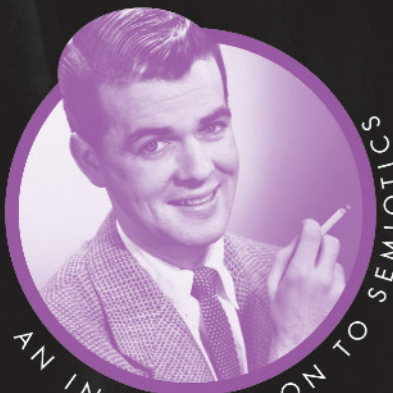
# OF CIGARETTES, HIGH HEELS, AND OTHER *INTERESTING* THINGS

SECOND EDITION



AN INTRODUCTION TO SEMIOTICS

MARCEL DANESI

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## An Introduction to Semiotics

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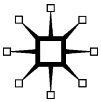



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# PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Among species, human beings seem to be a peculiar lot. For example, why is it that certain members of the species routinely put their survival at risk by puffing on a small stick of nicotine? Why is it that some females of the species make locomotion difficult for themselves by donning high heel footwear? Are there hidden or unconscious reasons behind such strange behaviors that seem to be so utterly counterinstinctual, so to speak?

For no manifest biological reason, humanity has always searched, and continues to search, for a purpose to its life. Is it this search that has led it to engage in such bizarre behaviors as smoking and wearing high heels? And is it the reason behind humanity's invention of myths, art, rituals, languages, mathematics, science, and all the other truly remarkable things that set it apart from all other species? Clearly, *Homo sapiens* appears to be unique in the fact that many of its behaviors are shaped by forces other than the instincts. The discipline that endeavors to understand these forces is known as *semiotics*. Relatively unknown in comparison to, say, philosophy or psychology, semiotics probes the human condition in its own peculiar way, by unraveling the meanings of the symbols, known more exactly as *signs*, that undergird not only the wearing of high heel shoes, but also the construction of words, art forms, numbers, and the like.

This is not a comprehensive textbook on semiotic theory and practice. There are number of excellent textbooks that are available on the market. My aim here is to present the basic notions of semiotics that help us understand how humans "produce meanings" and how these constitute small-scale versions of humanity's larger-scale need to unravel the "meaning of life." Studying the raison d'être of the latter has always been—and continues to be—the aim of philosophy, theology, and various other disciplines; studying the raison d'être of the former is the specific goal of *semiotics*, which can be defined simply as the "science of produced

meaning." I have left out many of the technical details of sign theory and I have not gone into any in-depth discussion of the pivotal contributions made by theorists, since these belong to a more comprehensive treatment. My hope is that this book will engender in the reader the same kind of inquisitive frame of mind with which a semiotician would closely examine people and cultures and why they search for meaning. Perhaps the greatest mental skill possessed by *Homo sapiens,* literally the "knowing species," is the ability to know itself. Semiotics helps sharpen that skill considerably.

The first edition of this book came out in 1999. To my pleasant surprise, it seems to have struck a chord among many readers. One of the reasons may have been that, in it, I decided to contrive my presentation of semiotics around a seemingly trivial scene, but one that nonetheless appears to reveal a lot about the human need for meaning. The scene was a fashionable modern-day restaurant—an urban courtship setting where wooing rituals are performed in a "sign-based" manner. The fictional actions in that scene allowed me to tell the semiotic version of the human condition in concrete terms. Much has changed in the world since 1999, but the role of the restaurant as a locus for human courtship rituals has not. Therefore, in this updated second edition I have retained that scene as a framework for describing sign-based behaviors, although even there some radical changes have taken place such as, for instance, the virtual elimination of smoking from public venues owing to changes in social attitudes toward cigarettes and their meanings. The world has also become much more digitalized and technologically sophisticated since 1999, with the Internet practically replacing all other media systems for the routine transmission and recording of information. Such changes have informed the revision of this book.

Similar to the previous edition, however, I have taken nothing for granted. I have defined in clear language and illustrated with common examples any concept that is basic to semiotic theory. I have also avoided making constant references to the technical literature. The works that have informed my commentaries, descriptions, and analyses are found throughout the endnotes. I have tried to cast as wide a net as possible, attempting to exemplify within two covers how semiotics can be used effectively to probe human nature in specific ways. As in the first edition, I also wish to assure the reader that I have made every possible attempt to emphasize method of analysis, rather than my personal views.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with any or all of my commentaries is, in fact, besides the real purpose of this book, which is to spur the reader to identify and reflect on the unconscious meanings that flow through the system of everyday life in which he or she takes part daily. That and that alone will have made writing it worthwhile.

