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# Media Semiotics

Outline for a semiotics that media studies can actually connect to. <sup>1</sup>

„We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. [...] We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.”

(Benjamin Lee Whorf <sup>2</sup>)

## 1. Intro

Semiotics is the science of signs, and any reasonable semiotics must be able to explain what it means when it speaks of ‘signs’ and ‘sign systems.’ From a media studies perspective, this question is precarious, because media studies always have *differing* media in mind. In the case of language, numbers, data, and writing, everyone would agree that these are all ‘signs.’ But does this also apply to images? To photography and the movies? To facial expressions, gestures, and to sound and music? There are no clearly defined, enumerable ‘signs’ here. Images would be considered symbolic and certainly images have “meaning.” But is that enough? Does ‘symbolic’ always already mean the same as ‘sign’?

And even more precarious with regard to the sign *systems*, the *codes*. As early as the 1960s, it was recognized that the medium of film, unlike language, has no lexicon and no grammar. Almost everything that linguistics says about the ‘langue,’ the systemic side of language, does not seem to apply here: In the case of images, ‘meaning’ seems to be guaranteed by ‘iconicity,’ i.e. by the fact that the images ‘resemble’ what is depicted. Does this make the question of the ‘code’ superfluous? Has the central question been elegantly avoided?

Of course, this is not the case, but unfortunately it has often been argued in exactly this way. And many texts that use semiotic categories do not seem to take the subject very seriously,

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<sup>1</sup> The Text summarizes in a compact form the thoughts on semiotics that I developed in my book ‘Ähnlichkeit’ [Similarity] (Berlin: Kadmos 2021); who is interested in the theoretical background of my consideration will find it there. The main chapters are published in English: .../Winkler--Similarity.pdf. The German book is also available online: ... /Winkler--Aehnlichkeit.pdf.

<sup>2</sup> Whorf, Benjamin Lee: Science and Linguistics [1940]. In: Id.: Language, Thought, and Reality. Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf. NY/London: MIT Press 1959, p. 213.

anyway, forgo sufficient definitions and use the semiotic terms pragmatically and instrumentally. Language is shifting from a conceptual to a more or less metaphorical one.

In the course of media history, this led to the crash of semiotic approaches in the early 1970s and ruined their claim to validity. A crash that threatens to repeat itself whenever semiotics is used. Concepts, I think, can only be work as ‘instruments’ in analysis if their claim to validity can be justified at least to some extent, if they can bear the burden that their use imposes on them.

We will therefore have to insist on the question: What is a code? And what would be a concept of a sign that can claim cross-media validity? A media semiotics that cannot answer this should abandon the field.

## 2. So: What is a Code?

[To emphasize the provisional nature of my remarks, I have divided the text into theses and set these off visually from the explanatory sections].

Semiotic concepts are often used to analyze texts (literature, images, audiovisual material...). Semiotics is intended to provide the concepts that enable their scientific analysis. Accordingly, semiotic argumentation often starts from the *individual text*.

This perspective is problematic, however, because in this way the central puzzle of all semiotics – the question of the code – does not come into view:

1. A code is by no means part of the individual text but has – quite the opposite – its place in the *intertextual space*, i.e. between the texts, and beyond the texts.

2. A code is the structure of a prior knowledge that producer and recipient share and that the recipient already brings with him when he encounters the individual text.<sup>3</sup>

(This raises the question of how codes develop historically, how the individual has built up his/her prior knowledge, i.e. how he/she has been socialized into the various codes, how codes achieve intersubjective validity, how they gain stability while still being able to change, and what part the individual text plays in this change).

One often reads that codes are based on social “agreement”; what this means in concrete terms, however, must remain a complete mystery. It is therefore much more plausible to say:

3. Codes are bound to processes of conventionalization.

Processes of conventionalization can be thought of as similar to the formation of habits (and a semiotic theory must be able to make such processes plausible).

4. Unlike a text, a code is never “manifest,” but always *latent*.

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<sup>3</sup> I use – against my better judgment – the generic masculine in order to keep my text readable.

(This raises the question of where the code has its material location (here, for example, the empirical memories of the many individuals come into consideration), how one can talk about “latent” objects at all and what one can say about them theoretically. And even if one focuses primarily on media analysis, the question would be how the individual text interacts with the code, where it makes use of it and where it has the chance to contradict it, how the producer knows what prior knowledge the recipient has, what happens if he is wrong with his assumption, etc.).

