

SECOND EDITION

5

SIGNS OF LIFE

IN THE USA

READINGS ON POPULAR
CULTURE FOR WRITERS



SONIA MAASIK • JACK SOLOMON

SECOND EDITION

SIGNS OF LIFE IN THE U.S.A.

Readings on Popular Culture for Writers

SONIA MAASIK

University of California, Los Angeles

JACK SOLOMON

California State University, Northridge

Bedford Books



Boston

**We wish to dedicate this book to the memory
of our dear friend, Kenzo.**

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PREFACE FOR INSTRUCTORS

Thirty years ago, Marshall McLuhan announced the beginning of a new era in the history of Western communication. The printing press, he argued in his classic study *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), was yielding to a new set of media — to radio, television, and film — and a new consciousness was emerging in response to the change. The years that have passed since the publication of McLuhan's book have borne out many of his predictions, especially concerning the growth of video technologies. Today, ours is indeed a culture of the electronic media, centered on the visual image rather than the printed word, and the shape of our knowledge and experience has shifted accordingly.

This transformation from a text-centered to an image-centered culture presents a certain challenge to writing teachers. How can such a textually based enterprise as writing instruction respond to a video-driven world? How are reading and writing related to seeing and hearing? Can the habits of critical thinking that are so central to the analytical tasks of academic writing be adapted to McLuhan's brave new world?

We have prepared *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* because we believe not only that such bridges can be built but also that building them represents our best hope for training a new generation of students in critical thinking and writing. Thus, while the goal of our text remains the traditional one of helping students become strong writers of argument and analysis, our method departs from convention by using printed texts to guide students in the interpretation and analysis of an unwritten world: The world

of American popular culture, wherein images, often electronically conveyed, can be more important than words.

In the past, the study of popular culture led a rather marginal existence in the academy, but that marginalization is now coming to an end. Scholars from a host of different fields are recognizing that, far from being a trivial addition to human history, popular culture encompasses that enduring process which Michel de Certeau has called “the practice of everyday life.” What is surprising, then, is not that popular culture should now be emerging as an important topic in the field of cultural studies, but that it was once so thoroughly excluded from academic inquiry. This exclusion has historically been justified on the basis of a naturalized distinction between “high” (or academically approved) and “low” (or popular) culture that contemporary cultural analysis has shown to be historically contingent. Indeed, one need only consider that such monuments of contemporary high culture as the works of Charles Dickens and William Wordsworth were once viewed as the products of popular (or folk) culture to see just how fluid the boundaries between high and low culture can be.

The reception of the first edition of this book has demonstrated how cultural studies is now an established part of the curriculum, and that semiotics — the particular method we have chosen to guide the critical analyses pursued in this text — has become an accepted tool in the study of popular culture. Teachers of composition are recognizing that students feel a certain sense of ownership toward the products of popular culture — and that using popular culture as the class focus can help students overcome the sometimes alienating effects of traditional academic subject matter. In this way, popular culture can encourage the development of the critical thinking and writing skills that writing courses are designed to promote.

Readings on American Popular Culture

The 76 readings in this book address a broad cross section of contemporary American popular culture. We have chosen popular culture as our field because we believe that students think and write best when they are in command of their subject matter. Too often, academic ways of thinking, reasoning, arguing, and even speaking and writing seem like a foreign language for students, especially those in their first year. As a result, students may find it difficult to develop ideas, risking either writer's block or the adoption of an awkward, pedantic style that hinders their own creativity and insights. Unfortunately, both within and outside academia, students' attempts to grapple with this foreign language are sometimes interpreted as proof of their apparent “illiteracy.”

