GILL BRANSTON and ROY STAFFORD

Prepare

the Media

Student's

Book

ANSTON and ROY STAFFORD

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oks should be like this. No student could read it without

The media student's book

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and
ROY STAFFORD

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The Media Student's Book provides a comprehensive introduction for students of Media Studies on A-Level, BTEC, GNVQ and undergraduate courses. It relates very intimately to the sharpest contemporary cultural pleasures and draws on a range of difficult theories to understand these experiences. It covers all the key topics encountered in Media Studies, including:

- Images and languages
- Narratives
- Genres
- Representations
- Advertising, marketing and fashion
- Realisms
- Modernism and postmodernism

- Technologies
- Industries
- Institutions
- Independents and alternatives
- Audiences
- Producing

This introductory textbook has been written by two experienced teachers of Media Studies, and it is specially designed to be easy to use and understand. It includes in-depth case studies, notes on key terms and references, follow-up activities and suggestions for further reading. Throughout the book, examples are provided from a rich range of media forms, including advertising, films, television, radio, newspapers, magazines and photography.

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Contents

Introduction

Media Studies is now an established area of work in many schools and colleges. Yet there are very few books designed to help students through a subject which both relates very intimately to the sharpest contemporary cultural pleasures, and has to draw on a range of difficult theories to understand these experiences. Added to these challenges is the fact that many of you have a range of non-school educational experiences upon which to draw. TV, from children's programmes, through schools and educational programmes, to '**infotainment**' forms, has probably taught you a great deal, in ways that books cannot hope to emulate. You may also have quite sophisticated experience of computers, at home, school or college, and may even have played with interactive material like music CD-ROMs, on which you can remix tracks.

Such ways of learning have major implications for anyone setting out to write a textbook. Sometimes we have tried to keep the print media's ability to sustain quite complicated arguments, where this needs to be done, in longish chapters. Often, you'll come across a history of a key term or debate which you may not want or need to go into straight away. To follow these you may need some of the patience more traditionally associated with books than with computers (but hopefully not *too* much patience).

Terms in Media Studies

Some students have problems in Media Studies because of its terminology. Words that have fairly straightforward meanings in everyday life outside the subject (like '**sign**' or '**closed**') take on rather different ones within it. This can be confusing. We've tried, wherever possible, to warn you of potential misunderstandings.

The development of Media Studies has often been 'driven' by developments in higher education. From the 1960s onwards, many academics, trying to get modern media taken seriously as objects for study, had to present arguments couched in very specialised language.

Along with an excitement with theoretical developments, such as **structuralism** and **semiotics**, which seemed to promise radical political possibilities, this produced a very difficult set of theoretical terms — especially for those who had not been involved in the years of struggling through, applying and familiarising themselves with these terms. Now the dust has settled, the real gains of some of these approaches can be brought into study of the media.

We've adopted the computer's engaging ability to offer information in different-sized chunks and formats. We hope you'll like and use the jokes and quotes in the margins, the case studies, the activities and appreciate the feel of a book aiming to work with a mixture of materials.

Modern technologies have dazzling capacities. It is now possible, using **digital editing**, to make it seem as though Marilyn Monroe and Brad Pitt are playing a scene together or that Arnold Schwarzenegger can 'morph' into an android before our eyes; to broadcast such scenes simultaneously across continents; and to accompany it with music created entirely by a computer. The **Internet**, a global 'Information Superhighway' has been touted, like many technologies in the past, as a kind of Utopian space where information about 'the universe and everything' is readily available and all questions can be answered.

Two major fallacies have evolved as a result:

- All you need to know about is how to press the buttons on these amazing technologies. Theories and histories are now irrelevant.
- Especially irrelevant are theories that allow us to understand why such technologies are unequally distributed both geographically and between rich and poor. Or, why they take the forms they do.

Yes, the technologies are terrific, and this is what makes modernity an exciting yet possibly disturbing experience. But we hope you find our sections on their histories, distribution and ways of working useful, rather than a diversion from the delights of simply celebrating 'virtual reality'. And, however convincingly you have Monroe and Pitt in the same **frame** together, however much information is at your fingertips on the Net, you can't rely on virtual decisions about what dialogue they will speak, or how they will be lit, framed, and directed to move. Nor can you make use of the Net without some sense of what information you need. For this we all need theories and histories of how stories, images, and music have been made, told, and sold in the modern media and before.

