



# a critical reader of “new” media

## 03. THE SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE

(or a series of questions that we may not end up solving at all)

# IN THIS CLASS

- What is the semiotics of culture?
- What do we analyze with it?
- Actually, what is culture?

# SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE – an overview

- What do we call ‘semiotics of culture’? First, let’s try to reanswer this:
- What do we call ‘semiotics’?
- How can there be a *semiotics of something*?

# SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE

## **Semiology and structuralism**

- A Saussurean approach to understanding systems of signification
- Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Greimas, etc.

## **Semiotics of culture**

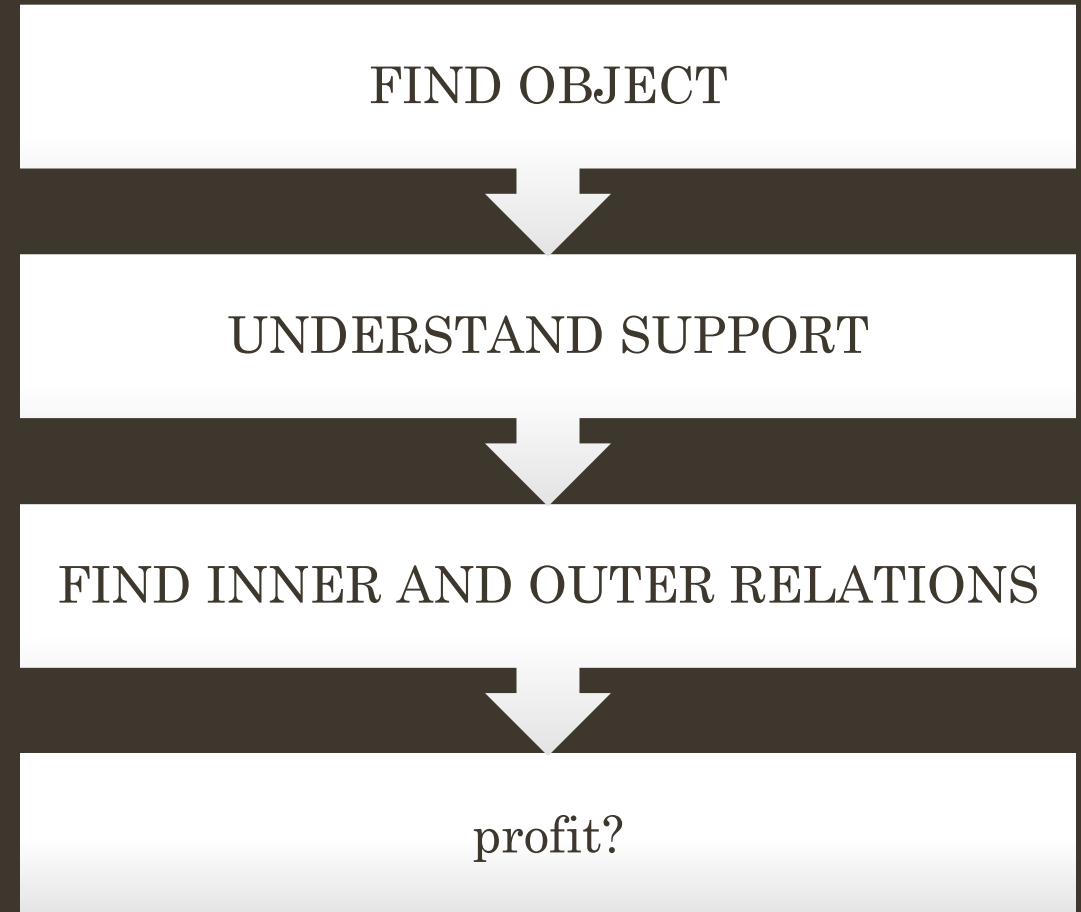
- An analytical approach to understand systems of culture and elements within
- Lotman, Piatigorsky, Uspensky, etc.

# SIDENOTE: WHAT COUNTS AS ANALYSIS?

- Both areas of cultural analysis are fairly compatible, though have significant differences
- Structuralism, semiotics and criticism all create means of analyzing meaningful cultural objects
- What do we mean by analysis though? This may sound like a ridiculous question, but it actually grants some thinking!

