

Semiotics in Digital Context

Talan Memmott

The course is divided into **four seminar modules**: There is an exercise attached to each module -- sometimes they involve work in Photoshop, sometimes they are critical writing, sometimes they involve the investigation of different phenomena related to digital rhetoric, and sometimes they are a combination of tasks.

The seminar sessions involve lectures, student presentations, and in-depth discussion of issues addressed in assigned reading. It is very important to do the reading and come to class prepared to actively participate in the discussion.

MODULES

Module 1. Signs, Models, and Modes deals with Structuralist models for signification and how they differ, or are complicated by digital media. We will consider a number of diagrams and models from Saussure and Peirce, as well as artworks by Rene Magritte, Marcel Broodthaers, and a number of digital artists and writer.

Reading for Module 1: *Semiotics: The Basics* (Daniel Chandler) Ch.1: 13-58, Ch.2: 59-82

Module 2. Codes, Tropes, and Textual Interaction will go a bit deeper into the construction of meaning-making in digital media, considering how the technology sometimes determines signification and how – due to the variety of media and platforms available – the classification ‘digital’ may be too reductive to contain the potential methods of meaning-making that we currently encounter through computational devices.

Reading for Module 2: *Semiotics: The Basics* (Daniel Chandler) Ch.4: 123-146, Ch.5: 147-194, Ch.6: 175-216

Module 3. Landscape, Cityscape, and Spatial Intervention will deal with the metaphors of space as applied to ‘cyberspace’, ‘virtual space’, and IRL. The module will consider alternative applications for locative media, Google Maps and Google Earth, and bring into play Guy Debord’s Situationist aesthetics of the Dérive and the notion of movement through the web.

Reading for Module 3: *A User’s Guide to Détournement* (<http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/detourn.htm>), *Theory of the Dérive* (<http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/2.dérive.htm>)

Module 4. Analysis, Ecology, and Prospective Method will consider contrast traditional scholarly language and method with potential digitally mediated forms of critical analysis. In this module we will consider narrative constructs in both print and electronic literature and analytical approaches that consider both the historical connection between the two forms as well as the ruptures brought about by the advent of digital media.

Reading for Module 4: *Semiotics: The Basics* (Daniel Chandler) Ch.3: 83-122

**Additional Reading will be delivered electronically, or as a handout in-class.

ASSESSMENT

Exercise 1	Systems and Models	5,5	25	EXAM 1215 2,5hp
Exercise 2	Tropes and Devices	5,5		
Exercise 3	Spatial Intervention	5,5		
Exercise 4	Alternative Critical Forms	5,5		
Seminars	Participation in Discussions	3		
Media Studio A	Project in Image Editing	17,5	35	EXAM 1205 3,5hp (students take two of the three Media Studios)
Media Studio B	Montage and Remix	17,5		
Media Studio C	Narrative and Navigation	17,5		
Group Presentations	Presentation of research for Seminar/Roundtable	5	40	EXAM 1225 4,0hp
Seminar/Roundtable	Group-led Seminar Session	15		
Media Studio Presentation	Projects from the Media Studios	10		
Analysis	Critical Paper	10		

100-91(A/VG) | 90-81 (B/G) | 80-71 (C/G) | 70-61 (D/G) 60-51 (E/G) | 50-0 (F/U)

EXERCISES

EXERCISE 1:

Complete A, and select between B and C

Feedback for this assignment will be given during the Critique Session:

A, Semiological Diagrams and Annotation

Download the zip archive of structuralist and semiotic diagrams.

Select TWO of the semiological diagrams included in the archive

Open the images in Photoshop and edit the diagrams to make them relevant to digital culture and media. You may add to them, remove text, alter them in any way you feel necessary for the diagrams to be more directly referable to how digital media operates in terms of how information is transferred from interface to user.

For the critique session, be prepared to discuss and defend the alterations you have made to the original diagram.

B. Reinterpreting the Common

Go to Google Image search. Set the Search for “international signs and symbols” or “international traffic signs”. The results will display images of various signs and icon used around the world for everything from restrooms and telephones to speed limits and toxic material. One question to ask is how are these icon readable across cultures?

