

**A new Semiotic Perspective and its Application to Film Analysis:
Methodological Proposal based on a Practical Case**

*Hacia una nueva perspectiva semiótica y su aplicación al análisis fílmico:
propuesta metodológica a partir de un caso práctico*

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Abstract:

This study will investigate the new semiotic conception created by Julia Kristeva, who through terms such as genotext, phenotext, connotation and denotation, manages to analyze the unanalyzable, defining a unique analytical method in the field of communication. Based on these postulates, the role of the observer will be delved into, since it is in his/her perceptual process where meaning is formed.

Cinema detaches itself from the classical codification of language to identify itself with the poetic word, settling on the intertextuality of codes and drawing on other previous cultural texts. For this reason, we will treat all artistic expression as a fabric of meaning influenced by the cultural and social baggage of both the sender, the receiver and the observer. Given that we have little methodology at the service of this type of analysis, the article will end with a proposal based on the theoretical postulates studied and applied to a specific practical case, where it will be clarified on how to decompose a film to later examine each one of its parts in communicational terms.

Keywords:

Semiotics; Cinema; Film analysis; Methodology; Ideologeme

Resumen:

En este estudio se profundizará en la nueva concepción semiótica que acuña Julia Kristeva, quien a través de términos como genotexto, fenotexto, connotación y denotación, consigue analizar lo no analizable, creando un método analítico único en el campo de la comunicación. En base a estos postulados se ahondará en el rol del observador, ya que es en su proceso perceptivo donde se forma el significado.

El cine se desliga de la codificación clásica del lenguaje para identificarse con la palabra poética, asentándose sobre la intertextualidad de códigos y nutriéndose de otros textos culturales previos. Por este motivo, trataremos toda expresión artística como un tejido de significados, influidos por el bagaje cultural y social tanto del emisor, como del receptor y del observador. Dado que contamos con una escasa metodología al servicio de este tipo de análisis, se finalizará el artículo con una propuesta basada en los postulados teóricos estudiados y aplicada a un caso práctico concreto, donde se clarificará cómo descomponer un filme para, posteriormente, examinar cada una de sus partes en términos comunicacionales.

Palabras clave:

Semiótica; Cine; Análisis fílmico; Metodología; Ideologema

1. Introduction

Before tackling a semiotic proposal of film analysis, based on the most basic elements of the communicative process, it is worth asking whether cinema is itself a language that can be analyzed through those theorems, since otherwise this methodology would be invalidated for such a study. In this sense, authors such as Christian Metz (2001) point out that cinema constitutes a language in itself or, more specifically, a specific type of signifier; while for others, like Urrutia (1984), cinema is the alternative for those who have reached the limit of the possibilities offered by a language, so that, more than a language, it would be an extension of it. On the other hand, there are those, like Sergei Eisenstein, director and editing expert, who conceives the cinema as that artifact that makes possible a kind of rebirth of the inner language, comparable to the type of language that the child uses in his first years of life (Andrew, 1993). This is why until now the classic communication scheme for film analysis used by some scholars has been composed of the code, the sender, the receiver, the message, the channel, the context and the referent, and in the involving processes such as encoding and decoding.

Since the beginnings of cinema and, more specifically, since the Institutional Representation Mode was established -characterized by the narratological style by which we know it today-, the lack of structure and objectivity of the methodological analysis of the film has been considered a challenge. And it is for that reason that more than a century later, we still do not have a model with which to analyze in a legitimate way neither the content nor the technique of a cinematographic product. However, many authors have tried to approach, with their different proposals and models, the validation of a norm with which to examine and interpret an audiovisual text; a good example of this is the semiological approaches that, based on the communicative process try to

analyze the message and its reception through starting from the classical scheme that has just been described, or those that do so by alluding to the psychoanalytic, which have a greater impact on the perceptual aspects of the observer.

