

Culture, the Media, and the Study of Signs

Introduction: Signs and Society

- **Semiotics: the Study of Signs, Symbols, and Signification**
- **Signs: smallest unit of meaning.**
- **People are the symbol or sign-using animals**
- **Signs are all around us, involved in the most trivial aspects of everyday life.**

Principles of semiotics

- **The study of *how* meaning is created, *not* what it is.**
- **Signs are arbitrary, i.e., conventional**
- **Signs are not just mirrors of things; they cannot be understood just in terms of the things they signify**
- **Signs are part of systems**

Principles (Cont.)

- **Like language, signs are rule governed, patterned; all sign systems have a kind of grammar, a set of structuring rules**
- **The Principle of Difference: Signs make meaning by way of their difference from other signs**
- **Signification is a process, not a static structure**

Signifier and Signified (Sr/Sd)

Signifier #1 "ROSE"	Signified #1 	Signifier #2
<i>Passion</i>		Signified #2

Symbolic (arbitrary), Iconic, and Indexical Signs

- **Symbolic: language, visual codes (pink vs blue for babies; white hat for good guys)**
- **Iconic: resemblance. Photos, TV images are iconic. But there is much that is NOT iconic on TV that we think of as iconic ("seeing is believing": dangers of this; case of War of Worlds Broadcast) -- semiotics is the study of anything that can be used to tell a lie.**
- **Indexical: smoke means fire**

Denotation/connotation: the displacement from Sr to Sd (aka "signifying signs")

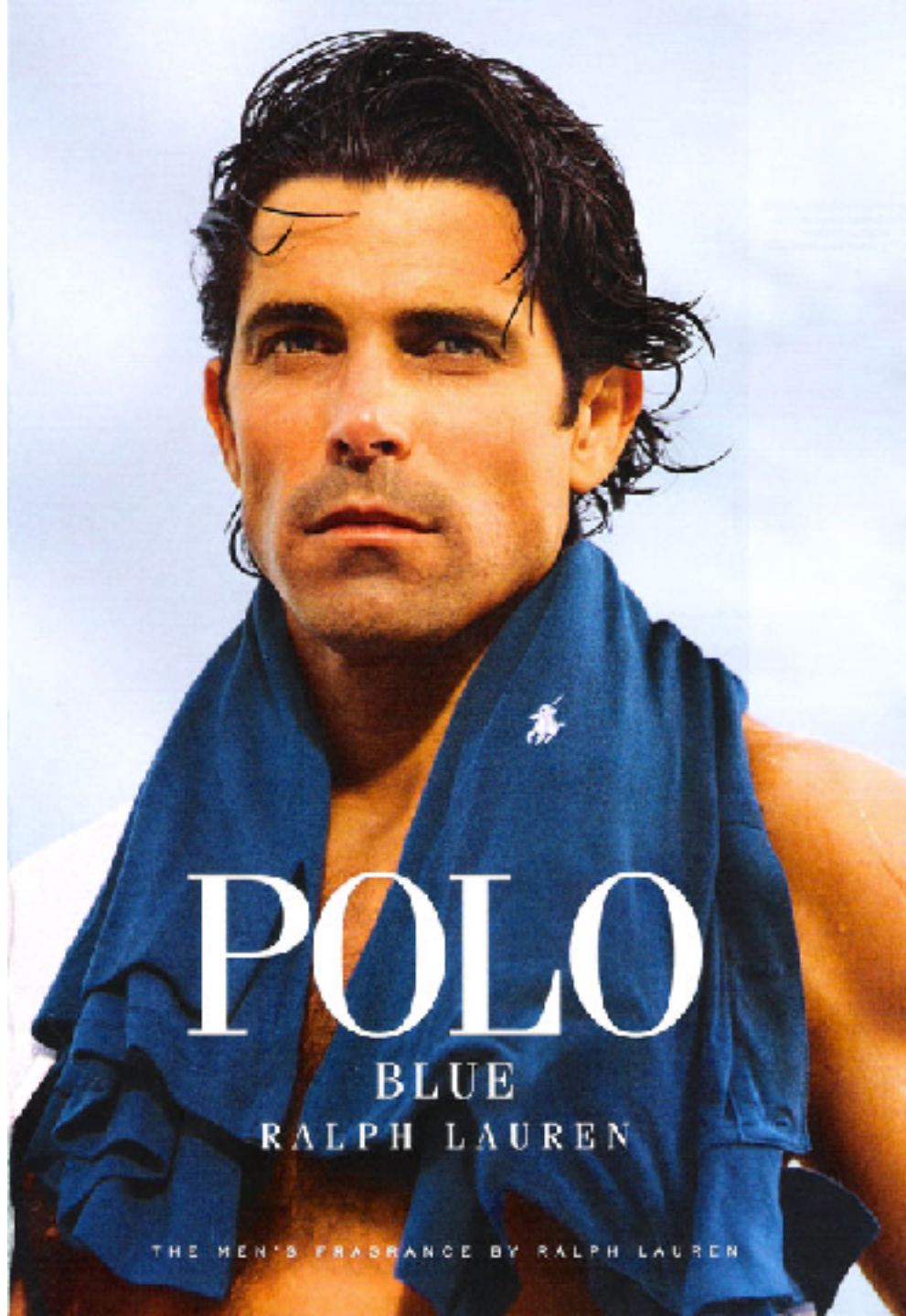
- "rose" -- passion
- "pink" -- feminine
- "black" -- mourning (except in Far East: white)
- **Cosby's sweater: domestic father figures in sit coms**