While you are looking at the images consider a few that you would like to work with. Download the images you have selected and open them in Photoshop. The exercise is to change what is expressed by the icon. What if a STOP sign was green? What if the sign for Passport Control was a set of handcuffs? One good example is the numerous yield for wildlife signs. In Sweden we see ÄLG and RÅDJUR, in Australia you will see a Kangaroo, some places in the US will have an Armadillo... What about a gnome? Would you be surprised to see a YIELD FOR ELEPHANT sign in Karlskrona?

With this exercises it is about being creative and thinking outside the box. Reinvent four signs. They can play with expectations. They can represent signs that there just isn't an international symbol for... They can alter the original so it is no longer immediately recognizable.

For the critique session, be prepared to discuss and defend the alterations you have made to the original signs, symbols, and icons.

C. Iconicity

Find two representational images online – the images can be a painting, a photograph from the news or elsewhere, something odd or something normal. The image can include people, or not. It may just be a picture of a tree, a shoe, an aardvark... Download the image.

Study the image and consider what sort of images could replace what is represented. Think about the disconnection between images, the things they represent, and how they are represented in language.

Once you have studied the image, taken some notes perhaps, consider how you could re-represent its content in another form. There are a number of choices here. Perhaps you want to open the image in Photoshop and replace its content with new images so the meaning is somewhat maintained but the output is very different from the original image. Maybe you open it in Photoshop and replace everything in the image with words, perhaps developing a narrative for the original. Then again, maybe you want to do away with the image entirely and write the image. The choice is yours.

For the critique session, bring both the original image and your new work based on the original and be prepared to discuss what is at play in this sort of transfer between sign regimes.

EXERCISE 2:

Complete Two of the Exercises Below

Feedback for this assignment will be given during the Critique Session:

A. WIKI DÉRIVE 21

This exercise borrows from the Situationist notion of the *dérive*. Guy Debord, the founder and primary philosopher of the Situationist movement describes the *dérive* method as follows:

... one or more persons ... drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones. For this version of the *dérive* process we will be exploring the psychogeography of Wikipedia. Using Wikipedia as a source a cityscape if you will, select a starting point. In this case a starting point would be a term to look up in Wikipedia. When you have made your selection go to the page and copy a bit of text from the entry. Sentence fragments tend to work best for this exercise and paste it into a new document. Insert an endnote for your starting point that contains the URL for the page. Now search the page for links to other Wikipedia pages that are not included in the text you have appropriated and go to the page. Repeat the process of appropriation trying to build coherence across the different contexts you encounter. The results may surprise you. In the Process document there is an example that starts with PIGEON and ends with SUBLIMATION. Though these terms may not be obviously related they are associated by way of progressive linkage.

The goal of this assignment is to build a sort of coherence from diverse, intertextual fragments and to consider the psychogeography of web-based navigation. During the critique session be prepared to discuss your process, and how Debord's notion plays into this intertextual method.

B. JanusNode. Text-generation/Text-morphing

Download JanusNode from <http://janusnode.com/>

JanusNode is a software that runs text mapping routines on input text. Running the mappings will alter the text substantially, taking it out of its original intended context.

For this assignment you will use a set of appropriated text and run various routines on the text. The more the text is processed the further away it will become from the original. JanusNode includes a set of mapping routines that can morph the text by adding postmodern verbiage, texts taken from George W. Bush, reformat the text so it has the appearance of a poem from E.E. Cummings, or morph the text by including L33T (hacker text) type alterations.

The goal of this exercise is to run the mappings until the text carries little semblance to its original source, while documenting your process. For the critique session be prepared to talk about automated text generation and morphing, along with a demonstration of your text, perhaps attempting to read the text out loud. Through this we can further discuss differences between orality and inscription as processes, and algorithmic methods of meaning-making.

C. N+7 Intertextual Remix

N+7 is a method invented by the French OULIPO (Ouvroir de littérature

potentielle; or "workshop of potential literature") movement. The N+7 method involves replacing nouns in a text with the noun to be found seven nouns forward in a dictionary. Though the method originated as an analog, manual process computation has made the method quite a bit simpler to engineer. For this exercise you will use the online N+7 Machine to perform the process for you. Not only does the computationally-based N+7 Machine make the process easier, it provides output from N+1 to N+14. With this you can extend the variations in the source text taking it further from its source.

In the exercise you will select excerpts from a number of sources (a poem, a work fiction, a Wikipedia entry, a current news item, and product information), compile and remix these texts manually, then run them through the N+7 Machine three times. The first time you will select the output for N+7, the second and third times you can select any of the output above N+7 that you like. Finally, from the output text you will pull a fragment of text that makes for a nice title to the piece.