One final note—as in the first edition I refer constantly to "Western culture" without defining it. In today's global village it is difficult indeed to use such broad designations unambiguously. However, my purpose here is not to enter into an anthropological debate, but rather simply to use a form of culture as a backdrop to the purpose at hand—to describe semiotics. So, for the sake of argument I use the term "Western culture" in a very limited way—as a descriptor of what goes on in societies such as the United States, Canada, and Europe (to mention a few), in terms of ritualistic, expressive, and representational behaviors and patterns in general.

The first edition of this book was the idea of the late Professor Roberta Kevelson of Penn State University, a leading semiotician. She will be missed greatly. It was Michael Flamini of St. Martin's Press who brought it to fruition as editor. The invitation to put together a second edition comes from Farideh Koohi-Kamali, also of St. Martin's. I cannot thank her enough for the support and enthusiasm she has shown in this regard. I am also deeply grateful to Victoria College of the University of Toronto for granting me the privilege of teaching semiotics for many years. This has allowed me to learn a great deal about human nature from the enthusiastic students I have taught over those years. I have learned more from them than they have from me. Finally, heartfelt thanks go out to my family, Lucy, Alexander, Sarah, Danila, Chris, and my late father, for all the patience they have had with me over my incessant pontifications about signs and symbols. I must also ask their forgiveness for having been so grumpy and neglectful of family duties during the rewriting of this book. I would like to dedicate it to my late father, Danilo. He was a simple and kind soul who inspired generosity and benevolence in all those around him by his very existence.

# 1

# CIGARETTES AND HIGH HEELS

## The Universe of Signs

> A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?
>
> —Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

It's eight o'clock on a Saturday night. Two attractive people, both in their late twenties, are sitting across from each other at an elegantly set table in a trendy restaurant/night club, located in the downtown area of a North American city. For convenience, let's call the duo Cheryl and Ted. Other couples are seated at tables in other parts of the restaurant. The lights are turned down low. The atmosphere is unmistakably romantic, sustained by the soft, mellifluous sounds of a three-piece jazz band. Cheryl and Ted are sipping drinks, making small talk, looking coyly into each other's eyes, and smoking cigarettes in a secluded part of the restaurant, set aside for smokers. Smoking is a tradition that this particular restaurant has decided to preserve, despite great opposition to it from city legislators, not to mention society. The scene is distinctly reminiscent of a classic Hollywood setting for the enactment of romance.

What Cheryl and Ted do not know is that from behind a partition a semiotician, whom we shall call Martha, is capturing their evening together as it unfolds on a tiny digital recording device, through a concealed hole in the partition. Martha is our research assistant assigned to record our couple's words, facial expressions, body language, and other behaviors on video, so that we can dissect them semiotically. Her video device transmits the images simultaneously to a monitor to which we have access.

Let's start by first examining the smoking gestures that our two subjects made. As the video starts, we see Cheryl taking her cigarette out of its package in a slow, deliberate manner, inserting it coquettishly into the middle of her mouth, and then bringing the flame of a match toward it in a leisurely, drawn-out fashion. On the other side of the table, we see Ted also taking his cigarette from its package but, in contrast, he can be seen employing a terse movement, inserting it into the side of his mouth, and then lighting it with a swift action. As the two start puffing away, we see Cheryl keeping her legs crossed, placing her arm gently on the table, with the cigarette between her index and third fingers pointing upward, periodically flicking the ashes into an ashtray, and using her index and middle fingers to insert and remove the cigarette from her mouth, always with graceful, circular, swooping motions of the hand. Occasionally, she tosses her long, flowing hair back, away from her face, looking shyly but enticingly at Ted as she does so. On our video monitor, we can see Ted sitting with his legs apart, leaning back in his chair in a regal manner, keeping his head taut, looking straight ahead at Cheryl, holding his cigarette between the thumb and middle finger, and guiding it to the side of his mouth with sharp, pointed movements. Cheryl draws in smoke slowly, retaining it in her mouth for a relatively longer period than Ted, exhaling the smoke in an upward direction with her head tilted slightly to the side, and, finally, extinguishing her cigarette in an ashtray, "squishing" it in a tantalizing way. On the other side, we see Ted inhaling smoke abruptly, keeping the cigarette in his mouth for a relatively shorter period, blowing the smoke in a downward direction (with his head slightly aslant), and then extinguishing the cigarette by pressing down on the butt with his thumb, almost as if he were effacing or destroying evidence.

