CHAPTER 1

HISTORY AS NARRATIVE

Postmodernism marks a shift in the perspective of epistemology that has manifested in a variety of disciplines including the social sciences, art, architecture, literature, fashion, communications and technology. Postmodernism can also be associated with a parallel shift in the power structure of the world and dehumanization brought out by the Second World War and the emergence of consumer capitalism. Largely influenced by the Western disillusionment induced by World War II, postmodernism refers to a cultural, intellectual or artistic state lacking a clear central hierarchy or organizing principle and embodying extreme complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, diversity, interconnectedness or interreferentiality. Postmodernism questions the specific notions of monolithic universals and encourages fractured, fluid and multiple perspectives. Challenging the social basis of assertions, postmodernist philosophers attack unities seen as being rooted in the Enlightenment philosophy. Postmodernism was originally a reaction to modernism. Modernism made the Enlightenment the pivot of its critical enquiry. So this attack on modernism amounts to an indirect attack on the establishment of modernism itself as a movement that subverts fragmentation and celebrates unity and coherence.

After World War II postcolonialism contributed to the idea that one cannot have an objectively superior lifestyle or belief. This idea was taken
further by the anti-foundationalist philosophers: Heidegger and Derrida, who have examined the fundamentals of knowledge. They argue that rationality is neither as sure nor as clear as modernists or rationalists assert. It was with the end of the Second World War that recognizably postmodernist attitudes began to emerge.

The growing anti-establishment movements of the 1960s can be identified as the constituting event of postmodernism. It was in the French academia that the theory gained some of its strongest ground in its early development. The Arab-American theorist, Ihab Hassan, is one of the first to use the term in its present sense in his book *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1971). In this work, Hassan traces the development of what he calls “literature of silence” through Marquis de Sade, Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, Samuel Beckett, and a few others, and classifies new genres such as the Theatre of the Absurd and the nouveau roman. Richard Rorty enumerates the characteristics of postmodernism in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes are also influential in developing and popularizing the postmodern theory in the 1970s. Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard have provided the philosophical framework for postmodernism.

Baudrillard’s book *Simulations* (1983) theorizes the “loss of the real.” According to Baudrillard, “the real” is now defined in terms of the media in
which it moves. He contends that social “reality” no longer exists in the conventional sense, but it has been supplanted by an endless procession of simulacra. The mass media and other forms of mass cultural production generate constant reappropriation and re-contextualization of familiar cultural symbols and images. This shifts human experience away from “reality” to “hyper reality.” The pervasive influence of images from television and advertising has led to a loss of the distinction between the real and the imagined. The same is true of the distinction between reality and illusion, and between surface and depth, which have also disappeared.

Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche can be called the precursors to postmodernism. For the postmodernists, the three, with their emphasis on skepticism, especially concerning objective reality, social morals and societal norms, represent a reaction to modernism. Postmodernists often express a profound skepticism regarding the Enlightenment quest to uncover the nature of truth and reality. Modernist authors moved away from the nineteenth century “realist” notion that a novel must “tell a story,” from an “objective” and “omniscient” point of view. Instead, they began to embrace subjectivism and fragmentariness in narrative and attempted to bring coherence out of fragments. Modernism, with its belief in the primacy of human reason, values realism in fiction and logical narrative structures.

Postmodernism stretches and breaks away from the idea that man can achieve understanding through a reliance on reason and science.
Though objectivity is the primary test of knowledge, all kinds of experiences cannot be subjected to the litmus test of objectivity. There is an element of subjectivity in at least some kind of knowledge. Postmodernism envisages that knowledge is not exclusively objective: at times, knowledge is subjective and intuitive. This opens up the possibility of a metaphysical level of human experience.

The term “history” is difficult to explain; it is one of the most complex and problematic term in postmodern theory. In referring to a discourse and the object of that discourse, the term history encapsulates a posited reality and its representation. The problems of the term are not just related to the efforts of historians, but to the issues of representation and reality. Most of the attempts to explain the discourse of history revolve around the question of its representational strategy or narrative. Most of the debates on history focus on the plurality of history and the problematic of its narrativization.

The word “history” refers to two things: narration of past events, and the events themselves. Frederic Jameson exhorts in *The Political Unconscious* “Always historicize!” (9) The process of historicizing of events is a perennial concern for students of literary studies. The relationship between literary writing and historiography has been the subject of debate from Aristotle to the present day. History as a specifically textual concern has entered the domain of literary studies for the past twenty five years. Historicism, in some form or other, has dominated the early development of literary studies until
New Criticism turned literary studies towards textual analysis in the 1940’s. According to the New Critics, history is something from which literary analysis need be protected. New Criticism explicitly divorces literary texts from their historical moments of production and condemns contextual or historicist approaches as distractions or “fallacies.”

In the 1980s, the dominant textualism of the Western critics gives way to the trend, “return to history.” As a result, history is no longer what it used to be- a background of ideas or a field of empirical facts. Heavily influenced by Foucault, the New Historicists argue for a view of history that emphasizes the role of representation and discourse in life and art. They take a position that neither history nor literature offers a firm ground from which the other can be independently studied. The term “New Historicism” refers to all those historicist theories of both history and literature which are informed by textualist and poststructuralist ideas which break with traditional historicisms. In this context, J.N.Cox and L.J.Reynolds, observe in their work, *New Historical Literary Study*:

For most part new historicism can be distinguished from ‘old’ historicism by its lack of faith in ‘objectivity’ and ‘permanence’ and its stress not upon the direct recreation of the past, but rather the processes by which the past is constructed or invented. Unsettling, transgressive, at time contradictory, new historicism tends to regard texts in materialist terms, as objects
and events in the world, as a part of human life, society, the historical realities of power, authority, and resistance; yet at the same time, it rejects the idea of ‘history as a directly accessible, unitary past’, and substitutes for it the conception of ‘histories’, an ongoing series of human constructions, each representing the past at particular present moments for particular purposes.(1)

They mean that historical text is not simply a narration of events and objects or persons, but a representation of the intricate relations of power, authority and resistance. New Historicism rules out a direct, simple unitary past: history is replaced by “histories,” each of which is reconstructed or re-invented from a distinct political perspective.

New Historicism (sometimes referred to as Cultural Poetics) emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, largely as a reaction to the lingering effects of New Criticism and its ahistorical approach. “New” Historicism’s adjectival emphasis highlights its opposition to the old historical-biographical criticism prevalent before the advent of New Criticism. In conventional school of historicism, literature is seen as a (mimetic) reflection of the historical world in which it is produced. In historicism, history is viewed as a stable, linear and recoverable narrative of fact. In contrast, New Historicism views history as a broadly skeptical discourse since historical narrative is inherently subjective; history includes all the cultural, social, political and anthropological discourses at work in any given age. These various “texts” are unranked;
that is, any text may yield valuable information in understanding a particular milieu. Rather than forming a backdrop, many historical discourses at work at any given time affect both the author and his/her text: both are inescapably part of a social construct. Stephen Greenblatt analyses “Commonwealth Literature” from a historical perspective. Michel Foucault’s intertextual methods focus on issues like power and knowledge.

With New Historicism, all texts are created equal: anything written, any piece of discourse, is treated as a text/narrative open to interpretation and analysis. New Historicism, as used in the disciplines of history, anthropology and literary studies, starts with the assumption that rather than a set of provable facts, history is a story which a culture tells itself about its past. New Historicism examines texts as narratives, using many of the same assumptions and techniques developed in literary analysis. This includes an examination of the narrator’s point of view, the author’s social position, influences and motivations, the rhetorical devices employed, and the implied audience for whom writing is meant to persuade. New Historicism assumes that any text can be deconstructed to reveal its own ideological assumptions, contradictions and limitations.

Like New Historicism, postmodern fiction by E.L. Doctorow, Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie and Angela Carter have also forced a rethinking of the writing of history. As Paul Ricoeur observes about narrative, the writing of history is actually “constitutive of the historical mode of
understanding” (*Time and Narrative*: Vol I 162). Historical facts are normally established by historiography’s explanatory and narrative structures of past events. Hayden White’s insistence on historiography as a process of constructing a meaningful historical past challenges the idea of direct correspondence between representation and reality, and the traditional notions of the historian’s role. The ideas of the poststructuralist thinkers, including Derrida, Lacan and Foucault, have transformed the popular understandings of the relationship between texts and the world, and of critical practice. Poststructuralists insist that truth is not something that exists independently and can be discovered conclusively, but it is an effect of politically charged systems of knowledge production. Truth or reality exists within the text; it can be discursively constructed and critically analysed as analogues of power or knowledge. In this regard, Foucault remarks: “Truth is linked…with systems of power which produce and sustain it” (*Power/Knowledge*, 131-3). He means that truth or the factual nature of events is an analogous construct of power.

