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

Abstract

Cinematographers have been using their films as mediums to send their audience a message, or illicit 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 cinemaphotographer 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. 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 syntagma's 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 illicit a particular message or emotion within its audience, influence their high-level cognitive processes, and shapes their computational representations.

Foundational Semiotic Concepts and Ideology (Introduce basic semiotic theories)

¶ Discuss what the field of Semiotics is referencing the Britannica and Wollen.

¶ Introduce Ferdinand de Saussure and his semiotic Ideology.

¶ Saussure's approach featuring elements of linguistics including the semantics and syntax of language.

¶ Explain how Saussure's semiotic approach can be seen similar to Noam Chomsky's linguistic work using Britannica as a reference.

¶ Relate the idea of the universal grammar and generative grammar.

¶ Introduce C.S Peirce and his semiotic Ideology, referencing Horton and Britannica.

¶ Emphasize the relationship between the signified and the signifier, referencing Deleuze Cinema 2.

¶ Explain concept of the Icon and provide an example from everyday life and the Cinema, referencing Horton.

¶ Explain concept of the Index and provide an example from everyday life and the Cinema, referencing Horton.

¶ Explain concept of the Symbol and provide an example from everyday life and the Cinema, referencing Horton.

Christian Metz and Film Theory (Introduce film theory and film semiotics)

¶ Introduce and explain the field of film studies referencing *Film Language.*

¶ Discuss foundational concepts found in the field of film studies referencing both Cinema 1 and Cinema 2 by Deleuze.

¶ Examine how film theory came about and how it has transitioned to take in many interdisciplinary approaches.

¶ Introduce Christian Metz and his semiotic Ideology, making reference to Film Language.

¶ Explain the idea of the syntagma referencing Film Language.

¶ Explain more in depth the idea of syntagma's and how they relate to the studied of language.

¶ Relate the concept of syntagma's to other aspects of everyday life like art and the cinema.

¶ Explain the idea of Connotations referencing Yacavone.

¶ Explain the idea of Denotations referencing Yacavone.

¶ Explain the idea of the Imagery Signifier referencing *Imagery Signifier*.

Susanne Langer: Art and Expression (Show how art/images have meaning and used in film)

¶ Explain who Susanne Langer was and her approach to semiotics and art/expression (*Feeling and Form).*

¶ Discuss Langer's approach to understanding art as, first examining a paintings individual aspects and then the whole, refencing *Feeling and Form.*

¶ Allow the reader to understand how each piece or aspect is mapped to one other to form the whole.

¶ Talk about the aspect of color in art and how it adds meaning to any form of art.

¶ Talk about the aspect of lighting in art and how it adds meaning to any form of art.

¶ Talk about the aspect of shading in art and how it adds meaning to any form of art.

¶ Talk about the aspect of object placement in art and how it adds meaning to any form of art.

¶ Talk about the aspect of setting in art and how it adds meaning to any form of art, referencing *Feeling and Form*.

¶ all crucial aspects of art and each need to be examined and discussed with regards to cinemaphotography and semiotics.

Roland Barthes and The Coded Message (Explain the semiotics of ads and relate film studies)

¶ Explain the approach Roland Barthes takes when developing his semiotic theories and ideology. (Classics of semiotics)

¶ Introduce the semiotics of advertisements referencing Roland Barthes work.

¶Discuss the similar semiotic techniques used in both advertisements and film.

¶ Talk about the concept of the coded message in advertisements and then in film.

¶ Describe an example of a coded message in an advertisement.

¶ Talk about the concept of the non-coded message in advertisements and then in film.

¶ Describe an example of a non-coded message in an advertisement.

¶ End by re iterating the ideas of connotation, denotation and discourse and explain how these concepts relate to the work done by Metz. (Signs and meaning in the cinema)

The Camera and The Frame (Method of deriving meaning)

¶ Explain the function of the frame in film theory using Deleuze as a refence.

¶ Introduce the concept of a syntagma referencing work done by Metz

¶ Compare the concept of Syntagma to that of a films frame or set of frames.

¶ Explain the function of the Camera in film theory using Deleuze as a refence.

¶ talk about how the human brain functions similar to that of a camera as it processes, interprets, and represents film.

Embodiment, Categorization, and Conceptual Metaphors (Method of deriving meaning)

¶ Explain what Embodied Cognition is, referencing Lakoff.

¶ Preface why you wanted to introduce embodied cognition and explain how it will be necessary to understand when discussing the next concepts.

¶ Explain the concept of categorization referencing the work done by Langer and Lakoff (Women, Fire and Dangerous Things).

¶ Explain the importance of categorization to high-level cognitive processes like cognition and perception.

¶ Explain the importance of categorization to computational representations.

¶ Explain the concept of conceptual metaphors referencing the work done by Lakoff and Johnson (The Journal of Philosophy).

¶ Explain how meaning is derived with regards to a conceptual metaphor.

¶ Talk about how conceptual metaphors rely on categorization and more specifically categorization within the mind.

¶ Tie back in the concept of syntagma's discussed in the section for Metz

Diegetic and Non-Diegetic Sounds (Method of deriving meaning)

¶ Explain the concept of Diegetic Sounds being sounds that affect the actual plot of the movie and often involve main characters of a film.

¶ Provide an example of Diegetic Sounds in well-known films.

¶ Explain the concept of Non-Diegetic Sounds as eliciting a certain feeling or mood within the audience in attendance.

¶ Provide an example of Non-Diegetic Sounds in well-known films.

¶ Talk about how the concepts of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds are related to Langer's ideology of examining all aspects of art for individual meaning.

Connotations, Denotations, and Discourse (Method of deriving meaning)

¶ Explain Christian Metz concept of connotation and how it relates to semiotics and film studies, making reference to Yacavone's work.

¶ Explain Christian Metz concept of connotation and how it relates to semiotics and film studies, making reference to Yacavone's work.

¶ Reiterate the concept of discourse expressed in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure.

¶ Compare the concept of discourse to foundational concepts of the field of linguistics.

¶ Tie back in Syntagma's and the semantics of language when diving into the concept of discourse in film and language.

¶ Explain Metz vs. Barthes concepts of connotation and denotation, referencing Yacavone, Britannica and *Classics of Semiotics.*

Other Approaches and Ways of Thinking

¶ Explain how the approach we took examining this problem is not the only way of looking at it.

¶ Restate the similarities between the fields of semiotics and linguistics.

¶ Make clear how one could look at this problem from a linguistic perspective.

¶ Explain how one could look at this problem from a HCI perspective, referencing Normans Design of Everyday Things.

¶ Dive into contradictory arguments to paper.

¶ Counter each contradictory arguments that could be through off when conducting this research.

Conclusion

¶ Restate purpose of the research.

¶ Discuss other considerations and questions that could further this research in the future.

¶ Make clear how semiotics can be seen in our everyday lives

¶ Wrap up paper and thank the reader.

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