

SIGNS *of* LIFE

in the USA

READINGS ON
POPULAR CULTURE
FOR WRITERS



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Sonia Maasik
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Seventh Edition

Signs of Life in the U.S.A.

Readings on Popular Culture for Writers

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Preface for Instructors

Since the 1994 publication of the first edition of *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*, a popular cultural revolution has taken place, a revolution that is easy to take for granted but whose profundity demands the kind of analytic attention that this book is designed to foster. That revolution, of course, involves the explosive growth of digital technology and its many uses—the world of Facebook and Google, Twitter and texting, iPads and iPhones, and every other expression of a digitally linked-up world. The information superhighway of the 1990s has become the social network, and everything from the way we interact with one another to the way we consume entertainment is changing.

But one thing hasn't changed throughout the history of this book: the ever-increasing dominance of popular culture in American life. To put this another way, American popular culture is not simply an embellishment on our lives anymore, a superficial ornament that can be put on or taken off at will. Popular culture has virtually *become* our culture, permeating almost everything we do. So if we wish to understand ourselves, we must learn to think critically about the vast panoply of what was once condescendingly regarded as “mass culture.” And now that digital technology has blurred beyond recognition the line between everyday life and entertainment, work and play, with the work places of school and office becoming veritable play stations wherein students and employees alike text and tweet while updating their Facebook pages, the relevance of *Signs of Life's* focus on popular culture has only increased.

Then and Now

The importance of understanding the role of popular culture in our lives has not always been apparent to the academic world. When the first edition of *Signs of Life* appeared, the study of popular culture was still embroiled in the “culture wars” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a struggle for academic legitimacy in which the adherents of popular cultural studies ultimately prevailed. Since then, more and more scholars and teachers have come to recognize the importance of understanding what Michel de Certeau has called “the practice of everyday life” and the value of using popular culture as a thematic ground for educating students in critical thinking and writing. Once excluded from academic study on the basis of a naturalized distinction between “high” and “low” culture, which contemporary cultural analysis has shown to be historically contingent, popular culture has come to be an accepted part of the curriculum, widely studied in freshman composition classrooms as well as in upper-division undergraduate courses and graduate seminars.

But recognition of the importance that popular culture has assumed in our society has not been restricted to the academy. Increasingly, Americans are realizing that American culture and popular culture are virtually one and the same, and that whether we are looking at our political system, our economy, or simply our national consciousness, the power of popular culture to shape our lives is strikingly apparent. That is why, unlike most other popular cultural texts, *Signs of Life* adopts an interpretive approach—semiotics—that is explicitly designed to analyze that intersection of ideology and entertainment that we call *popular culture*. We continue to make semiotics the guiding methodology behind *Signs of Life* because semiotics helps us, and our students, avoid the common pitfalls of uncritical celebration or simple trivia swapping.

The Critical Method: Semiotics

The reception of the first six editions of this text has demonstrated that the semiotic approach to popular culture has indeed found a place in America’s composition classrooms. Composition instructors have seen that students feel a certain sense of ownership toward the products of popular culture and that using popular culture as a focus can help students overcome the sometimes alienating effects of traditional academic subject matter. At the same time, the semiotic method has helped instructors teach their students how to analyze the popular cultural phenomena that they enjoy writing about and through these methods students have learned the critical thinking and writing skills that their composition classes are designed to impart.

Reflecting the broad academic interest in cultural studies, we’ve assumed an inclusive definition of *popular culture*. The seven chapters in *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* embrace everything from the marketing and consumption of the products of mass production to the mythologies and contradictions that underlie

the actual content of the television programs and movies that entertain us. We have chosen semiotics as our approach because it has struck us that while students enjoy assignments that ask them to look at popular cultural phenomena, they often have trouble distinguishing between an argued interpretive analysis and the simple expression of an opinion. Some textbooks, for example, suggest assignments that involve analyzing a TV show or film, but they don't always tell a student how to do that. The semiotic method provides that guidance.

As a conceptual framework, semiotics teaches students to formulate cogent, well-supported interpretations. It emphasizes the examination of assumptions and of the way language shapes our apprehension of the world. And, because semiotics focuses on how beliefs are formulated within a social and political context (rather than just judging or evaluating those beliefs), it's ideal for discussing sensitive or politically charged issues. As an approach used in literature, media studies, anthropology, art and design coursework, sociology, law, and market research (to name only some of its more prominent field applications), semiotics has a cross-disciplinary appeal that makes it ideal for a writing class of students from a variety of majors and disciplines. We recognize that semiotics has a reputation for being highly technical or theoretical; rest assured that *Signs of Life* does not require students or instructors to have a technical knowledge of semiotics. We've provided clear and accessible introductions that explain what students need to know.

We also recognize that adopting a theoretical approach may be new to some instructors, so we've designed the book to allow instructors to use semiotics with their students as much or as little as they wish. The book does not obligate instructors or students to spend a lot of time with semiotics — although we do hope you'll find the approach intriguing and provocative.