## CIGARETTES AND SEX

Welcome to the world of the semiotician who is, above all else, a "people-watcher," observing how individuals and groups behave in everyday situations, always asking: What does this gesture or that action *mean*? Meaning is everything to the semiotician, no matter what package it comes in, small or large, so to speak. So, let's start our excursion into the fascinating world of semiotics by unraveling what the various gestures and movements recorded by Martha might mean. But before starting, it might

be useful to check whether there is some historically based link between smoking, sex, and romance.

Tobacco is native to the Western Hemisphere and was probably first used in rituals by the Maya and other Native American peoples, believing that it had medicinal and powerful mystical properties. As Jason Hughes has aptly put it, "Tobacco was used to appease the spiritual hunger, thereby gaining favors and good fortune."[1] The Arawak people of the Caribbean, as observed by none other than Christopher Columbus in 1492, smoked tobacco with a tube they called a *tobago*, from which the word *tobacco* is derived. Brought to Spain in 1556, tobacco was introduced to France in the same year by the French diplomat Jean Nicot, after whom the tobacco plant is named, *nicotine*. In 1585 the English navigator, Sir Francis Drake, took tobacco to England, where the practice of pipe smoking became popular almost right away, especially among Elizabethan courtiers. Tobacco use spread quickly throughout Europe. By the seventeenth century it had reached China, Japan, the west coast of Africa, and other parts of the world.

By the early twentieth century cigarette smoking became a routine social activity in many parts of the world. In America alone, more than one thousand cigarettes per capita each year were being consumed. American society believed that smoking was not only highly fashionable, but that it also relieved tensions and even produced health benefits. During World War II, physicians encouraged sending soldiers cigarettes in ration kits. However, epidemiologists started noticing around 1930 that lung cancer—rare before the twentieth century—had been increasing dramatically. The rise in cancer rates among the returning soldiers eventually raised a red flag. The American Cancer Society and other organizations initiated studies comparing deaths among smokers and nonsmokers, finding significant differential rates of cancer occurrence between the two. In 1964 the U.S. Surgeon General's report affirmed that cigarette smoking was a health hazard of sufficient importance to warrant the inclusion of a warning on cigarette packages. Cigarette advertising was banned from radio and television, starting in 1971. In the 1970s and 1980s several cities and states passed laws requiring nonsmoking sections in enclosed public and work places. In February 1990 federal law banned smoking on all domestic airline flights of less than six hours. Today, there are laws throughout North America that prohibit smoking in public places, buildings, and

vehicles. The goal of society over the past few years has been to achieve a smoke-free world.

Yet despite the dangers and all the legislative and practical obstacles, a sizeable portion of the population continues to smoke. Studies show that approximately 25 percent of the population does so.[2] Why do people smoke, despite the dangers that smoking poses and despite its prohibition virtually everywhere? People smoke, or at least start smoking, because it is meaningful. To the semiotician, this comes as no surprise, since cigarettes have, throughout their history, been imbued with various socially based meanings. Let's consider what these might be.

The restaurant scene that Martha captured on video is identifiable essentially as a courtship display, a recurrent, largely unconscious, mating ritual rooted in gesture, movement, and body language that keep the two sexes differentiated and highly interested in each other. As Margaret Leroy has suggested, such actions are performed because sexual traditions dictate it.[3] Let's scrutinize Cheryl's smoking gestures more closely. The way in which she held the cigarette invitingly between her index and middle fingers, fondling it gently, and then inserting it into the middle of her mouth, slowly and deliberately, constitutes a sexually charged sequence of unconscious movements. At the same time, she exhibits her fingers and wrist to her suitor, areas of the body that have erotic overtones. Finally, her hair-tossing movements, as she simultaneously raises a shoulder to highlight her breasts, constitute powerful erotic signals of femininity (as any male reading this book can easily confirm).

Ted's gestures form a sequential counterpart to Cheryl's, emphasizing masculinity. Her movements are slow, his movements are abrupt; she crosses her legs, he keeps his apart; she puffs smoke upward, he blows it downward; she holds the cigarette in a tantalizing dangling manner between her index and middle fingers, he holds it in a sturdy way between his thumb and middle finger; she puts out the cigarette with a lingering motion, he crushes it forcefully. Overall, her gestures convey smooth sensuality, voluptuousness, sultriness; his gestures suggest toughness, determination, control. She is playing the female role and he the male one in the courtship display—roles determined largely by culture.

Smoking is sexual fun and games. Moreover, because it is now socially proscribed, it is probably even more fun to do (at least for some people).

