The definition, scope and methodologies of semiotics vary from theorist to theorist, so it is important for newcomers to be clear about whose version of semiotics they are dealing with. There are many semioticians whose work has not been discussed in this brief introduction to the subject, and other theorists – notably Derrida and Foucault – have been included because they address semiotic issues even though they are not semioticians. The Appendix lists some ‘key figures and schools’ but this little book cannot perform the functions of the encyclopedias of semiotics (Sebeok 1994b, Bouissac 1998) or of Nöth’s magisterial handbook (Nöth 1990). Even in these three great reference works, the only dedicated entries appearing in all of them are for Barthes, Hjelmslev, Jakobson, Peirce and Saussure. Those included in both Bouissac’s one-volume encyclopedia and Nöth’s handbook who are noticeable by their absence from Sebeok’s three-volume work are: Algirdas Greimas, Julia Kristeva and Umberto Eco (though Eco was a contributor). My own account of semiotics is partial in both senses; the biases of which I am conscious
were outlined in the Preface – the critical reader will no doubt discern others. Regarding semiotics as unavoidably ideological alienates those semioticians who see it as a purely objective science, but the history of its exposition reveals that semiotics is clearly a ‘site of struggle’.

STRUCTURALIST SEMIOTICS

Semiotics has become closely identified with structuralist approaches but it is not tied to any particular theory or methodology. The current review has focused primarily on the European tradition deriving from Saussure (although we have also taken account of the impact of the Peircean approach within this tradition). As we have seen, even the European tradition has been far from monolithic: there have been various inflections of both structuralist and poststructuralist semiotics. Whatever the limitations of some of its manifestations, the legacy of structuralism is a toolkit of analytical methods and concepts which have not all outlived their usefulness. Particular tools have subsequently been applied, adapted, replaced or discarded. Some have even been used ‘to dismantle the master’s house.’ Saussure’s framework was thus dismantled not only by deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida but also by the structuralist linguist Roman Jakobson. Yet even from the ruins of the crumbling creation which bears Saussure’s name, valuable concepts have still been salvaged. Jakobson commented: ‘Saussure’s *Course* is the work of a genius, and even its errors and contradictions are suggestive’ (Jakobson 1984b, 85).

Saussure’s provocative stance on the radical arbitrariness of signs has long been demonstrated to be unsustainable. It was another structuralist linguist and semiotician who argued that the radical arbitrariness of the sign advocated by Saussure (in contrast to the variability of arbitrariness in the Peircean model) was an ‘illusory’ ‘dogma’ (Jakobson 1963a, 19; 1966, 419). Even language incorporates iconic and indexical modes (Jakobson 1966, 420). As we have seen, Saussure did in fact allude to ‘relative arbitrariness’. However, this potentiality was little more than a footnote in his exposition of
the ‘first principle’ of the sign, and as we have seen it was through the influence of Peirce that this concept gained widespread acceptance. Nevertheless, the enduring value of Saussure’s emphasis on arbitrariness lies in alerting us to the conventional character of many signs which we experience as natural. All signs, texts and codes need to be read. When we interpret television or photography as ‘a window on the world’ we treat the signified as unmediated or transparent. Saussurean-inspired semiotics demonstrates that the transparency of the medium is illusory.

Saussure’s emphasis on arbitrariness was based on his adoption of language as his model for semiotic systems – even Jakobson acknowledged ‘the predominantly symbolic character of language’ (Jakobson 1966, 420). Subsequent structuralists sought to apply verbal language as a model to media which are non-verbal or not solely or primarily verbal. Such attempts at a unifying approach were seen by critics as failing to allow for the diversity of media, though Jakobson rejected this criticism: ‘I have looked forward to the development of semiotics, which helps to delineate the specificity of language among all the various systems of signs, as well as the invariants binding language to related sign systems’ (Jakobson 1981, 65; cf. 1960, 351 and 1970, 455). Despite the Jakobsonian stance, a key example of the problem identified by critics is that analogical images (such as in traditional painting and photography) cannot be unproblematically reduced to discrete and meaningfully recombinable units in the way that verbal language can. Yet some semioticians have insisted that a ‘grammar’ can nevertheless be discerned at some level of analysis in visual and audio-visual media. While we may acknowledge the role of conventions in painting, in the case of an indexical medium such as photography, common sense suggests that we are dealing with ‘a message without a code’. Thus, semiotic references to ‘reading’ photographs, films and television lead some to dispute that we need to learn the formal codes of such media, and to argue that the resemblance of their images to observable reality is not merely a matter of cultural convention: ‘to a substantial degree the formal conventions encountered in still or motion pictures should make a good deal of sense even to a first-time viewer’ (Messaris 1994, 7). Semioticians in the Saussurean tradition insist that such
stances underestimate the intervention of codes (even if their familiarity renders them transparent): relative arbitrariness should not be equated with an absence of conventions. The indexical character of the medium of film does not mean that a documentary film lacks formal codes or guarantee its ‘reflection of reality’ (Nichols 1991).