5. If one wanted to sharpen the thought, one could say that the individual text *does not say* or does not have to say what the code already provides as prior knowledge.

6. And even more pointedly: The text *cannot say this at all*, because a code is implicit knowledge, tacit knowledge, and it is not possible to put it adequately or completely into an explicit form.

(Dictionaries, encyclopedias or grammars, for example, are attempts to do this, at least for language; for film, and this is significant in terms of media theory, there is no such thing).

7. A code is a social machine, an institution, a technology, an apparatus; that is, it is integrated into certain mechanisms (e.g. of repetition) that enable it to reproduce itself, to stabilize itself, and yet to change...

(Which raises the question of what can be said theoretically about these mechanisms. And secondly, how the apparatus of the symbolic relates to other social apparatuses).

The main characteristic of language (as a system and as a code) – as linguistics and the theory of semantics have shown – is the fact that the semantic system articulates itself in *contrasts*. Polarities such as big/small, good/bad, or hot/cold form the axes of contrast that structure the vocabulary as a system; in total the axes of contrast build the network of language. This raises the question of whether all this also applies to other media and sign systems. Let us therefore begin with a hypothetical assertion:

8. Codes articulate themselves – “negatively-differentially” – in contrasts.

(This definition is fundamental, so that one would actually have to turn the matter around: One can only speak of a ‘code’ if this condition is given).

Contrasts and differences result from processes of differentiation. If contrasts and negative-differential relations are the most important structural feature, one can say:

9. Codes are machines of *analysis*. They record distinctions that have been made in the past and that have proven themselves over long periods of time, and make them available in a stable, conventionalized form for future use.

While difference and contrast initially only bring two elements into relation, a code – as a system – is only formed in the totality of the relations. The elements of language, for example, are connected by a network of reciprocal references.

10. In the totality of negative-differential references, a network, a system, a structure emerges.

When trying to imagine this network in concrete (or model-like abstract) terms, you soon reach a limit (and I will only make a few suggestions on this in the course of my text). What is important at this point is that a code is something *skeletally emaciated*; this is exactly what the metaphor of the ‘network’ or structure wants to say: While the world of phenomena (that which is to be understood) is dense and full, the codes (with the help of which we decipher the world) are net-like, lean and ‘empty.’



It was Saussure who tried to grasp language as a ‘structure.’ He distinguished between the syntagmatic axis and the ‘associative’ axes. By syntagma, he initially meant the linear sequence of signs in the actual, material-manifest text; in contrast, there is the multitude of associative axes; they form the system of language, the code. (Later, the associative axes were called ‘paradigmatic’).<sup>4</sup>

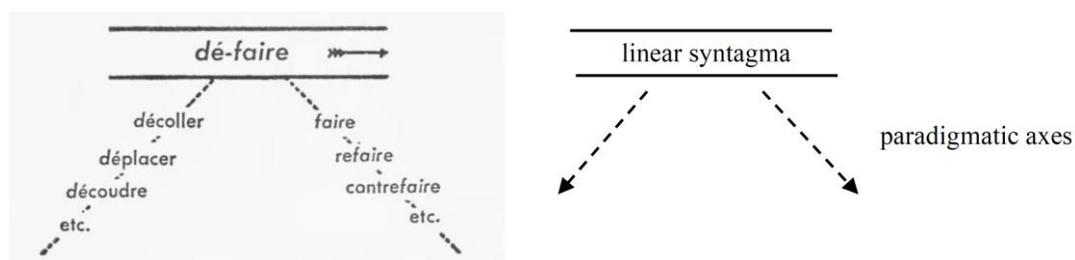
11. The text forms the material, manifest syntagma, whereas the code organizes the “associative,” paradigmatic axes.

This addresses the crucial difference *that causes everything semiotic to split into two worlds*:

On the one hand, there is the *syntagma* and more generally the material ‘*situation*’ (either a place in the text or in the actual world), embedded in its material context. Situation and context stand for an exact position in space and time; and they are, as Derrida in particular has always insisted, not repeatable and not interchangeable as such. Situation and context are materially ‘manifest’; and the material is organized according to the law of *contiguity*, i.e. spatial or temporal proximity.

