

# SIGNS OF LIFE

IN THE USA

READINGS ON  
POPULAR CULTURE  
FOR WRITERS



SONIA MAASIK • JACK SOLOMON

# SIGNS OF LIFE IN THE U.S.A.

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*Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*

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# PREFACE FOR INSTRUCTORS

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**T**hirty 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 written *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* because we believe not only that such bridges can be built but 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 analysis and interpretation of an unwritten world: The world of

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

### Readings on American Popular Culture

The 75 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 shopping mall designs to interpretations of the film *Malcolm X*, from explorations of women's language to advertisements for jeans and backpacks. 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 increasing academic interest in cultural 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 broad 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, es-

pecially 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 the First Amendment controversy, multiculturalism, gangs, gender, and AIDS, they 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 while students enjoy assignments that ask them to look at popular cultural phenomena, they often have trouble distinguishing between an argued interpretive analysis and 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 how language shapes our apprehension of the world. 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, anthropology, sociology, law, and business, to name only a few fields, 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 choice of semiotics is also based on classroom experience. In adopting the approach for classes ranging from freshmen to graduate students, we've found that students respond quickly and positively to this approach. Students have told us how much they appreciate learning something entirely new in our classes, and what they learn extends beyond the topics covered to a new way of looking at the world. But we haven't relied just on our own experience; a colleague, Patrick McCord, tested most of the book with his freshman writing students at California State University, Northridge, and found that his students were impressed not only with how semiotics opened their eyes but with the respect of their own activities that the approach conveyed.

### **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, which suggests ways to "read" the topic, presents model interpretations, and links the issues raised by the reading selections. Every chapter introduction contains two 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 Discussing the Signs questions trigger class activities such as debates, discussions, or small-group work. Each reading selection is 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 analytical thinking and strong persuasive writing; they often make connections among reading selections from different chapters. Most assignments call for analytic essays, while some ask for journal responses, in-class debates, group work, or other creative activities. We've also added a Glossary of semiotic terms to serve as a ready reference for key terms and concepts used in the chapter introductions.

Finally, the *Instructor's Manual* provides suggestions for organizing your syllabus, encouraging student response to the readings, and using popular culture and semiotics in the writing class.

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# CONTENTS

---

**Preface for Instructors**      xv

**Introduction:**

**POPULAR SIGNS: Or, Everything You've Always Known About  
American Culture (But Nobody Asked)**      1

**PART ONE**

---

**IMAGES**      15

**1. CONSUMING PASSIONS: *The Culture of American  
Consumption***      17

LAURENCE SHAMES: *The More Factor*      25

"Frontier: opportunity: more. This has been the American trinity from  
the very start."

PETER GIBIAN: *The Art of Being Off-Center: Shopping Center Spaces and  
Spectacles*      32

"Malls probably have the most to learn from the *amusement park*, 'where  
most people spend more than they intend.'"

ELIZABETH WILSON: *Oppositional Dress* 45

"Subcultural styles reinterpret conflicts of the wider society."

SCOTT POULSON-BRYANT: *B-Boys* 56

"Black boys—regardless of who's censoring whom or which white cop is bulleting down which black cousin or uncle or bro—reconstruct themselves, and ultimately reconstruct the culture around them."

STUART EWEN: *Hard Bodies* 60

"'Soft flesh,' once a standard phrase in the American erotic lexicon, is now . . . a sign of failure and sloth. The hard shell is now a sign of achievement, visible proof of success in the 'rat race.'"

JOAN KRON: *The Semiotics of Home Decor* 66

"We use our possessions in the same way we use language—the quintessential symbol—to *communicate* with one another."

ANDREW WERNICK: *Vehicles for Myth: The Shifting Image of the Modern Car* 78

"The production of cars as symbols is a special case of the way in which, since the industrial revolution of the late eighteenth century, all mass commodities have come to intersect with the world of meaning."

ROLAND BARTHES: *Toys* 95

"Current toys are made of a graceless material, the product of chemistry, not nature."