While the concept of codes that need to be read can shed light on familiar phenomena, critics have objected to the way in which some semioticians have treated almost anything as a code, while leaving the details of some of these codes inexplicit. It has been argued that we draw on both social and textual codes in making sense even of representational pictures, as indeed we do, but we also draw more broadly on both social and textual knowledge. Not all of such knowledge is reducible to codes. In ‘bracketing the referent’ Saussure excluded social context. We cannot identify which codes to invoke in making sense of any act of communication without knowing the context (or alternatively, being there). The single word ‘coffee’, spoken with the rising inflection we associate with a question, can be interpreted in a host of ways depending largely on the context in which it is spoken (just try stopping yourself thinking of some!). It is indeed only in social contexts that codes can be learned and applied. However, as we have seen, excluding context is not necessarily a defining feature of structuralist approaches. Roman Jakobson showed that the context counts at least as much as the code in interpreting signs. Such a stance challenges the reductive transmission model of communication.

There are no ideologically neutral sign-systems: signs function to persuade as well as to refer. Valentin Voloshinov declared that ‘whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too’ (Voloshinov 1973, 10). Sign-systems help to naturalize and reinforce particular framings of ‘the way things are’, although the operation of ideology in signifying practices is typically masked. Consequently, on these principles semiotic analysis always involves ideological analysis. Victor Shklovsky of the Moscow school argued in 1916 that the key function of art was estrangement, defamiliarization or ‘making strange’ (ostranenie) (Hawkes 1977, 62–7). Many cultural semioticians have seen their primary task as denaturalizing dominant codes; denaturalization was at the heart of Roland Barthes’ analytical
approach. Semiotic denaturalization has the potential to show ideology at work and to demonstrate that ‘reality’ can be challenged. In this respect, although Saussure excluded the social and therefore the political, his concept of arbitrariness can be seen as having inspired Barthes and his more socially oriented followers.

As we have seen, the Saussurean legacy was a focus on synchronic rather than diachronic analysis. Synchronic analysis studies a phenomenon as if it were frozen at one moment in time; diachronic analysis focuses on change over time. The synchronic approach underplays the dynamic nature of sign systems (for instance, television conventions change fairly rapidly compared to conventions for written English). It can also underplay dynamic changes in the cultural myths which signification both alludes to and helps to shape. Structuralist semiotics in a purely Saussurean mode ignores process and historicity – unlike historical theories like Marxism. However, once again we should beware of reducing even structuralist semiotics to its Saussurean form. As we have already noted, even other structuralists such as Jakobson rejected the Saussurean splitting of synchronic from diachronic analysis while Lévi-Strauss’s approach did at least allow for structural transformation.

Semiotics is invaluable if we wish to look beyond the manifest content of texts. Structuralist semioticians seek to look behind or beneath the surface of the observed in order to discover underlying organizational relations. The more obvious the structural organization of a text or code may seem to be, the more difficult it may be to see beyond such surface features, but searching for what is hidden beneath the obvious can lead to fruitful insights. The quest for underlying structures has, however, led some critics to argue that the focus on underlying structures which characterizes the structural formalism of theorists such as Propp, Greimas and Lévi-Strauss tends to over-emphasize the similarities between texts and to deny their distinctive features (e.g. Coward and Ellis 1977, 5). This is particularly vexatious for literary critics, for whom issues of stylistic difference are a central concern. Some semiotic analysis has been criticized as nothing more than an abstract and ‘arid formalism’. In Saussurean semiotics the focus was on langue rather than parole, on formal systems rather than on social practices. Lévi-Strauss is
explicit about his lack of interest in specific content – for him, structure is the content (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1962, 75–6; cf. Caws 1968, 203). Jakobson’s challenge to Saussure’s emphasis on parole demonstrates that structuralism should not be equated with the Saussurean model in this respect. Nevertheless, structuralist studies have tended to be purely textual analyses (including Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss 1970), and critics complain that the social dimension (such as how people interpret texts) tends to be dismissed as (or reduced to) ‘just another text’. Semiotics can appear to suggest that meaning is purely explicable in terms of determining textual structures. Such a stance is subject to the same criticisms as linguistic determinism. In giving priority to the determining power of the system it can be seen as fundamentally conservative.