In contrast, there is the completely different realm of the code, the *paradigmatic*. Here the material is organized, as has been written, according to the law of *similarity*. (Why and to what extent “similarity” will have to be clarified). The realm of the paradigmatic is ‘latent.’

<sup>4</sup> Saussure’s illustration is well known:





### 3. What is a Sign?

The problem described above is a bloody serious one and has certainly contributed to the fact that semiotics – in the history of science – has almost completely lost its reputation. And if you stick to the concept of the sign itself, it may not be solvable at all. The concept of the sign – from everyday language to technical usage – seems to almost force a reified (thing-like) idea. A sign without a stable identity and without fixed boundaries does not seem to be a sign. I will therefore outline my own, somewhat different solution below.

First, however, I want to make a few points about signs in general; and my suggestion is to use the concept of the sign in brackets, so to speak, and to leave the question of whether ‘signs’ actually exist in all media open for the time being.

In order for signs to function as signs, a number of conditions must be met:

14. Signs have special properties, and they take on a special role within social processes.

15. Therefore, it must be possible to recognize signs as signs without any doubt.

This requirement is not trivial, because

16. on the material side, signs are *signifiers*, and that means: things among things.

And this is where the *media* come into play:

17. First and foremost, media have the function of ensuring the separation of signs and non-signs, symbolic and non-symbolic use.

An example would be the stage ramp that separates two spaces: Symbolic processes take place on the stage, what happens in the auditorium is ‘real.’ More generally:

18. Without media there are no signs.  
Media form the biotope for all semiotic processes.

And vice versa:

19. Without signs, no media.  
Media are characterized by the fact that they allow symbolic operations.  
This is the only way to distinguish media from other social apparatuses.

But what is the special role of signs? Especially if signifiers are things among things – how do symbolic and non-symbolic operations differ?

20. The most plausible definition of media is that they permit *symbolic trial action*.

21. Media establish a space within society that has the particularity of being largely decoupled from actual consequences.

22. Actions in this space are – in contrast to actual actions – *reversible*.

If a murder takes place on stage, the murdered person stands up afterwards and takes a bow. This applies, mediated and to varying degrees, to symbolic processes in general.<sup>5</sup>

And a second definition is also important:

23. Signs are special things because they do not stand for themselves but for something else. Signs have a *referential character*.

24. Signs refer to things that usually are *not present*.  
Signs are re-presentations.

The last-mentioned determinations, representation and reference to the world, have been disputed emphatically and for good reasons. Nevertheless, they are essential because a meaningful concept of the sign does not seem possible without them. Concepts that have been pushed as an alternative cannot clarify important semiotic mechanisms and have failed in my view.<sup>6</sup> However, certain arguments of the debate are more than justified; they will play their role in the course of my argumentation.

25. Signs have a ‘reflexive’ character, signs ‘double’ the extra-symbolic world.  
They form a sphere of reflection.

However, they do so – one will have to add immediately – in a special way. Even if the metaphor of ‘reflection’ suggests this: It is completely absurd to conceive of signs and sign systems as a ‘mirroring’ of the extra-symbolic world.

26. Sign systems do not provide a 1:1-correspondence, but a *model, an abstract modeling of the world*.

(The way in which this happens will have to be shown). And above all:

<sup>5</sup> This definition (20-22) is in no way a consensus; and of course there are also symbolic processes that do have consequences, and even irreversible consequences, as the debate on performativity has clearly shown. Nevertheless, I stand by my thesis: Compared to actual actions – war and violence, building houses and welding steel – symbolic actions are always ‘weakly performative.’

<sup>6</sup> This also applies to the concept of ‘performativity’ which was brought into the field as a kind of general-purpose weapon after the post-structuralists had dismantled the traditional notion of representation. However, performativity does not provide an answer to the central semiotic questions either.

27. It is never the individual sign that performs this function. Reference and representation are always *mediated by the code*, by the sign system as a whole.

(The way in which this happens will also have to be shown).

28. Signs are not dependent on having an equivalent in the non-symbolic world; and the reference function (the reference to the world) does not necessarily mean that the referent actually exists.

29. The pointing gesture can also go nowhere, or signs can bring their object into being themselves, 'construct' or assert it.

This applies to fictions such as the unicorn, but also to abstract concepts (such as 'honor' and 'God'). This alone does not damage the assertion of the reference. In these cases, too, the signs do not stand for themselves, but point/refer.