Postmodernist theories transcend the boundaries of the fabricated literary world into the supposedly objective and scientific discipline of history. Postmodern historians and philosophers question the representation of history and cultural identities: history as “what ‘really’ happened” (external to representation or mediation) against history as a “narrative of what happened,” or a “mediated representation” with cultural/ideological interests.
History requires representation and mediation in narrative, a story-form encoded as historical. The issue of representation in both fiction and history has been dealt with in epistemological terms: how the past is constructed and understood. We have access to the past only through its traces: its documents, the testimony of witness, and other archival materials. In other words, we have only partial representations of the past from which we have to construct coherent narratives or convincing explanations. According to Barbara Foley, the postmodern situation is that a “truth is being told with ‘facts’ to back it up, but a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts” (67). In fact, the teller- of story or history- also constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to the events. Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of the narrative: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole. In this regard, Linda Hutcheon remarks: “… all past ‘events’ are potential historical ‘facts,’ but the ones that become facts are those that are chosen to be narrated” (73). Facts are not ascertained like sense impressions and they do not speak for themselves. They are not entirely the creation of historians. Facts exist apart from the historians, but they become “historical facts” only when they are judged as historically significant by selection and interpretation. In this context, E.H.Carr, in his What is History? observes: “The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context” (11). Historians select, interpret and present facts according to
their interests and experiences, but the facts that they study may also lead them to change their views. Historians are thus engaged in what Carr calls “an unending dialogue between the past and the present” (30). The past does not present itself ready packaged in narratives that historians have only to transmit. Rather, historians approach the past with present-day beliefs and aspirations that cannot be put aside. Histories, in short, are statements of the historian’s present rather than studies of the past. Histories are best described not as “empathetic” descriptions of the past, but as readings of the past that serve particular present-day ideological and material interests. Similarly, readers cannot put aside their own beliefs and aspirations when they approach histories. The past that we know is always contingent on our own views, our own present. Just as we are the products of the past, the known past (history) is an artifact of ours. History written in the present pretends to operate in the domain of the past, but in reality it fabricates that past in its own present. In this context, Michel de Certeau (The Practice of Everyday Life) remarks: “…the past is the fiction of the present” (10). So, history is of the past as fiction is of the present. Clearly, this perspective has important ramifications. Considering history as a form of fiction justifies a literary analysis of historical records; it allows the historical document to be read as a novel, thereby making its machinations more visible and its content less verifiable.

A remarkable critical work, which raised a problematic of historical narrative is Roland Barthes’s article “The Discourse of History.” In this
article, he seeks to dissolve the distinction between fictional discourse and the writings of historians; he argues that a signified (the real) is occluded or made illicit throughout a historical discourse. A past is only known as its telling (a signifier, narrative). However, by replacing the subjective persona of the narrator with an objective persona, an effacement of this problem is effected by representing the past (the signified) as telling (signifying). It becomes obvious that there is no neutral narrative or ‘scientific’ (objective) narrative; for the narrative is in itself a subjective persona.

History is first and foremost a literary narrative about the past, a literary composition of the data into a narrative where the historian creates a meaning of the past. This implies that in producing historical narratives we must no longer suppress history’s character as literature. If so, the philosophical assumption that history can correspond with the reality of the past through a knowledge of its content is no more possible. Paul Ricoeur also endorses this view: “…history is intrinsically historiography… a literary artifact” (162). He underlines the view that history is a literary construct: history and fiction are identical as narratives.

There are several problems connected with the representation of history. The first one is a question of perspective. In this matter, History (the academic discipline) is different from histories (narrated forms). The former deals with the epistemology, representation, narration and mediation of history. The latter deals with different represented forms of history. The
representation of history as a grand narrative is already challenged by postmodern epistemology. So the narration of history becomes problematic. From the point of view of narration, there are different kinds of history. The mainstream history is narrated from the perspective of the power structures that govern the society either by force or by consent. This mainstream history is called empirical history. It is often used as an indirect form of politics perpetuated through forms like education. The type of history narrated from the perspective of the marginalized communities/groups is called genealogy. So, there are different histories narrated from the genealogical points of view of the cultural communities. The process of narration always brings in an element of subjectivity. Thus, genealogical history may also be called a representation of marginalized subjectivity. The element of subjectivity brings in the question of mediation. As a form of narrative, history undergoes mediation. The extent of mediation depends on the politics of the perspective and the degree of subjectivity. So, any type of history is a mediated narrative with elements of subjectivity and political perspective. The discipline History deals with the epistemological challenges of histories.

For the modernists, unlike the postmodernists, “reality of facts” or the content of the past determines the form of history in the pattern of the historical narrative. This means that modernist history prioritizes content over form. But postmodernists have reversed the priority of content over form.
This reorientation has produced a linguistic turn that has moved historical explanation to a discussion about the role played by language in producing and shaping the meaning of historical events. This is what the American philosopher Richard Rorty calls “making true” (4). The argument is about the extent to which truth, objectivity, and justified descriptions are feasible once the priority of content over form is reversed. The result of the rethinking on the priority of content over form is the dissolution of the divisions among history, fiction, perspective and ideology. Placing form above content means that what is highly significant in creating a sense of the past are the ways in which historians organize, configure and prefigure the historical events. What becomes important is how we constitute those informing concepts, classifications, theories, arguments and categories that we use to organize and explain historical evidence and generate meaning from it.

Traditionally, history is regarded as an independent, impartial and objective body of knowledge. Now it is recognized as a literary performance. It is first and foremost a deliberate and calculated written act on the part of the historian rather than a neutral reflection or correspondence. There are important parallels between the process of history-writing and fiction-writing. Among the most problematic of these are their common assumptions about narrative and about the nature of mimetic representation. In this regard, Frederic Jameson remarks: “History is only accessible to us in narrative form” (20). The form of narrative can be graphic or written or oral. Arthur
Marwick also remarks: “History is simply a branch of literature, in which the ‘narratives’ of historians do not significantly differ from the novels of the novelist’s” (12). He says that the historian’s task is similar to that of the novelist’s. Marwick argues that “historical writing must in some sense tell a story; it must contain narrative, a sense of movement through time” (235).

A narrative is a story that is created in a constructive format that describes a sequence of fictional or non-fictional elements. Narratives show us that we draw together past, present and future: our experiences are shaped by our hopes and previous experiences, and which in turn shape future experiences and hopes.

The works of the American historian Hayden White, and those of others including Dominick LaCapra, Frank Ankersmit and Patrick Joyce, are often described as part of a shift or movement called “the linguistic turn” that explores the textuality of history. The historians who have initiated the linguistic turn work with ideas from literary theory and argue that, far from seeing literature as the fictional opposite of factual history, historians should acknowledge their intimate relationship as two forms of writing that create, rather than find, meaning.

Although earlier thinkers, notably Paul Ricoeur and Roland Barthes, explored the relationship between narrative and history, it is the works of Hayden White that have had a particularly dramatic effect on many historians’ sense of the role and future of their discipline. White argues that
historians do not find the meaning of the past by examining the facts, they invent or make meanings through their use of language. They do not reconstruct or translate lived stories into prose stories, but create meaningful narratives. According to Hayden White, histories offer “a kind of order and fullness in an account of reality” turning the past into a story (Tropics of Discouse 12). These stories or narratives have five important qualities:

They have plots

They have social centers

They moralize

They are allegories

They have aesthetics. (Tropics of Discouse 12)

In order to give the past “continuity, coherency, and meaning,” histories turn the past into stories with well-defined plots. White believes that Western historians, like Western writers of fiction, use five basic plots. Historians write romances, tragedies, comedies, satires, or epics. Histories have social centres. They tell the stories of particular human communities from a particular point of view. According to him, “Narrativity . . . is intimately related to . . . the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine” (Tropics of Discouse 14). Histories, however accurate they may be, however faithful
they are to the evidence and to the experiences of people in the past, are always allegories. They are stories not only about the past but also about the present. They are stories not only about the particular experiences of particular people at a particular time and place in the past, but about the human experiences in all times and at all places. Symbolic characters, actions, and settings connect stories about the past to the present, as do the mythic plots through which those stories unfold. Every history has an aesthetic. It has a theory of what is beautiful or sublime in societies, characters, and actions. In short, historians turn the past into “histories” by writing stories that impose order, structure, and coherence onto the past.

Hayden White underlines some similarities in the form and objective of the fictional and historical discourses:

All written discourse is cognitive in its aims and mimetic in its means. And this is true even of the most ludic and seemingly expressivist discourse, of poetry no less than of prose, and even of those forms of poetry which seem to illuminate only ‘writing itself’. In this respect, history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation.