## 2. BROUGHT TO YOU B(U)Y: *The Signs of Advertising* 101

ROLAND MARCHAND: *The Parable of the Democracy of Goods* 109

"'Body Odor plays no favorites,' warned Lifebuoy Soap. No one, 'banker, baker, or society woman,' could count himself safe from B.O."

JANE CAPUTI: *IBM's Charlie Chaplin: A Case Study* 117

"Stuck with a multinational, cold, colossus, remote, and even a totalitarian 'Big Brother' public image, IBM took the plunge and set out to manufacture some warmer and more sympathetic associations for itself and its 'personal' computer."

PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS: *The Fiction of Truth in Advertising* 122

"Ours is not the first generation to fall prey to false needs; but ours is the first generation of admakers to realize the complete fulfillment of the consumerist vision through the fine-tuning of sheer hucksterism."

DIANE BARTHEL: *A Gentleman and a Consumer* 128

"The masculine role of always being in charge is a tough one."

GLORIA STEINEM: *Sex, Lies, and Advertising* 139

"If *Time* and *Newsweek* had to lavish praise on cars in general and credit General Motors in particular to get GM ads, there would be a scandal. . . . When women's magazines from *Seventeen* to *Lear's* praise beauty products in general and credit Revlon in particular to get ads, it's just business as usual."

**Portfolio of Advertisements** 156**3. M(ORE) TV: *The Television and Video Revolution*** 167HOLLY BRUBACH: *Rock-and-Roll Vaudeville* 175

"The vast majority of videos look as if they had been directed by the same two or three people, all of whom you would guess to be seventeen-year-old boys."

LISA A. LEWIS: *Male-Address Video* 182

"The male-address videos activated textual signs of patriarchal discourse, reproducing coded images of the female body, and positioning girls and women as the objects of male voyeurism."

BELL HOOKS: *Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?* 190

"If Madonna had to depend on masses of black women to maintain her status as cultural icon she would have been dethroned some time ago."

MINABERE IBELEMA: *Identity Crisis: The African Connection in African American Sitcom Characters* 198

"If you think I'm gonna change the sign from Sanford and Son to Sanford and Kalunda, you're crazy."

JOSH OZERSKY: *TV's Anti-Families: Married . . . with Malaise* 209

"TV has absorbed the American family's increasing sense of defeat and estrangement and presented it as an ironic in-joke."

SUSAN FALUDI: *Teen Angels and Tart-Tongued Witches* 219

"Women's disappearance from prime-time television in the late eighties repeats a programming pattern from the last backlash when, in the late fifties and early sixties, single dads ruled the TV roosts and female characters were suddenly erased from the set."

WALTER KIRN: *Twentysomethings* 229

"Resigning one's self to living off the table scraps of the American century is what twentystuff culture is all about."

#### 4. THE HOLLYWOOD SIGN: *The Semiotics of American Film* 233

ROBERT B. RAY: *The Thematic Paradigm* 241

"To the outlaw hero's insistence on private standards of right and wrong, the official hero offered the admonition, 'You cannot take the law into your own hands.'"

LINDA SEGER: *Creating the Myth* 250

"Whatever our culture, there are universal stories that form the basis for all our particular stories. . . . Many of the most successful films are based on these universal stories."

UMBERTO ECO: *Casablanca, or, the Clichés Are Having a Ball* 260

"Aesthetically speaking (or by any strict critical standards) *Casablanca* is a very mediocre film."

DIANE RAYMOND: *Not as Tough as It Looks* 264

"If one can truly achieve 'motherhood without stretch marks,' then there is nothing that women can do that men cannot."

TANIA MODLESKI: *Dead White Male Heterosexual Poets Society* 278

"The film lyricizes life in the closet."

MICHAEL PARENTI: *Class and Virtue* 283

"The entertainment media present working people not only as unlettered and uncouth but also as less desirable and less moral than other people."