Marlboro

100 mg "tar," 1.1 mg nicotine av. per cigarette by FTC method.

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.



POLO

BLUE

RALPH LAUREN

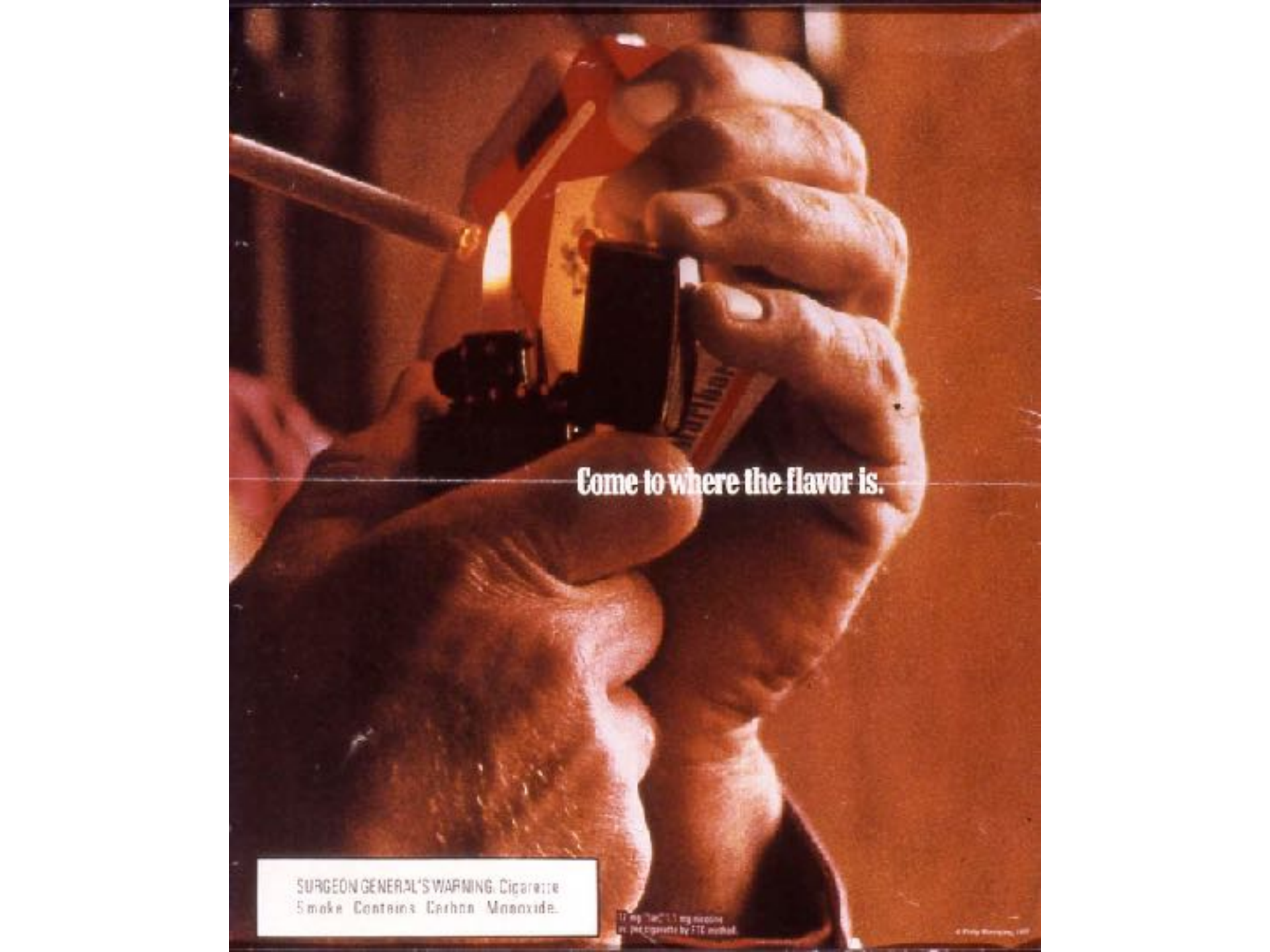
THE MEN'S FRAGRANCE BY RALPH LAUREN

COCO
MADEMOISELLE



Metonymy: part for the whole

- **a) "many sails" for many ships; "The Whitehouse said today that . . . "**
- **b) Marlboro ads**
- **c) e.g., establishing shots**



Come to where the flavor is.

SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Cigarette
Smoke Contains Carbon Monoxide.

11 mg "tar," 0.9 mg nicotine
av. per cigarette by FTC method.

© Philip Morris Inc. 1997



Without Black, it would all be flat.



Ultimately, there's Black.



Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic relations

- **Paradigmatic -- Selective/associative; for written language, e.g., alphabets, animals with fur, or things that come with wealth**
- **Syntagmatic -- relations of sequence; words in sentences; for film, editing techniques; narratives**



TABU

The Forbidden Fragrance by *Dama*



Narratives

- **Narratives (stories): a causally connected sequence of events (my summer vacation, boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl)**



Six cities. Two days.

Easy.

The *AT&T Calling Card* makes it easy to cover a lot of ground. No other calling card even comes close in letting you call so many places around the world from so many places in the US.

Or offers as many operators to speed your calls through. Or gives you as much service.

No other calling card connects you to a worldwide network as reliable as ours. And it does it all with the ease and convenience of the world's most widely accepted calling card.



So if you don't have the *AT&T Calling Card*, make sure getting one is the next thing on your itinerary.

To get your free *AT&T Calling Card*, call **1 800 551-3131 Ext. 4203**.

AT&T. How can we help you?



AT&T
The right choice



For people
who like
to smoke...