(Tropics of Discourse 122)

According to Hayden White, historical work is a verbal artifact. It is a narrative discourse, the content of which is as much imagined or invented
as found. He explains this point in the essay “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact”:

In general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences. (Tropics of Discourse 82)

He is of the opinion that in the construction of their historical narratives, historians inevitably combine known or found parts (facts) with ultimately unknown and thus imagined/invented wholes. White, in the essay, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” applies theories of fiction to historical writing. The essay raises questions about the disciplinary boundaries between history and literature or logical boundaries between fact and fiction. He coins the term “metahistory,” to represent histories or stories about history, which attempts to blur the disciplinary distinctions between historiography and literature. He argues that when depicting the past, historians employ historical imagination. The historian relies on the narrative strategies of a literary writer. So history is narrative prose shaped by literary conventions and the historian’s imagination.

White argues that historical narratives are more closely linked with literature than with the sciences. This is not because historical narratives are
fictional, but because historical narratives employ tropes to configure historical events in ways that the audience can relate to. Historians re-emptot, re-describe, or re-code past events so that contemporary cultures can make sense of their past. Histories, then, are similar to fiction because figurative language is used in both genres to help readers come to know the actual by “contrasting it with or likening it to the imaginable” (Tropics of Discourse 98). Both historical narratives and fictional narratives employ similar strategies in making sense of past events whether they are real or imagined. His concept of history as narrative, states that historical works in general take the form of a narrative, in the sense of a coherent and ordered representation of events or developments in sequential time. He says that all historical explanations are rhetorical and poetic by nature.

White’s concept of “history as narrative” has led to the postmodernist debate about historiography. Postmodernism is skeptical towards any claims of certainty in sciences including history. In historiography, postmodernism is identified with the linguistic turn, which refers to the priority given to language. White wants historians to have linguistic skepticism and to question their use of language. His defense of this idea appears very controversial: “…the techniques or strategies that historians and imaginative writers use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional level” (Tropics of Discourse 121). White argues that historical studies are best
understood not as accurate and objective representations of the past, but as creative texts structured by narrative and rhetorical devices that shape historical interpretation. He proposes a theory of tropes, or symbolic modes that constitutes the deep structure of historical thought.

White has developed his argument through the cases of four historians- Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt, and four philosophers of history- Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Croce. Arguing for a sustained examination of the figurative features of historiographical texts, White asserts the importance of four tropes of consciousness that shape the works of a historian at every stage. He identifies four rhetorical styles through which the authors presented their interpretations: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. He also identifies four corresponding literary genres by which the historians figured historical processes in their works as stories of a particular kind: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire. Each of these figures has its own characteristic way of organizing pieces of information into a larger whole. In *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth Century Europe*, White extends the use of tropes from linguistic usage to general styles of discourse. He believes that histories are determined by tropes, in as much as the historiography of every period is defined by a specific trope. For him, metaphor is the most useful trope, and historical explanation “can be judged solely in terms of the richness of the metaphors which govern its sequence of articulation” (*Tropics of Discourse* 46). The greater the
imagination of the historian, or the greater is his poetic talent, the greater will be the literary quality and readability of the historical narrative. In this regard, White remarks, in *The Content of Form*: “A true narrative account… is less a product of the historian’s poetic talents, as the narrative account of imaginary events is conceived to be, than it is a necessary result of proper application of historical ‘method’” (27). It is an evidenced fact that he was strongly influenced by Paul Ricoeur. White echoes Ricoeur in the same work: “plot is not a structural component of fictional or mythical stories alone; it is crucial to the historical representations of events as well” (51). Here, White underlines Ricoeur’s contention that plot forms the fundamental structure of fiction as well as history.

Postmodernists believe that history is qualified with subjective elements because the historian has his own choices. His processes of selection are personal and subjective. The historian takes some past events and makes story out of them. The events selected will be his personal choice. In that selected events he makes his preferences as to which element should be given prominence.

Writing history involves selecting evidence and filling in gaps. Histories are “not only about events but also about the possible sets of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure” (*Tropics of Discourse* 94). For example, the chronological sequence a,b,c,d,e,…n may be endowed with different meanings, such as:
A,b,c,d,e,…n;
a,B,c,d,e,…n;
a,b,C,d,e,…n;
a,b,c,D,e,…n and
a,b,c,d,E…n
and so on. In these sequences, capital letters indicate the privileging of a certain event or set of events. These sets of relationships are not inherent in the events themselves. Rather, they are a part of the language that the historian uses to describe them. Historians use the conventions of figurative, not technical, language.

According to White, the historian begins his work by constituting a chronicle of events which is to be organized into a coherent story. These are the two preliminary steps before processing the material into a plot which expresses an ideology. Thus the historical work is “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them” (Metahistory 2).

White defines historical work as a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse. It classifies past structures and processes in order to explain what they were by representing them as models. A historian takes
events that happened and makes a story out of them. In order to make a story intelligible and meaningful as history, historians, consciously or unconsciously, make it conform to their preferences. A historian does not just find history, but makes it by arranging events in a certain order: deciding which events in the chronicle to include and which to exclude; answering questions like what happened? When? How? Why; stressing some events and subordinating others. Emplotment, Argument and Ideological implication are the three ways in which he answers these questions.

Emplotment is the literary genre into which the story falls. According to White, every history, even the most “synchronic” of them, will be emplotted in some way: “Histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by an operation which I have elsewhere called emplotment. And by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures, in precisely the way that Frye has suggested is the case with “fictions” in general” (Tropics of Discourse 223). Emplotment is the act of giving something a plot, of putting it within a narrative structure. This is what authors do when they tell stories, but this is also what historians do when they write reports. They do not just report the facts - they create a narrative, a story in an attempt to give their data meaning. Creating a plot for something inevitably means leaving some things out and emphasizing others.
Emplotment is mediation of pre-understanding, event and story. And a plot is one among many alternative plots. Barry and Elmes have applied the concept of narrative plot to organizational strategy.

Accordingly, a narrative approach can make the political economy of strategy more visible: Who gets to write and read strategy? How are reading and writing linked to power? Who is marginalized in the writing/reading process? (Barry and Elmes 430) They point to the possibility of having many alternative/ equivalent stories. There are as many stories as writers/readers. Each story aims at to strengthen or weaken a power structure. “A story the strategist tells is but one of many competing alternatives woven from a vast array of possible characterizations, plot lines, and themes” (Barry and Elmes 433). In emplotment, the plot is not just a chronology of events or the schematic arrangement of a causal chain that links events and episodes together into a narrative structure. Emplotment is also the intertextual arrangement of events within the text, and the epistemology of time and being-within-time.

There are three mediations to accomplish emplotment. The first is the mediation between individual events and story as a whole. A diversity of events or succession of incidents are constructed and grasped together into a meaningful story. An event has meaning in its relation to other events and incidents in the development of a plot within the meaningfulness of the whole story. Stories are more than a chronology of events in serial order because of
plot, which organizes and (re)configures event networks into an intelligible whole. The second is the mediation between heterogeneous factors. Factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results get emploted and embellished. Plot (re)configures heterogeneous events and factors into a whole story and into one grand “thought,” “point,” or “theme.” Mediation allows a synthesis of the heterogeneous. The episodic dimensions of narrative are chronological while the narrative of time is not. Plot (re)configures chronological time into storied and teleological time. Emplotment grasp together configuration from mere succession. The synthesis can occur in the conclusion of a story where all the contingencies, factors, and events are given a point of view and formed into a whole understanding.

The four types of emplotment are romance, satire, comedy and tragedy. Romance celebrates the triumph of the good after trials and tribulations. Comedy is socially integrative and it celebrates the conservation of shared human values against the threat of disruption. Tragedy stresses the irreconcilable element of human affairs, and laments the loss of the good necessarily entailed when values collide. Satire sees only meaningless change in human life; human affairs display no pattern, and for the most part they are governed by folly and chance.

Argument is the historian’s view of what history ought to be. The four types of arguments are formist, organicist, mechanistic and contextualist.
The formist mode of argument sees individual historical units or entities as self-contained and relatively autonomous. The organicist mode assumes that individual units are determined by their place in a larger whole and by a common spirit; for example, the zeitgeist. The mechanistic mode looks for laws of cause and effect connecting historical phenomena. The contextualist mode relates units to each other against a common background or frame of reference.

Ideology reflects ethics and assumptions which the historian has about life, how past events affect the present, and how we ought to act in the present. There were ideologies which did not claim science as an authority before the Enlightenment. According to White, there is no possibility of authoritarian ideology now. Conservative, liberal, radical and anarchist are the four types of ideologies that exist now. White thinks that in principle any of the modes of emplotment can be combined with any of the modes of argument and any of the modes of ideology. Thus, in principle one can have a history written as mechanistic anarchist comedy.

