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 signs and codes of films.

Key words: sign, codes, semiotics, connotation, denotation

What is semiotics?

The word ‘semiotic’ is derived from ‘semeion’, 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 mental picture a signifier evokes; the internal response to the signifier;
Signified could mean different things to different people. The signifier is the vehicle and the signified meaning. The key aspect is that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Let's consider a scenario where a man gives a woman a red rose. In most cultures this signifies romance or passion though Gertrude Stein famously declared, “A rose is a rose is a rose.” Thus, in *American Beauty*, (2000) Lester Burnham fantasizes about his teenage daughter’s friend Angela’s body covered in roses that are in saturated shade of red.

A key feature of semiotics is that the sign exists within a system of differences. Thus, a sign is part of a code, which permeates the whole of social life.

**Denotation and Connotation**

**Denotation** is the primary, direct meaning and suggests whatever we see in a picture; **Connotation** is the secondary, indirect meaning and depends on collective cultural attitudes/personal associations. According to Christian Metz, “The study of connotation brings us closer to the notion of the cinema as an art (the “seventh art”).” (1999: 71)

Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* (1970) gives us five systems of meaning or ‘codes’ that are as follows:

- **The enigma code**

  Films set puzzles, pose problems, and hint at secrets. They make us ask the following questions:
  1. What is this going to be about?
  2. What’s going to happen next?
  3. Who did it?
  4. What happens at the end?

  The enigma code is the principal structuring device that demands audience’s attention. In a film such as *Vertigo*, our attention is held till the end because we want to unravel the mystery of Madeline’s (or Judy’s) dual personality.

- **The connotative code:**

  The code is about the signs that imbue characters and settings with meaning, these signs include speech, clothing, movement, and gestures. The code creates illusion of real people having real experiences in a real world. The idea of this code is that meaning is the result of the interaction between the film and the audience. Consider the title sequence of Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), where seven men of varying ages, identically dressed in black suits and white shirts, walk in slow motion to the soundtrack of “Little green bag” by George Baker. The music, cars, streets, fashion, style----all these elements bring important sub-codes to the film.
- **The action code**

This refers to the signs belonging to a pattern of action. For e.g., a poster with a romantic pair tells us that the film is a love story. However, the picture of a hero with a gun or a bruised body suggests that the film is an action story.

- **The symbolic code**

This refers to the way an audience receives texts by organizing all experiences into a binary pattern: good/bad; master/slave; hero/villain; true/false. This helps in our understanding of what the filmic text means. Barthes draws primarily on Freud and Claude Levi-Strauss to describe the symbolic “economy” of a narrative and defines the major symbolic rhetorical device in literature as antithesis.

- **The cultural code**

The cultural code encompasses the text’s references to things already known. It depends on certain shared assumptions of cultural behavior, morality and politics. Culture not only constitutes the self but also constrains the self. These films raise questions about the codes of conduct in a particular social order. For example, the poster of Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* suggests a romantic relationship between two men. However, the cultural code it evokes will vary enormously according to the viewers’ attitudes towards homosexual relationships. This leads us to the understanding that meaning does not reside in the film but is a result of interaction between the film and its viewers.

On the other hand the poster of Joel Schumacher’s *Falling Down* (1993) raises questions about his environment. He is a bespectacled middle-aged man, seen wearing a white shirt and a striped tie, with a briefcase in one hand and a gun in another. He is completely alone with no other character surrounding him. We as film viewers can read this as isolation of an ordinary urban man, driven to the extreme edge, who has perhaps resorted to using weapons.

For Barthes, all five of these codes are bound by the weight of convention, what he calls “what’s already been written and done.” Applied to films, these signs and codes are like grammar to a language and are used to construct meaning.

In the following section, we will see how the codes fit the interpretation of David Fincher’s *Se7en* (1995).

**Semiotics of Se7en** (David Fincher; 1995)

David Fincher’s *Se7en* is a study in sin, and the genre is crime, thriller, film noir, and horror. Richard Dyer in his masterful commentary says, “the film is not working primarily on the level of crime but sin. …Seven makes
reference to three forms of salvation: religion, culture and human goodness. However, it only believes in religion’s diagnosis rather than its cure, culture merely affirms bleakness” (1999: 68)

This brings us to the two questions about the title of the film: What is ‘Se7en’? And how is the myth of the Seven Deadly Sins used in plot development?

The title or number Se7en as an index can mean several things: days of Creation and of the week, cardinal virtues, wonders of the world, pillars of wisdom, and even colors of the rainbow. Further, Somerset (Morgan Freeman) refers to 7 slain children in Dante’s Purgatory in Divine Comedy. However the film draws on the 7 sins and 7 days. The central idea is that of the 7 deadly sins used as the basis for 7 murders over seven days. In the context of the film, Detective Somerset has 7 days to go before retirement.

The character of Somerset is at the centre of the film. At one level, Se7en is a character study in contrast. In the early scenes Detective Somerset shows all signs of being methodical. He is a great brain, and follows up on signs and clues in the public library. In other words, he is the one who knows. He has wisdom and gravitas, and as audiences, we are supposed to take him seriously. The film plays on the Morgan Freeman persona as a reliable, dependable man of wisdom. This image is reinforced by his earlier turns in Driving Miss Daisy (1989), The Shawshank Redemption (1994).

Opening scene: Key connotations

There are ‘Road signs’ at the beginning with external sounds in the background. The external chaos and noise is contrasted with Somerset’s private world which is calm. As he gets ready, we are shown the objects in his room: The chess set in the foreground and the Metronome, to cut off the sound from the outside. Later we find Somerset working to the sound of Bach’s Air on a G string. As a result we find the filmmaker creating an identifiable character.

Se7en’s title sequence was very popular with soundtrack by Kyle Cooper. Notice the opening credits montage of John Doe (the mysterious killer’s) working: close-ups of items, scissors, notebooks, needles. Doe’s (the pseudonym used by the killer, John Doe, is a play on the American Everyman, literally anonymous) work is accompanied by the Nine Inch Nails “Closer” a group associated with Charles Manson & the song was recorded in his house.

The film uses the formula of older black/The younger white cop (notice the echoes of 48 Hours, Lethal Weapon), but though Somerset is black but his race is of no importance here. While Somerset is painstaking, thorough and intellectual, Mills is an impatient, headstrong rookie. The two are a study in binaries yet the relationship begins in hostility and ends in mutual respect. Intellectually, Somerset and Doe share the same world view, which is, the world is beyond redemption.
Like in most buddy movies, Pitt and Freeman are foils to each other. Beginning from their initial interaction involving mode of dress and manner of speaking, we are directed to understand the clash of opposites in these two figures. While Somerset is calm, Mills is easily excitable; leading to his tragic denouement. This contrast comes across most forcefully in the library scene with Somerset going through canonical texts, as we are acquainted with the iconography of sins and punishment. Mills, on the other hand, resorts to Cliff Notes. Clearly he is not on the same wavelength as Somerset and Doe.

**The Enigma of Se7en**

*Se7en* raises, but does not answer the questions it poses: What makes someone a serial killer? Why does John Doe turn himself in? Who is John Doe? Why does John Doe commit the murders?

**John Doe’s first appearance**

We see him for the first time as he surrenders himself, covered in blood. It is only later we realize the horrible truth about whose blood it was. *Se7en* presents a bleak view of our universe and denies us the comfort that law can protect us. The closure of the film is not achieved by the law but by the criminal. Therefore *Se7en* is often called one of the darkest films ever made. Doe sees himself as a moral voice of the society, who has taken upon himself the role of the law enforcers. He identifies with the moral code of society, a Christian society, and recognizes that he like everyone else is a sinner. “I tried to play husband, I tried to taste the life of a simple man. It didn’t work out. So I took a souvenir, her pretty head. Because I envy your normal life, it seems that envy is my sin.”

**Cultural code**

*Se7en* takes us on a journey into Moral and philosophical territory and debates over social responsibility and human nature. In order to understand the central conceit (of sins) the audience should recognize a host of moral and religious ideas based on a distinction between crimes that break the law of man (represented by Somerset/Mills) and acts that offend God (Doe represents this territory).

**David Fincher’s Films**

David Fincher’s works usually lead us to the edge of our nightmares. His genres include science-fiction, detective, horror, and film noir and mirror the pessimistic world-view of the director. David Thomson rightly points out in *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, “Few young directors have such command of streamlined imagery.” (p. 290).

Fincher’s *Zodiac* (2007) deals with a serial killer who leaves behind certain signs and clues for the police to track him down, and also sends a series of cryptic letters to newspapers. An example of Zodiac’s letter, “I like killing people because it is so much fun it is more fun than killing wild game in the forest because man is the
most dangerous animal.” (sic) The misspellings and the lax punctuation are those signs that the killer wants the public and the police to decipher, thus leading us on a psychological thriller.


**Reference**

**Suggested readings**

**Suggested websites**
- http://manovich.net/TEXT/cinema-cultural.html
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_grammar
- http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/5codes.htm
- http://www.movie-locations.com/movies/s/seven.html#.UewO8ILrbZo
- http://www.artofthetitle.com/title/se7en/

**Quiz**

1. Answer the following:
   i. Explain the difference between ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’?
   ii. Analyze the 5 codes as given by Roland Barthes.
   iii. Give an example of synecdoche.
2. Match the following:

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<tr>
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<th>Mythologies</th>
<th>a</th>
<th>Charles Sanders Pierce and Ferdinand de Saussure</th>
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<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td><em>Brokeback Mountain</em></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>Joel Schumacher</td>
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<td>ii</td>
<td><em>A Course in General Linguistics</em></td>
<td>c</td>
<td>Ang Lee</td>
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<td>iii</td>
<td><em>Falling Down</em></td>
<td>d</td>
<td>Roland Barthes</td>
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3. Fill in the blanks:

i. The declaration “A rose is a rose is a rose” is attributed to.............
ii. The film *Se7en*’s soundtrack is composed by.................
iii. Cinema is ...........as it arouses senses.

**Answer key**

2. i-d ; ii-c ; iii-a ; iv-b

3. i- Gertrude Stein; ii-Nine Inch Nails ; iii-synesthetic