The history of smoking shows that tobacco has been perceived at times as a desirable thing and at others as a forbidden fruit.[4] But in almost every era, as Richard Klein[5] has documented, cigarettes have had some connection to something that is erotically, socially, or intellectually appealing—musicians smoke; intellectuals smoke; artists smoke; and of course romantic partners in night clubs smoke (despite all the warnings). Movies have always told us that cigarettes are meaningful props in sex and romance. So do advertisements for cigarettes. Smoking is, in a word, a sexual language, which, as Michael Starr puts it, is designed to convey "certain qualities of the smoker."[6]

Ever since it fell out of the social mainstream, smoking has entered the alluring world of the *verboten*. Anytime something becomes taboo, it takes on powerful occult symbolism—the more forbidden and the more dangerous, the sexier and more alluring it is. Smoking now communicates rebellion, defiance, and sexuality all wrapped into one. No wonder then that those regulations aimed at curbing the marketing and sale of tobacco products to young people have failed miserably in deterring them from smoking. As Tara Parker-Pope has aptly put it, "For 500 years, smokers and tobacco makers have risked torture and even death at the hands of tobacco's enemies, so it's unlikely that a bunch of lawyers and politicians and the looming threat of deadly disease will fell either the industry or the habit."[7]

The smoking gestures that Martha recorded for us to examine are performed in a gender-specific way, in parallel situations, throughout many secular societies as part of urban courtship rituals; they form what semioticians call a *code*. Codes are systems of *signs*—gestures, movements, words, glances—that allow people to make and send out meaningful messages in specific situations. The meaningful signs in a dress code, for instance, are the items of clothing that are worn in different combinations to send out specific kinds of social messages about an individual, as we will see in a subsequent chapter. Codes mediate relationships between people and are, therefore, effective shapers of how we think of others and of ourselves. The smoking routines caught on Martha's video are part of a *gender code* that unconsciously dictates not only smoking styles, but also how individuals act, move, gesture, dress, and the like to present an appropriate gender persona.

The particular enactment of the code will vary in detail from situation to situation, from person to person, but its basic sign structures will remain

the same. The code provides a script for social performances. No wonder that teenagers tend to take up smoking, at least early on in their tentative ventures into adulthood.[8] In several research projects that I undertook in the 1990s and early 2000s, I noticed that adolescents put on the same type of smoking performances that our fictional restaurant protagonists did, using cigarettes essentially as sexual props, albeit in different situations (in school yards, in malls, at parties).[9] Cigarette smoking in adolescence is, in a phrase, a coming-of-age rite, a ritualized performance designed to send out signals of sexual difference, maturity, and attractiveness to peers.

Smoking performances raise more general questions about human ritualistic behaviors. In biology, the word *sex* alludes to the physical and behavioral differences that distinguish organisms according to their role in the reproductive process. Through these differences, termed *male* and *female,* the individual members of a species assume distinct sexual roles. Therefore, sensing the other person's sex is an innate or instinctual biological *mechanism*, as it is commonly called. This mechanism is sensitive to mating signals emitted during estrus (going into heat). However, at some point in its evolutionary history, the human species developed a capacity and need to engage in sex independently of estrus. Other animals experience chemical and physical changes in the body during estrus, which stimulate desire. Humans, however, normally experience desire first, which then produces changes in the body.

The biologist Charles Darwin (1809–82) called courtship displays "submissive," because they are designed to send out the message, *Notice me, I am attractive and harmless*. In effect, Cheryl's coy glances are opening gambits in courtship. Her hand placement on the table, her shoulder shrug, and her head tilting are examples of submissive gestures. However, human courtship is not controlled exclusively by biological mechanisms. Smoking has nothing to do with biology. A cigarette is an imaginary prop, not a biological mechanism. Smoking unfolds as a *text*—literally, a "weaving together" of the signs taken from a specific code. Together with the gestures, bodily postures, and other actions shown on Martha's video, smoking constitutes a *courtship text*—an unconscious script that is performed regularly at locales such as nightclubs.

Therefore, the human story of courtship has many more chapters in it than a purely biological version of it would reveal. Nature creates sex; culture creates gender. This is why there are no gender universals. Traditionally, in Western society, men have been expected to be the sex

seekers, to initiate courtship, and to show an aggressive interest in sex; but among the Zuñi Indians of New Mexico, these very same actions and passions are expected of the women. Recently a societywide process that can be called "degendering" has been occurring in Western culture, or the tendency to blur and even eliminate traditional gender roles.

