

## Spring 2013 Common Text End-Product

“Semiotic Analysis of the Images of *America Again*”

Preliminary Exercise

Due February \_\_\_\_, 2013

3-4 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12 pt. Type  
10% of the final grade

You will have noticed that *America Again* uses images as well as words to deliver its messages. In most “serious” newspapers and magazines, the pictures you find are meant to act as a window into the world you’re reading about in the text. The reader is supposed to trust that this is an accurate representation the world the writer is describing in prose. If the newspaper article concerns a trial, the accompanying image will probably depict a solemn judge speaking to a defendant, or an earnest lawyer addressing a concerned jury.

In contrast, the images in *America Again* represent an exaggerated or skewed version of reality. In this book, a courtroom scene shows a gleefully maniacal judge standing on a chair, about to leap onto a “test of strength” circus game, the outcome of which will determine whether the defendant will be sentenced to community service, marriage, public beheading, or (worst of all) jury duty (see page 172). This is, presumably, not the sort of courtroom in which we would want to stand trial, for it suggests that the American justice system often administers arbitrary punishments intended not to protect society or rehabilitate the criminal, but rather to prove the “toughness” of macho, egomaniacal judges. This isn’t how the *real* world works...is it?

While we might find this cartoonish intensification of the real world funny, if we are to fully comprehend the serious argument *America Again* is making about our culture, we need to bracket our emotional response and carefully analyze the different elements at work in each image. This assignment will ask you to unpack the collection of symbols that comprise the illustrations at the beginning of each chapter, and to interpret why the authors of the book chose to use these particular symbols.

I would like you to write a 3-4 page paper that demonstrates your ability to perform a semiotic analysis of an image. This exercise will provide you with the raw material you’ll soon shape into a polished critical essay. This is an extension of our previous in-class activity, in which we applied the concepts discussed in your textbook *Signs of Life in the USA* (*denotative* and *connotative* meanings, *sign systems*, and *cultural mythologies*) to images we found in current affairs magazines. I’d like you to select one of the full-page illustrations at the beginning of a chapter, and ask yourself:

What is the denotative meaning of the symbols (or *signs*) you find in the image? What is the connotative significance of those signs? In order to determine the connotative significance, you need to place the image within a system of related

images. What similarities or differences do you perceive between the images you found in *America Again* and other images in that system?

You should begin the analytical process by creating a chart similar to the one I drew on the board several times. In the first column, make a list of signs. Next, list their denotative content. After that, list their connotative meanings. In the fourth column, describe the cultural mythologies (or ideologies) to which the image's signs refer. Finally, decide whether the image reinforces or subverts (or a combination of both) America's dominant cultural mythologies.

I would like you to compose a brief essay that communicates your findings to readers in an articulate, organized manner. Your first paragraph should summarize some of the conflicts and controversies surrounding the theme in question (American Exceptionalism, Healthcare, Justice, Food, et cetera). Your next paragraph should vividly describe the scene depicted in the illustration you've chosen from *America Again*. Subsequent paragraphs should assess the significance of particular signs in relation to similar signs we often come across in newspapers and magazines. Your concluding paragraph should offer an interpretation of the argument you believe Colbert is advancing in the illustration. A successful paper will demonstrate a firm grasp of the key concepts of semiotic analysis, an ability to adhere to the organizing principles of an academic essay, and an insightful understanding of the ways in which irony and humor are often employed to make serious cultural critiques.