Most historical writings define itself by reference to these categories. This has the important corollary that there is no further, scientific, correct, neutral way of writing history which can be found outside this grid. Rather, historians are “indentured to a choice” among these options, and cannot choose. Within the grid, no one mode has a closer relation to truth than any other; thus, a sequence of events can be narrated as a tragedy or as satire.
or as romance, and there is no way to prove that one of these is the right way of narrating it.

Underpinning the narrative combinations of emplotment, argument and ideological implication are tropes, the linguistic figures with specific rhetorical functions. The historian “prefigures” the act of writing history by writing within a particular trope. In this regard, White observes: “Tropes are especially useful for understanding the operations by which the contents of experience which resist description in unambiguous prose representations can be prefiguratively grasped and prepared for conscious apprehension” (Tropics of Discourse 34). Prefiguration in historiography is the relation between a set of patterns in an epoch to an identical set of patterns in another epoch. This relation makes us bewilder whether history can repeat, irrespective of space and time. For White, the tropes are:

…deviations from literal, conventional, or, ‘proper’ language use, swerves in locution sanctioned neither by custom nor logic. Tropes generate figures of speech or thought by their variation from what is ‘normally’ expected, and by the associations they establish between concepts normally felt not to be related or to be related in ways different from that suggested in the trope used… Thus considered, troping is both a movement from one notion of the way things are related to another notion, and a
connection between things so that they can be expressed otherwise. (*Tropics of Discourse* 2)

Tropes help historian to make his language metaphoric, which enables them to construct meanings, obtuse and vicarious. In other words, tropes create the possibility of polysemic contexts in historical narratives.

White thinks that the way the “historical field,” or the given set of events, developments, structures and agents, takes shape in the historian's mind is ultimately determined at a deep level, deeper than that on which the modes operate. Each person's mind is biased towards a certain way of making links between data. White borrows terms from rhetoric to describe them: metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and irony. These four correspond to the “master tropes” identified by Kenneth Burke in *A Grammar of Motives*. The metaphorical imagination makes connections by seeing likenesses; the metonymic, by making a part represent or stand for any other part of a whole; the synecdochic, by making the part represent the whole. The ironic mind is skeptical about whether making connections is possible at all. Romantic narrative is founded on metaphor, tragic on metonymy, comic on synecdoche, and satiric on irony. White’s tropes are not turns of speech in the sense of decorative flourishes, but dominant strategies by which known and unknown phenomena are made meaningful within language.

The historian gathers data and assembles them toward a form. Part of the success of histories in explaining events of the past to readers in the
present is due to the story-making ability of the historian, or “emplotment.”

R. G. Collingwood views historians as story-tellers, but does not make the distinction between the elements of a story and the story itself. The story takes shape by “the suppression or subordination” of some events and the “highlighting” of others (Tropics of Discourse 84). But the form is not implicit in the events, as Collingwood suggests. Rather, the form comes from the combination of the historian’s choices in telling the events and the reader’s familiarity with the forms of tragedy, comedy, romance, or irony. Telling history is in this way a literary form. By encoding the events so as to reflect a familiar form, the historian “refamiliarizes” readers with events. Historical narratives serve not only as a “reproduction” of the events but also as a “complex of symbols” assisting readers to find an “icon” of those events (Tropics of Discourse 88). Form limits the coherence of the story, which is the coherence of the events. The facts must be tailored to the form, while preserving the chronology or sequence. This happens both by emphasis within the sequence and by the omission of some events from the sequence. The choices of emphasis and omission come from the historian’s sense of possible sets of relationships among the events. The historian begins with “ordinary educated speech” as his communication method, leaving figurative language to construct meaning. The “dominant figurative mode” available can determine the type of emplotment to be used (Tropics of Discourse 94). The mode of figuration determines the mode of emplotment. Ultimately, construction of meaning depends on the mode of figuration.
In *Metahistory*, White sets out the interpretive framework that guides much of his later work. Arguing for a sustained examination of the figurative features of historiographical texts, White asserts the importance of four tropes of consciousness that shape the work of the historian at every stage. Following Vico’s work on rhetoric, White associates these four modes of historical consciousness with four figures of speech: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Each of these figures has its own characteristic way of organizing pieces of information into a larger whole. White argues that this poetics of history, and not historical evidence alone, determines a historian’s perspective and interpretation. Thus, for White, the power of these different modes of representation highlights the non-scientific nature of the discipline of history. If one assumes a base level of honesty and skill on the part of the historian, White finds no reason to privilege one historical account over another based only on historical evidence. White asserts that the kind of history one chooses to tell is based on moral and aesthetic values that stand in sharp contrast to some objective, neutral understanding of historical evidence alone. White’s *Metahistory* reveals a relativism that dissolves the distinctions not only between historiography and the philosophy of history but also between fiction and historiography. For White, fictitious and historiographical events are both conveyed through similar representational strategies and hence, at this formal level, no differences exist between these two kinds of discourse. White’s challenge to history is that it is not a science, or a story
told only in facts; but rather it is a form of discourse that relies on conventional narrative forms and imagination.

It is necessary to recognize the fictive element of historical narratives and to reconnect history with its “literary basis.” This allows the incorporation of theories of language and narrative to make a “more subtle presentation” of historical events. Such recognition and reconnection would guard against “ideological distortions” and develop a theory that would revitalize the discipline of history (*Tropics of Discourse* 99). History can sustain itself with the theories of language and narrative embedded in its texture.

As both Foucault and White suggest, historians are epochal as well as textual creatures and as such they can prefigure the historical field accordingly. Historians are, therefore, influenced by the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the present. These assumptions are established and made manifest as the historian brings his narrative, and the conceptual and ethical explanatory strategies to bear on the content of the past. This is managed through the activity of the historical imagination in the initial process of troping. The historical imagination composes the historical narrative through the deliberate sequencing of events to effect an explanation. This ordering of events is the imaginative process of emplotment. The function of historical imagination not only establishes connections between the documents but also couples the past, the present and the future.
In this regard, White observes:

Historical imagination is often described as putting oneself in the place of past agents, seeing things from their point of view, and so forth, all of which leads to a notion of objectivity that is quite different from anything that might be meant by that term in physical sciences. (*Tropics of Discourse* 67)

The historical imagination, working through the troping process of analogy and difference, creates casual links in the form of metaphorical descriptions. White’s major contribution is his suggestion that historians interpret the cultural history of any period by reference to its dominant tropic prefiguration, while bearing in mind the epistemic signature of their own epoch.

As language shows the direction and relationships between the “facts” presented, rather than a grand narrative which tells us ultimately what happened, history becomes a way of understanding the social relations between the past/present, powerful/weak, conscious/subconscious. White asserts that all of these relationships can be ascertained through the analysis of the language in which histories are written, and the gaps or contradictions present in that language, rather than the content of the histories themselves. White’s concept of history as narrative, as a literary genre, questions the claims of truth and objectivity in historical works. As historical narratives proceed from empirically validated facts or events, they necessarily require
imaginative steps to place them in a coherent story; they represent only a selection of historical events. Thus, truth is limited. Narratives explain why events happened, but they are, according to Alun Munslow,

…overlaid by the assumptions held by the historian about the forces influencing the nature of causality. These might well include individual or combined elements like race, gender, class, culture, weather, coincidence, geography, region, blundering politicians, and so on and so forth. So, while individual statements may be true (or) false, narrative as a collection of them is more than their sum. (*Deconstructing History* 10)

He means that the effect created by a historical narrative is more than the total effects created by individual historical events. White argues that the distinction between historical and fictional narratives is too narrow to be defined:

Narrative historiography may very well, as Furet indicates, “dramatize” historical events and “novelize” historical processes, but this only indicates that the truths in which narrative history deals are of an order different from those of its social scientific counterpart. The relation between historiography and literature is, of course, as tenuous and difficult to define as that between historiography and science.
In part, no doubt, this is because historiography in the West arises against the background of a distinctively literary (or fictional) discourse which itself took shape against the even more archaic discourse of myth. (*Metahistory* 44)

White states that history fails, if its intention is the objective reconstruction of the past because the process involved is a literary one of interpretative narrative, rather than objective empiricism or social theorizing. By denying universal truths, White’s concept criticizes Western scientific and rationalistic worldviews. These ethnocentric perspectives are considered the justifications for the use and abuse of power and authority. In this context, Mark T. Gilderhus remarks: “History devoted exclusively to the activities of white male elites of European extraction is no longer the standard” (*History and Historians* 136). White questions the Eurocentric notion of history as a form of narrative. His theory calls for emerging models in the realm of historical narration. History constructs sense of the past events in the present through emplotting events, troping contents, prefiguring narratives and inventing new models.

