) cogently argued that it is indeed culture that predisposes people to think of specific illnesses in certain ways. Using the example of cancer, Sontag argued that in the not-too-distant past the very word *cancer* was an emotionally unsettling disease, not just a dangerous physical one: "As long as a particular disease is treated as an evil, invincible predator, not just a disease, most people with cancer will indeed be demoralized by learning what disease they have."[20] In a similar vein, Jacalyn Duffin has argued that diseases are often pure cultural constructs.[21] "Lovesickness," for instance, was once considered a true disease, even though it originated in the poetry of antiquity. Its demise as a disease is due to twentieth-century skepticism. At any given point in time, concepts of disease crystallize from cultural factors, not just from any scientific study of disease. The ways in which a culture defines and represents health will largely determine how it views and treats disease, what life expectancy it sees as normal, and what features of body image it considers to be attractive, ugly, normal, or abnormal. Some cultures view a healthy body as being a lean and muscular one, others a plump and rotund one. Certain cultures perceive a healthy lifestyle as one that is based on rigorous physical activity, while others perceive it as one that is based on a more leisurely and sedentary style of living.

The third principle does not in any way exclude the role of nature in the makeup of humanity in any way. To semioticians, the nature-versus-culture debate is irrelevant, since they see both as partners in *semiosis*—the ability of the human brain to convert perceptions into signs. In other words, cultures are reflections of who we are, not forces constructing us *tabula rasa*. Differences in worldview are, thus, superficial differences in sign-based emphases. It is in exposing those differences that semiotics is best suited, allowing us to understand each other better in the process.

To the semiotician, subjects such as cigarettes and high heels, which might at first appear to be trivial, are highly useful in exposing differences in worldview. Semiotics allows us to filter the signs that swarm and flow through us every day, immunizing us against becoming passive victims of a situation. By understanding the signs, the situation is changed, and we become active interpreters of that situation.

Notes

1. Jason Hughes, *Learning to smoke: Tobacco use in the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 19.
2. Source: *World tobacco market report*, Euromonitor International (Chicago, 2017).
3. Margaret Leroy, *Some girls do: Why women do and don't make the first mov*e (London: Harper Collins, 1997).
4. Jordan Goodman, *Tobacco in history: The cultures of dependence* (London: Routledge, 1993).
5. Richard Klein, *Cigarettes are sublime* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
6. Michael E. Starr, "The Marlboro man: Cigarette smoking and masculinity in America," *Journal of Popular Culture* 17 (1984): 45–56.
7. Tara Parker-Pope, *Cigarettes: Anatomy of an industry from seed to smoke* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 168.
8. According to the 1995 report of the Center for Tobacco Free Kids, nearly 35 percent of teenagers are smokers, many of whom started smoking around 13 years of age. Similar statistics were published in the late 1990s and the first part of the 2000s. The CDC (Centers for Disease Control) reported in 2002 that anti-smoking ads, for example, did little to deter smoking among teens, highlighting the fact that the anti-smoking media campaigns of governments and concerned citizen groups have little effect—1 in 3 still smoke, a percentage that has not changed much since adolescents started smoking *en masse* in the 1950s. The situation is bound to change, however, as the meanings of smoking will change. I have started to notice that teenagers themselves are now finding smoking to be less and less attractive socially.
9. The original research was published in *Cool: The signs and meanings of adolescence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994). In a follow-up project I discovered that not much had changed in virtually two decades after the original project. It would seem that in some matters of human behavior, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, as the French expression goes ("The more it changes, the more it is the same"). Those findings were published in *My son is an alien: A cultural portrait of today's youth* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).
10. Hughes, *Learning to Smoke*, p. 121.

11. Charles Peirce's main semiotic ideas can be found scattered in the *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vols. 1–8, C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (eds.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958).
12. William Rossi, *The sex lives of the foot and shoe* (New York: Dutton, 1976).
13. Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, sex, and power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
14. Erving Goffman, *The presentation of self in everyday life* (Garden City, Conn.: Doubleday, 1959).
15. Lillian Glass, *He says, she says* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1992), 46–8.
16. Desmond Morris, *The human zoo* (London: Cape, 1969).
17. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1916).
18. John Deely, *Four ages of understanding: The first postmodern survey of philosophy from ancient times to the turn of the twentieth century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).
19. Umberto Eco, *A theory of semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).
20. Susan Sontag, *Illness as metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), 7.
21. Jacalyn Duffin, *Disease concepts in history* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

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