Semiotics: The Study Of How Signs Generate Meaning

In broad terms, semiotics is the study of how signs, (language, images, objects) generate meaning or the processes by which we comprehend the meaning. Challenging concepts such as naturalism and realism, semiotics looks beyond the study of symbolism, exploring the result of complex inter-relationships between the individual, the image or object and other factors such as culture and society.

Think of it this way. By investigating something through semiotic analysis, we start the decoding process from an outside perspective, looking at culture as a whole, the work in, as opposed to inside out. So the idea is that you explore the culture you inhabit, and search for the origins of the meanings weave attached to particular ideas and concepts, whether they be linked to class, gender, religion and so forth. These all circulate within a particular given culture and from there we begin our attempt to decode messages. We're all familiar with Stuart Hall's reception theory, and his model of 'encoding' and 'decoding' ideas. Similarly, codes in the notion of semiotics are an important principal within this field of research, which can be divided into three kinds.

The hegemonic or dominant code, being the reading or message that the largest number of people at a said place and time will identify as the intended meaning. However, codes are not stagnant and they shift alongside societies and often change within them. From this, there are two other codes that stem, there are lapsed codes that once made sense to many people but no longer do, as well as emerging codes, which emerge through the changes in society.

Furthermore, semiotics is a highly useful discipline when investigating what these future codes may be. Looking at Stacey Leasca's article titled, Headless Women in Hollywood' Is Going Viral Again, as It Should, the article reflects how women in today's age are still represented in film, television and advertising as "objects to be gazed upon by men rather than being treated as human beings." Leasca particularly looks at comedian Marcia Belsky's "The Headless Women of Hollywood" Tumblr page, cataloging every movie, television, and advertising poster that features a woman's body as the main focal point. According to her 'about' page, Belsky's intention was to bring attention to "the still standard practice of fragmenting, fetishising, and dehumanising the images of women we see in film, TV, book covers, and advertisement" and start a new conversation about the sexualisation of women as it teaches individuals to "only strive for an ideal body whose reward, if achieved, is becoming interchangeable."

On the whole, semiotics is definitely something that a lot audiences have recognised and woken up to, but as a master discipline, it has existed for quite some time. Although it's come from the critical theory space and has been instrumental in its ability to read societies and contexts in every way, shape and form and marketing has only woken the notion up to its full potential. As I mentioned how the principal works from the outside in, it is very context-specific, semiotics becomes prevalent in making sense of the local context in a way that traditional market research cannot provide.