

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF SOME SELECTED HOLLYWOOD AND NOLLYWOOD MOVIES

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Abstract

Movies possess a rare combination of modern technology, music, literature, and dance, a movie is a phenomenal art production, and has a steering hold on its viewer. By using signs which are content/culture specific, a movie achieves its universality; nonetheless, some movies pose certain levels of difficulty to viewers, not because of the use of elevated language, but due to the use of signs which viewers can barely grasp. This study attempts a semiotic analysis of Hollywood and Nollywood movies, it seeks to identify the type of signs used in movies, and their cultural and contextual meanings. The objectives of the study were to investigate the use of signs and the type of signs used in selected American and Nigerian movies, as well as how the signs contribute to the meaning of the movies. Six images (one for each) were purposefully selected for analysis. The study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach, movies used as data for the study were downloaded from Netflix and YouTube streaming, the source of the data were scenes (screenshots) from *US, Mulan, Black Panther* (American Movies) and *October 1, Black November, and Sugar Rush* (Nigerian movies). The result of the study revealed that movies are an amalgam of signs, and these signs need to be situated within the context they are used, to fully grasp their meanings. Further findings also confirm that ICONIC, INDEXES and SYMBOLS signs are richly deployed in American and Nigerian movies and enhance the overall meaning creation of movies produced in these cultures.

Key Words: Semiotics, Signs, Codes, Index, Icon, Symbol, Movies/Film.

Introduction

As the study of signs, Semiotics uncovers the various dimensions of signs; it studies what signs are, and how they are used to convey meaning. Signs are the foundation of all communication, allowing humans to speak with one another through intermediary signs (Chandler, 2014). The transmission process usually involves exchange of messages which include signs, symbols, language, as well as discourse. Semiotics is thought of as the analysis of signs, which is essentially the study of codes, or a system that allows semioticians to see elements as being meaningful (Budiman, 2011). Chandler (2014) has shown that Semiotics concerns itself with how society creates meaning and values through a system of communication that is totally reliant on signs. Semiotics, according to Fiske (2006) is the study of signals and their meanings, as well as the study of the way to transmit meaning in various

facets of life.

Movies communicate both verbally and visually using action, gesture, and dialogue. To elaborate this point, Navaro (2021) says that as a unique production of art, movies have a strong hold on its viewers, through the combination of music, painting, literature, drama, and is good to be viewed. A movie could be visual images in colour, and the words, setting, music, costume, and actors are just a means of conveying ideas and emotions to the audience/viewers (Dennis, 1985). A critical look at films reveal that they are not just a combination of sound, action, and picture; they also convey information, through the portrayal of strong characters with meaningful signs.

Globally, millions of people have consumed different products of the media in their lifetime, because of the availability of modern technology and the internet, movies being a part of it. To a large extent, movies influence many

aspects of people's lives both positively and negatively viz, dressing, speech mannerisms, and intelligent quotient. These movies induce aggressive and destructive behaviours in adults and children, enhance or deter productivity, in extreme cases, affect or form belief systems of individuals or a group. To affirm this position, Kubrak (2020) holds that films occupy a large part of the media product consumed by people, stressing that the cinema is considered a means of individual and social transformation. That is how important movies are to individual's existence. Movies affect people's lives through the continuous use of verbal and non-verbal signs, therefore, an understanding of the way these signs are used in movies will not only aid understanding of the movies, but it will also reduce boredom, as many movies pose some level of difficulty to viewers, because the signs may not be clearly understood.

Statement of the Problem

Humans are driven by the desire to make meanings, what Chandler (2007) calls "homo significans" (meaning makers). These meanings are made through the creation and interpretation of signs, and this is in consonance with the view of Peirce (1951), who submitted that we think only in signs.

Many scholars have worked on movies using the theory of Semiotics. Parsa (2004) paid attention to the surface and deep structure of the hit movie Titanic and discussed the work in terms of Propp's storyline for analyzing movies, paying particular attention to various aspects of props and how these props are used in the movie. Wills (2008) examined how the cultural discourse of femininity affects the portrayal of women in movies, the writer depicts how instruments such as culture and societal expectations affect the role of women in Chinese movies. Like the previous studies, the research fails to account for the way these cultural practices and societal expectations are conveyed in signs and are made to express meaning, a gap which the current study aims to fill.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The core objective of this research is to explain the use of signs in movies, with a stronger focus on the Semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Peirce, and Umberto Eco. From the core

objectives, these four specific objectives will be derived:

1. Identifying semiotic signs used in select movies.
2. Finding out how semiotics helps in deepening the intended meaning of films.
3. Describe how the signs in the movies convey meaning to the audience.
4. Describe how the signs in the movie aid meaning comprehension.