SHELBY STEELE: *Malcolm X* 287

"How can a new generation of blacks—after pervasive civil rights legislation, Great Society programs, school busing, open housing, and

more than two decades of affirmative action—be drawn to a figure of such seething racial alienation?”

VALERIE BOYD: *The Word on Malcolm X* 296

“What *Birth of a Nation* was to Southerners or *The Godfather* was to Italian-Americans, *Malcolm X* will be to African-Americans—a defining element of our culture.”

## 5. LARGER THAN LIFE: *The Mythic Characters of American Culture* 301

GARY ENGLE: *What Makes Superman So Darned American?* 309

“It is impossible to imagine Superman being as popular as he is and speaking as deeply to the American character were he not an immigrant and an orphan.”

PETER RAINER: *Antihero Worship* 318

“Is it a coincidence that Superman died the same week the movie *Malcolm X* opened?”

ANDY MEDHURST: *Batman, Deviance, and Camp* 323

“If I want Batman to be gay, then, for me, he is.”

GEORGE H. LEWIS: *From Common Dullness to Fleeting Wonder: The Manipulation of Cultural Meaning in the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Saga* 340

“This uniquely American wrinkle on the superhero, the smoothly functioning team, is reflective of our faith in bureaucratic models—like a football team or a military unit, we win when our plugged-in specialist selves each play their part.”

EMILY PRAGER: *Our Barbies, Ourselves* 353

“I used to look at Barbie and wonder, What’s wrong with this picture?”

WANDA COLEMAN: *Say It Ain’t Cool, Joe* 356

“At root, old Joe’s shtick is plain-and-simple racist.”

MCCREA ADAMS: *Advertising Characters: The Pantheon of Consumerism* 359

“How much difference is there really between the two Ronalds, McDonald and Reagan?”

GERARD JONES, RON RANDALL, AND RANDY ELLIOTT:  
*Doomed by Deconstructo* 370

"There is no meaning. In art. In life. In history. In heroes. We can only know what our minds choose to let us know."

## PART TWO

## ISSUES 375

---

### 6. SPEAK NO EVIL: *The Politics of Free Speech* 377

NAT HENTOFF: *"Speech Codes" on the Campus and Problems of Free Speech* 385

"Universities cannot censor or suppress speech, no matter how obnoxious in content, without violating their justification for existence."

THOMAS C. GREY: *Responding to Abusive Speech on Campus: A Model Statute* 392

"Prohibited harassment includes discriminatory intimidation by threats of violence, and also includes personal vilification of students on the basis of their sex, race, color, handicap, religion, sexual orientation, or national and ethnic origin."

CORNEL WEST: *Diverse New World* 400

"We need to see history as in part the cross-fertilization of a variety of different cultures, usually under conditions of hierarchy."

TODD GITLIN: *On the Virtues of a Loose Canon* 405

"Academic conservatives who defend a canon . . . sometimes sound as if American universities were fully and finally canonized until the barbarians showed up to smash up the pantheon . . . the academic left has degenerated into a loose aggregation of margins—often cannibalistic, romancing the varieties of otherness, speaking in tongues."

RICHARD GOLDSTEIN: *Hate Speech, Free Speech, and the Unspoken* 411

"How can the law possibly regulate something as fundamentally subjective as symbolic expression? And yet, given the power of symbols to incite fear and loathing, not to mention violence, how can it not?"

BARBARA EHRENREICH: *Ice-T: Is the Issue Creative Freedom?* 418

"Just, please, don't dignify Ice-T's contribution with the word 'sedition.'"

ELAINE LAFFERTY AND TAMMY BRUCE: *Suddenly, They Hear the Words* 422

"If you want to criticize Ice-T for 'Cop Killer,' fine. But understand that women have been the targets of this kind of lyrical assault for years."

JAMES CRAWFORD: *Hold Your Tongue: The Question of Linguistic Self-Determination* 424

"Rights that individuals would otherwise enjoy, including free access to government, must not be limited on account of language ability."