So how do signs refer to things that are not signs themselves?

30. Between the individual sign and the world (to which the sign refers), there is in any case the sign system as a whole, the code.

This definition is important and has far-reaching consequences. 'meaning,' reference to the world and almost everything that can be said about signs are thus made dependent on the totality of the semiotic mechanisms that produce and constitute a sign system, a code, in the first place.

And above all, as I said, this applies to 'meaning.'

31. Signs do not have 'meaning' for themselves, but meaning only exists mediated by the relational system that the sign system, the code, provides as a whole.

Codes, as mentioned above, are themselves networks of references. So, there are obviously two types of references: (1.) those within the code, i.e. to other signs that constitute the code as a network, and (2.) those that referentially relate the signs (mediated via the code) to the world.

32. The totality of references within the network (the position within the network) determines the 'meaning.'

33. The references out of the network to the non-symbolic world determine the 'reference.'

But of course, the two are connected, insofar as a 'meaning' without world reference (or the assertion of reference) is pointless; and conversely a reference, as I said, is only possible mediated by 'meaning.'

So how do signs become signs? How do signs acquire their ‘meaning’? The first answer to this would be:

**34.** Signs do not come into being through ‘definition’ or ‘social agreement,’ but *signs gain their meaning in their use.*

This seems paradoxical because one would think that a sign must already be established before it can be ‘used.’ However, this is expressly not the case. Rather, a double dependency applies:

**35.** Signs are dependent on use, and at the same time their use is dependent on already existing, constituted signs.  
Use and the constitution of signs are cyclically linked.

But how can this be?

**36.** Signs are used in specific contexts or situations.  
*And in every new situation in which they are used, they take on some of the ‘meaning’ provided by the context.*

In this respect ‘meaning’ is indeed, as we can read often, determined by the context. But not – and this is a real difference – by the individual context.

**37.** Signs do not gain their ‘meaning’ in a single situation, but rather *in an indeterminably long chain of repeated uses.*

These contexts of use will be similar – a prerequisite for the sign to appear in them – but at the same time they will also differ.

**38.** Each individual use leaves a ‘trace’; these traces are precipitated – cumulatively – as ‘meaning’ in the individual sign.

In this respect, each individual context, each individual use, has only a very limited influence on meaning. More important – far more important – is the cumulative effect.

**39.** ‘Meaning’ is created in a process of quantitative accumulation and ‘condensation.’<sup>7</sup>

**40.** ‘Meaning’ and the constitution of signs are bound to repetition.

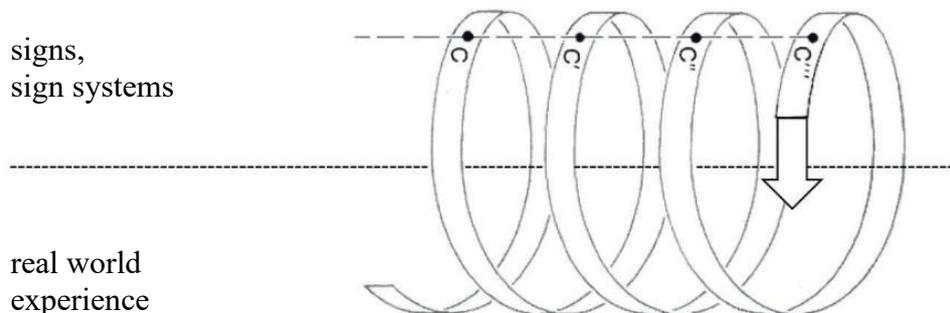
And now we must consider what was said above about discourse and context: If the sign actually cumulatively absorbs into itself what the situations of its use provide as ‘meaning,’ then this applies to both the textual context and the extra-textual, real-world context.

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<sup>7</sup> I have repeatedly advocated establishing the term “condensation” for this process.

41. Signs absorb traces of the textual context as well as traces of the extra-symbolic context in which the individual use of the sign occurs.

Each new use of a sign passes through a new context.



And in this passage, the constitution of meaning crosses the magical boundary between the symbolic system and the non-symbolic reality. The experience in the current situation of use and the ‘meaning’ of the sign meet, with the opportunity to measure them against each other and to constantly question the assertion of reference anew.<sup>8</sup>

This is precisely the point at which one can generalize:

42. Discourse and system (contiguity and “similarity”) are systematically related.

Or with regard to the process of sign constitution:

43. Proximity in context turns into ‘meaning,’ and  
*syntagmatic proximity turns into paradigmatic proximity.*<sup>9</sup>

(I consider this to be probably the most important law in the field of semiotics).