All of White’s works share a concern with combining literary criticism and historiography in order to develop a deeper understanding of historical discourse and cultural perspective. In *Metahistory*, White sets out the interpretive framework that guides much of his later work. Arguing for a sustained examination of the figurative features of historiographical texts,
White asserts the importance of four tropes of consciousness that shape the work of the historian at every stage. In *Tropics of Discourse*, White strives to develop a less relativistic stance by arguing that the deep structures that define human consciousness have a certain stability that allows for the creation of sound representations of human perceptions of reality. He also suggests that it is not possible for some pieces of historical evidence to be represented within particular tropological structures, and hence the historian needs to rely only on those modes of discourse that will most accurately reflect the evidence in question. Although White’s arguments in *Tropics of Discourse* place some distance between his works and those of poststructuralist theorists with whom he has been associated, they also raise tensions within his own approach. White’s next collection of essays, *The Content of the Form*, places less emphasis on the existential separation between life and narrative found in his early works, emphasizing instead the role ideology plays in the representation of historical processes and events. In *Figural Realism*, White again employs his theory of tropes to examine the works of Proust and Freud, arguing that history cannot serve as neutral ground for the interpretation of varied texts. White also examines the difficulties and ethical problems posed in finding effective ways to represent the Holocaust.

The concept of history as narrative has wide implications; it leads among other aspects, to the postmodernist debate on historiography.
White’s view of historical texts as literary artifacts erases the distinction between history and story. According to him, authors have other messages that they want to convey so that the historical past is the medium but not the message of the historical work. As he states, comparable to good narratives, historical works carry the reader smoothly but directly to the conclusion the author has in mind.

White’s text contains a radical critique of historical methodology and the consciousness of historians. His concept of history as narrative, as a literary genre, challenges the claims of truth and objectivity in historical work. According to White, historical narratives are verbal fictions; their contents are as much invented as found and their forms have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences. As he states, while historical narratives proceed from empirically validated facts or events, they necessarily require imaginative steps to place them in a coherent story; they also represent only a selection of historical events. His insistence that history is as much how you narrate as what you narrate, opens up the possibility of demonstrating the past’s relevance to the present. Moreover, his central thesis that historical writing may be understood as a system of tropes, such as the metaphorical and the ironic, allows for the beneficial expansion of historical thinking into the realm of literary and critical theory.
The visualization of history can be analysed with the help of visual semiotics. Semiotics is a branch of communication theory that investigates sign systems and the mode of representation that humans use to convey feelings, thoughts, ideas and ideologies. It is the study of signs and signals, sign systems and processes. Jakobson defines semiotics as “the exchange of any messages whatever and the system of signs that underlie them” (42). Semiotic analysis looks for the cultural and psychological patterns that underlie language, art and other cultural expressions. Umberto Eco jokingly suggests that semiotics is a discipline for studying everything which can be used in order to lie (Eco 7).

The term semiotics has its roots in Greek semeiotike. Although it has become the word most commonly used to designate this area of study, ironically, it was employed by neither of the two great theorists who most decisively shaped modern semiotics. The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce preferred “semiotic” (parallel to terms like logic and rhetoric) as a label for the study of the doctrine of signs, or frequently semeiotic to indicate its derivation from the Greek. And the French structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure conceived of language as a particular system of signs, linguistics itself as being one part of the comprehensive science of signs that he called semiology.

Semiotics has sometimes been understood as a specific discipline, with its own method and determinate subject matter. In this case, the semiotician
will attend most directly to the basic structure of the sign relation, the conditions of possibility for anything functioning as a sign of anything else. Here semiotics is closely related to philosophy, especially to inquiries in formal logic, and to theoretical linguistics. More typically, semiotics has been portrayed as a complex, interdisciplinary field of study, drawing not only upon philosophy and linguistics but also with vital links to literary and communication studies, hermeneutics, the history and theory of art, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and even biology and the natural sciences.

There are two major traditions in modern semiotic theory. One is grounded in the European tradition led by the Swiss-French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and the other from the American pragmatic philosophy led by Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure sought to explain how all elements of a language are taken as components of a larger system of language in use. This led to a formal discipline which he called semiology. Peirce’s interest in logical reasoning led him to investigate different categories of signs and the manner by which we extract meaning from them.

Saussure’s thesis was that language is the instrument which enables human beings to achieve a rational comprehension of the world in which they live. Instead of seeing words as subordinate to our grasp of reality, Saussure saw our understanding of reality as depending essentially on our social use of the verbal signs which constitute the language we use. He saw language as
central to human life. Human existence is linguistically articulated. Saussure laid the foundation for the structuralist school in linguistics and social theory.

A structuralist looks at the units of a system and the rules of logic that are applied to the system, without regard to any specific content. The smallest unit of analysis in Saussure’s semiology is the sign made up of a signifier or a sensory pattern, and a signified, the concept that is elicited in the mind by the signifier. Saussure emphasized that the signifier does not constitute a sign until it is interpreted. He emphasized the arbitrary association between a word and what it stands for. The link between the sign and what it stands for is understood by convention. This arbitrariness is true in most spoken and written languages; they may not be so for other types of signs such as visuals that provide cues to stimulate recognition through resemblance or mimesis.

Pierce shared the Saussurian observation that most signs are symbolic and arbitrary, but he called attention to iconic signs that physically resemble their referent and indexical signs that possess a logical connection to their referent. To Peirce, the relationship of the sign to the object is made in the mind of the interpreter as a mental tool which he called the interpretant. According to him, semiosis, the process of sign interpretation, is a process involving multiple references. The signifier elicits in the mind an interpretant which is not the final signified object, but a mediating thought that promotes understanding. In other words, a thought is a sign requiring interpretation by a subsequent thought in order to achieve meaning. This mediating thought
might be a schema, a mental model, or a recollection of prior experience that enables the subject to move forward towards understanding. This interpretant itself becomes a sign that can elicit yet another interpretant, leading the way toward an infinite series of unlimited semiosis. By this analysis, Peirce shifts the focus of semiotics from a relational view of signs and the objects they represent to an understanding of semiosis as an interactive, mediational process.

A sign, as defined by Peirce, is “something that stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (99). He states again: “A sign is an object which stands for another to some mind” (141). In other words, his triadic model of a sign identifies the word or image sign that stands for some other object or concept. In line with his philosophical focus, the most basic premise of his semiotic theory states that all we can know is mediated by signs. This very important “stands for” process is the point where meaning is generated both through encoding by the source (production) and decoding by the receiver (reception), and this relationship is the focus of the process of interpretation. The importance of interpretation is apparent in the definition given by the Italian semiotician, Umberto Eco, who further defines a sign as “something that is interpreted” (Eco 15). Eco defines a sign as anything which may be interpreted to “stand for” (or substitute for) something. A sign is a unit consisting of an expression and a content which are connected with each other by a mutual correlation or “sign function.”
Peirce’s most important contribution is in the area of interpretation. According to him, the meaning making process is an infinite process of interpretation. This process of interpretation involves the consideration of the meaning of a sign in terms of all possible signification possibilities- a sign can be a signal, or an iconic, indexical or symbolic sign, all at the same time. Interpretation is done by puzzling out the inferences from these multiple levels of signification. This type of search for meaning is infinite, in Peirce’s view, because every signifier can be translated into other signifiers and interpretants through an endless process of inference chaining.

Peirce’s concept of interpretant is very important in visual communication because visual meaning is more open for interpretation than verbal. Contrary to conventional wisdom which suggests that if you can see, you can understand (that is, meaning is transparent), the interpretation of many visual messages may be more complex and more demanding on the decoder because of the inferential dimension on which visual interpretation rests. Visual interpretation involves more than simple inference. Eco suggests that a viewer goes through a process of “synthetic inference” which involves both denotative (realism, representation) and connotative (associations, attitudes, emotions) processes. Association, in particular, unlocks this chaining process. In this complex inferential process where information is being actively synthesized, an involved audience extends and fills in meaning as well as decodes the meaning.
According to Eco, the meaning of signs is determined by the objects (things or events) to which they refer, and he rejects the notion that “iconic” signs must be likenesses of their objects. He argues that the meaning of signs is not necessarily determined by whether they refer to actual objects. He explains that the existence of objects to which signals or signs may correspond is not a necessary condition for their signification. Eco defines signification as the semiotic event whereby a sign “stands for” something, and he defines communication as the transmission of information from a source to a destination. Communication is made possible by the existence of a code, or by a system of signification. Without a code or a system of signification, there is no set of rules to determine how the expression of signs is to be correlated with their content. The use of a code or a system of signification is necessary to establish any form of communication. According to him, a “code” is an instrument for connecting the expression of signs to their content, and is a correlational device which generates “sign-functions.” A “code” is also a rule for sign production and interpretation in that it determines how the expression and content of signs are to be correlated.