The views people develop of gender shape feelings and guide their attempts to make sense of a kiss, a touch, a look. These are products of a culture's history. This is why there is so much variable opinion across the world, and even within a single society, as to what sexually appropriate behavior is and what body areas are erotic. The people of one culture may regard legs, earlobes, and the back of the neck as sexually attractive. However, those of another may find nothing at all sexual about these body parts, preferring lips or other areas of the body. What is considered sexual or appropriate sexual behavior in some cultures is considered nonsense or sinfulness in others.

## ENTER THE SEMIOTICIAN

Now that we have identified the smoking gestures made by Cheryl and Ted as meaningful signs in a gender code, our next task is to unravel how this code came about. The association of smoking with sexual attractiveness can probably be traced back to the jazz night club scene of the first decades of the twentieth century. The word *jazz* originally had sexual connotations; and to this day the verb form, *to jazz*, suggests such connotations. The jazz clubs, known as "speak-easies," were locales where young people went to socialize and to smoke, away from the eyes of social elders. The association between smoking and sexuality was thus forged in our collective memory. That unconscious imagery continues to sell cigarettes. Cigarette smoking and jazz are fun. They allow an engagement in the profane aspect of psychic life. Although smoking is diminishing in the face of a societywide onslaught on it, it still goes on because it is part of a "profane subtext," as it may be called, that is perceived to be enjoyable, sexy, and subversive (or at least transgressive), setting itself against the sacred (read: "sanctimonious") system that wants to prohibit it.

Certainly, the movies and advertisers have always known this to their great advantage. Director Gjon Mili, for instance, captured the "night club" allure of smoking memorably in his 1944 movie, *Jammin' the Blues*. In the opening segment, there is a close-up of the great saxophonist Lester

Young inserting a cigarette gingerly into his mouth, then dangling it between his index and middle fingers as he plays a slow, soft, style of jazz for his late-night audience. The makers of Camel cigarettes strategically revived this scene in their advertising campaigns of the early 1990s, with ads showing images of a camel, dressed in an evening jacket, playing the piano in a club setting, a cigarette dangling suggestively from the side of his mouth. Those ads were clearly designed to evoke the cool smoothness and finesse embodied by jazz musicians.

The sexual subtleties of the jazz club scene were captured as well by Michael Curtiz in his 1942 movie, *Casablanca*. Cigarettes are the dominant visual feature in Rick's Café. There is a particularly memorable scene in this regard at the start of the movie. Swaggering imperiously in his realm, with cigarette in hand, Rick (Humphrey Bogart) goes up to Ingrid Bergman, expressing concern over the fact that she had had too much to drink. Dressed in white, like a knight in shining armor, Bogart comes to the aid of a "damsel in distress," sending her home to sober up. As he admonishes her, he takes out another cigarette from its package, inserting it into his mouth. He lights it, letting it dangle from the side of his mouth. So captivating was this image of masculinity to cinemagoers that it became an instant paradigm of "masculine cool" imitated by hordes of young men throughout society. In a scene in Jean Luc Godard's 1959 movie, *Breathless*, Jean-Paul Belmondo stares at a poster of Bogart in a movie window display. He takes out a cigarette and starts smoking it, imitating Bogart in *Casablanca*. With the cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth, the tough-looking Belmondo approaches his female mate with a blunt, "Sleep with me tonight?"

The "Bogartian cigarette image," as it can be called, has found its way into the scripts of many movies. For instance, in the car chicken scene of Nicholas Ray's 1955 movie, *Rebel without a Cause*, James Dean, one of two combatants, can be seen behind the wheel of his car, getting ready for battle, with a cigarette dangling in Bogartian style from the side of his mouth. In Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 movie, *Blow Up*, Vanessa Redgrave can be seen swerving her head excitedly to the jazz rock music that David Hemmings, her boyfriend, has put on his record player. He then gives her the cigarette he had in his own mouth. She takes it quickly, eager to insert it into her own mouth. However, no, Hemmings instructs her, she must slow the whole performance down; she must go "against the beat," as he puts it. Leaning forward, Redgrave takes the cigarette and

inserts it slowly and seductively into the middle of her mouth. She lies back salaciously, blowing the smoke upward. She gives Hemmings the cigarette back, giggling suggestively. He takes it and inserts it into his own mouth, slightly to the side, in Bogartian style, visibly overcome by the erotic power of her smoking performance.

Such images have become emblazoned in the collective memory of our culture, even though starting in the mid-1990s, Hollywood became politically correct, producing fewer and fewer movies with cigarettes in them. Nevertheless, the "history of smoking," as captured by the movies, explains why, in situations that call for romance, a skillful use of the cigarette as a prop continues to be perceived as enhancing romance. All this reveals something truly extraordinary about the human species. People will do something, even if it puts their lives at risk, for no other reason than it is *interesting*. Smoking makes courtship interesting. A colleague of mine once quipped that semiotics can be defined as the study of "anything that is interesting."

