

INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNICATION

Course Book 3: Communication and the Production of Meaning.

Edited by Pieter J Fourie

1996. Cape Town: Juta

239 pages, soft cover, illustrated, R87.

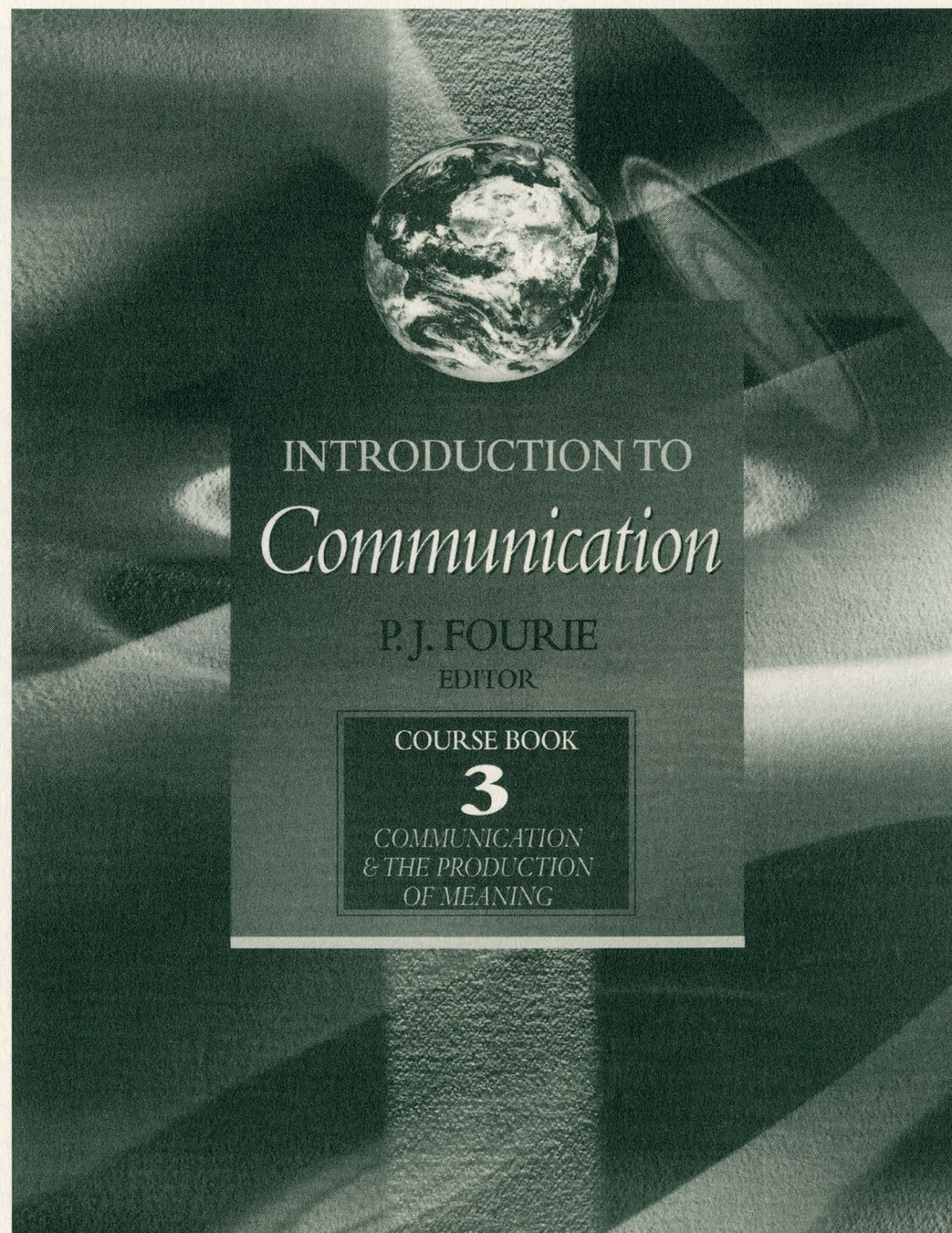
ISBN 0 7021 3458 9

Reviewed by Retha van Niekerk

The study of what gives meaning has long been the focus of disciplines such as philosophy, theology, psychology, anthropology, etc. In this introductory communication course book, semiotics forms the background to a wide ranging discussion of what constitutes meaning and how it is produced. The book is part of a series of communication course books by Unisa lecturers and this particular book is directed at second year students in communication.