Eco also argues that the content and not the referent of a sign is the location of the sign’s meaning. The meaning of a sign is a “cultural unit” in that the meaning of every sign is culturally defined. “Semiosis,” the term borrowed from Charles Sanders Peirce, is expanded by Eco to designate the process by which a culture produces signs and/or attributes meaning to signs.
Although Eco argues that meaning production or semiosis is a social activity, he admits that subjective factors are also involved in each individual act of semiosis. This notion is then pertinent to the two main emphases of current or poststructuralist, semiotic theory. One is a semiotics focused on the subjective aspects of signification and strongly influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, where meaning is construed as a subject-effect: the subject being an effect of the signifier. The other is a semiotics concerned to stress the social aspect of signification, its practical, aesthetic, or ideological use in interpersonal communication, here, meaning is construed as semantic value produced through culturally shared codes.

Peircean semiotics allows us to discuss all signs, whether verbal or non-verbal, as components of all forms of meaning. He explains: “All the universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs” (Peirce, 258). According to Peirce, signs are not just words and meaning is not necessarily a product of convention or language. He has developed a tripartite system to classify the complex world of signs as icons, indexes and symbols. Peirce defines an icon as similar to its subject; in other words, iconic signs carry some quality of the thing they stand for as a portrait stands for a person. Most often an iconic sign is a representation such as a drawing or a photograph where likeness or resemblance is a determining characteristic; early picture writing or pictographs, also had iconic elements. An index is physically connected with its object, an indication that something
exists or has occurred; a footprint means someone just walked by or smoke
that means there is a fire. Symbolic signs arbitrarily stand for something
through a process of consensus as a word stands for a concept. A symbol,
such as a leaf on a flag, is linked by convention with its object. We learn that
a maple leaf stands for the country of Canada. Symbols, therefore, are
conventional like most spoken and written words and subject to a more closed
than open interpretation process.

Although symbols are arbitrary, icons and indexes are “motivated;”
that is, they are more likely to resemble their object in some way rather than
being created by convention. In this regard, John Fiske and John Hartley
explain in *Reading Television*: “…the greater the motivation, the smaller the
role played by socially based convention; and the weaker the motivation, the
more constraining is the convention” (39). Icons and indexes are also more
open to interpretation since they are not based on arbitrarily determined
relationships of meaning, but on personal experience. Symbols may be
complex, but once the meanings are understood, they are less subject to
idiosyncratic interpretations. A stop sign is a stop sign, but a rose is not
always a rose.

The distinctions between and among icon, index and symbol are not
rigid boundaries. In fact, a rose can be an icon (a picture), an index (sign of
summer), and a symbol (the War of Roses). Photographs are indexical as well
as iconic because they are reality grounded. In communication production
and reception, the meaning may shift from one to another as the communication act progresses. For example, a study of Sinead O’Conner’s iconoclastic tearing up of the picture of Pope Paul illustrates how conflict can be generated when an iconic representation is turned into a symbol.

Saussure explains a sign and the process by which it is interpreted as a two-part construct which he describes as containing first a sound or image, called the signifier, and the concept for which it stands, called the signified. This is similar to Peirce’s sign and object. For linguistic-oriented theorists who work in the Saussurian model, the “stands for” relationship is often seen as arbitrary. In other words, the link between the sign, or expression, and what it stands for is understood by convention. This arbitrariness, which leads to a more closed model of communication, is true in most spoken and written languages. Obviously, with language, there is room for interpretation, but the space for idiosyncratic interpretation is more tightly drawn through the process of realized meanings and dictionary definitions.

The concept of open and closed texts, which originated with linguistic, but can be applied to visuals as well. A murder mystery, whether a book or a movie, for example, is a closed text where the code is known and the cause and effect chains are not open. All that the reader does is to supply a sense of the rules of the game. “Open” texts, on the other hand, such as most poetry and tales like Finnegan’s Wake make complex demands on the reader. Such texts are seen differently by different readers at different times.
The metaphor holds for visual communication as well. The stop sign is a relatively closed text, but a news photograph, an advertisement, a Renaissance painting, or our perceptions of the natural environment are much more open to individual interpretation.

The idea that visuals are primarily open texts and subject to idiosyncratic interpretation is an important point. In this context, Robert Rutherford Smith points out in a review of works by Eco and Sebeok: “It is in the field of open texts, from the work of Joyce and Brecht to the music of Berio and Stockhausen, that the important work of the twentieth century is being accomplished” (209). He points out that Eco’s notion that the reader plays an important role in the interpretation of “modern,” open texts, corrects the historic imbalance in communication theory that has focused on the sender. It corrects another historic imbalance: the lack of recognition of visual communication as generating a complex and highly sophisticated process of interpretation.

Peircean semiotics is much broader than theories of linguistic processing. Eco’s definition of the boundaries of semiotics, for example, includes a variety of natural communication systems from zoosemiotics (animal communication) to biosemiotics (all biological signaling systems). Deely’s book, Basics of Semiotics, follows Peirce’s suggestions that semiosis should be divided between cognitive- zoosemiotics (animal), anthroposemiotics (human), and non-cognitive physiosemios (the broad
physical universe), and phytosemiosis (plant life). The two dominant strands of thought in modern semiotics, the Saussurean and the Peircean, began to intersect late in the twentieth century as poststructuralist thinkers, steeped in the Saussurean tradition, increasingly began to draw on Peircean concepts and arguments.

In Fiske’s critique of Jensen’s work, he suggests that semiology is a richer arena than Peircean semiotics because it is more “generative.” Peirce’s theory opens up a much broader interpretation of sign systems in contrast to much of the work of traditional communication theory which is grounded in language. Semioticians are interested in any system that uses signs to create meaning and most of them argue that communication should include sign systems other than language. Only a percentage of human communication is verbal, there being a vast amount of communication on the non-verbal level.

One of the most important sign systems used to communicate non-verbally is that employed in visual communication where signs are used to stand for experiential knowledge as well as ideas. We perceive information visually from nature and the reality around us; we also perceive visual information from mediated forms of communication. Both forms of visual perception are grounded in observation, a neglected area in most language-based theories of meaning.

Some scholars argue that movies, television and advertising are dominated by visuals rather than language. The reality-grounded perceptual
process used in understanding these media is largely untutored and mastered through experience rather than education. This is a fact that apparently makes the process seem suspect and less sophisticated than language-based meaning systems. Almost a hundred years ago, Peirce made a plea that scholars ‘not be in haste to deride a kind of thinking that is evidently founded upon observation” (258).

Visual communication scholars would argue that driving on a freeway or watching an MTV program involves a very complex set of interpretive skills, even if they are grounded in observation, rather than language. In other words, visual communication is complex and the information processing facility is sophisticated, even if much of it is self-taught. The interpretation of visual information, as it uses more open communication codes, is highly subjective and it puts more demands on a viewer/observer than on a receiver of language-based communication which operates within the more restricted space of convention.

At the most basic level, the meaning of a sign is internalized by the process of perception- the intersection of our senses with reality-based data as information from the perceived world is “registered.” Two important factors are personal observation and individual experience. We understand a great many things from experiences with reality.

The idea of non-verbal perception of meaning contrasts with the work of language-based theorists who believe that converting perception into
knowledge happens only through language. Visual communication scholars argue that it is possible to apprehend signs and make sense of them without the mediation of language. According to them, we naturally make sense of visual information without language. Language is used for interpreting some kinds of information, particularly abstract and theoretical concepts; but a great deal of what we process visually is managed without stopping to find a word for it.

As perception is active, the individual selects the information and modifies it depending on the individual’s previous experiences. It takes repeated observations for us to make sense of the patterns around us and that is where perception interacts with cognition through the processes of recognition, organization, and discrimination. In other words, visual interpretation involves both the eyes and the brain: what we understand is moderated by what we know or have experienced in the past and how we have made sense of these experiences and recorded them in memory.

Meaning can be internalized as much of what we learn through visual processing of reality-based information. But it can also be socially or culturally driven which creates an externalized dimension in interpretation. In other words, much of what we know from language or code based signs including most visual symbols is derived from social learning. For example, the way we dress is derived from a socially determined code of fashion. This is where Peirce’s notion of interpretive communities or communities of
inquirers is useful. This suggests a continuum of interpretation factors moving from internal to external. So we understand things not only by using both the eyes and the brain but also by using internally derived information learned from experiences combined with externally based conventions. Thus, meaning of signs is constructed through a complex interaction of perception and cognition as well as individual and conventional factors.