# THINGS THAT COUNT AS ANALYSIS

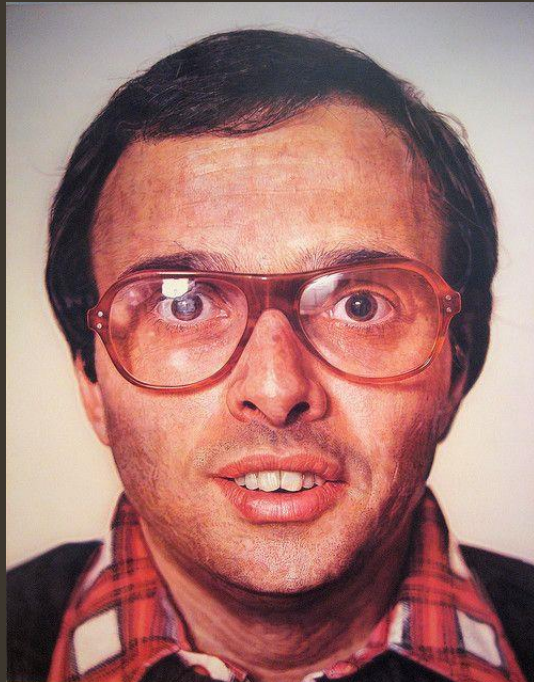
- Understanding motivation of cultural object
- Understanding underlying meaning of cultural object
- Understanding underlying structure of cultural object
- Understanding overlying structure of cultural relations



- Summarization of contents of cultural object?
- Description of appearance of cultural object?
- Psychoanalysis of authorial intent?
- Psychoanalysis of reader reaction?
- Craft quality *qua* content analysis?

things that  
maybe do not  
count as analysis

but can we be sure about this?



# IS THE MEDIUM THE MESSAGE?

- Instead of making a point about what a work *means* or what an artist *means* (etc., etc., etc.), our analysis and sense of *meaning* has to correspond to more areas of cultural objects—the medium is essential, the relations of the work are essential, the relations within a semiosphere (and towards other semiospheres) are essential
- Let's give this idea a spin





- The question is then, *what do we do with this?*



# SEMIOTICS, AGAIN

- So what do we call semiotics?
- In general, we will think of semiotics as both a set of methodologies and a point of view
- It's not properly a methodology because semiotics implies a commitment to the usage of *signs* and the relevance of *meaning-making*
- But from this commitment we derive a number of potential analytical tools that can be extended towards full methodologies (such as structuralism and the semiotics of culture!)

# HOW CAN THERE BE A *SEMIOTICS OF SOMETHING*?

- If semiotics deals with the general phenomenon of meaning-making, signification and all that, then it means it can be applied to specific areas where meaning-making is important
- If perception and meaning-making are fundamentally semiotic, and cultural signification is a subsystem of a more general signification, then semiotics can cover these areas with some success in order to analyze the mechanisms of meaning generation!
- So you can have, say, a semiotics of toilets that could successfully analyze how meaning is generated in the context of toilets!



# WHAT IS CULTURE

- Now this is a tricky one: We previously talked about the concept of *semiosphere* and its constituents
- Lotman defined culture at some point as ‘the whole of uninherited information and the ways of its organization and storage,’ pointing out the cybernetic nature of his theory
- Culture, in general, is the whole of meaning-making practices historically and locally situated, ever-changing and interacting by way of human action through modeling
- Let’s remember the Sebeokian revision of what modeling systems are:
  - Primary modeling systems
  - Secondary modeling systems
  - Tertiary modeling systems

# WHAT IS A CULTURAL OBJECT



- Is an *axe* the same as a *movie*? How do we assign value to different objects?
- If we go by the McLuhanian understanding of medium, both correspond to different media
- If we try, however, to model their meaning-making, we end up with a different picture
- Moreover, if, after modelling, we try to account for the usage of signs in regards to both objects, we can get a picture of what *kinds* of signs we are witnessing

# SO WHAT IS THE SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE, AFTER ALL?

- Maybe it's an ad-hoc systems theory that takes into account historical relations to make sense of how cultural objects create meaning
- Maybe it's a way to treat culture as a sort of language, with specific expressions within it as specific aspects or instances of language usage
- Maybe it's a theory of how cultural systems work by observing both the micro and macro levels

- Question: What distinguishes how we treat different but related cultural objects? For instance, why do we treat news articles differently than fiction novels?
- In other words, why are there discourses/genres?