Among many others, the theories of Umberto Eco, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Christian Metz, Roland Barthes, Mijaíl Bajtin, André Bazin or Tadeuz Kowzan stand out. All of them influence in some way the most current semiotic perspectives, since their authors are part of the so-called poststructuralism, characterized by the rejection of the binary conception of the world, as promulgated by structuralist authors such as Saussure, Jakobson or Greimas. For poststructuralists, knowledge cannot be divided into hierarchical pairs of meaning/signifier, but rather the history and the culture which accompanies and supports it. On one hand, we find Pasolini or Eco, who base their studies on semiotics as a culture that brings us closer to reality, and on the other hand, Barthes who defends that all cultural products emerge from a previous text, as does Bajtin with concepts such as polyphony; while Bazin and Metz describe the communicational possibilities that cinema provides as a discursive platform.

Taking as a reference the theory of Tadeusz Kowzan, and more specifically his postulate of the thirteen signs, along with the *ideologeme* of Julia Kristeva, we will establish a reference guide for the analysis of films and audiovisual products, in order to be able to distinguish the elements that contribute to create the message and that facilitate the decoding of it by the viewer. Thanks to its ideological coordinates, we can build knowledge from the social and historical structure that accompanies film creation and reception.

2. Objectives

This article's main objective is to provide a methodological proposal for the analysis and study of filmic stories. By trying to elucidate the way in which language and context feed into each other, within the film, to communicate with the viewer, we enable the activation of the *ideologeme* and therefore the interpretation through the processes of denotation and connotation. The role that language plays in adaption and how cinematographic technique influences it will be addressed. In short, we make a proposal for film analysis that addresses both the technique and the audiovisual content.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical framework

After the structuralist current predominated in the field of linguistics, in which each sign was defined by its contrast with another sign in favor of its perceptual distinction, a new trend emerged in the 1960's. This position ceased to consider the author as an active element and the receiver as a passive subject to go on to defend that the meaning of the work depends on the previous texts to which the author has been passively subjected, being the receiver who upon perceiving them builds the meanings of actively, relating what is perceived with the cultural and social baggage that it carries behind it. This statement supposes, in the words of Barthes, the death of the author and the birth of the reader.

For Roland Barthes (1993), each cultural product is the consequence of an echo chamber, where it is impossible to locate the influences that have intervened in its meaning. The author, therefore, becomes incapable of controlling the construction of meaning, since it is a mere link between the texts it receives and those it creates. However, this task, which is denied to the author, is imposed on the observer who, by perceiving such signs, constructs the semiology of the discourse. Bakhtin (1999) proposed in turn, the concept of polyphony, by means of which he suggested that when staging a certain text, created by a voice, the meaning of this began to be created by a multitude of voices, from the author himself, the actor or the illuminator.

Parallel to these studies directed to the construction of semiotic meaning, others happen to aim to question the interaction between semiology and culture, among which we find those of Umberto Eco (1997), for whom culture constitutes a phenomenon of communication in itself, therefore it is up to semiotics to study and understand it. In fact, for the semiologist, the only way to reach a good understanding is to return to the original context in which the communicative element was created and analyze it.

Likewise, Pier Paolo Pasolini (2005) focused on the cultural fact as the only possible form of reality in the cinematographic field, attributing the minimal unity of the cinema to the real framed objects, and not to the image itself, as Metz defended (2001). And it is that, for the latter, the cinema can be analyzed in basic units of meaning from the semiological perspective, despite the fact that there is no purely cinematographic sign as such; units that have been internalized in such a profound way by the viewer, that they endow the image with reality or, rather, with an illusion full of realism as a consequence of the disappearance of material limits for the camera's eye, such as Bazin (2001) points out.

When proposing this new poststructuralist semiotic conception, Julia Kristeva was based on Barthes' theory, since she considers in very similar terms some of his theorems, such as the notion that both sender and receiver are responsible for the construction of a text or that of intertextuality. In this sense, Kristeva also takes Bakhtin as a reference, in turn creator of dialogism and otherness, who defended that ideology mediates between the text or the cultural product of reality. It should be remembered that the *ideologeme* arises from the semiologist's interest in intertextuality, considered by Bajtín (1999) as the set of the texts with which an author has been in contact before creating a cultural product, closely related to Barthes's (1997) proposal and his echo chamber, which he defined as a box in which there is a continuous resonance of discourses. Going much further, we could also compare it with Hebdige's theory (1979), in which it is collected that subculture, which has been created by the common people as a social force, has gone through filtering process to eliminate its most critical part, and be returned to the same people in the form of the dominant culture; in this way, every cultural product would be reprocessed and rewritten over and over again.