But we believe that today's students are not illiterate at all; they simply have a different kind of literacy, one that exists outside the boundaries of traditional academic knowledge. We also believe that there need not be a split between academic and "real world" knowledge in the first place; rather, the two should inform each other, with the most exciting inquiry combining the riches of everyday life with the discipline and depth of academic study. *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* is thus designed to let students take advantage of their expertise in the culture around them, allowing them to build on their strengths as they sharpen their ability to write cogent analyses, insightful interpretations, and persuasive arguments. We have included, for example, materials ranging from analyses of package designs to interpretations of the film *Malcolm X*, from explorations of women's language to advertisements for jeans and personal computers. This is not to say that we assume students are all consumers of popular culture in the same way. Indeed, the book is structured to encourage students to bring to their writing class a variety of backgrounds, interests, and experiences, a variety that will generate lively class discussion and create a community of writers.

The Book's Organization

Reflecting the broad academic interest in culture studies, we've assumed an inclusive definition of popular culture. This definition can be seen in the book's organization, for it is divided into two sections—Images and Issues—to highlight the essential cultural connection between the things we do and the things we believe. The five chapters in the Images section focus on popular cultural behavior, especially as it is stimulated and mediated by the images projected through the objects we consume, the ads that sell us those objects, the entertainments we enjoy, and the heroes and popular characters we admire and emulate. The five Issues chapters may seem a bit more sobering, but they are inextricably linked to the text's first half. For in addressing gender issues, racial conflict, outlaw subcultures, the AIDS epidemic, and the emergence of the Internet, these chapters show that behind every image there is an issue, an ideology and belief system that shapes our behavior.

The Critical Method: Semiotics

Signs of Life departs from some textbook conventions in that it makes explicit an interpretive approach, semiotics, that can guide students' analyses of popular culture. We've made this approach explicit because it has struck us that although students enjoy assignments that ask them to look at popular cultural phenomena, they often have trouble distinguish-

ing between an argued interpretive analysis and the simple expression of an opinion. Some textbooks, for example, suggest assignments that involve analyzing a TV program or film, but they don't always tell a student how to do that. The semiotic method provides that guidance.

At the same time, semiotics reveals that there's no such thing as a pure, ideologically neutral analysis, even in freshman composition. Anthologies typically present analysis as a "pure" category: They present readings that students are asked to analyze, but articulate no conceptual framework and neither explore nor define theoretical assumptions and ideological positions. Being self-conscious about one's point of view, however, is an essential part of academic writing, and we can think of no better place for students to learn that lesson than in a writing class.

We've found through experience that a semiotic approach is especially well suited to this purpose. As a conceptual framework, semiotics teaches students to formulate cogent, well-supported interpretations. It emphasizes the examination of assumptions and the way language shapes our apprehension of the world. And, because it focuses on *how* beliefs are formulated within a social and political context (rather than just judging or evaluating those beliefs), it's ideal for discussing sensitive or politically charged issues. As an approach used in literature, media studies, anthropology, art and design coursework, sociology, law, and market research, to name only some of its more prominent field applications, semiotics has a cross-disciplinary appeal that makes it ideal for a writing class of students from a variety of majors and disciplines. We recognize that semiotics has a reputation for being highly technical or theoretical; rest assured that *Signs of Life* does not require students or instructors to have a technical knowledge of semiotics. In fact we've provided clear and accessible introductions that explain what students need to know.

We also recognize that adopting a theoretical approach may be new to some instructors, so we've designed the book to allow instructors to be as semiotic with their students as they wish. The book does not obligate instructors or students to spend a lot of time with semiotics — although we do hope you'll find the approach intriguing and provocative.

The Editorial Apparatus

With its emphasis on popular culture, *Signs of Life* should generate lively class discussion and inspire many kinds of writing and thinking activities. The general introduction provides an overall framework for the book, acquainting students with the semiotic method they can use to interpret the topics raised in each chapter. The chapters start off with a frontispiece, a provocative visual image related to the chapter's topic, and an introduction that suggests ways to "read" the topic, presents model

interpretations, and links the issues raised by the reading selections. Every chapter introduction contains three types of boxed questions designed to stimulate student thinking on the topic. The Exploring the Signs questions invite students to explore an issue in a journal entry or other prewriting activity, whereas the Discussing the Signs questions trigger class activities such as debates, discussions, or small group work. Reading the Net questions invite students to explore the chapter's topic on the Internet, both for research purposes and for texts to analyze.

