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Professor Peters

Semiotics

### The Golden “M”

Semiotics is the study of signs, and it is extremely helpful in reaching new insights about any object. According to Professor Peters, “Signs, once analyzed semiotically, reveal (potentially endless) hidden meanings.” In this essay, I will focus on Charles Peirce’s theory of semiotics. I will explore his theory of the sign, object, and interpretant in order to discuss how the McDonald’s “M” logo has much more meaning behind it than simply standing for the “M” in McDonald’s.

Charles Peirce was an American philosopher who developed a theory of semiotics. He wrote extensively about the topic, and according to Paul Cobley and Litza Jansz, authors of *Introducing Semiotics*, “Initially, Peirce posited 10 sign types, which he then revised in order to theorize 66 signs, before eventually coming up with the troublesome figure of 59,049” (30). This essay will only examine 3 of these sign types, though it could go much deeper with the number of signs that Peirce theorized. One of these is the sign. According to the article “Peirce’s Theory of Signs” from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “We can think of the sign as the signifier, for example, a written word, an utterance, smoke as a sign for fire etc.” Another way to explain this according to Professor Peters is that the sign is, “The form of the symbol.” In this paper, the sign to be examined is the “M” logo for McDonald’s. The “M” logo is the form of the symbol for McDonald’s. When people see the golden “M” on a billboard, a fries container, or perched on top of a metal pole, they know it stands for McDonald’s. The second sign type of

Peirce's that will be discussed is the object. According to the article "Peirce's Theory of Signs" from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "The object, on the other hand, is best thought of as whatever is signified, for example, the object to which the written or uttered word attaches, or the fire signified by the smoke." Another way of saying this, according to Professor Peters is that the object is, "That to which the sign refers." In the case of McDonald's, this would be the "M" represented materially. For example, this could include the "M" on a McDonald's fries container, or the "M" perched on top of a metal pole that can be seen from highways. The third sign type of Peirce's that will be discussed is the interpretant. According to the article "Peirce's Theory of Signs" from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "The interpretant... is best thought of as the understanding that we have of the sign/object relation" and "The idea is that the interpretant provides a translation of the sign, allowing us a more complex understanding of the sign's object." Another way of explaining this, according to Paul Cobley and Litza Jansz, is, "Remember: we said that the interpretant was like a further sign or 'sign in the mind'" (25). When thinking about the McDonald's "M", this essay will discuss what the "M" actually means and represents. This will become clear as the sign and the object are explored further.

When examining McDonald's through Peirce's sign, many new insights are revealed. First there is the obvious conclusion that the "M" logo stands for the "M" in McDonald's. But it goes much further than this. An interesting thing about the "M" logo is that the "M" is curved, so that it looks like two arches put together. Throughout history, arches have had a lot of symbolism. One example of arches in history are triumphal arches. According to Naomi Meiri-Dann in her article "Triumphal Arches in the Public Sphere in Israel—Between Temporary Reality and Fantasy," "Roman triumphal arches were created from the outset to be a symbol. At first, temporary arches were usually built along the route where regiments returning from battle

would march. At a later stage, they were replaced by permanent stone arches” (78). Triumphal arches were built as a way to welcome soldiers as they arrived home from battle and to celebrate the victories achieved by the soldiers. Another example of a prominent arch that still stands today is the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. The symbolism appears in the name. The St. Louis Arch is a gateway for people. According to the article “Gateway Arch” from *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “The strong elegant shape of the arch represents a door to the western part of the country.” The Gateway Arch is meant to be a welcoming symbol for people new to the Midwest. Along with this, the Gateway Arch is massive, measuring 630 feet tall, which means it can be seen from multiple different points throughout the city of St. Louis.

This leads to the object part of Peirce’s theory. The object of the McDonald’s “M” logo is the materiality of it. When someone is driving on the highway or down a busy street, and that person sees the McDonald’s “M” perched on top of a tall metal pole, he knows that a McDonald’s restaurant is nearby. This was the purpose of the design. According to Jonathan Glancey, discussing one of the founders of McDonald’s in his article “The Strange Story of the World’s Most Famous Logo,” “Dick had sketched out two half circles he thought would look good at either end of the structure, catching the eyes of motorists and their hungry families.” However, according to Glancey, this design was slightly changed by architect Stanley Clark Meston, who “turned Dick’s half circles into a pair of striking 25ft high tapered and neon-lit ‘golden sheet’ metal parabolas.” These parabolas eventually turned into the “M” logo everyone knows today. At the time, however, they did the same work as the “M” logo. They were tall and bright, which made them visible to people from a distance. The McDonald’s arches, in any form, attract people to the restaurant.

Now what does this all mean for the McDonald's "M"? This is where Peirce's interpretant comes into play. As with the Roman triumphal arches, the McDonald's arches act as a welcome home for people. Because of the nature of arches, when people see the twin golden arches of McDonald's, they feel a sense of happiness. They know that they are near a familiar and comfortable place that they will always be welcomed into. While McDonald's customers may not be coming back from war, they could be having a good day or a bad one. No matter what kind of circumstance customers are in, McDonald's is a place for people to relax and feel welcomed. Also, like the Gateway Arch is a symbol of welcome to people coming to the Midwest for the first time, the McDonald's arches are welcoming to people no matter what city they are in. There are McDonald's all over the world, and when people find themselves in new and unfamiliar places, they can feel welcomed by the familiar golden "M" perched high above them. The Gateway Arch also acts as a door, as does the McDonald's arches. When someone walks into a McDonald's, he walks from the reality of the outside world into a place that, according Jonathan Glancey, "Has certainly played on tens of millions of people's inner child, as well as children themselves." The golden "M" is a door to a world different from the one everyone lives in. It's a place that welcomes adults and children with its bright colors and clown mascot.

This essay only scratches the surface of what the McDonald's "M" logo symbolizes, but it reveals insights that were unclear before. Aside from the fact that the "M" is the shape of two arches, many other aspects of it could be analyzed symbolically to reveal much more about the nature of the logo. With Peirce's theory of semiotics, it was possible to dive deeper into the meaning of the logo and uncover new insights about what the golden "M" symbolizes.

# Works Cited

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