

Chapter 2

Semiotics of Films

Objectives: The objective of this chapter is to familiarize the students with the grammar of films and to enable them to read the signs and codes of films.

Keywords: sign, codes, semiotics, connotation, denotation

What is semiotics?

The word 'semiotic' is derived from 'sēmeion', the Greek word for sign. The modern disciplines of semiotics are invented by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), later published as *Course in General Linguistics* (1906-1911). Essentially, semiotics is the study of signs. Filmmaking is choosing the precise images for the particular story, and every picture tells a story. It is noteworthy what can be read from a single image. For Peirce, there were multiple types of sign, and three main types are worth discussion. The icon, or a sign which is similar to what it signifies, the index, which is affected by what it represents, and the symbol, a sign that is connected to what it signifies by a law or convention.

How does a film use signs?

Film is the art of visual abbreviation. Cinema is synesthetic as it arouses senses. Roland Barthes, the French semiotician, states in *Mythologies*, "trivial aspects of everyday life can be filled with meaning", and this includes even a character's hairstyle.

The basic tenet of semiotics is that a sign has two parts: the physical, or the sign-as-object and the psychological, or the sign as concept. Filmmakers show and we understand visual signs such as smiles, scars, guns, badges, hairstyle etc. At this point, an important term you should be familiar with is synecdoche, that is, relationship of a part to a whole (the crown represents the king or the queen, the Oval office stands for the President, the badge symbolizes law and order). It is the little things that fill our everyday lives with meaning, and the same holds true for films. Consider Javier Bardem's hairstyle in *No Country for Old Men* (2007). Does it say anything about his character? Film images are signs, look at any film poster and you will notice how posters and publicity materials send signals that tell you about the genre of the film.

A key field of study in semiotics relates to the text (literature, film, or even a piece of music). Films construct meaning through signs. Sign has two parts: Signifier/signified. **Signifier** is the physical part, or the tangible thing we see/hear. It is what we perceive. **Signified** is the psychological part, the reaction to the object, the

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