However, as an antidote to dominant myths of individualism, it is instructive to be reminded that individuals are not unconstrained in their construction of meanings. Common sense suggests that ‘I’ am a unique individual with a stable, unified identity and ideas of my own. Semiotics can help us to realize that such notions are created and maintained by our engagement with sign-systems: our sense of identity is established through signs. We derive a sense of self from drawing upon conventional, pre-existing repertoires of signs and codes which we did not ourselves create. As the sociologist Stuart Hall puts it, our ‘systems of signs . . . speak us as much as we speak in and through them’ (Hall 1977, 328). We are thus the subjects of our sign-systems rather than being simply instrumental ‘users’ who are fully in control of them. While we are not determined by semiotic processes we are shaped by them far more than we realize.

In this context it is perhaps hardly surprising that structuralist semiotic analysis downplays the affective domain. Connotation was a primary concern of Barthes, but even he did not undertake research into the diversity of connotative meanings – though the study of connotations ought to include the sensitive exploration of highly variable and subjective emotional nuances. Socially oriented semiotics should alert us to how the same text may generate different meanings for different readers. However, although admirable studies do exist which have investigated the personal meanings of signs (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, Chalfen 1987 – both
of which include some explicit references to semiotics), research into this aspect of signification has not characterized ‘mainstream’ semiotic studies.

Purely structuralist approaches have not addressed processes of textual production or audience interpretation. They have downplayed or even ignored the contingencies of particular practices, institutional frameworks and cultural, social, economic and political contexts. Even Roland Barthes, who argued that texts are codified to encourage a reading which favours the interests of the dominant class, did not investigate the social context of interpretation (though his ideological analysis will be discussed in relation to poststructuralist semiotics). It cannot be assumed that preferred readings will go unchallenged (Hall 1980; Morley 1980). The failure of structuralist semiotics to relate texts to social relations has been attributed to its functionalism (Slater 1983, 259). Sociologists insist that we must consider not only how signs signify (structurally) but also why (socially): structures are not causes. The creation and interpretation of texts must be related to social factors outside the structures of texts.

POSTSTRUCTURALIST SEMIOTICS

Many contemporary theorists have rejected a purely structuralist semiotics, though as we have seen, structuralism has taken a variety of forms, and not all of them are subject to the same catalogue of criticisms. However, even those who choose to reject structuralist priorities need not abandon every tool employed by structuralists, and whether they do or not, they need not reject semiotics wholesale. Influential as it has been, structuralist analysis is but one approach to semiotics. Many of the criticisms of semiotics are directed at a form of semiotics to which few contemporary semioticians adhere. It is only fair to note that much of the criticism of semiotics has taken the form of self-criticism by those within the field. The theoretical literature of semiotics reflects a constant attempt by many semioticians to grapple with the implications of new theories for their framing of the semiotic enterprise. Poststructuralism evolved from the structuralist tradition in the late 1960s, problematizing many of its assumptions. Seeking to account for the role of
social change and the role of the subject, poststructuralist semiotics has sometimes adopted Marxist and/or psychoanalytical inflections. Another inflection derives from Foucault – emphasizing power relations in discursive practices. Such shifts of direction are not an abandonment of semiotics but of the limitations of purely structuralist semiotics.

Theorists such as Roland Barthes used semiotics for the ‘reve- latory’ political purpose of ‘demystifying’ society. However, the semiotic ‘decoding’ and denaturalization of textual and social codes tends to suggest that there is a literal truth or pre-given objective reality underlying the coded version, which can be revealed by the skilled analyst’s banishing of ‘distortions’ (Watney 1982, 173–4). This strategy is itself ideological. Poststructuralist theorists have argued that the structuralist enterprise is impossible – we cannot stand outside our sign-systems. While we may be able to bypass one set of conventions we may never escape the framing of experience by convention. The notion of ‘codes within codes’ spells doom for a structuralist quest for a fundamental and universal underlying structure but it does not represent the demise of the semiotic enterprise conceived more broadly. More socially oriented semioticians accept that there can be no ‘exhaustive’ semiotic analyses because every analysis is located in its own particular social and historical circumstances. In his widely cited essays on the history of photographic practices, John Tagg comments that he is ‘not concerned with exposing the manipulation of a pristine “truth”, or with unmasking some conspiracy, but rather with the analysis of the specific “political economy” within which the “mode of production” of “truth” is operative’ (Tagg 1988, 174–5).