Media Studies is still a young subject area and the syllabuses — the official definitions — offered by the various examining and awarding bodies are still being developed. The media industries are also growing

and developing rapidly and the academic subject can't afford to get left behind. We hope we've covered all the basic *concepts* you will encounter and quite a few of the *debates* or issues which are addressed by Media A-Levels, the new GNVQ Advanced in Media: Communication and Production, BTEC and City & Guilds Media courses, and by Access courses and many undergraduate media units as well. *Media theories* have also influenced work in other subjects including Sociology and Cultural Studies. *Media production practice* increasingly spills over into art, design and photography. Our 'target audience' includes many different groups of students and so don't be surprised if you find things that aren't on your syllabus. Dip into them anyway: you'll probably find that they increase your understanding of the key concepts (and they may well be required for the next course you take).

We haven't included any essay questions as such, because we haven't targeted any one particular syllabus and we would rather try to support your basic understanding of concepts and debates. We are conscious that Media Studies needs to be approached in an integrated way and so we have tried to indicate links between the chapters whenever possible and to think of activities that require you to be 'active' in your learning.

The two of us, over the last fifteen years or so, have worked in most levels of further and higher education, and in media education generally. We 'entered the field' because we enjoyed popular culture in all its forms and we recognised its importance in contemporary society. Most of all, we love movies and that gives this book a special flavour. We have also tried to indulge an interest in radio as well as all the other media you would expect to find. We hope that our enthusiasm comes through in the writing – Media Studies should be challenging *and* fun. Whatever your interest, in passing an exam or simply understanding the 'media society', we hope you will enjoy reading and working with the book. Let us know, by writing to the publishers about your ideas for improving it.

How the book is organised

There are two types of material in the book. The main chapters carry the key theoretical ideas and concepts which are explained and contextualised in general terms. The case study chapters allow us to explore applications of theory or more specialised theoretical points in detail.

Case studies are distinguished by page design. Where main chapters use a single column and a margin for extra material, case studies are presented in two columns without margins. We expect you will need to keep 'dipping in' to the main chapters, but that you might read the case studies straight through.

Finding material

The book isn't organised like a 'set text' – there is no correct way to use it. Instead it serves as your support, so it is important that whatever you need, you can find it easily. At the start of all chapters and case studies is a list of main headings. In chapters, the appropriate headings are repeated in a computer-style menu at the top of each page. 'Running heads' on each page always let you know where you are.

If you want to find a key term, look in the index and you will find one or more references to explanations and definitions. The first time a key term appears in a chapter it will be presented in **bold type**.

References

As all media researchers will tell you, good references are invaluable. They provide evidence of the origins of material and they point to further sources which could be used. We've adopted a number of strategies. Whenever we quote another writer, we have placed a name and a date in the text, e.g. (Barthes 1972). This refers you to a book written by Barthes and published in 1972. Sometimes the page reference is also given (e.g. Barthes 1972: 182); here 182 indicates the page. The full reference (which includes title and publisher) is then given at the end of the chapter/case study. You should learn to list this full reference, for any books you use, at the end of your essays.

The list at the end of a chapter includes the sources we have used and perhaps some other material we think relevant. Some of our sources are quite difficult, both to obtain and to read, so we don't always expect you to go to them direct. At the end of the book we have included a 'selected' list of important (and accessible) texts which we do recommend you to look at.

The titles of films, television and radio programmes, newspapers and magazines are usually given in *italics*. Again, this is a convention that you might usefully copy, especially if you word-process your work. It makes it much easier to read essays. We have given the country of origin and the date of release of films to help you find them in reference sources (the Movie Database on the Internet is very good). We have tried to use film examples which are well referenced, so even if you've never heard of them, you should be able to find out more.

Activities

Dotted through the book you will find suggested activities. The book is designed as your guide, not as a class text, so where possible the exercises and activities are those you can undertake yourself at any time. Sometimes, especially for production-based activities, you will need others to help you.

Images and languages

The media work with words, images, sounds, or a mixture of all three. These have their own rules and conventions, but it is only when we experience the breaking of their rules, or stop to think how many of those rules we know, that we question the 'naturalness' of the image and sound combinations we have learned. We spend years at home and at school learning how to read words, and, before that, how to speak them. Because such effort is needed, it should be easier to be aware of language as a matter of **codes and conventions**. Yet we lose this awareness too as everyday usage makes language seem natural or 'transparent'.