## 4. Back to the Code...

Codes are not a glass bead game, but

44. Codes are machines for accessing the world.

45. Codes provide the categories and grids with which we confront the world.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, things are probably more complicated because, as has been said, the referents are usually absent, so they are *not* initially available as a yardstick in the current situation of use. And yet, I think, it is the individual situation of use in which the sign touches the sphere of experience.

<sup>9</sup> The expression ‘paradigmatic proximity’ is problematic because symbolic systems are not bound to physical space and therefore do not know any spatial ‘proximity.’ In this respect, it is only acceptable as a metaphor.

Without these grids, we would be completely overwhelmed by the multitude of impressions that stream in on us; the mere fact that we recognize and identify things, situations and processes enables us to make do with our scarce mental resources. This is the main achievement of codes (and the main reason for the theory to insist on reference).

46. Codes serve the mental economy.

The second main achievement has already been mentioned above: The code provides a large number of pre-existing distinctions. This also takes the pressure off the current situation; not every distinction has to be made 'live,' i.e. under time pressure.

## 5. ...and Back Again to the Sign

If codes make the world accessible, rasterize the flow of perceptions and are economic in a specific way, this has a prerequisite that has not been mentioned so far:

47. Signs are schemata/abstractions;  
and in any case *more abstract* than what they refer to.

The terms of language, to choose this example again, do not stand for a concrete, single thing, but they *subsume*, i.e. they have the property of drawing together a multitude of concrete objects into a uniform category.

48. Signs *group* the empirical material found.

49. The sign is a kind of label that subsequently stands for this group of things and designates this group.

This, above all, causes the specific economy: Instead of a buzzing variety of buzzingly different impressions, we are now dealing with a (relatively) ordered world that is already pre-sorted into a manageable (albeit still very large) number of categories.

At the same time, it remains the case that the things themselves – as concrete, individual specimens – are different. No dog is exactly like another dog; concepts/signs therefore do not claim that they are the same, but only that they are similar.

50. Signs do not assert the 'identity' of their referents, but their similarity.

The grouping depends – as in all cases of similarity – on certain characteristics: Some features must be the same for group formation to occur at all; in other respects, specimens will still differ.

51. Signs form groups by favoring certain characteristics and excluding others or placing them in the background.

The term ‘horse,’ for example, can include black, brown or white horses, large and small ones, workhorses and racehorses.

52. Signs, as has also been said, are machines of analysis. They suggest which distinctions/characteristics are relevant, and which – for the group formation that the sign performs – are irrelevant.

53. Signs are ‘abstract’ above all insofar as they set aside and ignore the ‘irrelevant’ features.

54. In this way, they ‘slim down’ the exuberantly complex reality and transform it into a *structure*.

55. Signs and sign systems are social machines for reducing complexity.

## 6. Schema Formation

Let us now return to the initial question of a ‘media semiotics’; for everything that has been said is initially only plausible for those media in which there are stably constituted signs (my example was language and writing). I had postponed the question of media where this is different (images, moving images, sounds...), and this, as I said, is actually the *media-semiotic* question. But now, I think, everything is in place to at least bring this problem closer to a solution.

One preliminary remark, however, seems necessary to me: While what has been said so far is mainly common knowledge in the field of semiotics,<sup>10</sup> the following is a development of my own. There has been no consensus here so far; and my theses are indeed *theses*.

And there are two methodological proposals that I think shift the question in a fundamental way: Firstly, I would like to take up the fact that *signs have an abstract character*, that signs, as I said, are schemata. My proposal is – in a semiotic context, this is certainly strange at first – to put the concept of the sign on hold and first ask about the concept of the *schema* alone. And only after this reassurance should we return to the concept of the sign.

And my second suggestion is not to start from the reified result – from schema, sign, or code – but to ask about *the processes in which schemata* – and then signs and codes – *are formed* in the first place. This too, as will be shown, fundamentally changes the perspective.