The Editorial Apparatus

With its emphasis on popular culture, *Signs of Life* should generate lively class discussion and inspire many kinds of writing and thinking activities. The general introduction provides an overall framework for the book, acquainting students with the semiotic method they can use to interpret the topics raised in each chapter. It is followed by the section "Writing about Popular Culture" that not only provides a brief introduction to this topic but also features three sample student essays that demonstrate different approaches to writing critical essays on popular cultural topics. Also included in that section are three articles that guide students in the appropriate use of the Internet as a research tool. The introduction concludes with "Conducting Research and Citing Sources," a section to help your students properly document the research they've done for their writing assignments.

Each chapter starts with a frontispiece, a provocative visual image related to the chapter's topic, and an introduction that suggests ways to "read" the topic, provides model interpretations, and links the issues raised by the

reading selections. Every chapter introduction contains three types of boxed questions designed to stimulate student thinking on the topic. The Exploring the Signs questions invite students to reflect on an issue in a journal entry or other prewriting activity, while the Discussing the Signs questions trigger class activities such as debates, discussions, or small-group work. Reading the Net questions invite students to explore the chapter's topic on the Internet, both for research purposes and for texts to analyze.

Two sorts of assignments accompany each reading. The Reading the Text questions help students comprehend the selections, asking them to identify important concepts and arguments, explain key terms, and relate main ideas to one another and to the evidence presented. The Reading the Signs questions are writing and activity prompts designed to produce clear analytic thinking and strong persuasive writing; they often make connections among reading selections from different chapters. Most assignments call for analytic essays, while some invite journal responses, in-class debates, group work, or other creative activities. Complementing the readings in each chapter are images that serve as visual texts to be discussed. We also include a glossary of semiotic terms, which can serve as a ready reference to key words and concepts used in the chapter introductions. Finally, the Instructor's Manual (*Editors' Notes for Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*) provides suggestions for organizing your syllabus, encouraging student responses to the readings, and using popular culture and semiotics in the writing class.

What's New in the Seventh Edition

Popular culture evolves at a rapid pace, and the substantial revision required for the seventh edition of *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* reflects this essential mutability. First, we have updated our readings, including over thirty new selections focusing on issues and trends that have emerged since the last edition of this book. We have also updated the exemplary topics in our introductions, which are used to model the critical assignments that follow, and have adjusted the focus of some chapters to reflect changing conditions of students' lives and the ways they consume popular culture. A new chapter, "American Makeover: Constructing Identity in the Age of Entertainment," combines the sections on multicultural and gender semiotics from earlier editions to reflect the new, more flexible approach to personal identity that contemporary students embrace.

From the beginning, *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* has been based on the premise that in a postindustrial, McLuhanesque world, the image has come to supplant the printed word in American, and global, culture. That is yet another of the reasons we chose semiotics, which provides a rational basis for the critical analysis of images as the guiding methodology for every edition of our book. Each edition of *Signs of Life* has accordingly included images for critical analysis; the seventh edition continues this tradition. The images included in the text supplement the readings, offering a visual perspective designed to enhance the critical understanding modeled by the texts. Yet the images are not meant to

replace the texts — we strongly believe that while the semiotic interpretation of images can help students hone their writing skills, it should not be a substitute for learning critical thinking through the analysis of written texts.

Even as we revise this text to reflect current trends, popular culture continues to evolve. The inevitable gap between the pace of editing and publishing, on the one hand, and the flow of popular culture, on the other, need not affect the use of popular culture in the classroom, however. The readings in the text, and the semiotic method we propose, are designed to show students how to analyze and write critical essays about any topic they choose. They can choose a topic that appeared before they were born, or they can turn to the latest box-office or prime-time hit to appear after the publication of this edition of *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* Facebook and Twitter may be replaced by new sites within the life span of this edition (indeed, Facebook surpassed MySpace in popularity shortly after the publication of the sixth edition), but such changes are opportunities for further analysis, not obstacles. To put it another way, the practice of everyday life may itself be filled with evanescent fads and trends, but daily life is not itself a fad. As the vital texture of our lived experience, popular culture provides a stable background against which students of every generation can test their critical skills.

You Get More Digital Choices for *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*

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- Three free tutorials from *ix: visual exercises* by Cheryl Ball and Kristin Arola
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Assign an interactive e-book. It is almost quaint to say that the Internet is ever-present in students' lives. Perhaps it is more apt to say that social media and Web 2.0 deliver a larger percentage of the popular culture that students consume than ever before. For the first time ever, *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* is available in an e-book format. With all the content of the print book, the ***Signs of Life in the U.S.A. e-Book*** lets students easily search, highlight, and bookmark. Instructors can customize and rearrange chapters, add and share notes, and link to quizzes and activities. Loaded with additional multimodal readings, the e-book gives students more flexible options for thinking and writing about popular culture. The ***Signs of Life in the U.S.A. e-Book*** can be purchased standalone or packaged with the print book. To order the e-book packaged with the print book, use ISBN 978-1-4576-1830-7.

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INSTRUCTOR RESOURCES

You have a lot to do in your course. Bedford/St. Martin's wants to make it easy for you to find the support you need — and to get it quickly.

The Editors' Notes for *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* is available in PDF format and can be downloaded from bedfordstmartins.com/signsoflife. In addition to chapter overviews and teaching tips, the *Editors' Notes* includes sample syllabi and suggestions for classroom activities.

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