Christian Metz, for his part, seeks further into the filmic question by establishing the way in which the process of signification is created. For the semiologist, cinema, unlike any other artistic production, is a process and not an object and this is mainly due to the role played by the unconscious. In this way, the spectator adopts an active role when

constructing the film in his mind, which leads him to interpret it in an individual and personal way, influenced by his cultural and social baggage. Both Kristeva and Metz contemplate filmic analysis as a guided procedure from the most subjective side of the human being, insofar as its assessment and interpretation depend in the same way on the context in which the text lives and receives.

In opposition to these conceptions of the meaning process, which alludes to the active and reciprocal role in the interpretation between transmitter and receiver, others such as Tadeusz Kowzan (1997), belonging to the theatrical field rather than the cinematographic one and to a tradition closer to the structuralism, bets on objective and closed criteria, limiting up to a total of thirteen analyzable signs that, based on a system of conventions. All these conventions build the cinematographic character, assigning it an identity and a specific origin. Within elements such as “word, intonation, gesture, wardrobe, accessories” (p. 150).

The fact is that the positions of Kristeva and Kowzan come to conflict in some of their main ideas. The semiologist maintains that it is not possible to establish a series of minimal signs in the representations and that the only classification that can be delimited is that it differentiates some specific signs such as gestures, looks and words, and that others last longer such as decorations, objects and clothing.

3.2. *The concept of Ideologeme*

Studied by the semiologist Julia Kristeva in the 70's, the *ideologema* concept refers to the intertextual function that condenses the dominant thought of a society at a specific historical moment. The ideologeme is what gives a certain text historical and social coordinates, through which the receiver can interpret the message. However, the idea behind the term is not new, since it refers us slightly to what Roland Barthes called the echo chamber, emphasizing that each cultural product is the result of everything previously read and received by the issuer. Related to this point, Giulia Colaizzi (2007) has called “politicization of a text” (p. 57), to the meaning in which the dominant political forces are the ones that give meaning to the story. Barthes also considers that each image, being a product that it emerges from a concrete culture, it immediately becomes an ideological construct, conditioning its interpretation. In this sense, the Russian linguist Valentin Voloshinov (1992) highlighted the fact that it is in the linguistic sign where social conflicts and class struggle are staged.

Therefore, we can state that the *ideologema* represents all that word or sign that agglutinates in its bosom the synchronous historical and social coordinates at the time of the emission of the message, whether it is written or audiovisual, endowing the word with a meaning dependent on the context. In other words, it implicitly condenses the dominant thought of a society, which conditions: both the characters and their story, being the set of experiences and feelings experienced by the author in the space -time axis in who lives and therefore writes.

Nevertheless, the *ideologema* is erected from two related concepts also raised by Kristeva: the *phenotext* and the *genotext*. The first of them concerns the culture to which the author of the text belongs, while the second concerns to the work itself as a product

of that culture, producing a feedback of codes between the two, which the receiver has to decode later. Thus, the *ideologema* refers to the ideological sign that Voloshinov coined decades ago.

3.3. *The communicative processes of connotation and denotation.*

While Román Gubern (1994) considers the cinematographic as a connoted image, since it contributes both the psychological and moral point of view of the framed, Julia Kristeva conceives the filmic construction as a communicative process supported by both constructs. Kristeva sustains that connotation is also being the main responsible for providing meaning, although in this case, by connoted, it will refer to the historical and social atmosphere and not to the angulation or lighting, which will assign it to the denotation process, unlike Gubern.

The semiotics of cinema can be conceived either as a semiotics of connotation or as a semiotics of denotation. IN the second case, the framing, technical movements, lighting effects, etc. will be studied. In the first one, we will try to perceive different meanings, “atmosphere”, etc., which causes a denoted segment.