The exercise both plays with notions of intertextuality as well as computationally-based text manipulation. Since the source text is not your own, how does the process make you as the manipulator of the text the author of the final output? For the critique session be prepared to discuss some of the issues that arise out of this form of authorship.

D. Flarf Poetry

Flarf Poetry is a poetic form truly born of the Internet. Loosely, Flarf works are based on Google searches of mundane or banal subjects and use appropriated phrases from the search results. For this exercise you will create two flarf poems – one being a sort of asymmetrical sestina, the other taking the form of an English Sonnet. Flarf work tends to look for the ridiculous in the search results and attempts not to edit too heavily what is found in the results. There is of course some latitude here, and room for invention.

For each of the poems you will do Google searches and then pull text from the results. Your Google searches can be on pretty much anything. Some examples might be searching for “I am having a bad hair day”, “Cookies are health food”, “Eurovision is my life”, “Smelly shoes”, “Bieber”, etc. You get the idea. The process document includes two examples – “PENCIL”, and “I LOVE MY LITTLE PONY”.

Because of the appropriation method involved in Flarf poetry, there is an embedded relationship to intertextuality. During the critique be prepared to discuss this aspect of the process, perhaps indicating the variety of sources you have used. You may also want to read your work out loud, as if it was serious poetry. The Flarf method not only deals with intertextuality but draws into question elitism related to the cultural positioning of both poet and poetry – in essence the Flarf method allows anyone to be a poet. But, what does it say about authorship?

EXERCISE 3

For this exercise you will investigate the idea of psychogeography and how it may apply to locative media and documentation.

Consider alternative modes of a “tour” of a location and document what is usually not addressed in locative media. The idea is to not develop a map or tour that is necessarily helpful in terms of getting from point A to point B, or pointing out what people should be

interested in; rather, the map you develop should consider what is generally ignored, perhaps inconvenient, or prohibited.

You may use any technology you like for the exercise. You may want to collect images of minor locations and present these as a narrative; you may want to create a video demonstrating contrary acts for various locations. Perhaps using dice, random numbers or some other system to determine which direction to proceed, how many paces, etc.

For the critique session, be prepared to discuss not only the content of your tour, but also the method or system you used to determine it.

EXERCISE 4 + ANALYSIS

Develop a 2000 word structural, rhetorical, semiological analysis that uses

MARKEDNESS, OPPOSITION, AND COMMUTATIONAL TESTING

To examine

- A work of digital art or electronic literature
- A piece of software
- A commercial website
- A journalistic website
- A computer game

2000 words should be considered as a guideline. You may also consider alternative forms critiques

Such as:

- A set of images
- A website
- Creative-Critical writing combined
- Video
- (other forms may also be accepted)

MEDIA STUDIOS

In the course, students are required to take two out of three media studios. Each media studio was directed not only toward developing technical production skills, but also address critical issues around digital rhetoric and semiotics. Below is an example of one of the media studios. The example addresses a form of transmediation in style – changing a photographic image to an image resembling a comic book panel. The other media studios dealt with sublimated content in film, and performative coding.

MEDIA STUDIO A: PROJECT IN IMAGE EDITING

To pass this Media Studio you must complete a minimum of six images using the process below and be involved in the narrative decisions made by your working group. If you do not complete the work, as a retake you will be asked to do more work because of the collaborate nature of the project. Failing the Media Studio will first be recorded as U/F before adjusting the grade based on a retake.

The project involves image editing, planning, following a determined method, following standardized naming conventions, and collaboration. It is very important that you work together to make the project a success. Please follow the method and if you have questions do not hesitate to ask me, or to work with others in your group, or the class as whole to find solutions.

If everyone completes the project we will have 90 images included in the variable remix. This is quite substantial and can lead to some interesting narrative outcomes. It is my hope that the project be successful so we can show it off at the end of the term.

TO START

Select an image you want to work with and open it in Photoshop.

You will notice that the image size is quite large (4320px X 3240px)

For this project we will be outputting images that are 440px X 440px, the large size of the original images gives us a lot of latitude, as to framing, changing the angle, distorting the image, etc.

Depending upon what you want to do with the image there are a number of methods for selecting what will become the exported image.

FULLFRAME:

If you want to use a small area of the image, as if it has been zoomed in upon. Use the following method.