Whereas both common sense and positivist realism involve an insistence that reality is independent of the signs that refer to it, socially oriented semioticians tend to adopt constructionist stances, emphasizing the role of sign-systems in the construction of reality. They usually refer only to ‘social reality’ (rather than physical reality) as constructed. Some argue that there is nothing natural about our values: they are social constructions which are peculiar to our location in space and time. Assertions which seem to us to be obvious, natural, universal, given, permanent and incontrovertible may be
generated by the ways in which sign-systems operate in our discourse communities. Although Saussure's principle of arbitrariness can be seen as an influence on this perspective, the social constructionist stance is not an idealist denial of external physical reality but rather an insistence that although things may exist independently of signs we know them only through the mediation of signs and see only what our socially generated sign-systems allow us to see. Social semioticians have also emphasized the materiality of signs – a dimension ignored by Saussure.

As noted in Chapter two, the emphasis on the mediation of reality (and on representational convention in the form of codes) is criticized by realists as relativism (or conventionalism). Such philosophical critics often fear an extreme relativism in which every representation of reality is regarded as being as good as any other. There are understandable objections to any apparent sidelining of referential concerns such as truth, facts, accuracy, objectivity, bias and distortion. This is a legitimate basis for concern in relation to Saussurean semiotics because of its bracketing of reality. However, socially oriented semioticians are very much aware that representations are far from equal. If signs do not merely reflect (social) reality but are involved in its construction then those who control the sign-systems control the construction of reality. Dominant social groups seek to limit the meanings of signs to those which suit their interests and to naturalize such meanings. For Roland Barthes, various codes contributed to reproducing bourgeois ideology, making it seem natural, proper and inevitable. One need not be a Marxist to appreciate that it can be liberating to become aware of whose view of reality is being privileged in the process. What we are led to accept as ‘common sense’ involves incoherences, ambiguities, inconsistencies, contradictions, omissions, gaps and silences which offer leverage points for potential social change. The role of ideology is to suppress these in the interests of dominant groups. Consequently, reality construction occurs on ‘sites of struggle’.

Since the second half of the 1980s ‘social semiotics’ has been adopted as a label by members and associates of the Sydney semiotics circle, much-influenced by Michael Halliday's *Language as Social Semiotic* (1978). Halliday (b. 1925) is a British linguist who
The retired from a chair in Sydney in 1987 and whose functionalist approach to language stresses the contextual importance of social roles. Members of the original Sydney group include Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, Paul J. Thibault, Terry Threadgold and Anne Cranny-Francis; other associates include Robert Hodge, Jay Lemke and Ron and Suzie Scollon. Members of the group established the journal *Social Semiotics* in 1991. The Sydney school version of ‘social semiotics’ is not a ‘branch’ of semiotics in the same sense as ‘visual semiotics’; it is a ‘brand’ of semiotics positioned in opposition to ‘traditional semiotics’. While the terminology of this school is often distinctive, many of its concepts derive from structuralism (and others from Peirce). There is, of course, nothing new about semiotics having a social dimension (albeit widely neglected): the roots of social semiotics can be traced to the early theorists. It is true that neither Saussure nor Peirce studied the social use of signs. However, Saussure did have a vision of semiotics as ‘a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life’ (even if he did not pursue it himself). As for Peirce, he emphasized that signs do not exist without interpreters (even if he did not allow for the social dimension of codes). Furthermore, as we have seen, it was the structuralist Jakobson (stressing both code and context) who had already upturned the Saussurean priorities along some of the lines outlined by Hodge and Kress (1988). The Sydney school has adopted and adapted some of its analytical concepts partly from (primarily Jakobsonian) structuralism (with a Hallidayan twist) while (like Jakobson) defining itself largely in opposition to Saussure’s analytical priorities. The key difference in this respect is that this Australian school has set itself the task of investigating actual meaning-making practices (theoretically prioritized but not pursued by Jakobson). A key concern of socially oriented semioticians is with what they call ‘specific signifying practices’ or ‘situated social semiosis’ (Jensen 1995, 57).

