

# **Understanding the Semiotics of The Cinema: How Cinemaphotographers Use Semiotic Concepts and Techniques to Instill a Message or Feeling Within its Viewers**

## **Abstract**

Cinematographers have been using their films as mediums to send their audience a message, or inflict a certain emotion or feeling within them, since the form of art and expression was first developed. Semiotics is the study of sign, sign manipulations, and the interpretation or meaning that individuals assign to each. By dissecting film from a semiotic perspective, one will be able to begin to understand how a motion picture can be influenced by an individual's high-level cognitive processes and in turn shape their computational representations. We examine many concepts and theories developed by well renowned semioticians including Ferdinand de Saussure, C.S. Peirce, Christian Metz, Susanne Langer and Roland Barthes. We discuss in depth just how these well-known theories have shed a light on the effects of the cinema, while also diving into the many alternative perspectives one can take when approaching this problem.

## **Introduction**

Since the art of creating film was first established, it has been used as a medium for conveying information to the spectators in attendance in a meaningful way. Cinematography in general terms is "the art and technology of motion-picture photography" (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011). Cinemaphotography involves more than one stagnant image, it is a collection of many images composed into a sequence, with outside variables and systems providing structure and constraints to the sequence of images and objects, in a set way. There are many aspects, as previously stated, in the production of a film, and every aspect adds to the overall meaning that is attached to the end product shown at a premier. Semiotics is a well-known field of study within the cognitive sciences and at its most basic level, "semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their meanings and interpretations" (Horton, 2017). Signs are all around us and the way in which individuals interpret symbols, infers a lot about the cognitive processes and computational representations within the individual. With that being said, this paper argues that the approaches and techniques used by filmmakers to portray a certain meaning, influence the mental processes within the individuals in the audience watching.

There are many high-level mental processes and computational representations that occur within the individual sitting in a theater observing a film. These mental processes and computational representations are shaped by the meaning derived from signs hidden within a film. In film, signs can be seen as individual images within a frame, the sounds, and colors used on a set, even the color of the main character's cape can be seen as a sign and hold importance to a film's message and meaning being conveyed. Any aspect of a film can be seen as a sign and portray meaning to the viewer watching, and these signs have been compiled by the producer in a set way to serve a set purpose. In Peter Wollen's novel *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Wollen dives into this very concept by showing a great deal of meaning that one can derive through the images of a film:

“Yet our experience of cinema suggests that great complexity of meaning can be expressed through images. Thus, to take an obvious example, the most trivial and banal book can be made into an extremely interesting and, to all appearances, significant film; reading a screenplay is usually a barren and arid experience, intellectually as well as emotionally. The implication of this is that it is not only systems exclusively 'grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign' which are expressive and meaningful. 'Natural signs' cannot be so readily dismissed as Saussure imagined.” (P.120)

Just as a novel filled with words can strike the reader with such vivid representations and make them think and feel a certain way, a film does through the use of imagery and sounds used. Except with more stimulating aspects to a film over a novel, the audience of a film is more immersed because they can find a relationship with the film that speaks to many of their sensory systems. Often an individual can become so involved and invested in a film that they can imagine themselves within the film as if they were cast to play the lead role. There are many factors that allow individuals to derive meaning from film and more importantly derive the meaning intended by the film creator. To again reference Peter Wollen's novel *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Wollen makes clear the ways in which filmmakers need to keep up with the changes of society to ensure their film is concurrent within the audience's culture.

“The study of film must keep pace with and be responsive to changes and developments in the study of other media, other arts, other modes of communication and expression. For much too long film aesthetics and film criticism, in the Anglo-Saxon countries at least, have been privileged zones, private reserves in which thought has developed along

its own lines, haphazardly, irrespective of what goes on in the larger realm of ideas.