Research Questions

Based on the objectives proposed above, the study will answer the following research questions:

1. What type of semiotic signs are used in the movies?
2. How does Semiotics help in deepening the intended meaning of film?
3. How do the signs used in the movies convey meaning to the audience?
4. What type of Semiotic codes are used in movies?

Scope of the Study

The research was limited to the discussions on Semiotic analysis of *US*, *Mulan*, and *Black Panther* (American movies), while *October 1*, *Black November*, and *Sugar Rush*, were discussed under Nigerian movies, making a total of six movies to be discussed. The researcher used the semiotic theories proposed by de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, and that of Umberto Eco, to elucidate the report of the findings. Types of signs such as iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs were discussed in line with the movies, as well as how aspects of cultures are expressed in signs, according to Eco. The time spotted and how long the scenes lasted were captured. However, there was a ban placed on one of the Nigerian movies (*Sugar Rush*) by the Nigerian Government at the time of the research, making it unavailable in all video sharing platforms, the duration of the scenes was not captured.

Theoretical Framework

Isn't it rather fascinating that every aspect of human lives is greatly submerged in signs, even when we so aptly ignore them? Whenever the word "semiotics" is mentioned, we are immediately reminded of signs. The term "semiotics" is derived from the Greek word "semeion" (interpreter of sign) and the word

“tikos” meaning (pertaining to). “*Semeiotics*” spelt in that manner is believed to have been used by Stubbs, as noted by Cobley and Jansz (2012) to represent the interpretation of signs and symptoms, before gaining its root in the field of Linguistics through the works of proponents such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce’s assertion that “we think only in signs” is a constant reminder that we live lives creating and trying to make meaning of those signs

“Semiotics” is derived from the Greek word “*semeion*,” which means “sign.” It has been explained as a word that describes the regulations that govern a sign and what makes it up (Danesi, 2004). Semiology (his preferred word) is the discipline concerned with the study of signals in society, according to Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist and semiotician who provided the groundwork for the study of semiotics (1974,661). Semiotics is defined by Peirce, a notable American philosopher and semiotician, as “the quasi-necessary, or formal doctrine of signals”.

Chandler (2007) defines semiotics as a study of the role of signs in social life, which can include words, images, sounds, gestures, objects, and more, while Sobur (2009) defines it as a science that investigates signs. Semiotics, according to Sobur, is a method of evaluating signs. Eco (1986) defines semiotics as “everything that can be interpreted as a sign.” According to Eco, anything can be seen as a sign if it refers to or stands for anything other than itself. This means that everything in our lives serves as a sign. Semiotics can be defined as the study of signs, according to the different definitions given.

The Dyadic Theory of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the Triadic Theory of American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce are the two prominent contemporary ideas of what defines a sign in semiotics. According to Chandler (2007),

Saussure's Dyadic Theory of Signs views a sign as a "Signifier" and a "Signified," with the "Signifier" referring to the physical form of a sign and the "Signified" referring to the concept the signifier refers to (mental sign). Peirce's theory (Triadic Theory), on the other hand, is made up of three elements of sign: Representamen, Object, and Interpretant. These are explained below:

1. The Representamen: This is the form which the sign takes.

2. An Object: This is something beyond the sign to which it refers (a referent).

3. An Interpretant: It is the sense made of the sign. Umberto Eco expanded Peirce's concept of sign, observing that signs could be understood in a variety of ways depending on a person's perceptiveness and experience, due to their culture, worldview, context, and knowledge level. In a publication, *A Semiotic Theory*, Eco made a significant contribution to the development of contemporary Semiotic approaches. Semiotics, in Eco's opinion, is everything that can be interpreted as a sign.

Eco maintained throughout his career that Semiotics is a multidisciplinary field and an ongoing cognitive process based on the active participation of our experience and encyclopedic knowledge, rather than a discipline or a theory (our overall culture). Humans typically form assumptions based on pre-made 'frames,' according to him (scenes and fragments from our encyclopedia). Eco employs linguistic and cognitive sciences, as well as philosophy and literary ideas, to stress the interconnectivity of signs in his writings and fiction. He does it by interpreting signals, texts, and cultural events in general using analogies such as libraries, labyrinths, rhizomes, and the encyclopedia (Cobley and Janz, 2012).

