A Semiotic Analysis of “After the Louisville Flood, 1937”

BY: Andy Bryce
FOR: David Black, Deborah Hanan
COURSE: PCOM 510
Royal Roads University
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The sign is a key element of the study of Semiotics. The sign can be a word, a picture, or a symbol, indeed almost anything as long as the observer recognizes it as a sign. Ferdinand de Saussure pioneered the work on signs. He divided them into two parts – the actual physical sign (which he called “sound-image”) is the signifier or form, and the concept it represents which is called the signified (he called it the “concept”) (Saussure, 1959) They work together, you cannot have the concept without the form, and the form always has some concept attached to it. A literal sign explains this well – the stop sign. In its form, it is a red hexagon with a word (“Stop” in English) on it. Conceptually it is a symbol of danger and it means the driver must stop the
vehicle, check for vehicles coming along the cross street, wait for them to pass, and then proceed when it is safe. The signifier itself has little meaning— one could simply stop the vehicle and then proceed without regard to the cross street traffic. But when the conceptual notion (danger, look for other vehicles, proceed only when it is safe) is added, the true meaning of the sign becomes clear.

There are a number of signs in this photo. The automobile is a symbol of wealth, as are the clothes of its inhabitants. The smiles on the faces of its occupants are signs of happiness. In contrast, the frowns on the people in the line-up are symbols of unhappiness. The scene depicted on the billboard is an index of movement, giving an element of mobility which relates to the American Way reference in the slogan beside it. The line up on the other hand is an index of stability, indicating that the mobility of the American Way is not available to them; they are waiting.

The third part of the discussion about signs involves the “thing” itself—the referent. This was introduced by Charles Peirce (Chandler, 1994. “Signs”) who used the term “object” rather than referent. The billboard is a symbol of the aspirations of the American Way, inferring that everything is okay and the American Way is working. But on another level it is simply an advertisement.

Myths are the narratives that explain the dominant ideologies of our time. An ideology is a world view that helps explain what is going on around us. Barthes argues that denotation and connotation combine to create myth (Barthes, 1984). Denotation and connotation are concepts based on the word image (signifier) and concept (signified) in Sassaure’s theory. A picture of a Royal Canadian Mounted Police Officer dressed in red serge is itself denotive— at its most
basic level it is only a photo of a Mountie in dress uniform. On the connotative or second level the Mountie represents the idea of an excellent police officer with wholesome qualities. At the Mythic level it represents a society which has authority that is fair, good and effective as indicated in the phrase “the Mounties always get their man”

The myth that is explored here reveals the ideology of the American Way. An ideology is a way for a society to make sense of reality. This one is based in the ideology of hard work and persistence, but it adds the element of class and race. This myth is that poor black people can also enjoy personal and financial success. This photograph questions that myth through the contrast between the white people depicted on the billboard, and the black people lining up for relief supplies below it.

Codes and Convention are linked concepts that lie at the level of parole as described by de Saussure. (Saussure, 1959) Parole is the surface level of communication which leads us to ask; “how was this picture taken, and what is the meaning of the elements of the picture?”

Codes are systems of signs that are governed by rules which a culture agrees to (Chandler, 1994. “Codes”). The observer takes a sign, or series of signs and extracts meaning from them. So when one is driving a car, there are a series of codes which govern behavior. Red means stop, green means go, a flashing arrow to the left means only people turning left may go.

Conventions are the underlying rules by which we respond to signs and they reside within the people who are observing signs. To continue with the driving analogy, two of the most important conventions at play are respect for life and property, and creating an adequate flow of traffic. The codes listed above are shaped by those conventions of safety and efficiency.
In this photograph, the convention is that the written text of the billboard relates to the picture. So the picture of a happy, well-dressed family is a result of the world’s highest standard of living which is a result of the American Way.

There are also four examples of code; two visual and two text-based. The visual of the white family indicates wealth because they are driving a car, and are well-dressed. It also indicates happiness because everyone is smiling. The visual of the black refugees indicates lack of status because they are waiting in a line up. Their clothing indicates they are waiting in the cold, and the baskets and bags they carry indicate they are waiting to get something. No one is smiling, and that of course indicates unhappiness. On the textual side, “standard of living” is code for wealth, while “the American Way” is code for an approach to living which values working hard to reach higher levels of wealth and status.

A paradigm is a category which has a number of values and assumptions associated with it (Chandler, 1994. “Paradigms and Syntagms”). Paradigms and sytagms lie at the level of Langue as defined by de Saussure (Saussure, 1959) Under the paradigm of “father” we have a number of assumptions and values: he’s male, the biological progenitor to a child, protector and provider. In our society we see this paradigm challenged – often a father is not the progenitor – he can be a step-father (which is yet another paradigm), some couples who care for children are gay so the traditional gender assumption is challenged, and sometimes the father neither protects, nor provides. Challenging and thinking about these paradigms often leads to contemplating and challenging the assumptions and values of society.

Among the paradigms in this photo are the Nuclear Family – mother, father, children (and dog). The line up shows the paradigm of the dispossessed. No one is happy, they are
dressed in a variety of clothing, and it is hard to tell what their relationship is to each other – they are a group of individuals which contrasts with the family unit shown in the billboard.

A syntagm is a series of rules used to interpret a text (Chandler, 1994. “Paradigms and Syntagms”). An example of syntagm is composition in visual design. Typically, visual artists, photographers and graphic designers divide a picture into thirds – both vertically and horizontally (Rowse, n.d., “Rule of Thirds”). The intersections of vertical thirds and horizontal thirds are considered “power” places in the picture. Also, the relative position of the thirds is important – so the top two intersections have more importance than the bottom two. In this photograph, the top left spot is occupied by the smiling face of a young woman, presumably the daughter of the couple in the front seat. Her image is the wholesome, happy white girl. At the opposite side is the intersection of the bottom right third, and in this photograph, it is of a poor, black middle-aged man; a 180 degree contrast. There are other powerful examples of syntagm here; “the World’s Highest Standard of Living” is a banner across the top, and the top right hand third spot has the phrase “There’s no way like the American Way” written across it. Finally the heads of the black people are right along the lower horizontal third line – both figuratively and literally on the lowest part of the picture.

Metonomy is the use of a text to refer to something that is related to it (Chandler, 1994. “Rhetorical Tropes”). At a television station, “He’s in news” actually means he works in the news department. An important sub-category of metonomy is synecdoche – the concept that one thing represents a greater thing (Chandler, 1994. “Rhetorical Tropes”). If one thinks of politics people will often use the seat of power to represent the entire political structure. “That decision
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will be made in Ottawa” then means that decision will be made by the federal government, which is located in Ottawa

There are two examples of synecdoche in this photo. The first is that the white people represent all white people – generally wealthy and happy. The black people represent all black people – poor and unhappy. This is misleading, of course. Not all white people are wealthy and happy, just as not all black are poor and unhappy. It is important that synecdoche be taken at a symbolic level, not a literal one.

REFERENCE LIST