When the media were first seriously studied, in the late 1950s, existing methods of literary and art criticism were applied to them. But it soon became clear that simply to discuss a film or TV programme by such methods (the valuing of 'good dialogue' or 'convincing characters' or 'beautiful compositions') was not going to allow certain kinds of engagement. People began to question the critical terms used in such discussions and ask : 'good' or 'convincing' or 'beautiful' according to what criteria? For whom?

We don't want to lose a sense that attention to language is important in media work. Scripts, single lines, soundbites in news, T-shirt slogans, headlines: the verbal is a key component of most media. But we need first to outline an influential and less literary way of studying such meaning systems, called **semiotics**.

Semiotics

Also called 'semiology', this is the study of **signs**, or of the social production of meaning by **sign systems**, of how things come to have significance or meaning. Though not all of its terms are used all the time in media analysis, its approaches are now very much part of the subject area, and are ones you need to understand, despite important criticisms in recent years.

Drawing on the work of the linguist **Saussure**, semiotics argues that language is one of many systems of meaning. Others include clothing,

Stuart Hood recounted once that the BBC announced the Russian invasion of Afghanistan with the newsreader standing. Scores of people rang in to ask if war had broken out, simply because the newsreader was standing rather than sitting behind a desk.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) French linguist who pioneered the semiotic study of language as a system of signs, depending on codes and structures. He distinguished between **langue** as a system of rules of speech (which children, for example, have to learn), and **parole** as acts of speaking. Other theorists, such as **Volosinov** put more emphasis on the difference and creativity involved in everyday speech acts.

'Dress is a form of address' (Erving Goffmann).

rose
or
ROSE

Figure 1.1

Roland Barthes (1913–80) French linguist who pioneered semiotic analyses of cultural and media forms. Most famous for *Mythologies* (1972), a collection of essays applying his theories wittily to ads, wrestling, Greta Garbo's face, and so on.

gesture, facial expressions, haircuts, etc. These work by means of signs, which have a twofold nature:

• First, a sign has physical form (words, either in the form of marks on paper (R-O-S-E), or sounds in the air; a haircut; a fingerprint; a photo). This is called the **signifier**. A sign must be understood as referring to something other than itself. This is called the **signified** and is a concept, not a real thing in the world. The word 'rose', spoken or written, refers to the concept of a certain kind of flower. **Barthes** would call it 'roseness', and like other semioticians would emphasise the distinction between this concept, the signified, and the **referent**, which is what is referred to: real roses, in all their difference.

This is a useful way of remembering that words do not directly label or depict the world but instead divide it into imaginative categories. It is easy to forget this, since we have normally come to use language easily and unselfconsciously. If you hear the word 'cat' or 'mother', a particular animal and woman are likely to spring to mind, and it's easy to imagine you are much closer to the world through language than in fact is the case.

• Second, these categories, into which verbal and other languages divide the world, work by means of differences. This is an emphasis which semiotics shares with **structuralism** (see below).

Signs are only fully understood by reference to their relationship to, or difference from, other signs in their particular language system. This relationship is sometimes as important as their relationship to the rest of the real world.

Examples

Once sound becomes possible in cinema, the potential meaning of silence is changed. The same is true of black and white in relation to colour. It signifies differently to produce a photo or a film in black and white once the choice to make it in colour is an available one. Black and white can then signify 'seriousness' or 'pastness'.

The part of the natural colour spectrum between blue and black is called purple and often signifies imperial power, or mourning. But in cigarette ads, under severe health warning restrictions, 'purple' signifies Silk Cut, just as 'red' signifies Marlboro cigarettes in others, and the yellowy colour called gold signifies Benson and Hedges in yet others.

ACTIVITY 1.1
The word 'man' may seem the simplest kind of label. But it usually signifies within a particular structure of meaning. A 'man' is not a 'boy'/a 'woman'/a 'god'/a 'beast'.

- Try creating sentences, questions where these different meaning-structures are implied, such as 'Is it a man's jacket you want?' (rather than a woman's, or a boy's). (Sometimes you will be able to signify your meaning by vocal emphasis.)

Once the extent to which languages are composed of material signs is grasped, it becomes easier to see that signs have relationships among themselves, as well as in the ways they **represent** the world.