DATA ANALYSIS

Datum 1 Time Spotted: 01:51-01:53



Multimodal text type: image and writing

Semiosis Process: the image above is that of the 1986 campaign in America “Hands Across America”. The campaign was aimed at creating the awareness of homelessness and hunger, this was to be done by an unbroken chain of people holding hands. It is an **ICONIC** sign.

The image is the **REPRESENTAMEN** (the form which the sign takes) and the signifier, the homeless and hungry in the United States which the image represents is the **OBJECCT**, while the idea that the image above can be linked to the Hands Across America campaign in the United States is the **INTERPRETANT** (signified). It is an artificial sign intentionally produced to signify.

Datum 2. Time Spotted: 42:11-42:41



Multimodal text type: image

Semiosis Process: the image above shows Adelaide and her kids Zora and Jason at the wake of the Tethered invasion, they are visibly scared. It is an **ICONIC** sign.

The image is the **REPRESENTAMEN** and the signifier, the **OBJECT** is represented by their facial expression (fear), while the idea that the Wilsons’ are like humans (scared) in that they express emotions as opposed to the Tethered is the **INTERPRETANT** (sense made of the sign) as well as the signified. It is an artificial sign intentionally produced to function.

DATUM 3. Time spotted: 09:32-09:40 (Mulan)



Multimodal text type: image

Semiosis Process: Just like the image in datum 4, the image of the Imperial City, Central China is a **SYMBOLIC** sign.

The image is the **REPRESENTAMEN** (signifier), it resembles the real Imperial City in China, the system of government that the image represents is the **OBJECT**, while the **INTERPRETANT** (signified) is the sense made of the image, when it can be identified as the actual Imperial City in China. It is an **ICONIC** sign. It is an artificial sign intentionally produced to signify.

Datum 4. Time Spotted: 16:19-16:23



Multimodal text type: image

Semiosis Process: The image above is that of the main character Mulan, about to fulfill societal and cultural expectations of her (being a good daughter by becoming a wife and ultimately bringing honour to her family). It is an **INDEXICAL** sign. It is a sign of suppression, and docility.

The image is the **REPRESENTAMEN** and the Signifier, ancient Chinese culture is the **OBJECT**, while the roles assigned Mulan by society and tradition is the **INTERPRETANT**, and the Signified. It is an artificial sign intentionally produced to signify.

Datum 5. Time Spotted: 04:42-04:45



Multimodal Text Type: Image and speech.

Semiosis Process: The above image is a scene that shows the late King T'Chaka's visit to his brother, to intimate him on the bomb blast back home. The debris in the image is an INDEXICAL sign, it resembles a blast scene, and as reported by T'Chaka, "lives were lost", as is typical of any explosion scene.

The image of the fire and debris is the REPRESENTAMEN (signifier). It takes the form of an explosion scene "OBJECT", the idea that lives were lost because of the explosion is the INTERPRETANT (the sense made of the sign) and the signified. This is what leads the late king T'chaka to suspect that his brother betrayed Wakanda. In Eco's view, the explosion scene is an artificial sign, intentionally produced as a primary function.

Datum 6. Time spotted: 07:36-07:38

Time spotted: 09:03-09:27



Multimodal text type: image and writing

Semiosis Process: The above image shows Sambisa Forest, where T'Challa rescues kidnapped girls. It is an ICONIC sign as it is like the real Sambisa Forest in Borno State, the North-Eastern part of Nigeria., and the kidnapped girls are like the abducted Chibok girls in Nigeria.

The image of the forest is the REPRESENTAMEN (Signifier) because it bears similarity with the Sambisa Forest in Nigeria. Sambisa forest is the OBJECT, the direct association of the object in the image above with the real Sambisa Forest in Nigeria is the INTERPRETANT and the signified. Eco classifies the above sign as a natural sign, unintentionally produced by a human agent.

Datum 7. Time Spotted: 02:54- 02:56



Multimodal text type: image and speech

Semiosis Process: The image above is that of the representative of the colonial administration (Mr. Winterbottom), and Detective Inspector Danladi Waziri (a Nigerian). Winterbottom's reference to Inspector Waziri (a man old enough to father him) as "Danny boy" is a SYMBOLIC sign. It symbolises the low status of the respondent, and the superiority of the caller, it also symbolises derogation and lack of respect for the later, and by extension, the Nigerian state.

The word "boy" is the REPRESENTAMEN (Signifier), what it is made to represent (inspector Waziri and Nigeria) is the OBJECT, while the idea that one can draw a similarity between the representamen,

and the object is the INTERPRETEANT and Signified. It is an artificial sign intentionally produced to signify.