(Kristeva, 1988, p. 287)

The particularity of the filmic language is born, precisely, from the bond of dependence that unites it to the denoted, that is why its signifiers require their own laws of signification, as Julia Kristeva well assures. The cinematographic signifier, unlike signifiers belonging to the other artistic fields or linguistics, is an imaginary signifier. Since it acquires a meaning in the mind of the viewer, who throughout the projection remains in a dream state, under which perceives what happens on the screen as if it were reality. This effect, called the fictional effect, is achieved, in addition to the physical and mental condition of the viewer, due to its introspection. It is a function based on the use of voyeurism, fetishism and identification, brings the viewer closer to his childhood, to that stage prior to the distinction between perception and reality. Thus, the story appears in the subject’s mind as a self-generated story whose traces of production have been erased in order to maintain neutrality and appeal to the viewer’s understanding and intelligence.

For Kristeva and her barthean theory of *semanalysis*, poetic language, including the cinematographic one, opens borders, enabling the creation of new meanings and different ways of interpreting them, thanks to its conception of the receiving subject as a subject that processes, who nowadays, due to the trivial things, he puts at risk his ability to understand and analyze film.

... Everyday experience seems to show a dramatic reduction in a previous life. Who still has a soul today? (...). Pressed by stress, impatient for serious gestures, to enjoy and die, the men and women of today dispense with this representation of their experience that we call a psychic life. The act and its double, abandonment, substitute for the interpretation of meaning.

(Kristeva, 1993, p.14)

Ultimately, the filmic discourse is constituted by connotations, the objective of which is to influence the viewer’s perception process starting from the technical elements, from the denotations. The connotation requires the spectator’s intelligence, their positioning and their involvement in the discourse, since it seeks to create that same illusion of self-generation that leads to the sensation or effect of reality. Nothing is ever on the screen by chance.

4. Methodological proposal for film analysis

Since, in the cinema, text and image are interrelated and feedback, constructing a specific meaning, in our methodological analysis proposal we will address both discursive platforms. The purpose is to create a practical guide, based on the developed theoretical framework, to analyze the communicational processes that take place and enable the reception of the film. Thus, we have defined a series of guidelines to follow in order to decode the most important sign and contextual elements of the audiovisual story and deepen into their meaning, both at a textual and iconic level.

In the first place, and by means of a table, the signs contributed by Kowzan’s theory will be presented in a first column in the second, the description of the technical elements (angles, planes, assembly rhythm, color grading...) that contribute a psychological point of view to the image -the denotation according to Kristeva-; and in the third, the *ideologema*, in which the connotation would be included. It should be noted that the Kowzan signs are oriented to the staging and the character, so we will take those that are most useful to us, since this table should be considered as a guide to follow which is attributed great flexibility to adapt it to each specific cultural product, being able to add or remove elements that do not provide us with the necessary information for an exhaustive analysis of the film in question. Therefore, when using the table shown below, those signs that, in a more relevant way, allude to the meaning of the film will be detailed, especially those referring to the staging (first column), and the audiovisual technique (second column) which endow the former with a point of subjective view. Lastly, the social and historical context that accompanies those signs (third column) that modulate the process of meaning and perception by the viewer.

Table 1

Methodological proposal for film analysis

Significant analysis	Iconic analysis	<i>Ideologema</i>
The word	Camera angles	Social structure
The tone	Planes	Political structure
The mimicking of the face	Mounting	Historical structure
The gesture	Grading	Connotation of space
The scenic movement	Framing	Subjectivity and identification
The make-up	Camera movements	Associated ideology
The hairstyle	Types of voices (<i>off, on, over</i>)	Social conflicts
The costumes		

The accesories		
The design		
The lighting		
The musc		
The sound effects		

According to the communicative register used, the way of dressing, expressing themselves, etc., the viewer infers, for example, the social class to which a certain character belongs or the profession he/she exercises, since he/she uses artificial constructs created socially to distinguish these types of characteristics. As the signs of the content of the staging are analyzed, those referring to the audiovisual can be examined from the more technical side of its sign construction, evaluating how the use of these technological tools influences the endowment of a meaning to the image, for which we will use the iconic analysis and the elements included in it. However, if we adopt a poststructuralist stance, this analysis of the signs as watertight boxes would give a reductionist and incomplete result by not addressing the historical and social context that accompanies the film in its production and reception. It is the reason why we have incorporated the third column, so these components can be decomposed. Although to increase their validity they should be analyzed twice, one taking into account the context of creation and the other one the context of reception, in case both do not coincide.