- On the toolbar, select the rectangular marquee tool.
- You will notice that the parameter panel at the top of the interface has become specific to this tool.
- In the style dropdown menu on the parameter panel, change the setting to fixed size and set the dimensions to width 440px and height 440px
- On the layers panel add a new layer.
- Select the rectangular marquee tool on the tool bar and position it over the image. A square 440x440 will appear.
- On the top menu go to Edit/Stroke, a popup menu will appear.
- Adjust the settings to Width 18px Location: Inside Mode Normal Opacity 100% You can change the color if you like.

- Click on the OK button
- The area will be highlighted. Type Ctrl+D to deselect the highlighted area.

Now you can move the small square around the image until you find the framing you would like to use. Once you have positioned the square where you like it.

- On the toolbar, select the Magic Wand tool
- On the parameter panel, make sure that the Contiguous checkbox is checked, and set your Tolerance to 44
- Move the Magic Wand over the image but outside of the square, click. Clicking will highlight the area outside of the framed area.
- On the top menu go to Select/inverse, now the area of the image for use is highlighted.
- On the layers panel highlight the layer that contains the source image.
- Type Ctrl+C to copy.
- Go to the File menu and Start a new file. The new file should automatically be sized to what you have just copied.
- Type Ctrl+V to paste the selected image into the new file.

And now you are ready to go!

RESIZED:

If you want to select a larger area of the image there are really only a few changes to the above.

- In the style dropdown menu on the parameter panel, change the setting to fixed Ratio and set the dimensions to width 440px and height 440px

Setting the parameter to fixed ratio allows you to draw the square to the size you need, while maintaining even width and height. Follow all of the steps above, but for after the final step

- On the top menu go to Image/Image Size, a popup menu will appear.
- Adjust the settings to Width 440px and Height 440px

Distortion, and other effects can be gone over in the workshop on a case by case basis, but feel free to experiment with this.

THE COMICBOOK METHOD

PREPARATION

	It is best to keep control over your file by managing layers. The first thing you will want to do is start a Group in Photoshop. This is done by adding a <u>Group from the Layers Panel</u>
	Move your image into the Folder. Name the Group. Let's name it <u>comic001</u> . This is done from the Group Properties menu, which can be found by right-clicking on the Group in the Layers Panel
	Drag your image into the Group Folder
	Right Click on the image and select Duplicate Layer. We want to keep the original source for reference and for further duplication, so name it BASE01, name your duplication CUTOUT01

CUTOUT PROCESS

	Hue/Saturation: You will probably want to adjust the color saturation for the cutout process. You find this under Image/Adjustments/HueSaturation.
	After you have set the color, duplicate the layer and name the duplication HALFTONE01, hide the layer.
	Cutout: return to the CUTOOUT01 layer and go to Filter/Artistic/Cutout
	Cutout Parameters: You will need to adjust the parameters on the popup panel. You will see three slide bars – Number of Levels, Edge Simplicity, and Edge Fidelity. Set these to 4, 4, and 2 as a starting point. The cutout tool is a little tricky and you want to strike a balance between abstraction and an image that has some semblance to the original. Depending on the exposure, the complexity of colors and edges you will need to play with these a bit.
	When you have created the results you like click the OK button.

HALFTONE PROCESS

	Highlight the HALFTONE01 layer.
	We don't really want any sharp edges for this process so we will need to blur the image before applying the halftone.
	Go to Filter/Blur/Gaussian Blur. A popup menu will appear. Change the radius to 12 pixels. Click the OK button.
	Your image will be out of focus now, but that is how we want it. Now go to Filter/Pixelate/Color Halftone, a popup menu will appear
	Halftone Parameters. Because of the size of the images we will be outputting a radius of eight pixels for the halftone is too large. Change the radius to 4px. We don't need to change anything else as the default for the pitch of the pixels works well for our purposes. After adjusting the radius – you guessed it -- click the OK button.
	Go to the Layers panel and adjust the opacity to 40%. Your cutout layer should be showing through, visually merging with the halftone layer.