Denotation and connotation

Signs **denote** or signify or point towards different aspects of our experience, the world. The word 'red' denotes a certain part of the colour spectrum, which involves differentiating it from other parts, such as 'blue' or 'pink'.

But signs also **connote**, or link the things they denote by association with other things. (Signs themselves can also relate to each other, most obviously through characteristics like words rhyming, shapes on screens resembling each other.) These **connotations** give overlaid meanings from personal or social history and experience. (We would argue this always happens, though Barthes' division of signs into 'denotative' and 'connotative' suggests a purely denotative sign is possible.)

We are likely to have experienced red in blood, sunsets, excited complexions, fires – which perhaps indicates why, in certain cultures, the colour has connotations of fierceness, passion, danger. But then these meanings get built into further signs: traffic lights, flags, phrases like 'paint the town red', 'like a red rag to a bull' and AIDS-awareness ribbons, which draw on and themselves reproduce these connotations.

> Unintentional puns can often remind us of this capacity of words to float free of intended meanings. For example, when drafting the case study on westerns and *The Searchers'* treatment of images of Native American characters, I first wrote: 'The film uses these with some reservations.' I quickly amended it (Gill Branston).

Example

Take *Pretty Woman* (US 1990) or *Don't Look Now* (UK 1973), or any other film/TV drama/ad where red is important.

Q What do you think the colour red connotes in them?

A In *Pretty Woman*, Vivien/Julia Roberts wears a red dress (after first wearing her multi-coloured hooker's gear, and later a black dress) at a point in the film where it seems to signify a growing confidence and passion in her feelings about her relationship with Edward/Richard Gere.

Gold is another good example. It denotes either a certain part of the colour spectrum, or a metal of that colour. But its connotations within certain cultures (not an arbitrary matter, but one deriving partly from its

prizing for jewellery, special ceremonies, and as a currency) are much wider, as in such phrases as 'golden opportunity', 'good as gold' and so on.

Sounds also signify. They are used in TV and cinema ads, as well as radio, where very quick, concentrated messages are constructed, drawing on heavily conventionalised signs: the chirp of a cricket signifying tropical climates; the creak of a door, sign of possible horror or mystery; a click of a cricket bat, and perhaps the coo of doves, signifying an English summer cricket match; and so on. (See Chapter 15, 'Realisms' for more on 'sound images'.)

Polysemy

polysemy (from the Greek, *poly* = many, *semeion* = a sign) having many meanings.

Though red may be a widely recognised sign within western culture, its meaning is by no means either fixed or single but **polysemic**. Just because red has featured in many contexts, as part of several **codes** or ways of combining signs, it is possible, for example, for some viewers to read Julia Roberts' dress as signifying danger, or socialism, or as part of the director's liking for the colour red (if the director were Scorsese) or as a colour within the fashion system (more fashionable than, say, turquoise). This is a result of two main factors:

'**Text**' and '**reader**' in ordinary life refer exclusively to written work, often holy or official. But in Media Studies they refer to anything capable of having meanings, written or not, highly valued or not (e.g. an ad, a piece of rap music, a cartoon). The 'reader' refers to anyone making a meaning in everyday encounters with such 'texts'.

- The inherent ambiguity or instability of signs once they are in contact with '**readers**' (which they have to be to produce meanings at all). Price (1993) quotes Hodge and Kress (1988) on amber traffic lights, whose official meaning is intended as 'slow down for red light' but which many motorists understand as 'speed up to avoid red'. 'Rose' signifies the idea of 'rose-ness' but each of us may well conjure up a different image of a particular rose, with very different associations. With more complex signs, like national flags, let alone movies, the range of audience interpretation is even wider.
- Most of the signs we encounter (photos, newspaper front pages, pop videos) have many elements (images, written words, colours, sounds, music), each capable of signifying in multiple ways, which compounds the possibilities for polysemy.

The 'Sleau lunch' ad (see Figure 1.2) was the first of a series used in summer 1995 to sell Perrier mineral water. If we consider the ad at a denotative level it sounds merely baffling: a snail made from what appears to be green glass with drink labels stuck on it? A description involving connotative meanings might describe it as using a crafted glass snail (a subdued green colour in the original), full of tiny bubbles, to signify a pleasantly leisurely meal, and perhaps also offer the generally agreeable connotations of 'green', ranging from summer countryside to mildly ecological politics. The caption 'Sleau lunch' will signify 'witty play on