GLORIA ANZALDÚA: *How to Tame a Wild Tongue* 431

"If you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language."

## 7. A GATHERING OF TRIBES: *Multicultural Semiotics* 441

MICHAEL OMI: *In Living Color: Race and American Culture* 449

"Popular culture has been an important realm within which racial ideologies have been created, reproduced, and sustained."

SAM FULWOOD III: *The Rage of the Black Middle Class* 462

"I straddle two worlds and consider neither home."

RICHARD MAJORS: *Cool Pose: The Proud Signature of Black Survival* 471

"Being cool, illustrated in its various poses and postures, becomes a very powerful and necessary tool in the black man's constant fight for his soul."

DORINNE K. KONDO: *On Being a Conceptual Anomaly* 477

"How could someone who *looked* Japanese not *be* Japanese?"

FAN SHEN: *The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition* 485

"Learning the rules of English composition is, to a certain extent, learning the values of Anglo-American society."

LESLIE MARMON SILKO: *Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective* 495

"The stories are always bringing us together, keeping this whole together, keeping this family together, keeping this clan together."

ADA MARÍA ISASI-DIAZ: *Hispanic in America: Starting Points* 503

"It is only within our own culture that Hispanics can acquire a sense of belonging, of security, of dignity, and of participation."

STUDS TERKEL: *Speaking About Race* 508

"Show me a white community and a black community and I'll show you an adjoining community between both."

## 8. STREET SIGNS: *Gang Culture in the U.S.A.* 527

CARL ROGERS: *Children in Gangs* 535

"The average age of youth gang members continues to decline."

LÉON BING: *Faro* 540

"If you die, you die."

ANNE CAMPBELL: *The Praised and the Damned* 544

"Despite the volumes written on male gang members, however, little is actually known about the girls."

SONIA MAASIK AND JACK SOLOMON: *Signs of the Street: A Conversation* 560

"The point is, everybody just wants respect, okay? Sometimes being in the gangs gets you that respect or being a tagger gets you that respect from other taggers. You know, it depends on where you're coming from."

JAMES DIEGO VIGIL: *Gang Styles: Cholo Dress and Body Adornment, Speech, Demeanor, Partying, and Car Culture* 570

"Gangs, like many youth groups, are notorious for encouraging their members to dress, talk, and act in a certain way to show that they belong and identify with peers."



SETH MYDANS: *Not Just the Inner City: Well-to-Do Join Gangs* 587

“If you want to be able to walk the mall, you have to know you’ve got your boys behind you.”

TEEN ANGELS MAGAZINE: *Summer Time* 592

## 9. YOU’VE COME A LONG WAY, MAYBE: *Gender Codes in American Culture* 595

HOLLY DEVOR: *Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes* 603

“Persons who perform the activities considered appropriate for another gender will be expected to perform them poorly; if they succeed adequately, or even well, at their endeavors, they may be rewarded with ridicule or scorn for blurring the gender dividing line.”

PETER LYMAN: *The Fraternal Bond as a Joking Relationship* 609

“We have a sense of crudeness you don’t have. That’s a cultural aspect of the difference between girls and guys.”

ROBERT BLY: *Men’s Initiation Rites* 617

“American men in general cannot achieve separation from the father because they have not achieved bonding with the father.”

ROBIN TOLMACH LAKOFF: *Women’s Language* 624

“Some form of women’s language exists in every culture that has been investigated.”

DEBORAH TANNEN: *Wears Jump Suit. Sensible Shoes. Uses Husband’s Last Name.* 629

“Some days you just want to get dressed and go about your business. But if you’re a woman, you can’t, because there is no unmarked woman.”

ELIZABETH CHISERI-STRATER: *Anna* 635

“For women, gaining access to the dominant discourse is often problematic, particularly in public settings.”

RICHARD K. HERRELL: *The Symbolic Strategies of Chicago’s Gay and Lesbian Pride Day Parade* 643

“‘Ethnicity’ has become a model for gays and lesbians.”