## CIGARETTES ARE SIGNS

As the foregoing discussion has attempted to suggest, cigarettes are hardly just cigarettes (nicotine sticks). In our culture, the cigarette is a *sign* that conjures up images and meanings of sexual cool. It also has (or has had) other meanings. When females started smoking in the early part of the twentieth century, the cigarette was perceived as a threatening symbol of equality and independence. Indeed, a brand of cigarettes, *Virginia Slims*, has always played precisely on this meaning, equating cigarette smoking with female power and women's liberation. From the outset, the brand has emphasized that smoking, once considered a "male thing," has empowered females, providing them with a symbolic prop through which they can tacitly communicate their independence from social patriarchy. For women to smoke "their own brand" of cigarette, in fact, has been promoted by the company as a subversive social act. It is relevant to note, however, that women in previous centuries smoked things such as cigars and pipes, not cigarettes. As Hughes puts it, the gendering of cigarettes was likely the result of male smokers' attempts "to distance their forms of tobacco use from that of women."[10]

The basic goal of semiotics is to identify what constitutes a sign and to infer, document, or ascertain what its meanings are. First, a sign must

have distinctive physical structure. The shape of a cigarette, for example, allows us to differentiate it from other smoking materials such as cigars and pipes. This is called vicariously the *signifier,* the *representamen,* or even just the *sign*. The term signifier will be used in this book. Second, a sign must refer to something. In the case of the cigarette, the referent can be sexuality, jazz clubs, Humphrey Bogart, and the like. This is designated the *referent, object*, or *signified*. The term signified will be used in this book. Finally, a sign evokes particular thoughts, ideas, feelings, and the like differentially in people. This is called, alternately, *signification*, *interpretation,* or simply *meaning.* All three terms will be used in this book. Cigarettes are clearly signs because they have all three aspects—they have physical structure, they refer to specific ideas, and, of course, they evoke different interpretations in different people.

A sign carries within it a slice of a culture's history. Take Salem cigarettes as a case in point. In the late 1990s the makers of the cigarettes created an abstractly designed package, imitative of symbolist or expressionist style. The company mailed out a sample package along with four gift packages—a box of peppermint tea, a container of Chinese fortune cookies, a bottle of mint-scented massage gel, and finally a candle—throughout the country. Each package came with a coupon for a free pack of cigarettes. The package's new designs, along with the occult nature of the gifts, were designed to impart a mystical aura to the cigarettes. It is no coincidence that the name of the brand itself is suggestive of the occult. The Salem witchcraft trials—the result of the largest witch hunt in American history—were held in 1692 in Salem, a town in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The cigarette's name is, in effect, a signifier that suggests an emotionally charged period in American history (the signified), no matter what interpretation we assign to the cigarette and its eponymous historical event.

The scholar who coined the terms *signifier* and *signified* was the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). For Saussure, the meanings of a sign were fixed socially by convention. Moreover, he believed that the choice of a particular sign to stand for something was largely an arbitrary process; that is, he did not think that it was motivated by any attempt to make it replicate, simulate, or imitate any perceivable feature of the entity to which it referred. For Saussure, onomatopoeic words—words that imitate the sound of the concept to which they refer (*chirp, drip, boom, zap,* etc.)—were the exception, not the rule, in how language

signs are constructed. Moreover, the highly variable nature of onomatopoeia across languages suggested to him that even this phenomenon was subject to arbitrary social conventions. For instance, the sounds made by a rooster are rendered by *cock-a-doodle-do* in English, but by *chicchirichì* (pronounced "keekeereekee") in Italian; similarly, the barking of a dog is conveyed by *bowwow* in English but by *ouaoua* (pronounced "wawa") in French. Saussure argued that such signs were only approximate, and more or less conventional, imitations of perceived sounds.

However, Saussure, a brilliant historical linguist, appears to have ignored the historical nature of sign-making processes. Although the relation of a word to its referent might seem to be arbitrary, its historical record often reveals a different story. It seems that the inventors of many words have attempted to capture the sounds of the things to which they referred. Thus, even a word such as *flow*, which means "to run like water or to move in a current or stream," has phonic qualities that clearly suggest the movement of water. It is unlikely that a hypothetical word such as *plock* would have been coined in its stead, for the simple reason that it is counterintuitive in referential terms.