Occasionally, when analyzing the *ideologeme*, these exposed components may not be clearly manifested and we need to resort to a more detailed study, though the contextualization of expressions, metaphors, proper names, vocabulary, etc.; In this case, and especially if the film is associated with a strong ideology that fully supports the argument, we would use a table like the one shown below. The guide details both the word in question and the associated objective definition and the ideology involved in using it, which will be concluded with the study of the *ideologema* as detailed in the table above. In order to check its validity, we have applied this guide to the specific case of *Death and the Maiden* (1994) by Roman Polanski, a film known for its clear ideological stance against the Pinochet dictatorship and the repression and torture suffered by the college students of the time.

Table 2

Example of textual analysis applied to the film Death and the Maiden (1994) by Roman Polanski

Concept	Definition	<i>Ideologema</i>
Exonerated	Released from an obligation	Political exonerators are people fired from their jobs for political reasons during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and the law includes people fired between September 11, 1973 and March 10, 1990. The beneficiaries received about \$140 thousand a month of pension.

<i>Tavelli</i>	A restaurant referred to by a character	Restaurant located in the center of Santiago de Chile where the upper class would go, at that time not represented by the citizens on whom the repression had fallen.
Yellow	Color with multiple connotations depending on the culture	In the film synonymous with betrayal, servitude and cowardice whose origin lies in the fact that Pinochet ordered the construction of some housing blocks for the working class in which, finally, the supporters of the dictatorship who provided information to the government ended up living. One morning those houses appeared to be painted yellow.
Stupid	In each Central American country, it has a different meaning, in Chile specifically stupid or brutal, although we usually translate it as foolish.	In the film it is used as a sample of the psychological nullification to which the victims are subjected.
Pisco Sour	Cocktail whose origin is disputed between Chile and Peru, although the recipe comes from the United States.	It manifests the presence of the American intervention in the country and its customs.

As we have been able to verify, by carefully analyzing some of the most used terms throughout the film, we have managed to deepen much more into the political and ideological connotations that nourish and characterize the story, leaving aside the superficial perception that any spectator who does not have lived in such a context can experience.

4. Results

It is no coincidence that the concept of *ideologeme* refers to the historical and social coordinates that accompany a specific text, because in order to interpret a message we must have necessary tools to decode it. As Metz (2001) points out, the only way to receive all knowledge is from who we are as a culture and society. Therefore, any

analysis based on then classical communication scheme or the pure signs or *representamen*, such as the one carried out by Kowzan or the one described by Charles Sanders Peirce or Saussure, develops serious limitations to us by leaving out a large number of factors that influence in the meaning, and that Kristeva synthesizes under this neologism.

Using the most classic semiological elements together with the *ideologeme*, we have obtained an analysis model applicable to any audiovisual story and, more preferably to cinematographic ones, with which to correct part of the methodological deficiencies that we find in this area.

Applying the previous tables made up of the study of components such as signs, iconic, textual and *ideologeme* (context subject to the dominant culture), we have been able to create a flexible guide for the analysis of any cultural product and more specifically, for an audiovisual story, legitimized in one of the most innovative theories in the field of semiotics. In addition, through the second of the tables, we have confirmed that it is capable of being applied to a specific case, such as *Death of the Maiden* by Roman Polanski, and offer us more information about its ideological construction.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Despite the fact that of our verifications, there is a great lack of methodological proposals focused on the analysis of communication and, as part of this, we learn that the same happens also on film. We do have a set of theoretical constructs that address this issue and that, to date, have been revised and expanded, offering us an empirical basis with which to start working methodologically.

Once the methodological proposal is based on the theoretical framework, it has been exposed and contrasted with its application to a practical case. Therefore we can conclude that this study contributes to the field of communication with its analysis as a guidance, applicable to filmic discourse, and that facilitates the study and an illustration of how we can use what is empirically validated at the theoretical level to build our own method of analysis.

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