Writers about the cinema have felt free to talk about film language as if linguistics did not exist and to discuss Eisenstein's theory of montage in blissful ignorance of the Marxist concept of dialectic.” (P. 17)

This idea can be found in any form of art, if your art does not reflect the society or culture the observer is experienced or has experienced, they will most likely struggle to derive the intended meaning or message. Filmmakers rely partially on the fact that most humans have similar enough experiences due to being raised in similar societies. Even though each experience one has is subjective, being a part of the same or similar culture can allow the subjective experience of two individuals to be similar. This also means that filmmakers need to keep up with the development and changes in society. Keeping up with these changes can help ensure a cinematographer that the intended meaning the audience derives from their film is coherent and understood in the context of the culture that surrounds the audience. If a filmmaker can keep up with cultural values, it allows the audience to get more invested in the plot and connect with the characters because there is an “impression of reality being experienced by the spectator” (Metz, 1991). This idea is very prominent in the work done by Christian Metz, a film theorist and semiotician, whose theories and concepts we will more revisit later in the paper. In Metz's novel *Film language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, he touches on this very idea of a film appealing to all the senses of the spectator, influencing the perspective in which they view the film.

“One of the most important of the many problems in film theory is that of the impression of reality experienced by the spectator. Films give us the feeling that we are witnessing an almost real spectacle—to a much greater extent, as Albert Laffay has noted, than does a novel, a play, or a figurative painting \* Films release a mechanism of affective and perceptual participation in the spectator (one is almost never totally bored by a movie). They spontaneously appeal to his sense of belief—never, of course, entirely, but more intensely than do the other arts, and occasionally films are, even in the absolute, very convincing. They speak to us with the accents of true evidence, using the argument that “It is so.” With ease they make the kind of statements a linguist would call fully assertive and which, moreover, are usually taken at face value.” (P.4)

Metz makes apparent how wonderful of an experience a film can create for the audience, and is something that no other form of art does justice like a motion picture. The idea that “films

release a mechanism of affective and perceptual participation in the spectator” is what allows filmmakers to influence the mental processes and representations within its viewers. All the aspects that lock the spectator in, keeping them on the edge of their seat and unaware of any surroundings because it feels as if they have stepped into a new reality, are designed in a particular way by the producer. The way in which this all occurs is what we will be discussing throughout the sections following the introduction.

Succeeding this paper's introduction, there are four sections dedicated to understanding some of the foundational concepts and theories developed by well-known semioticians in their field. Many of the semioticians also specialize in a variety of other related fields including linguistics, psychology, and philosophy, allowing this problem to be viewed from multiple perspectives. It will be first helpful to discuss the foundational work of Ferdinand de Saussure and C.S. Peirce. These two semioticians can be seen as setting the stage for semiotics as it was an emerging and unheard field in their time. De Saussure can be seen to have a linguistic twist to his semiotic theories and provides much insight into how language and the manipulation of signs are interconnected. Peirce's semiotic foundational work will make clear the relationship between signifier and signified. Pierce's theories also provide those new to semiotics, a perspective of looking at the world by suggesting that humans only view the world through the relationships of signs. The other three sections will feature work from Christian Metz, Roland Barthes, and Susanne Langer, each of these semioticians helping to provide insight into the problem under question. Following those four sections, we will dive deeper into important concepts that have been already introduced when discussing the works of known semioticians. These concepts are split up between three sections and each section can be seen as related to one another. The first of the three sections will break down the functionality of the camera and a film's frame, exposing the reader to the ways in which their functions are similar to cognitive processes and representations produced in the human brain. Next, we will bring to light the importance of categorization and the role of syntagmas in the development of film and the computational representations within humans. After we will resurface the ideas of connotation and denotation, as well as discourse, and discuss the different usage among scholars in the field. Before concluding the paper, we have included a section dedicated to talking about different approaches to this problem, as well as alternative arguments that contradict the approach in which we took when trying to solve this problem. The conclusion features a summary of the intended

significance of this research, as well as in the field of semiotics. At the end of the conclusion, we have included further questions one could ask to extend this research down the road, opening up our community of researchers to new horizons and ways of thinking.

In this paper, we look to understand how concepts and theories in the field of semiotics are being used by film makers to influence the spectators in the audience. We bring to light many different semiotic techniques developed over the years and show how they are used to affect the meaning one derives from film. This paper argues that the techniques and approaches used by filmmakers to inflict a particular message or emotion within its audience, influence their high-level cognitive processes, and shapes their computational representations.