Similarly, the phallic form of a cigarette and its association with sexuality is hardly an arbitrary matter—at least to human perception. It is what stands out in Rick's Café, in which it clearly suggests masculinity, and in *Virginia Slim* ads, in which it subverts this meaning. The view that signs are forged initially to simulate something noticeable about a referent was, in fact, the one put forward by the American philosopher Charles Peirce (1839–1914), who argued that signs are attempts to imitate reality, but are no longer perceived as such because time and use have made people forget how they came about. For example, the cross in Christian religions is now perceived largely as a symbolic, conventional sign standing for "Christianity" as a whole. However, the cross sign was obviously created to stand for the actual shape of the cross on which Christ was crucified.[11]

Most people, whether they speak English or Italian, will notice an attempt in both the words described earlier, *cock-a-doodle-do* and *chicchirichì*, to imitate rooster sounds. The reason why the outcomes are different is, in part, because of differences in the respective sound systems of the two languages. Such attempts, as Peirce suggested, can be easily recognized in many words, even though people no longer consciously experience them as imitative forms.

## HIGH HEELS ARE SIGNS TOO

Martha's video of the restaurant scene has captured many more interesting things for us to examine semiotically. At one point, Martha zeroed in with her device on Cheryl's shoes. As you might have guessed, Cheryl was wearing high heel shoes. Why? In prehistoric times people went barefoot. The first foot coverings were probably made of animal skins, which the peoples of the late Stone Age (approximately 4000 BCE) in northern Europe and Asia tied around their ankles in cold weather. Such footwear was the likely ancestor of the European and native North American skin moccasin, and the leather and felt boots still worn by many throughout the world. The original purpose of such footwear was to protect the feet and to allow people to walk comfortably, or at least painlessly, on rough terrain. Now, consider high heel shoes. They are uncomfortable and awkward to wear, yet millions of women wear them. Obviously, the semiotic story of such shoes has parts to it that have little to do with protection and locomotion. Similar to cigarettes, they are signs, as are all kinds of shoes—the strength of the Roman army was built practically and symbolically on the walking power of the soldier's boots; many children's stories revolve around shoes or boots that magically enable some hero to cover great distances at great speed; Hermes, the Greek god, traveled in winged sandals; and the list could go on and on.

High heel shoes have several meanings. The two most prominent ones are that they are elegant or stylish and, of course, they are erotic. The perception of high heels as stylish footwear dates back to fourteenth-century Venice when aristocratic women donned them to set themselves apart socially from peasant and servant women. In the sixteenth century, Caterina de' Medici (1519–89), the Florentine-born queen of France, donned a pair of high heel shoes for her marriage to Henry II in Paris in 1533. The event engendered a fashion craze among the French aristocracy (male and female), encouraged by Louis XIV of France, who apparently wore them to increase his modest height. The high heel shoe was, semiotically speaking, a signifier of nobility, and the higher the heel the higher the rank of the wearer. It was in the mid-nineteenth century that heeled shoes—low-cut, laced or buttoned to the ankle—became the fashion craze among all classes of females, who wore them to keep up their dresses from dragging along the ground. During that period, known as the Victorian era, the shoes became, for the first time in their history, gendered signs of female beauty and sexuality. The reason for this is obvious

to this day—high heels force the body to tilt, raising the buttocks, and allowing the breasts to jut out. They also give glimpses of the woman's feet in a tantalizing manner, thus accentuating the role of female feet in the history of sexuality, as the social historian William Rossi has documented.[12] The "lure of the shoe" is found in fairy tales such as *Cinderella* and *The Golden Slipper.*

This history would explain why high heels are often perceived to be *fetishes*—signs that evoke devotion to themselves, rather than what they stand for. In some cultures, this devotion results from the belief that the shoes have magical or metaphysical attributes, as is evidenced by cross-cultural narratives in which shoes are portrayed as the equivalent of magic wands. In our culture, the term *fetish* refers instead to objects or body parts through which sexual fantasies are played out. Common fetishes in Western society are feet, shoes, stockings, and articles of intimate female apparel. Psychologists believe that fetishism serves to alleviate feelings of sexual inadequacy, usually among males. However, in a fascinating book, Valerie Steele[13] has argued that we are all fetishists to an extent, and that the line between the "normal" and the "abnormal" in sexual preferences and behaviors is a blurry one indeed. Fashion designers, for instance, steal regularly from the fetishist's closet, promoting ultrahigh heels, frilly underwear, latex suits, and the like. The appropriation has been so complete that people wearing such footwear, garments, and apparel are generally unaware of their fetishist origins.