Roland Barthes’s semiotic theory focuses on the social phenomena of signs, specifically photographs. His theory emphasizes how signs constitute culture and ideologies in particular ways. According to Barthes, these messages are constituted in two ways: through denotation, the literal meaning and reference of a sign, and connotation, the meanings that are suggested or implied by the sign. For instance, “Hitler” denotes historical individual. Meanwhile, Hitler connotes evil, genocide, racism, and so on. Therefore, a photographic image by itself without a code is pure denotation. But Barthes claims that the denotative status of a photo “has every chance of being mythical.” (15). Barthes uses mythical as a way of describing the characteristics that are associated with common sense, or the characteristics of a photograph that have the opportunity to represent and convey ideological norms of a culture. Consequently, a photograph can also connote cultural meaning. But Barthes explains: “The press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms which are so many factors
of connotation” (31). Thus, there is a photographic paradox in which there is a co-existence of denotative and connotative messages.

In order to understand the connotative messages within a photo, Barthes suggests the awareness and ability to recognize the connotative procedures: trick effect, pose, objects, photogenia, aestheticism and syntax. Although the photo itself holds many connotative messages, the text around the photo also contributes to its connotation. Barthes describes the text as “parasitic” on the image. In other words, the text borrows the objectivity of the image, while at the same time loading the image with hidden connotations. Thus, words are not merely duplicating messages within the photo but always add to the meaning.

Ultimately, it is not the photo that is significant, but the historical and cultural elements of the photo. Accordingly, there are modes of connotation that one uses to identify the ideologies and messages. The first is perceptive, where an individual automatically categorizes what they perceive. The second is cognitive, where an individual recognizes elements that they personally know about. For example, they identify with a particular place and time of an event. Thus, connotation relies on the reader’s or viewer’s knowledge. The last is the ideological or ethical mode when one recognizes a certain value that is being depicted such as beauty. Through such modes of connotation Barthes’s semiotic theory frames problems through shared meaning.
Misunderstandings are then a result of different meanings whether it is of unconscious cultural differences or hidden ideologies.

Barthes wants to create a way for people to deepen their understanding of language, literature and society. Specifically, he focuses on non-verbal signs. His greatest concern is occidentalism - the French bourgeoisie considers its culture and mores universal. He feels that society is a construction, perpetuated by signs of the dominant values within its culture. Barthes begins to study the subject of semiotics not as a process but as an attitude. He believes that the importance of semiology resides in its functionality. Semiology provides Barthes with an opportunity to denunciate “the self-proclaimed petit-bourgeois myths... This means was semiology- the close analysis of process of meaning by which the bourgeoisie converts its historical class-culture into a universal nature” (*Mythologies* 5).

According to modern semiology, the benefit of culture resides in the differences (mores, bases, and attitudes) of groups. Without these differences, choices would be limited. He feels that occidentalism is like a set of blinders, providing only one tool for understanding - namely, rhetoric. Rhetoric was created in ancient Greece as a tool for persuasion. Truth is not a goal of rhetoric. Barthes observes that rhetoric is a technique, an art in the classical sense of the word, the art of persuasion. Rhetoric operates as the truth, co-opting an existing denotative system and making it the signifier of a secondary system.
Levi-Strauss, an anthropologist who applied Saussure’s theory to cultural anthropology is another structuralist who influenced Barthes. Levi-Strauss has accepted Saussure’s idea: “Language (langue), on the contrary to speech (language), is a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. As soon as we give language first place among the facts of speech, we introduce a natural order into a mass that lends itself to no other classification the norm of all other manifestations of speech” (29). He goes further by conceptualizing language itself as the production of society.

Like Saussure, Levi-Strauss focuses on the structure of language, and seeks to find the hidden structures that he believes to exist in archetypes. Based on the laws of language underlying the speech, he specifically tries to uncover the underlying substructure of various cultural phenomena such as customs, rites, habits, and gestures- phenomena which themselves said to be intrinsic to the creation of language. He also examines the underlying structure of the myth. In this regard, Levi-Strauss remarks:

Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the story which it tells. Myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at ‘taking off’ from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling. (Adams and Searle 811)

In *Mythologies*, Barthes offers a sense of the subtle potential and ideological impact of myth embedded in popular culture. With the enormous influence
of mass communication, cultural myths have been reified and taken-for-granted in their everyday presence as a mediated form of reality. Semiotics can serve as a tool to deconstruct myths embedded within popular culture.

In his *Mythologies*, Barthes frequently interrogates specific cultural materials in order to expose how bourgeois society asserts its values through them. For example, the portrayal of wine in French society as a robust and healthy habit is a bourgeois ideal that is contradicted by certain realities like that wine can be unhealthy and inebriating. He has found semiotics, useful in these interrogations. Barthes explains that these bourgeois cultural myths are “second-order signs,” or “connotations.” The picture of a full, dark bottle is a signifier that relates to a specific signified: a fermented, alcoholic beverage. But the bourgeoisie relate it to a new signified: the idea of healthy, robust, relaxing experience. Motivations for such manipulations vary, from a desire to sell products to a simple desire to maintain the status quo.

The process of myth analysis lies in articulating the relationship between all aspects of a sign system that constructs meaning around cultural assumptions embedded in the form. The process necessarily begins with the recognition of an ideological objection or an awareness that the sign system carries assumptions that appear at once natural and historical. Myth blends in with a message and denies its own existence through its apparent subordination to the content of the first and second order signifiers. When we become aware of myth, it shifts. We can look at an example of two moments
that shift between watching a play and watching someone in the audience engaged in reading the play. The play constructs an internal narrative, but watching the reader shifts attention away from the story content to the form of play and its relationship to its audience. Myth is related to associated concepts of culture: it refers to an unarticulated chain of associated concepts by which members of a culture understand certain topics. Myths assume a logical form within speech, folklore, stories, ritual and tradition. Myths are, according to Silverstone, “the attempt to identify a basic level of cultural experience, manifested in words and deeds throughout history, and concerned principally with the articulation of the core concerns and preoccupations of their host cultures” (23). Myths represent the perennial concerns and preoccupations of our culture.

In *Mythologies*, Barthes theorizes that myth carries an order of cultural signification where semiotic code is perceived as fact (131). Therefore, assuming a degree of power and authority in order to distinguish myth from connotation, it can be stated that myth appears as natural or universal in its signification: “myths are connotations which have become dominant-hegemonic” (125). There is an already assumed connotative meaning of the sign that seems natural from a particular context of cultural consumption. Thus, myth maintains an influential power through a quality of appearing self-evident.
Barthes’s methods still play an important role in the development of film theory. But it is Christian Metz, one of the giants of French film theory, who is best known for the use of semiology as a method to analyze cinema. In *Film Language*, Metz argues that cinema is structured like a language. Adopting Saussure’s models, Metz makes the distinction between “langue,” a language system, and “language,” a less clearly defined system of recognizable conventions. Metz contends that film cannot be regarded as comprising a “langue,” in the sense of having a strict grammar and syntax equivalent to that of the written or spoken word. Unlike the written word, film’s basic unit, as Metz argues, is the shot, which is neither symbolic nor arbitrary but iconic, and is, therefore, is laden with specific meaning. Metz suggests that film is a language in which each shot used in a sequence works like a unit in a linguistic statement. In his theoretical model, known as the “grandesyntaxmatique,” Metz argues that individual cinematic texts construct their own meaning systems rather than share a unified grammar.

These ideas were developed and expanded by a wide range of theorists, including Raymond Bellour who, in *The Unattainable Text*, has largely supported Metz’s views. Metz’s ideas are controversial and they become the catalyst for the heated debate among the theorists during the 1970s and the 1980s, especially among Left Wing cultural theorists in Britain and the United States. In this regard, Umberto Eco argues in “Articulations of the Cinematic Code,” that the photographic image is arbitrarily constructed, just as the
linguistic code is arbitrary. Stephen Heath challenges Metz’s arguments, suggesting in *Questions of Cinema* that all cinema is concerned with representation and that representation itself is a form of language equivalent to Saussure’s linguistic model of “langue.” In a similar vein, Sam Rohdie takes issue with some of Metz’s key statements while calling for a continued investment in the systematic textual analysis that semiology makes possible.