Published research into such practices has been rare until recently outside of specialized academic journals, though studies by Hodge and Tripp (1986) and by the Scollons (2003) are commendable examples of book-length treatments explicitly within this school of thought. The influence of socially oriented semioticians such as
those associated with the Sydney circle will hopefully stimulate many more. Not the least of the values of such stances is the potential to attract back to semiotics some of those who were alienated by structuralist excesses and who had reductively defined semiotics according to these. The Sydney school has nailed its colours to the mast in reprioritizing the social (Hodge and Kress 1988, van Leeuwen 2005). The extent to which socially oriented semiotics has so far met the concerns of sociologists is debatable. However, ‘social semiotics’ is still under construction and the Australian strategy is not the only game in town – socio-semiotics is not limited to those adopting it. Semiotics transcends its various schools.

METHODOLOGIES

Certainly there is room for challenging ‘traditional semiotics’. Semiotics has not become widely institutionalized as a formal academic discipline and it has not (yet) achieved the status of (social) ‘science’ which Saussure anticipated. There is little sense of a unified enterprise building on cumulative research findings. Sometimes semioticians present their analyses as if they were purely objective accounts rather than subjective interpretations. Few semioticians seem to feel much need to provide empirical evidence for particular interpretations, and much semiotic analysis is loosely impressionistic and highly unsystematic (or alternatively, generates elaborate taxonomies with little evident practical application). Some seem to choose examples which illustrate the points they wish to make rather than applying semiotic analysis to an extensive random sample. Semiotic analysis requires a highly skilled analyst if it is not to leave readers feeling that it merely buries the obvious in obscurity. In some cases, it seems little more than an excuse for interpreters to display the appearance of mastery through the use of jargon which excludes most people from participation. In practice, semiotic analysis invariably consists of individual readings. We are seldom presented with the commentaries of several analysts on the same text, to say nothing of evidence of any kind of consensus among different semioticians. Few semioticians make their analytical strategy sufficiently explicit for others to apply it either to the examples used or to others. Many
make no allowance for alternative readings, assuming either that their own interpretations reflect a general consensus or a meaning which resides within the text. Semioticians who reject the investigation of other people’s interpretations privilege what has been called the ‘élite interpreter’ – though socially oriented semioticians would insist that the exploration of people’s interpretive practices is fundamental to semiotics.

Semioticians do not always make explicit the limitations of their techniques, and semiotics is sometimes uncritically presented as a general-purpose tool. A semiotic approach suits some purposes better than others and makes certain kinds of questions easier to ask than others. Signs in various media are not alike – different types may need to be studied in different ways. The empirical testing of semiotic claims requires a variety of methods. Structuralist semiotic analysis is just one of many techniques which may be used to explore sign practices. In relation to textual analysis, other approaches include critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1995b) and content analysis. Whereas semiotics is now closely associated with cultural studies, content analysis is well established within the mainstream tradition of social science research. Content analysis involves a quantitative approach to the analysis of the manifest content of texts, while semiotics seeks to analyse texts as structured wholes and investigates latent, connotative meanings. Semioticians have often rejected quantitative approaches: just because an item occurs frequently in a text or cultural practice does not make it significant. The structuralist semiotician is more concerned with the relation of elements to each other while a social semiotician would also emphasize the importance of the significance which readers attach to the signs within a text. Whereas content analysis focuses on explicit content and tends to suggest that this represents a single, fixed meaning, semiotic studies focus on the system of rules governing the discourse involved in texts and practices, stressing the role of semiotic context in shaping meaning. However, some researchers have combined semiotic analysis and content analysis (e.g. Glasgow University Media Group 1980; Leiss et al. 1990; McQuarrie and Mick 1992). Semiotics is not incompatible with quantitative methods – for instance, a highly enlightening study of the signification of domestic objects for their
owners made effective use of both qualitative and quantitative data (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981).

Rejecting content analysis, Bob Hodge and David Tripp’s classic empirical study of *Children and Television* (1986) linked semiotics with both psychology and social and political theory, employing structural analysis, interviews and a developmental perspective. Semiotic investigations need to range beyond textual analysis, which does not shed light on how people in particular social contexts actually interpret signs – an issue which may require ethno-graphic and phenomenological approaches (McQuarrie and Mick 1992).