LIGHTS
Regular
and
Mild

BENSON & HEDGES



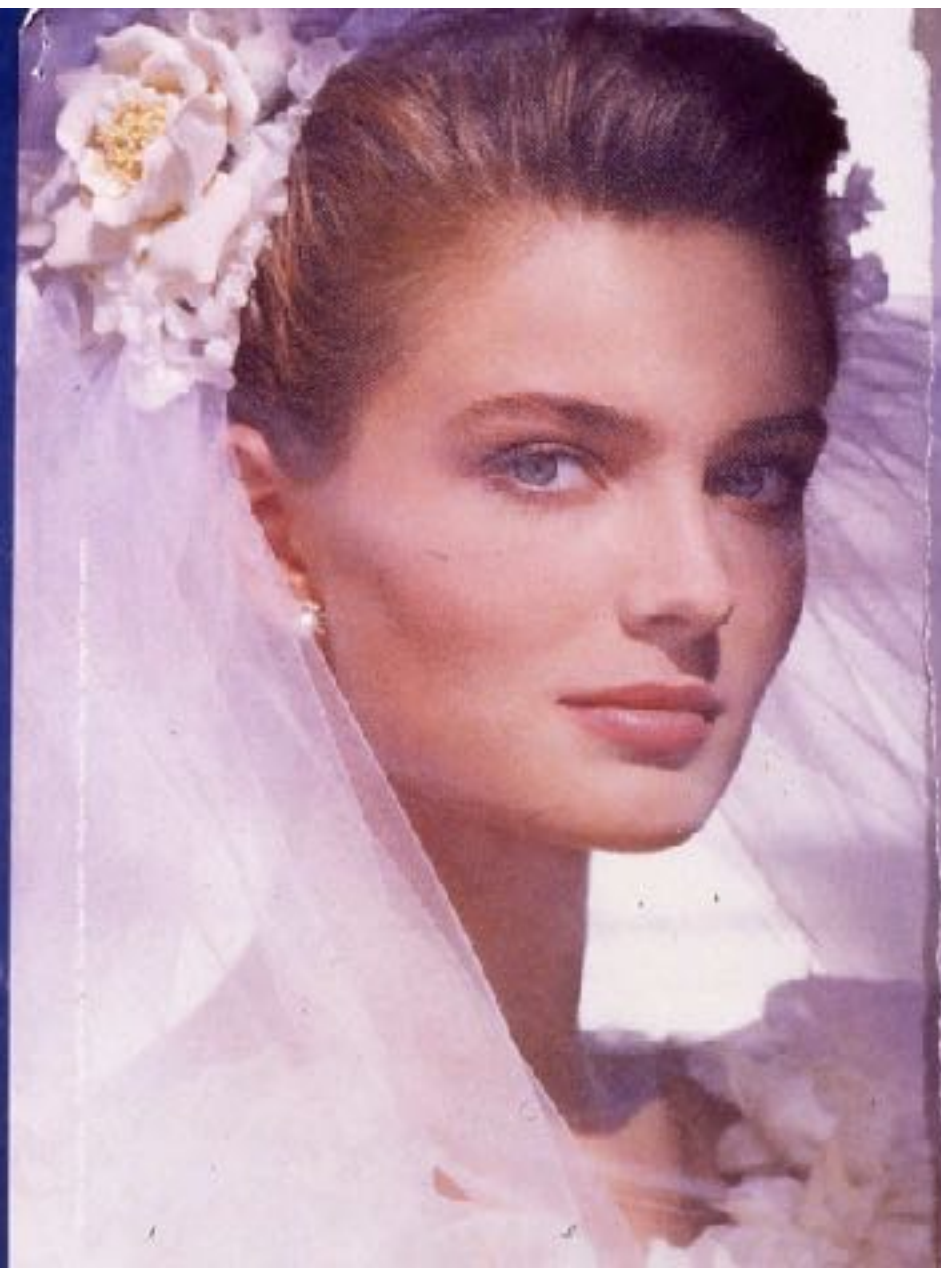
11 mg "tar," 0.8 mg nicotine av. per cigarette, by FTC method

**SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Quitting Smoking
Now Greatly Reduces Serious Risks to Your Health.**

© 1998 B&H Inc.

Myths

- **Myths: a collection of familiar narratives mixed with paradigms: cowboy myth, romance myth, military myth, wedding myth**