Datum 8. Time spotted: 36:29

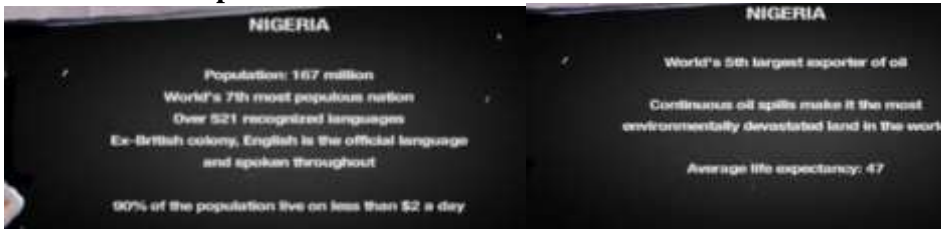


Multimodal text type: image

Semiosis Process: The image above is a gory scene of Bisi's death after having suffered strangulation, mutilation, and rape from the "killer". It is an INDEXICAL sign.

The image is the REPRESENTAMEN (the form which the sign takes) and the signifier, the fate of the young girls of Akute that the corpse represents the OBJECT, while the similarity that can be established between Akute Maidens and the corpse is the REPRESENTAMEN (sense made of the sign) and the signified, it is an artificial sign intentionally produced to signify.

Datum 9. Time Spotted: 0:40-01:05



Multimodal text type: Writing

Semiosis Process: The image above gives an idea of the socio-political state of the Nigerian nation. It is an ICONIC sign because the description given above fits Nigeria perfectly.

The image is the REPRESENTAMEN (the form which the sign takes), as well as the Signifier the socio-economic status of Nigeria which the image represents is the OBJECT, while the idea that there exists some form of similarity between the description and Nigeria is the INTERPRETANT (sense made of the sign), and the Signified. It is an artificial sign intentionally produced to signify.

Datum 6. Time Spotted: 10:35



Multimodal text type: image/speech

Semiosis Process: The image above shows women and children running to a leaking pipeline site to fetch oil, for domestic and economic purpose, as well as to prevent the oil from spilling into their lands and water (their only source of food and income). It is an ICONIC sign.

The image is the REPRESENTAMEN and Signifier, pipeline vandalism and oil spillage which the image represents is the OBJECT, while the connection that can be established between the image and the actual happenings in the Niger Delta is the INTERPRETANT (Signified). It is an artificial sign intentionally produced to signify.

Datum 10. Time Spotted: 49: 12



Multimodal text type: image

Semiosis Process: the image shows devout Muslims praying in the open. It is an **ICONIC** sign.

The image is the **REPRESENTAMEN** (Signifier), the religiously diverse Nigeria which the image represents is the **OBJECT**, while the resemblance that exists between the Muslims in the image and actual ones is the **INTERPRETANT**, and the Signified. It is an artificial sign intentionally produced to signify.

Datum 11. Time Spotted: 04:41 & 20:35



Multimodal text type: image

Semiosis Process: the images above show Susan's To-do list, and the priority on the list is "UK relocation money total 4 million". Also, in a conversation with her mother, she promises to take her mother to "London: a country that works". It is an **INDEXICAL** sign.

The images are the **REPRESENTAMEN**, and Signifier, the **OBJECT** is the lack of confidence in the workings of the country, which most citizens have come to terms with, while the parity that can be established between Susan's wants and the average Nigerian whose dream is to relocate, is the **INTERPRETANT**, and the Signified. It is an artificial sign intentionally produced to signify.

Conclusion

The burden of this paper has been to analyse signs in selected American and Nigerian movies. It was discovered that the bulk of researches carried out in the field have paid more attention to the aspects of films such as plot, costume, duration, casts, even signs, but with little or no emphasis on the type and role of signs in meaning creation and retention in movies, neglecting Chandler (2007) who stated that humans are "homo significans" (meaning makers), and Peirce (1951) assertion that we think only in signs.

In line with the Semiotic theory of Peirce, a sign is grouped into the representamen (the form which the sign takes), the object (something beyond the sign to which it refers), and interpretant (sense made of the sign). Eco differed in his

classification of signs, he grouped them into natural signs (those produced without the help of any human agent), and artificial signs (those produced intentionally to signify or function). Eco further stated that signs are best understood within the context of the culture they are used. These parameters were used in the analysis of signs in the movies chosen. Based on the findings of the data analysed, the study concludes that movies express beyond plot, themes, and settings, they express meaningful signs (iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs), they also have a triangular relationship existing between the Representamen, Object and Interpretant. The study also concludes that movies are beautifully woven around context and culture. Therefore, the analysis of sign is fundamental to movie review.

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