**AN ECOLOGICAL AND MULTIMODAL APPROACH**

The primary value of semiotics is its central concern for the investigation of meaning-making and representation which conventional academic disciplines have tended to treat as peripheral. Specific semiotic modalities are addressed by such specialists as linguists, art historians, musicologists and anthropologists, but we must turn to semioticians if our investigations are to span a range of modalities. Semiotic analysis has been applied to a vast range of modes and media – including gesture, posture, dress, writing, speech, photography, the mass media and the internet. Since this involves ‘invading’ the territory of different academic disciplines, it is understandable that semiotics has often been criticized as imperialistic. Aldous Huxley once wryly noted, ‘our universities possess no chair of synthesis’ (Huxley 1941, 276). Semiotics has an important synthesizing function, seeking to study meaning-making and representation in cultural artifacts and practices of whatever kind on the basis of unified principles, at its best counteracting cultural chauvinism and bringing some coherence to communication theory and cultural studies. While semiotic analysis has been widely applied to the literary, artistic and musical canon, it has also been applied to a wide variety of popular cultural phenomena. It has thus helped to stimulate the serious study of popular culture.

While all verbal language is communication, most communication is non-verbal. In an increasingly visual age, an important
contribution of semiotics from Roland Barthes onwards has been a concern with imagistic as well as linguistic signs, particularly in the context of advertising, photography and audio-visual media. Semiotics may encourage us not to dismiss a particular medium as of less worth than another: literary and film critics often regard television as of less worth than ‘literary’ fiction or ‘artistic’ film. To élitist critics, of course, this would be a weakness of semiotics. Potentially, semiotics could help us to avoid the routine privileging of one semiotic mode over another, such as the spoken over the written or the verbal over the non-verbal. We need to realize the affordances and constraints of different semiotic modes – visual, verbal, gestural and so on. We live within an ecology of signs that both reflects and gives shape to our experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, 16–17). We must identify and recognize the importance of new ‘literacies’ in this ever-changing semiotic ecology. Thinking in ‘ecological’ terms about the interaction of different semiotic structures and languages led the Tartu school cultural semiotician Yuri Lotman to coin the term ‘semiosphere’ to refer to ‘the whole semiotic space of the culture in question’ (Lotman 1990, 124–5). This conception of a semiosphere may once again connote semiotic imperialism, but it also offers a more unified and dynamic vision of semiosis than the study of a specific medium as if each existed in a vacuum.

Human experience is inherently multisensory, and every representation of experience is subject to the constraints and affordances of the medium involved. Every medium is constrained by the channels that it utilizes. For instance, even in the very flexible medium of language ‘words fail us’ in attempting to represent some experiences, and we have no way at all of representing smell or touch with conventional media. Different media and genres provide different frameworks for representing experience, facilitating some forms of expression and inhibiting others. The differences between media led Émile Benveniste to argue that the ‘first principle’ of semiotic systems is that they are not ‘synonymous’: ‘we are not able to say “the same thing”’ in systems based on different units (Benveniste 1969, 235). There is a growing theoretical interest in ‘multimodality’ (e.g. Kress and van Leeuwen 2001 and Finnegan 2002). This is ‘the
combination of different semiotic modes – for example, language and music – in a communicative artefact or event’ (van Leeuwen 2005, 281). It was foreshadowed in structuralist studies of what Metz called ‘intercodical relations’ (Metz 1971, 242), including Barthes’ exploration of relations such as anchorage between images and words.

In the educational framing of such relations, images are still the marked category, as also are makers as opposed to users. At present, ‘with regard to images, most people in most societies are mostly confined to the role of spectator of other people’s productions’ (Messaris 1994, 121). Most people feel unable to draw, paint or use graphics software, and even among those who own cameras and camcorders not everyone knows how to make effective use of them. This is a legacy of an educational system which still focuses almost exclusively on the acquisition of one kind of symbolic literacy (that of verbal language) at the expense of other semiotic modes. This institutional bias disempowers people not only by excluding many from engaging in those representational practices which are not purely linguistic but by handicapping them as critical readers of the majority of texts to which they are routinely exposed throughout their lives. A working understanding of key concepts in semiotics – including their practical application – can be seen as essential for everyone who wants to understand the complex and dynamic communication ecologies within which we live. As Peirce put it, ‘the universe . . . is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs’ (Peirce 1931–58, 5.449n.). There is no escape from signs. Those who cannot understand them and the systems of which they are a part are in the greatest danger of being manipulated by those who can. In short, semiotics cannot be left to semioticians.