This is your moment to be

BEAUTIFUL



**ESTÉE
LAUDER**

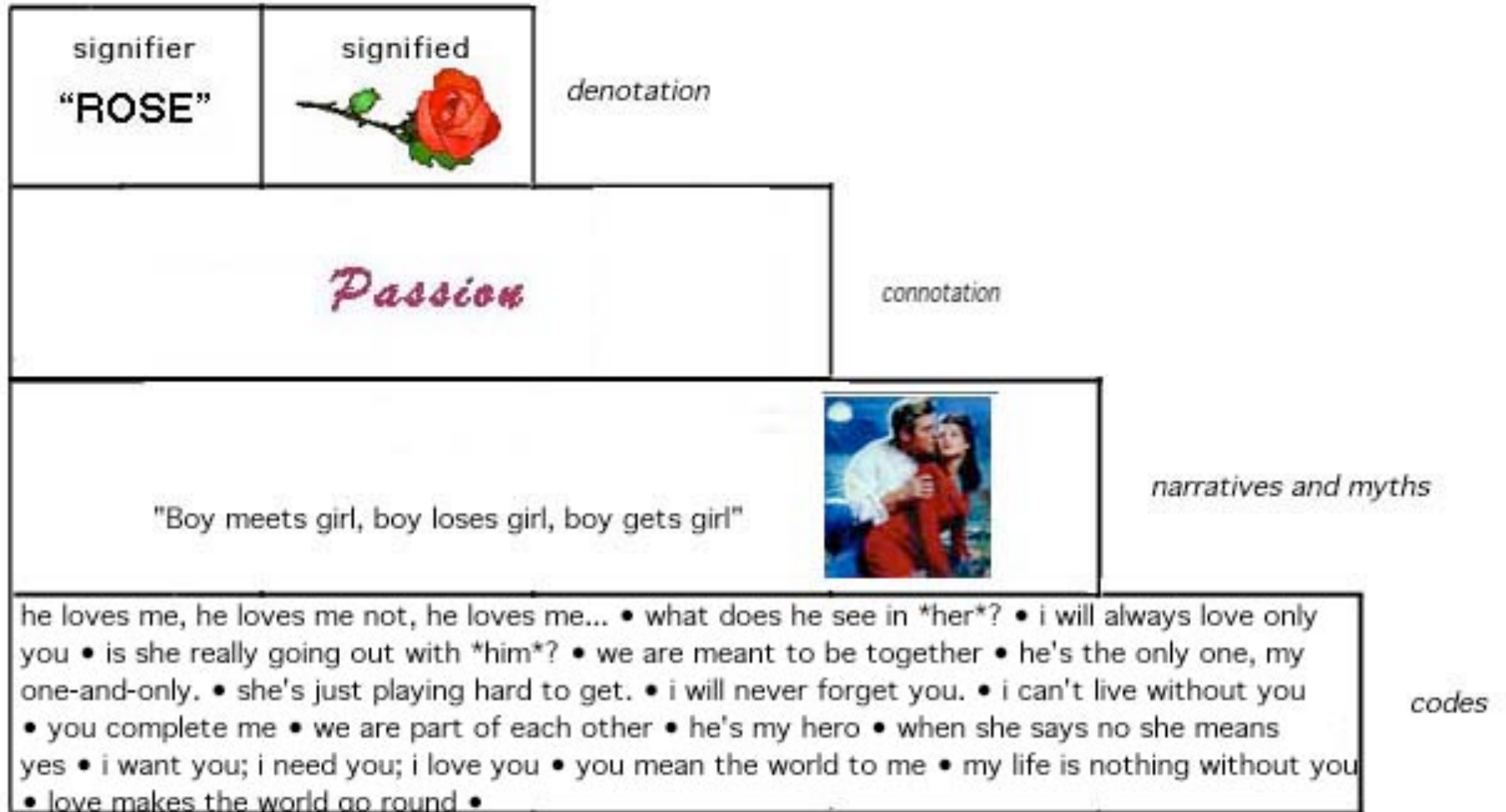
NEW YORK • LONDON • PARIS

Three levels of signification

- **Denotation (iconic)**
- **Cultural meanings**
 - connotation, metonymy, syntagms, paradigms
 - narratives, myths
- **Codes**

Codes: maps of social meaning

- **General maps of meaning, which imply views and attitudes about how the world is and/or ought to be.**
- **The connection between semiotics and social structure and values.**
- **E.g., color black -- > the meaning of skin color in the U.S.**



Codification as a Process

- **White hat gradually codified, (then over-codified to the point where it becomes a cliché.)**
- **Struggles over meanings: semiotic guerrilla warfare.**
- **from colored to Negro to "Black is beautiful."**