The high heels worn by Cheryl in our fictitious scene allowed her to send out powerful sexual signals. In effect, the shoes gave her emotional control over the situation, overwhelming Ted visibly. The shoes are signs with meanings built into them that reverberate with nobility, stylishness, fetishness, and eroticism—all meanings that are reinforced in media and pop culture representations of various kinds, from movies to ads. It would appear that the human mind is fundamentally a historical sensor of meanings, even when these are buried somewhere deeply within it.

## THE SYSTEM OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Cigarettes and high heel shoes provide human beings with unique kinds of tools to act out their constantly varying roles on the stage of everyday life. The sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–82) drew attention to the idea that everyday life is very much like the theater,[14] because it involves a skillful staging of character according to social context. The two protagonists

in our imaginary scene are indeed "character actors" who employ gestures, props, and conversation to impress each other for a specific reason—romance. The Latin term for "cast of characters" is *dramatis personae*, literally, "the persons of the drama," a term betraying the theatrical origin of our concept of personhood.[15] We seem, in a phrase, to perceive life as a stage.

The question of how this perception came about in the first place is an intriguing one. The scientific record suggests that life in early hominid groups revolved around duties associated with hunting, crop gathering, and cooking. These were shared by individuals to enhance the overall efficiency of the group. As the brain of these early hominids developed, their ability to communicate their thoughts increased proportionately. Plaster casts of skulls dating back approximately one hundred thousand years, which allow scientists to reconstruct ancient brains, reveal that brain size was not much different from current brain size. Cave art starts appearing shortly after, and linguists speculate that human speech had also emerged. Approximately ten thousand years ago, plants were domesticated, followed shortly by the domestication of animals. This agricultural revolution set the stage for the advent of civilization.

The first human groups with language developed an early form of culture, to which scientists refer as the *tribe*, a fully functional system of group life to which even modern humans seem instinctively to relate. The basis of such cultures was ritual—a set of actions accompanied by words intended to bring about certain events or to ascribe communal meaning to such critical events as the coming-of-age, matrimony, and the like. Ritual is the predecessor of theater. In complex societies, where various cultures, subcultures, countercultures, and parallel cultures are in constant competition with each other, and where the shared territory is too large to allow for members of the society to come together for salient ritualistic purposes, the tendency for individuals is to relate instinctively to smaller tribal-type groups (communities, clubs, etc.) and their peculiar rituals. This inclination toward *tribalism*, as the communications theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911–80) emphasized, reverberates constantly within humans, and may be the source of the sense of alienation that many people who live in complex and impersonal social settings experience.

Archaeological evidence suggests that as the members of the early tribes became more culturally sophisticated, that is, as their expressive capacities and technological systems grew in complexity, they sought

larger and larger territories to accommodate their new and growing social needs. The tribes thus grew in population and diversity, cooperating or amalgamating with other tribes in their new settings. The anthropologist Desmond Morris has called the complex tribal systems that came into existence *super-tribes* because of expansion and amalgamation.[16] The first super-tribes date back only four thousand to five thousand years, when the first city-states emerged.

A modern society is a super-tribe, a collectivity of individuals who do not necessarily trace their ancestral roots to the founding tribe, but who nevertheless participate in the cultural rituals of that tribe as it has evolved over time. Such participation allows individuals to interact in both spontaneous and patterned ways that are perceived as "normal." Unlike tribes, however, the mode of interaction does not unfold on a personal level because it is impossible to know, or know about, everyone living in the same super-tribe. Moreover, a society often encompasses more than one cultural system. Consider what people living in the society known as the United States call loosely "American culture." This culture traces its origins to an amalgam of the cultural systems of the founding tribes of European societies who settled in the U.S. American society has also accommodated aboriginal and other parallel cultural systems, with different ways of life, different languages, and different rituals. Unlike his or her tribal ancestor, an American can therefore live apart from the dominant cultural system, in a parallel one, or become a member of a subculture; he or she can also learn and utilize different sign systems, each leading to the adoption of different communication and lifestyle systems.

## THE SCIENCE OF SIGNS

Semiotics has never really caught on widely as an autonomous discipline in academia (or in society), as have other sciences of human nature, such as anthropology and psychology. There are various reasons for this, but perhaps the most understandable one is that it is difficult to define semiotics and to locate it within the traditional academic landscape. Yet, to an extent, everybody is a semiotician, whether he or she knows it or not. As we have seen earlier, semiotic method is something we engage in all the time. When we instinctively pose the question of what something means, in effect, we are engaging in basic semiotic thinking. In addition, as mentioned, we find this *interesting*. Semiotics constitutes a "questioning