Metz’ cinesemiotics leans heavily on linguistic models. The enterprise of semiotics arises out of the methods of structural linguistics, formulated by Saussure in the early part of the century. Linguistics has become one of the most rigorous and fruitful sciences of this century. Metz ultimately discards a theoretical model for film based on verbal language, although he still believes that cinesemiotics can learn much from linguistics. His primary reason for rejecting rigid analogies to language is based on his claim that the image, unlike the word, is not a discrete unit that can be reduced into smaller basic units and analyzed. According to him, the image discourse is an open system, and it is not easily codified, with its non-discrete basic units (the images), its intelligibility, its lack of distance between the significate and the signifier. Metz sees the image as being too close an analogue of the thing in the real world; it is not an indication of the thing but the actual “pseudo-presence of the thing.” The mechanical nature of the basic filmic operation (photographic and phonographic duplication) has the consequence of integrating into the final product “chunks of signification whose internal structure remains
afilmic, and which are governed mainly by cultural paradigms” (*Film Language* 18-19). This mimetic notion of the image is the opposite of that held by Umberto Eco, whom Metz cites as responsible for many of his later changes. Eco proposes the rather startling idea that the iconic (photographic) image is, like the verbal sign; it is “completely arbitrary, conventional and unmotivated” (“Articulations of the Cinematic Code” 2). He points out that the object undergoes many transformations when it becomes the object of representation, so the image retains none of the properties of the object represented; still the iconic sign reproduces some of the conditions of perception. Eco analyzes the codes of the image which allow us to perceive and understand it. They include perceptual codes, codes of recognition, of transmission, iconic, iconographic, rhetorical, stylistic, unconscious, and so on.

The difference between Metz’s notion of visual representation and that of Eco’s is a very important one: for Metz, there is little distinction between “inside” the film and “outside” the film. He precludes an analysis of the ways such that a given ideology in the film may be mediated through the codes of visual representation. Metz’s concept of visual representation allows ideology as something existing only at the level of the content and can be easily extracted from the film. The idea that ideology cannot be separated from the cinematic codes which mediate, transform and deform it, can be used to argue against the political efficacy of “popular radical” films like
Costa-Gravas’ *State of Siege*. This film has a “correct” ideology at the level of content but its message must pass through the sieve of bourgeois codes of representation—causal linear narrative, lenses that preserve Renaissance perspective, seemingly unbroken, diegetic reality, and so on, which deflect or even negate the radical intention of the film.

Metz, considers photographic images too “natural” to be subjected to analysis. So he looks to larger units in the film text and decides that the essence of cinema and the units most amenable to study are the large units of the narrative. He says that there is a methodological urgency that favors the study of the narrative film. He attempts to ground this in a rather ideologically biased version of film history. He goes back to the Lumiere brothers’ invention of the camera in 1895 and states that of all the possibilities that cinema could have evolved into (as a means of preserving records, as for use in research and teaching, as a new form of journalism or as a way to keep the memory of dead loved ones), it evolved into a “machine for telling stories... it was a historical and social fact, a fact of civilization.,” and because of this “fact,” the “inner semiological mechanism” of cinema became narrativity. (*Film Language* 18-19)

It is illuminating to contrast Metz’s stance and theory with that of Umberto Eco’s. Eco sees semiology as a tool for revolutionary activity and talks about “semiotic guerilla warfare.” If you cannot seize or change the institutions of production, you can at least change the way they are perceived.
The comparison of these two theoreticians is a good argument against the ideology that maintains that a “political” analysis is always and necessarily a reduction of the aesthetic object under study.

A language, by definition, is a semiotic process through which a thought may be conveyed, but a language system (or linguistic system) enables a response to that thought using the degrees and kinds of signs and signifiers produced by the language. Film uses not only words but also different kinds of shots, angles and speeds. Therefore, the audience can react to a film’s semantic intent, but cannot address its concerns regarding the film in the same language that the film used to convey its argument. For the same reason, Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis advance Christian Metz’s argument that while the means by which film expresses itself to its audience constitute a language, it cannot constitute a linguistic system. In this regard, Metz argues:

…one might call ‘language’…any unity defined in terms of its matter of expression…Literary language, in this sense, is the set of messages whose matter of expression is writing; cinematic language is the set of messages whose matter of expression consists of five tracks or channels: moving photographic image, recorded phonetic sound, recorded noises, recorded musical sound, and writing…Thus cinema is a language in the sense that
it is a ‘technico-sensorial unity’ graspable in perceptual experience. (Stam 37)

The language of cinema, as a result, cannot be answered or analysed by the language of literature because the two systems use different modes of expression. In support of this point, Raymond Bellour argues that film is the ‘Unattainable Text’:

The film-text, unlike the literary text, is not ‘quotable.’ Whereas literature and literary criticism share the same medium – words – film and film analysis do not. While the film medium entails five tracks – image, dialogue, noise, music, written materials – the analysis of the film consists of a single track – words. Critical language is therefore inadequate to its object; the film always escapes the language that attempts to constitute it.

(Stam 56)

In order to appropriately respond to a film, one would have to generate a film of his or her own, using the same methods employed by the director in a manner dialogic to the film being addressed. But this is problematic for most of the viewing audience. In spite of our inability to respond to a film in its language through natural means of discourse, understanding the nature of film semiotics makes us critically aware of the language being used. This results in an enhanced understanding of the way in which film is representative of the cultural and counter-cultural values.
The question which orients Metz’s works is whether the cinema is Langue (language system) or Language (language). His well-known conclusion is that the cinema is not a language system but that it is a language. His argument is that “langue is a system of signs intended for two-way communication, while the cinema allows only for deferred communication” (Stam 34). In contemporary context, this assertion need be reviewed because it does not allow for interactive cinema or Internet conference calling where role play is being done by either party- either of which can be technically considered film-making, especially if the parts of dialogue and imagery are manipulated to produce a contrived result. Metz further argues that cinema is not a language system because “it lacks the equivalent of the arbitrary linguistic sign,” replacing it instead with a “motivated” sign. So, the relationship between signifier and signified differs from literature to film (Stam 35). Metz argues against the idea that the camera(cinematic shot is like the word while the sequence is like the sentence. He states as evidence that “(1) shots are infinite in number…(2) shots are the creations of the film-maker…(3) the shot provides an inordinate amount of information…(4) the shot is an actualized unit (meaning that it generates an exact representation of its intended meaning)… (5) shots, unlike words, do not gain meaning by paradigmatic contrast with other shots that might have occurred in the same place on the syntagmatic chain” (Stam 35-36). Also, cinema “does not constitute a language widely available as a code;” for, while all speakers of English can produce English, not all can produce
the talent, training and access produced by filmic utterances (Stam 35). Again, this would have to be qualified in respect to advances in technology that put Internet cameras on everyone’s desktops or enabled lightweight camcorders to be used in independent film-making efforts like *The Blair Witch Project*. Stam argues further that language and film are both discursive “through paradigmatic and syntagmatic operations” (Stam 37).

By the mid 1980s, the version of semiology that Metz developed increasingly lost favour and became largely replaced in film studies debates by an interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis. This shift is due to a range of factors, including the waning interest in the radical leftist politics espoused by most structuralist thinkers and the emerging interest especially among feminist academics within film studies or in psychoanalysis as a theoretical paradigm. Indeed, Metz himself moved away from his investment in semiology to emphasize psychoanalysis during the mid1970s.

While Saussure is hailed as the founder of semiotics, semiotics has become increasingly less Saussurean. Teresa de Lauretis describes the movement away from structuralist semiotics which began in the 1970s:

In the last decade or so, semiotics has undergone a shift of its theoretical gears: a shift away from the classification of sign systems - their basic units, their levels of structural organization - and towards the exploration of the modes of production of signs and meanings, the ways in which systems and codes
are used, transformed or transgressed in social practice. While formerly the emphasis was on studying sign systems (language, literature, cinema, architecture, music, etc.), conceived of as mechanisms that generate messages, what is now being examined is the work performed through them. It is this work or activity which constitutes and/or transforms the codes, at the same time as it constitutes and transforms the individuals using the codes, performing the work; the individuals who are, therefore, the subjects of semiosis. (167)

The cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard also argues that postmodern culture with its rich, exotic media is a world of signs that have made a fundamental break from reality. Our contemporary mass culture experiences a world of simulation having lost the capacity to comprehend an unmediated world. Baudrillard has coined the term simulacra to describe a system of objects in a consumer society distinguished by the existence of multiple copies with no original (166). We experience manufactured realities: carefully edited war footage, meaningless acts of terrorism, and the destruction of cultural values.

In an age of corporate consolidation where popular culture is influenced by an elite few with very powerful voices, semiotic analysis is deemed essential for information consumers. Semiotics informs us about a text, its underlying assumptions and its various dimensions of interpretation. Semiotics offers us a lens into human communication. It sharpens
the consumer’s own consciousness surrounding a given text. It informs us about the cultural structures and human motivations that underlie perceptual representations. It rejects the possibility that we can represent the world in a neutral fashion. It unmasksthe deep-seated rhetorical forms and underlying codes that fundamentally shape our realities. Semiotic analysis is a critical skill for media literacy in a postmodern world.