The readings themselves are followed by two sorts of assignments. The Reading the Text questions help students comprehend the selections, asking them to identify important concepts and arguments, explain key terms, and relate main ideas to each other and to the evidence presented. The Reading the Signs questions are writing and activity prompts designed to produce clear analytic thinking and strong persuasive writing; they often make connections among reading selections from different chapters. Most assignments call for analytic essays, while some invite journal responses, in-class debates, group work, or other creative activities. In this edition, we've added an Appendix that not only provides a brief introduction to writing about popular culture, but also features three sample student essays that demonstrate different approaches to writing critical essays on popular culture. A Glossary of semiotic terms can serve as a ready reference of key terms and concepts used in the chapter introductions. Finally, the instructor's manual (*Editors' Notes to Accompany Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*) provides suggestions for organizing your syllabus, encouraging student response to the readings, and using popular culture and semiotics in the writing class.

What's New in the Second Edition

Few subjects move so quickly as does the pace of popular culture, and the second edition of *Signs of Life* reflects this essential mutability through its substantial revision of the first edition. First, we have updated our readings, adding selections that focus on issues and trends important in the mid- to late-1990s. With 36 new readings, our second edition represents nearly a 50 percent turnover from the first edition. At the same time, we have updated the exemplary topics in our introductions used to model the critical assignments that follow, and have readjusted the focus of some chapters to reflect changing conditions. For instance, our chapter on "Cultural Outlaws" now adds readings on militia and hacker groups to the essays on street outlaws from the first edition. The once-hot topic of campus speech codes has cooled considerably since the early nineties, and so we have replaced our chapter on the politics of free speech with a new chapter devoted to the cultural significance of the Internet. In the early 1990s, this issue had not yet emerged in popular consciousness, but

it now promises to dominate political, social, and business life in the foreseeable future through to the next millennium. Our chapter on “Virtual Culture” is designed to show how the Net represents not only a technological advance but a potential cultural intervention as profound as television. At the same time, the growing importance of the Internet in composition instruction has prompted us to add boxed questions to each chapter introduction designed to create assignments directly linked to Internet research.

We have also added an Appendix, “Writing about Popular Culture,” designed to provide further instruction in the writing of critical essays on popular culture. The Appendix includes a student essay, prompted by the first edition of *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*, that pursues a semiotic analysis of the movie *Cool Hand Luke*. In this essay, the student uses insights from Robert B. Ray’s “The Thematic Paradigm” (page 278 in this edition) to write a critical analysis that proposes the student’s own political interpretation of the film’s ideology. A second essay provides a personal take on the significance of makeup in our body-conscious society. And a third student essay interprets the cultural significance of the Statue of Liberty, pointing out how the Statue means something different depending upon who’s looking at it.

Even as we revise this text to reflect current trends, popular culture continues to evolve. The inevitable gap between the pace of editing and publishing, on the one hand, and the flow of popular culture, on the other, need not affect the book’s use in the classroom, however. The Readings following the selections, and the semiotic method we propose, are designed to show students how to analyze and write critical essays about any topic they choose. They can, as one of our student writers in the Appendix did, choose a topic that appeared before they were born, or they can turn to the latest box office or prime-time hit to appear after the publication of this edition of *Signs of Life*. To put it another way, the practice of everyday life may itself be filled with evanescent fads and trends, but everyday life is not itself a fad. As the vital texture of our lived experience, popular culture provides a stable background against which students of every generation can test their critical skills.

Acknowledgments

The vastness of the terrain of popular culture has enabled many users of the first edition of this text to make valuable suggestions for the second edition. Those instructors include: Ben Ament, St. Cloud State University; Dr. Claudia Barnett, Middle Tennessee State University; Dr. Bruce Beiderwell, University of California — Los Angeles; Elizabeth Brunsvold, St. Cloud State University; Dr. Michael Carroll, Highlands University; Dr. Mary Magdalena Chavarría, Pierce College, Los Angeles; Dr. Jane Cocalis,

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