The concept of schema has the great advantage that – unlike that of the sign – it is plausible on the terrain of almost all media. No one would deny that images are also subject to processes of

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<sup>10</sup> Exceptions are theses 20-22, 39 and 41-43, which I do not find in other authors.

conventionalization and schematization. In the repetition of image content, genres, clichés and stereotypes emerge; means of representation and aesthetic solutions begin as innovation, but then gradually become convention; on the production side, rules and regularities, best practice, techniques and standards develop; on the reception side, fixed expectations and stable prior knowledge are formed. Image and media competence are growing. All of these are conventionalization processes. And it is striking that they affect almost all levels of the products.

They are often judged in a derogatory way and pushed to the margins of analysis in the preference for ‘creativity,’ ‘art,’ and innovation; or they are declared to be self-evident, a necessary evil that creative artists actually avoid. But this makes no sense from a media studies perspective. Media studies, I think, have the task of describing the mechanisms by which media – beyond all judgment – actually function. And conventionalization is certainly of central importance here.

So, let’s ask: How do schemata come about? What can we say about the processes of schematization?

**56.** Schemata are the product of schematization processes.

And these are possibly more important than the schemata themselves.

**57.** Schematization is based on repetition,  
on empirical chains of actual discourse events;

these can be, for example, acts of utterance or reception.

**58.** Schemata are not planned and not intentionally produced.  
In this respect, schema formation is a bottom-up phenomenon.

**59.** The chains of repetition are notoriously difficult to observe,  
there is no place from which they can be viewed as a whole.

Schema formation processes can be made theoretically plausible, but empirically they are difficult to prove in individual cases.

**60.** Schema formation is always bound to time. This links it to individual socialization  
and *media history*.

**61.** The individual events that are included in the schema formation,  
are never ‘the same,’ but always only similar.

Whether a film scene corresponds to a schema (e.g. actually fulfills a certain stereotype) must therefore always remain debatable.

62. Schemata arise in repetition as precipitation, as *hardening*.

63. Schemata arise in the *transformation of discourse into structure*.

## 6. How Do Schemata Get Their Boundaries and Their 'Identity'?

This point is more than important for understanding: In the case of signs, the identity of the sign and its outer boundaries seem to be given in advance. Signs have a distinct character; the signs of writing, for example, are separated from each other by white spaces. This is different in the case of schemata:

64. Schemata gain their identity in the process of schema formation itself; the fact that it is a schema at all only emerges in the process of repetition successively.

And, as I said, this applies to the most diverse levels, to content and aesthetics/form, to patterns of action and regularities. Whatever is repeated in the discourse – the schema formation starts quasi automatically and produces the schemata we are talking about here as its product. And even more:

65. Schemata also gain their outer limits in the process of schema formation itself.

This already begins with object recognition. In order to recognize a dog in a film as a dog, you have to virtually punch it out of the image continuum and isolate it from its background. This happens unnoticed/automatically, but you actually have to have prior knowledge of what a dog can look like in very different situations and views. This prior knowledge can be learned from real-life interaction with dogs, but also from photos and films. Most people are more familiar with whales and most exotic animals from TV documentaries than from direct encounters.

66. Our real/everyday perception – not mediated by the media – already functions on the basis of schema formation.

In other words, on the basis of prior knowledge that was slowly built up during socialization.

67. Identifying objects is only possible on the basis of prior knowledge; in this respect, identifying objects is always re-encounter / recognition.

68. Our real/everyday perception – not mediated by the media – is already 'coded' in this respect.

The example of perception shows that schema formation itself is capable of isolating ‘objects’ from continuous material.

69. With each repetition, the boundary that separates the object from its context becomes more ingrained and more permanent.

Step by step, the schema gains stability and becomes increasingly autonomous, i.e. independent of the context.

70. In this respect, *schema formation is a progressive decontextualization.*

The end result is that the schema has gained its own ‘identity,’ which it brings into every new context, into every new situation of use.

71. The schema has changed sides, it was part of the context, and now it is code; *syntagma has turned into paradigm.*

72. This is how ‘meaning’ is created; what emerges is the *signified.*

## 7. Signs are Hardened Schemata

And now a reversal of perspective is possible, also with regard to the sign. If signs are a certain type of schemata, and the formation of schemata is a successive process of hardening, and if schemata only gain stable boundaries and ‘identity’ in the process of repetition (and through this alone), then we can say:

73. Signs represent a *particularly hardened type of schemata.*

The fact that signs are ‘distinct,’ have stable boundaries and a stable identity is only seemingly predetermined. In fact, they have – historically, as a system – undergone a comparable process of hardening. And there is a second thing that makes signs special:

74. Signs, that is their outstanding characteristic, are schemata to which a label, the signifier, has been affixed.

For signifiers, materials are chosen that are as recognizable as possible (for example, the black and white of writing), easy to distinguish and easy to reproduce.