The course book is divided into six units with each unit exploring a different facet of the production of meaning. In the discussions of signs, codes, and cultural representations, the reader is efficiently guided through the sometimes murky waters of structuralism, post-structuralism, discourse analysis and cultural studies.

In the first unit, semiotics as the science of signs is introduced and the interaction between signs, sign systems, codes and meaning explained. Semiotics provides one with the concepts and descriptions of the various ways in which meanings are conveyed through language, images, gestures, the arts, the media, fashion, architecture and so on. In the first part of the unit, the components in the communication process are discussed, namely message and code, the communicator and the recipient, medium and context, to show how these components contribute to the conveyance of meaning. In the latter



part of the unit, structuralism as the origin of modern and postmodern semiotics is examined.

The second unit is a theoretically dense section, but as it deals with the nature of meaning, it forms the central tenet around which the book is built. The departure point is the sign as the smallest element of meaning. Attention is paid to the component of a sign, the types of signs, and the functions of signs. Codes and their characteristics form the next part of the discussion. In an interesting application of semiotic analysis, we are asked to explore the semiotic meanings of codes such as styles of dress, architecture, media, food and furniture. The different kinds of meaning (denotation, connotation and ideological), and a discussion of the different forms of media criticism conclude the section.

In unit three, the attention shifts to language as text and discourse. The structure and functions of language form the basis of the initial discussion. Discourse as a particular form of social activity which involves the decoding and interpretation of texts, and the role of texts in a social context is examined. The unit concludes with an example of discourse analysis based on a media article.

The use of South African photographs to illustrate nonverbal communication in unit four adds considerably to the understanding of the various codes used in pictorial communication. The unit begins with a description of the codes used in interpersonal communication such as kinesics, proxemics, and artefacts. The discussion is then extended to the analysis of codes used in photographs. Lighting, colour, field forces and depth and volume are discussed as codes of content while area orientation, angles, camera shots and camera viewpoint are discussed as codes of form. Movement and auditory codes as specific to television and film are then explored, and the unit ends with a consideration of the link between cultural values and the meanings ascribed to nonverbal communication.

In unit five the media as symbolic form and text is discussed and a good guided tour through structuralist and post-structuralist theory is provided. The theoretical contributions

of writers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard are reviewed and the value of concepts such as binary oppositions, social myths and stereotypes in media text analysis assessed.

Postmodernism is an overused phrase for the 'anything goes' syndrome and it is refreshing to read a well-written and understandable overview of what the term refers to. The subsequent discussion of public communication is particularly relevant and includes an exploration of the role of television as the dominant form of communication and producer of meaning in the late twentieth century.

The last unit analyses forms of social and cultural expression such as religion, architecture, sport, theatre and fashion as representations of culture and carriers of meaning. An examination of the concepts of culture and ideology and the cultural studies approach to communication concludes this section.

This is a valuable book for all artists and designers involved in the use of signs and codes because of the lucid way in which difficult theoretical concepts are explained and applied. Each theoretical discussion is followed by a list of activities which ensures the interactive involvement of the reader. The lack of visual illustrations in some of the units may seem a bit unfriendly to anyone used to other books on communication and meaning, but the structured lay-out and clear typography make the book easy to read.

The interaction between signs, symbols and meaning is fascinating and this book provides both students and the general reader with a solid theoretical background to further explore his/her own contribution to the production of meaning. Highly recommended.

AS LONG AS IT'S PINK.

The Sexual Politics of Taste

by Penny Sparke

1995 London: Pandora

Softcover, 275 pp, illustrated, R112.

ISBN 0 04 440923 0

Reviewed by Jeanne van Eeden

Design historian Penny Sparke joins the ranks of those authors exploring the influence of gender role formation on culture in *As Long as it's Pink. The Sexual Politics of Taste*. Sparke's approach is an ideological deconstruction of 'feminine' taste and its antithetical relationship with 'masculine' Modernism from Victorian times to the present. She demonstrates that feminine taste has customarily been associated with conservatism, domesticity and consumption in the private sphere, whereas male taste has been equated with progress, mainstream culture and mass production in the public sphere. According to Sparke the history of taste and objects reveals that a tension ensued between gendered values, and influenced the ways in which men and women used and related to everyday objects.

Sparke sets out to illustrate that in the last 150 years feminine taste, which she defines as stereotypical 'aesthetic preferences that we all associate with frills and furbelows, "unnecessary" display and ornamentation, and an "excess" of gilt and glitter' (p 15), has been marginalised in favour of masculine taste. To substantiate her argument Sparke highlights the constant criticism and denigration of feminine taste by influential (male) critics. Hence, according to Sparke: