



## Semiotic approach to the representations of culture in the cinematic film

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### Abstract:

This paper seeks to highlight the semiotic approach that reveals the foundations of semiotic analysis of culture in audiovisual products for various media and communication. This is achieved through analyzing the different levels of speech and iconography, which is a rich field with different meanings and symbols of profound connotations that can be revealed through this analysis. The aim is to find the analytical correlation with the research topic or the phenomenon that the researcher seeks to detect and analyze according

**Keywords:** Semiotics; Representations Culture; Cinematic film.



### 1. INTRODUCTION

Before diving into the foundations of the semiotic analysis of culture representations in the cinematic discourse, it must be noted that cinema has been the most important discourse that appeals to its real-world signs since its emergence. This has been concluded through trying to produce it in accordance with the representations embraced by society and the endeavors to be reached, which made this cinematic discourse a mirror of reality in which we find many iconographic signs near the space that embraces it. The reason behind this is the specificity of the film discourse and its intrinsic structure, as it is a speech that combines sound and image, or rather between iconographic signs and verbal signs. At the same time, it contains many symbolic effects that would form its semantic field.

From this point of view, we can say that the semiotic approach to the representations of culture in the film discourse requires focusing on several fundamental points, some of which relate to the specificity of this discourse, its structure and its symbolic foundations on the one hand. On the other hand, the second contains the peculiarities of cultural representations and their relationship to the semiotic culture, so that we combine two important cinematic themes: the cinematic discourse as an audio-visual theme and the cultural discourse as a mythical symbolic theme. Therefore, it is necessary to combine the analysis foundations of two models of semiology, the first relates to the semiology of cinema and the foundations of film analysis, and the second is limited to the semiotics of culture and the analysis of cultural texts. However, before this synthetic process is carried out, it is necessary to stand at some of the fundamental foundations and characteristics of the film discourse and its cinematic structure. The first thing to say in this regard is that it's a multi-cipher speech with a variety of connotations. This is due to the constituent elements of this discourse in general and to the cinematic language in particular. Hence, the latter is characterized by the diversity of the symbols that form it which makes their contents and meanings profoundly significant. According to Christian Metz, cinematic language is a compound language that forms in its units a significant system consisting of the association of five semantic expressions: image, sound, noise, as well as moving photograph and written data.

Perhaps the most important factor that distinguishes this visual pattern is the moving image that makes the viewer interact with the events of the film in a way that is close to reality. This is due to the fact that the film discourse is an audio visual expression with a great similarity to reality, not to mention the audio effects and noise taken from the represented reference.

This confirms the ability of the film discourse to achieve a great degree of iconography, as cinematic language is characterized by a number of characteristics, including: (odin, 1990, p. 32)

- **Mechanical duplication:** Cinema has a superior ability to produce reality and reproduce it mechanically thanks to the peculiarities of the animation and the movements of the camera.
- **Multiplicity:** According to this, the cinema consists of several moving images and a monolithic form of the so-called photogram.
- **Mobility:** Cinematic language is dynamic and active thanks to the motion of the camera.



This would bring the viewer and the events closer to reality and bring similarity to it. We also

find a number of elements that make up the cinematic language which carries semiotic meanings in its union and consistency. One of the elements is:

**Photogram:** It is in the form of sequential images in a dynamic way that conveys meanings and translates events through the film image or footage. The latter is considered the most important and smallest unit in the film whose consistency forms meanings and symbols (anne goliot-lété, 2008, p. 280). It is also characterized by its proximity to reality and its iconic similarity, which has a close relationship with its movement and smoothness. From here we can distinguish several types of shots and each shot has its own specificity and its own dimensional semantic, including: (ابراقن, 1997, p. 181)

\***General Shot:** It is characterized by the fact that it frames the decor in all its dimensions, and we find this in the view of a city.

\* **Long shot or wide shot:** It provides an important part of the decoration and this shot allows us, for example, to see one view of the cityscapes. This shot is used to deepen feelings of sadness, anxiety and loneliness.

\* **Small shot:** This shot frames only part of the decor and allows characters to be highlighted and distinguished from each other. It is often used to present the hero in a dramatic medium such as quarrels.

\* **Medium shot:** In this shot, a complete or fuller figure appears within the frame of the image. The semantic dimensions of this shot put the actor in an intimate relationship with the audience, and allows the latter to be integrated into the atmosphere of the film and then interact with its events.

\* **American shot:** This personal shot is taken from the head to the middle of the thighs, allowing to highlight its action and movement. It is called the American shot because it refers to the western movies, where to see the gun of the cowboys hang on their belts.

\* **Close-up shot:** This shot frames the primary part of the character to make the rest of the details secondary and it is divided into two types:

- **The medium close-up:** Or a close shot to the waist. This shot frames the upper half of the human body from head to belt.

- **The close-up:** Or a close-up shot to the chest.

\* **Close shot:** It shows the face of the entire character, up to the neck, allowing the facial features to be revealed. It is employed to create an element of suspense by hiding the truth from the spectator, or in order to explain something specific by dissolving the dramatic knot.

In semiology of cinema, it is an indicator that draws the attention of the spectator to the details of the decor.



\* **Extreme close-up:** This shot shoots a certain part of the body of the character such as lips, ear and eye. It is used to create a kind of suspense in the viewer and at the same time it is used to determine the importance of the news. We find this in the magnifying headlines or the clock zoom.

\* **The insert shot:** It is a naming created in the semiology of cinema that has been given to four genres identified by Christian Metz as follows:

- **Narrative shot:** It is used in silent cinema. This shot is based on a comparison of two contradictory scenes.
- **Misplaced narrative shot:** It is known as the misplaced image to be placed in another position. It mostly presents a strange and exciting aspect of the plot.
- **Subjective shot:** The image shows the memory retrieval of the director and his dreams' remembrance.
- **Explanatory shot:** It is defined as the image that grows a certain object for the purpose of explanation.

Each of these shots have their function and their semantic meaning in the cinematic semiology. Hence, the first three types have a descriptive function, as they are used to describe the action and decoration, and to shift the story from general to particular. Other shots are used to highlight the status of the characters and are classified in turn by two main types: "narrative footage" and "descriptive footage". Narrative footage is represented in the descriptive American shot and the close up shot. Both are employed in presenting action and movement. While the descriptive footage highlights the state of the characters and their psychosocial interactions. The symbolism of the cinematic language is not complete with the quality of the shots used, but goes beyond it to other elements that can play an additional semantic role. The case here is concerned with the angles of the footage, as each angle has its own domain and semantic field, and this is determined by the following:

\* **Normal angle:** The camera is placed in front of the decor to be filmed. The image taken in this case is objective, honest and realistic. It is used more in documentaries because it carries in its content special semantic connotations determined by the semiology of cinema in explicit expression and sudden disclosure of things.

\* **High-angle shot:** It is the angle where the camera rises above the decor to be filmed. This leads to the shrinking of its dimensions and characters, and the limitation of movement in it. Some of the indications of this angle are:

- To imply the idea of dependency and subject the character to a certain dramatic situation.
- Create a sense of domination, contempt, crushing.
- Exploratory value related to highlighting new elements at the decorative level.

\* **Low-angle shot:** It is the angle in which the decor rises above the camera, which expands its reduced horizon and enriches its cinematic significance, such as the association with the idea of veneration, exaltation and prestige.



\* **Field and the opposite field angle:** This angle is suitable for capturing a conversation between two opposing persons separated by an imaginary line. It is the same line that allows images to be taken from three maximum positions without exceeding the other side of the line.

**Depth of field:** It is a procedure that allows the photographer to get perfectly clear images in the interface and less visible in the rear façade.

In the same context, we find other expressive elements that will influence the significance of the shot, including:

- **Camera movements:** Camera movements play an important role in enriching the semantic dimension of a shot. Its meanings vary as many as these movements diverse and multiply. The camera can be fixed to describe the places and scenes, and frame the faces with their gestures. The moving camera also plays an important role in highlighting the continuity of time, succession of events, multiple roles, characters and movements. (MONTODON, 1990, p. 185)

**A- Panorama:** It is a circular motion of the camera around its vertical or horizontal axis without moving the machine from its place. There are two types of panorama: (VINEYARD, 2004, p. 03)

**Horizontal panorama:** The camera is mounted according to this technique above the stand to rotate horizontally from right to left or vice versa at 180 degrees or in a circular way equivalent to 360 degrees. Horizontal panorama is generally used on a 180-degree line from right to left or vice versa, allowing characters and movements to be tracked. Then, framing the shot and achieving the following purposes:

- The gradual discovery or description of scientific space.
- Strengthen stress because before the camera expresses the detailed side, the director created a sort of suspense by gradually describing several characters or other objects.
- Focus on a tragic silence or vacuum by a gradual description like a description of a room's walls.

**Vertical Panorama:** The camera rotates vertically from top to bottom or bottom to top, allowing the imaging of the top and the bottom. It is used to photograph tall buildings and mountains, which helps to create a kind of suspense. 8 At the same time, it highlights the qualities of stress and doubt. Before the camera once reveals the actor's body with all its height, the camera begins to show off the shoes, legs and chest until it stops with the face, a gradient that induces discomfort. (ferro, 1979, p. 122)

**B- Mobility:** Camera movements allow for the capture of special and important shots and scenes that carry important significance in the film. In this regard, we can say that the camera moves in a certain path and can be shoulder-mounted or placed on a cart. Mobility is frontal to approach the decor, or rear to keep the decor, sideways, companion, circular or visual. The types of mobility can be classified as follows (VINEYARD, 2004):

- **Back mobility:** The shooting angle in this type changes from a general to close to a general. This means that the camera in this case gradually moves backwards, leaving space to show all that can be associated



with the idea of moving away from the place, such as a sense of isolation, helplessness, despair, and moral separation.

- **Front mobility:** This type of mobility occurs when the camera is gradually approaching the decor in order to highlight a specific element or detail of that decor.
- **Side mobility:** Also known as accompanying mobility in which accompanies the character in all its movements. It is an escort movement that involves a descriptive role, allowing the spectator to follow the characters or the mobile objects during a certain period of filming.
- **Vertical mobility:** A movement that occurs when the camera is mounted on a crane, and is moved in a way that gives the photographer the ability to track the movement of the actor as he accelerates in walking up and down the stairs.
- **Optical mobility:** A special lens with variable focus that allows the film frame to be changed without moving the camera. This type of movement is just a panorama because the camera remains constant and has been classified within the traditional mobility for several reasons such as:
  - The sensory effect it has on the spectator.
  - The link to two movements, one is front and the other is rear, which are equivalent to front and back mobility.
  - Adopting zoom as a film service, intended to accelerate or delay the movement of the character or the object that approaches the camera or moves away from it.
- **Non-private situations:** These are function elements in which the film ties in with other elements. It has an important role in completing the film's significance, among these elements we find:
  - **Characters:** The characters work on producing a conflict that develops the work, and increases its movements and interactions to create a thrill. From this point of view, it can be considered the main pillar that encourages the film work. Characters play an important role in delivering information to the viewer through the dialogue it utters, the ideas it adopts and the moves it makes. The characters are divided into two main types, from which we find the main characters and the secondary characters. The main character can be determined by the number of shots shown and the share of the dialogue assigned to this character, which is therefore the focus of each film.
  - **Decor:** It is an important element in the process of cinematic creation, as it helps to create the appropriate dramatic dimension, which is metaphorically called "the hidden character of the permanent presence". Its goal is to search for a better dramatic dimension in order to place the viewer in its appropriate socio-geographic context. The décor is therefore distinct in its essence, as it can be joyous, sad or scary. It is a creative matter linked to the designer's sense and personal talents that allow his style to be adapted to the director's point of view.



- **Lighting:** Lighting represents an artistic and dramatic element that introduces a subject or character by confining it and isolating it from the spotlight. For instance, small objects can attract attention if they have higher lighting and brighter colors than other objects. Objects can also bring out a particular figure or subject by moving it from dark to luminous areas. Lighting is useful in identifying and casting the curvatures and metaphors of objects, as well as creating a sense of spatial depth and thus creating an emotional atmosphere. This element also contributes to the completion of the mood or the psychological impact that the image can create in the viewer to what suits with the course of the events and the nature of the place. It is therefore an important factor in the psychological impact of the spectators. Its role is not only to provide the right atmosphere for taking the picture, but also one of its semantic is to determine the appropriate time when events take place.

- **Music:** Music of semiology is known as the acoustic fabric whose units are organized on a time axis and derive their significance from the harmony of their rhythms. Music is used in films to fill the periods of silence associated with the image or to express a psychological state or crisis in the dramatic situation. It is also used as a rhythmic value or for sensory purposes.

The image helps deepen its visual sense, and then beautify the story and make it clear, logical and poetic. It is thus an accompanying element of the image that contributes to its decoration by creating a sensory balance for the spectator and has a psychological effect.

- **Sound:** The sound has great abilities in expressing the general atmosphere of the film through various sound effects. Adding the sound effect mode in a scene creates a general atmosphere. Low-frequency sounds are used to embody the meaning of the scene and induces anxiety and ambiguity. Further, the rhythm has its own effect in increasing tension, as it plays a role in strengthening the emotional sensation. The sound effect also involves a photographic function in the photography of the place, which makes it a symbol used by the director in the drama. The sound and noise contribute to raising the credibility of the events and give it important dramatic dimensions. Thus, cinematic sounds are not just ordinary sounds, rather they are particular guides in film fiction. (vetraino, 1993, p. 128)

These elements emphasize one of the peculiarities of cinema's semiology, which is inherently similar to the semiology of dreams. Hence, their analysis knows no boundaries. The reason for this is due to the specificity of the film significance as many elements blend in their composition. Each element has its own semantic field, which in turn contributes to determining the overall meaning of the film.

At the same time, this idea confirms a reality associated with the semiology of cinema, where the latter is concerned with dismantling the codes that make up the cinematic language, and then establishing the relationship between the various elements formed for this language. This allows for the dismantling and reconstruction of meaning according to the reality of the cultural representations. The importance of the latter here can be determined in the semiology of cinema, where it is necessary to know the context and to check the elements formed for this context, and then forming the relationship between its general data and the various representations in order to understand and interpret the cinematic image.





The semiotic analysis of any film format requires deep study of the representations' various aspects that embrace it and frame its significance, its iconography and its sound signs specified for its language. However, to complete such significant and symbolic dimensions of this analysis, we must take into account the specificity of the film that consists of signs and images, which in turn have an important ability to produce other functions. We also take into account the specificity of the film structure, where it is complete with a significant number of sign formats, including what is private and what is shared with other formats. The film image is particularly important in this format due to its ability to give an aesthetic character to the story, and at the same time its ability to revive cultural representation, then give it a new image and special signs that will support its dimensional and semantic richness. (metz, 1971, p. 134)

In this area, we must take into account the specificity of cinematic semiology, where the image is a word related to a phenomenon that allows communication to be achieved, in which it is translated by this process (communication). However, the analysis of this image does not only mean linking it to the previous one and what comes after it, but also means linking it to the dimensions of time, space and culture that embrace it at the same time.

In this case, the importance of cultural representations and their relationship to cinematic semiology is evident. "Eco Umberto" considers that this semiology is a combination of linguistics and optics. Because iconography has a certain level of symbolism and a natural agreement, cultural representations allow to give a special meaning for cinematic language.

"Christian Metz" confirms the fact that the film is a broad and complex sociocultural phenomenon. Moreover, it is a model of cultural actions of various dimensions. Since it is a model of semiotic discourse, it focuses on psychological, analytical, social, cultural and ideological phenomena in its semantic structure.

From this point of view, the semiology of cinema can be considered as a deep study of the cultural representations that are reflected in the audiovisual format. Following this process, the semiology of cinema considers the film to be a significant speech in the light of the cultural representation that gives it its own meaning and symbolism. However, In order to extrapolate the cultural representation of the film discourse, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the film in particular and the cinematic language in general are a form of cultural discourse. Human culture is characterized by the fact that it speaks to individuals and transmits information in different languages. Some of the information are reflected in what is vocal or visual, or transmitted through natural language, and some are completely symbolic in more than one language known as the cinematic language. The latter can only convey what is based on "cultural representation". Thus, the following steps must be taken into consideration when extrapolating the dimensions of this representation<sup>14</sup>:

A- Before diving into extrapolation, interrogation and analysis, we must take into account the fact that cinema has been able to interact with its time long ago. This gives it the ability to provide us with information that no other art can give or shape. Hence, cinema is just a tool to control reality and its weapon is sound and image.





B- Analysis of cultural representation in cinema requires overlapping sciences, and then the formation of an encyclopedic approach in which we find sociology, psychology, comparative literature, semiology, linguistics, anthropology and ethnology... etc. It is an important field that enriched cultural studies in the 1980s. To complete the dimensions of this analysis, we must draw upon a series of methods and tools identified by “Thomas M Carr” as follows:

**First level:** At this level, we can distinguish everything related to daily habits, in addition to a set of symbolic and direct background elements that formed the general framework of these customs. This level requires asking the following questions:

- What are the dominant clothing elements in the film format? What are the exceptional dress items? And what are its cultural and symbolic meanings?
- What kind of architectural style do they live in?
- What are the types of greetings used between the individuals?

**Second level:** This level includes all information about the pattern of social organization and

the various social institutions. At this level, we also wonder about the family semantic, the

foundations and functions of the school and its various distinctive features, in addition to the various social roles attached to individuals and groups.

**Third level:** This level involves everything related to the system of cultural values and the behavior of individuals in the light of this system. We extrapolates this by analyzing their behaviors and attitudes in various occasions, and their judgments in normal and difficult situations. These levels can only be extrapolated after the technical dismantling of the film format into moral and symbolic meanings of each part of this format.

Gillian Rose suggested a model of critical interpretation of images that frame the film shots. This model is based on the following:

- Production field: In this field we wonder how the images were produced, the type of images and the goal of the director to employ them semantically.
- Image field: In this field we focus on the iconography, symbolic semantic and the different meanings contained in the image, as well as the relationship between these meanings and the interpretations that frame it. Here we find the two elements: “assignment and inclusion” that every semiotic research addresses.
- Recipient field: Here we address the implications of the film elements and their cultural dimensions that frame it. To complete this type of analysis, the following elements must be taken into account: (vetraino, 1993)



- \* It cannot in any way say that images are objective, nor can they be considered a mirror of reality in all its dimensions, and cannot be the reality itself.
- \* The interpretation of semiotic images and signs is within the framework of the culture and cultural representation embraced by the social group or addressed by the film idea.
- \* The study of the relationship between semantic and signs allows images to be interpreted and given their own features within the framework of cultural representation.
- \* The interpretation of cultural representation in the film format must be linked to the cultural representation of the social community, and then come up with new signs and dimensions.

Thus, it can be said that film production is the most important area in which cultural representations are embodied, because it implies an integrated language that combines what is audio and what is visual. This would contribute to the creation of a semantic atmosphere in which the intended meanings are conveyed with particular eloquence. However, to examine the different dimensions of these cultural representations, it is necessary to return to the specificity of the cultural image and its semiotic on the one hand, and the cinematic language with the analysis of films on the other hand. The purpose here is to achieve a comprehensive

approach to the analysis of symbolism and the representations of culture in this multilingual and coded format, considering advertising as a short film.

It can be said that culture is not limited to that human production, which is essentially aimed to satisfy its different needs, but is, first and foremost, a symbolic communication format that confirms the advantage adopted by the semiology of culture. This advantage is represented in the fact that man is a symbolic animal. Furthermore, culture can be considered as a single text with its vocabulary and the multiplicity of languages involved in this vocabulary. This is due to the fact that culture is rich concerning its composition, as it has multiple elements and units. It also has a series of unique characteristics that make it a special symbolic format.

All these characteristics have made culture an essential axis of semiology and promote it to gain it a special direction that eliminated the difference between what is communicative and what is semantic. The semantic field entered a comprehensive dimension that combines everything that is symbolic in which the group shares, the collective memory records and circulates it with its meanings and dimensions. All of this has led those interested in the semantic field to consider culture as a text that is diverse in symbols and vocabulary. This requires the search for culture foundations and axes, perhaps the most important of which is the “semiotic space”, which several dimensions unite to form it in order to create meanings dedicated to texts and elements of culture.

But to delve deeper into these dimensions, it is necessary to return to cultural representation as the collective mental image formed by social imagination of culture. The collective mental image is inherited in the form of cultural signs, symbols and codes. At the same time, it is the reference by which culture is



represented in various formats, particularly the cinematic publicity. It is used to investigate semantic and to interpret its codes.

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