### **Foundational Concepts**

Discuss foundational concepts and theories within the field of semiotics. De Saussure was one of the foundational semioticians in the field, with his approach featuring elements of linguistics including the semantics and syntax of language. Tie in ideas of the well-known cognitive linguist Noam Chomsky. Discuss again syntax and semantics of language and how a universal grammar ties in with the semiotics of the cinema. Explain Peirce's signified and signifier relationship. The difference between symbol, icon and index, including examples of each to allow the reader to begin to understand the basics of the field of semiotics.

### **Christian Metz and Film Theory**

Examine the history of film theory and the foundational concepts that have developed in the field, make sure to some of the ideas discussed in Deleuze's novels. Examine how film theory came about and how it has transitioned to take in many interdisciplinary approaches. State who Christian Metz was and his semiotic approaches to examining film. Introduce the idea of syntagma's, imagery, connotation, and denotation.

### **Susanne Langer**

Explain who Susanne Langer was and her approach to semiotics and art. Discuss Langer's approach to understanding art, first examining a paintings individual aspects and then the whole, understanding how each piece is mapped to one other to form the whole. Color, lighting, shading, object placement, setting, etc. all crucial aspects of art and each need to be examined and discussed with regards to cinemaphotography and semiotics.

## **Roland Barthes**

Explain the approach Roland Barthes takes when developing his semiotic theories and ideology. Discuss the semiotics of advertisements and the similar semiotic techniques used in both advertisements and film. Decipher the difference between a coded and non-coded message, while including examples of both. End by re iterating the ideas of connotation, denotation and discourse.

## **The Camera and Frame**

Explain the function of the camera and the frame, and how each are used in cinemaphotography. Explain how the function of a camera is similar in functionality to the human brain while processing the many aspects of a film. Introduce the idea of syntagma's and compare and contrast the concept to the functionality of a films frame.

## **Syntagma, Categorization, and Conceptual Metaphors**

Start by explaining what categorization is and how it is an important concept with regard to cognitive science and human cognition/perception. Explain more in depth the idea of syntagma's and how they relate to the studied of language. End by relating the concept of syntagma's to other aspects of everyday life like art and the cinema.

## **Diegetic and Non-Diegetic Sounds**

Explain the concept of diegetic sounds and how it is used to affect the plot the audience is invested in, while including examples of the concept in well-known films. Explain the concept of non-diegetic sounds and how they are used set a mood or feeling within the audience, while including examples of the concept in well-known films.

## **Connotations, Denotations, and Discourse**

Explain the concepts of connotations and denotation with regards to Metz semiotics approach, including examples that the reader can relate to. Talk about how the concepts relate to the idea of discourse and the structure of language previously mentioned with regard to De Saussure's semiotic approach. Tie back in Syntagma's and the semantics of language. Explain Metz vs. Barthes concepts of connotation and denotation.

## **Other Approaches and Ways of Thinking**

State some of the many other approaches besides the semiotic one I took when examining how a film influences its viewers. Restate the similarities between the fields of semiotics and linguistics and dive deeper into the similarities and differences that can be seen between the fields. Explain how one could look at this problem from a HCI perspective and tie in ideas from Norman. Discuss contradictory arguments to the problem.

## **Conclusion**

Restate the purpose of the research and the importance this research has to the reader. Discuss alternative questions the can further expand this research in the future. Make clear how aspects of semiotics are seen all over and shape our everyday lives.

## **References**

- Horton, H. (2017, April 21). The Symbiotic Relationship Between Semiotics and Cinema. Retrieved September 14, 2020, from <https://filmschoolrejects.com/the-symbiotic-relationship-between-semiotics-and-cinema-c28c349a5799/>
- Metz, C. (1991). *Film language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2020, May 21). "Semiotics." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2011, Nov. 25). "Cinematography." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.
- Wollen, P. (1972). *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Univ. Press.
- Wilson, R., & Foglia, L. (2015, December 08). Embodied Cognition. Retrieved October 01, 2020, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/embodied-cognition/>