OUTLINE PROCESS

	Go back to your BASE layer and duplicate. Name the new layer OUTLINE01
	Drag this layer so it is in front of the HALFTONE and CUTOOUT layers
	We need this image to be monochromatic. Go to Image/Adjustments/Black & White. The default settings are fine.
	We also need the image to be high contrast. Go to Image/Adjustments/Levels.
	Looking at the Histogram we need the white to be white and the black to be black, midtone greys will not work so well. Adjust the sliders, until you have a high contrast image with true white. In general this is can be gauged by moving the highlight slider till it lines up with the highlight peak in the histogram. Still, you may need to fine tune the settings.
	When you have this set... Click the OK button.
	Look on the toolbar and set the foreground and background color to black and white. Make sure black is the foreground color.
	Go to Filters/Artistic/Poster Edges
	PosterEdges Parameters: You will see three sliders on the parameter popup menu. Set Edge Intensity to 10 and Posterization to 0. The Edge Thickness will have to be adjusted depending on the image but 4-5 is usually a good starting point. When you have set the parameters click the OK button.
	Go to the toolbar and select the Magic Wand. On the top parameter menu set the Tolerance to 2 and make sure the Contiguous checkbox is NOT checked. Move the Magic wand over a black area of the image. Click. This will select all of the black in the image.
	Go to Select/Inverse and this will highlight anything that is not black. Now, hit the delete button.

	Go to the Layers panel, and look for Lock at the top of the panel. Click on the first item (it looks like a little checkerboard). This will lock the transparent areas.
	Go to Edit/Fill. A popup panel will appear. Change the fill content to black... this will get rid of any grey artifacts in the image.

TEXT PROCESS

	To determine the size of the speech bubble you will first need to determine what text it needs to contain.
	Once you have determined the text.
	On the toolbar select the text tool.
	Adjust the parameters on the top menu bar to be: Comic Sans Bold 14pt For the sake of consistency it is important that this guideline be followed.
	Now move the text tool to the image area, click, and start typing your text.
	The text will need to be adjusted, adding linebreaks and such. Once you have typed it in go ahead and add these. Once you have this inserted and set. Go to the select tool on the toolbar.
	To adjust line spacing go to Windows/Character and check it. The line spacing should be set to 18pt.

SPEECH BUBBLE PROCESS

	Between the outline layer and your text layer insert a new layer and name it BUBBLE01
	Go to the Elliptical Marquee Tool and drag a ellipse around the text leaving some room around the text.
	Go to Edit/Fill and fill the ellipse with white.
	Go to the Polygonal Lasso Tool. What we want to do is create the tag that leads from the mouth to the speech bubble.
	Starting somewhere in the middle of the bubble, click to add a point. Move the cursor toward the person speaking and click to add a point, and then back into the bubble some distance away from the first point. Double click to complete the shape.
	Go to Edit/Fill and fill the ellipse with white.
	Now we need to create a black line around the bubble and the tag.
	Go to Edit/Stroke. On the parameter popup set the width to 4px, the color to black, and make sure that the stroke is set to be inside the shape. Click Ok.

FINISHING PROCESS

	The image is pretty much complete, but it looks a little rough. So, let's frame it using the Stroke tool.
	In front of your text layer add a new layer
	Go to Edit/Fill and fill the layer with white.
	Go to Edit/Stroke. On the parameter popup set the width to 16px, the color to black, and make sure that the stroke is set to be inside the shape. Click Ok.
	Go to Edit/Stroke. On the parameter popup set the width to 12px, the color to white, and make sure that the stroke is set to be inside the shape. Click Ok.
	Go to Edit/Stroke. On the parameter popup set the width to 5px, the color to black, and make sure that the stroke is set to be inside the shape. Click Ok.
	Go to the toolbar and select the Magic Wand. On the top parameter menu set the Tolerance to 2 and make sure the Contiguous checkbox is checked. Move the Magic wand over a white area in

	the middle of the image. Click. Delete.

EXPORTING

	To export the image go to File/Save for Web or Device
	In the format dropdown menu select PNG-24
	YOU MUST FOLLOW THIS NAMING CONVENTION: Save your image as msa-TM-01.png (replacing TM with your initials.)

GROUP RESEARCH

Toward the beginning of the term students are provided with an “expansion pack” that includes excerpts and quotes from a variety of media theorists. The class is then divided into small groups (4-5 students) and asked to explore the collection to look for ideas they find interesting. The “expansion pack” is meant to stimulate discussion and motivate further research. Collectively, each group decides upon a theme addressed in the expansion pack, performs independent group research, and develops a topic for presentation. At the end of the each group presents a roundtable and leads discussion on the topic.

The expansion pack is included in the anthology. (memmott_expansionpack.pdf)