75. Signifiers are *stylized* / abstracted in a specific way.

The fact that schemata are abstractions is also reflected here in the signifiers.

76. This is the basis for the fact that signifiers can be repeated ‘identically.’

And from here, a new view of media differences is also possible.

## 8. Media Differences

In terms of media history, technical images, photography, and moving images, came into being later than language and writing.

77. It is possible that these image media only exist because they are less ‘hardened’ than writing and avoid distinct, stably conventionalized signs.

As I said, they cannot escape conventionalization and schema formation. In the case of images, this process takes place quasi ‘live’:

78. In the case of images, it is up to the recipient to isolate, recognize and identify schemata in the material.  
Language and writing, on the other hand, offer pre-segmented, distinct signs.

And the material to be found in the repetition also differs drastically. In the case of technical images, it is *different* material that realizes the schemata; never (or hardly ever) is ‘identical’ material repeated.

79. In the case of images, the signifiers are only *similar*,  
in the case of language and writing, it is (within empirical limits) ‘identical’ signifiers that are repeated.

80. All media are bound to the mechanism of schema formation,  
all media work with abstractions,  
media without abstraction and schema formation do not exist.

81. There is also a ‘code’ in the case of visual media. However, this is concealed:  
The code is the structured prior knowledge with which the recipients encounter the products.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that different media function in different ways:

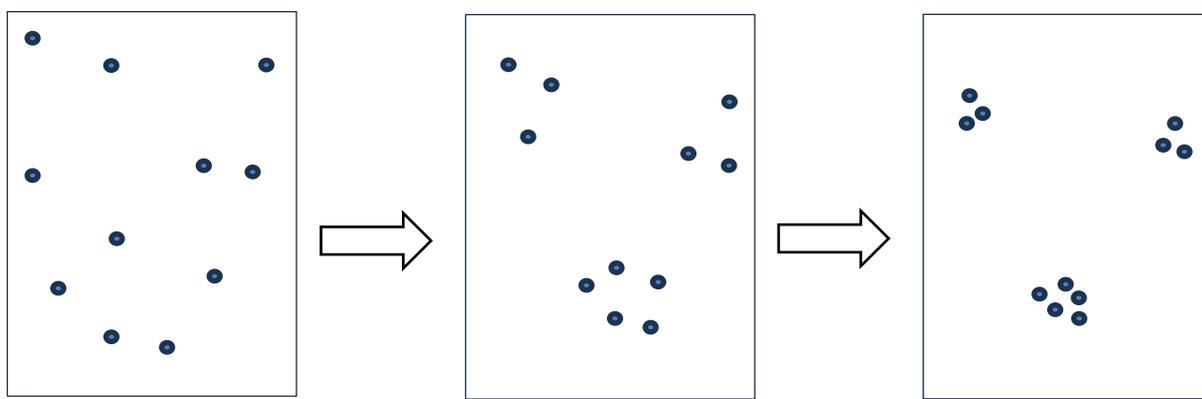
82. Different media may only exist because (or so that?) there are different types of schemata, at different levels of ‘hardening’ and embedded in different semiotic practices.

## 9. Identity and Difference

Perception – as mentioned above – already works with distinctions; and codes articulate meaning ‘negatively-differentially.’ Schema formation can now be described as a semiotic operation that reworks the more or less diffuse material provided by perception by stylizing and reinforcing the differences it finds in the material, and turning elements that appear similar into ‘identical’ ones.

83. Schema formation takes up existing differences and stylizes them into ‘difference.’

84. Similarities are stylized into ‘identity.’



85. This creates *structure*.

## 10. Conclusion

86. Media banish the complexity of the world by transforming the existing material into schemata.

87. This happens by stylizing identity and difference. Media rework the analog buzz of the world into ‘clean’ distinctions.

88. Media are social machines that reduce the complexity of the world, schematize / typify it and make it available to the discourse in a typified form – as a set of signs, as structure and as prior knowledge.