

**Athens Institute for Education and Research**  
**ATINER**



**ATINER's Conference Paper Series**  
**MED2012-0064**

**The Relationship between Cinema and  
Semiotics**

**Rengin Ozan,  
Associate Professor,  
Istanbul University,  
Communication Faculty  
Cinema Department  
Istanbul - Turkey**

Athens Institute for Education and Research  
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece  
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209  
Email: [info@atiner.gr](mailto:info@atiner.gr) URL: [www.atiner.gr](http://www.atiner.gr)  
URL Conference Papers Series: [www.atiner.gr/papers.htm](http://www.atiner.gr/papers.htm)

Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research.  
All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the  
source is fully acknowledged.

ISSN **2241-2891**

3/08/2012

## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

**Ozan,Rengin** (2012) "**The Relationship between Cinema and Semiotics**" Athens:  
ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: MED2012-0064.

## **The Relationship between Cinema and Semiotics**

Rengin Ozan,  
Associate Professor  
Istanbul University,  
Communication Faculty  
Cinema Department  
Istanbul - Turkey

### **Abstract**

Cinema is formed of dynamic images. It is because of this feature of cinema that psychoanalysis is applied within the analysis of cinema used as a tool of manifestation. Semiotics (*fr.semiologie*) is, with its most general and known definition, the science that studies signs and sign processes. The foundation of contemporary semiotics was laid in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The studies by Charles S. Peirce and Saussure were essentially composed of linguistics, semiotics and cinema art. As a matter of fact, cinema is a linguistic phenomenon and it is inevitable that film studies are based on linguistics. Each film is understood within the frame of its own features. It is important to know the culture for the establishment of context. Therefore, it is important to know the cultural and linguistic of a country to analyze the films of that country semiotically. Cultural insights have an important place in film analyses. The goal of the study is to concretize the relationship between images and signs.

**Key Words:** Cinema, Semiotics, film

**Contact Information of Corresponding author:**

## INTRODUCTION

Through the human history, the first lines developing progressively and paintings reaching immortality on the walls of caves have formed the basis of the communication process prior to oral culture. The purpose lying beneath these lines and paintings is the desire to create a world similar to the one they live in. To André Bazin, creating quasi-image of the world is an entirely psychological desire. The achievement to create this similar image from the moment the moving image comes in contact with the viewer can be understood quite well when the way covered by cinema is considered. The more one approaches an objective reality, the more influential the similarity between the reality and those works that have achieved such a success is on the viewer. In this way, new pursuits have been inaugurated in search of new original and objective images. Out of the intimacy between meaning making and cinema art has arisen a new branch of science. Cinema is formed of dynamic images. It is because of this feature of cinema that psychoanalysis is applied within the analysis of cinema used as a tool of manifestation. Semiotics (*fr. semiologie*) is, with its most general and known definition, the science that studies signs and sign processes.

### About Image

Image emerges as a mean of expression that brings certain content with the viewer. As a result, it is at the focal point because of being the smallest meaningful unit of cinema. It is the substance of what we see with the naked eye; that is, the part not including the form. What is recorded by the film camera with a certain method constitutes the form of the image. Considering the form, director or cameraman have some contributions, such as angle and light. At that point, personal point of view is included to the product. In an image that different scales of shots are used, differences in meaning are constructed on purpose. Camera angles provide the vision of the ways how object is seen, such as good-bad and strong-weak. There is no difference between the substance of image and its physical appearance. Form; on the other hand, differs the image from other images with the same substances. The ways how readers of a written text and cinema viewers evaluate objects are different. While the reader imagines the objects, viewer sees the similar of the objects. Viewer confronts the moving image. What is reflected through the written text affects the form of the image. Form is important in cinema; because it directly affects the form of presentation and the meaning. Because signifier of the image extremely resembles to reality, it strongly creates the denotation. It is easy to understand the meaning through denotation. Director simply shows what he wants to show. To make out the correct meaning, viewers need to know the objects. Connotation becomes meaningful through previous and next images. Director needs to play with the form so as to give any meaning to his movie. Form comes into prominence because signified and signifiers are united in cinema. Connotation depends on the form. Despite his meticulous manner about the form, in some cases director cannot form the meaning that he wants. The reason is that a movie is not independent from the viewers. At this point, cultural codes that viewers accumulated manifest themselves. Each viewer understands the movie in his own way. Even if the viewers differ according to their educational or cultural backgrounds, method in cinema can create very different meanings. An applied method can create different meanings for different productions. One thing is certain, which is also accentuated by Vardar, throughout the history sign system has been used within the communication, such as painting and writing. Image always includes an attraction in itself, which appeals to the viewers. According to some scientists, the superiority of image over voice and writing should be discussed. For

example, according to Roland Barthes, language and writing are leaving our culture. Thanks to the contributions of digital technology, the fact revealed itself. Accordingly, “because of the graphic even writing itself has become an image” (Babylon and Mignot; 1992:9).

### **The Emergence of Semiology**

According to its most general and popular description, Semiology (*fr.semiologie*), is the science that examines signs and sign systems. It is not possible to understand semiology without understanding “sign” (*fr.sign*), which constitutes the main subject of it. Sign, “typically has the ability to substitute another thing, hence it is the object, existence, or phenomenon that reflects other than itself” (Vardar; 1980:11). With respect to Berke Vardar’s expressions, related concepts can be listed as follows, signified (*fr.signifié*) is the content formed by the combination of conceptual framework of sign and signifier. Signifier (*fr.signifiant*) is the sound or the unity of sounds that forms the sign by combining it with the signified. Iconic sign (*fr.icone*) is the sign that forms a similarity relation with external reality. According to another definition semiology is, in short, a science of signs and primarily deals with the emergences of meanings (Erdoğan and Alemdar; 1990:172). The start of the foundation of modern semiology dates back to the first quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century. American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) started to establish the foundation of modern semiology about same time, but in different locations. Between the years 1857 and 1913 Ferdinand de Saussure announced his students at University of Geneva that a new science called Semiology was emerging. He said that, “a science that will examine the place of signs within society can be designed; this science will constitute a part of the social psychology. We will call this science as semiology. Linguistic is nothing but a part of semiology.”(Saussure;2001:46). Semiology, which was established and pioneered by Saussure and Peirce, became an independent science after 1960’s. While researches like Louis Hjelmslev, Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Julia Kristeva, Christian Metz, Algirdas J. Greimas, and Jean Baudrillard embraced European tradition based on Saussure’s ideas; other researchers like Charles W. Morris, Ivor A. Richards, Charles K. Ogden, Umberto Eco, and Thomas Sebeok embraced American tradition pioneered by Pierce ([www.ege-edebiyat.org](http://www.ege-edebiyat.org)). Linguistics theorist Roland Barthes and his follower scientists protected the social reality of accepting beyond question the messages coming from mass communication mediums, which were constructed after the Second World War. The need for a new science revealing these mediums’ ideological functions, paved the way for the emergence of semiology. In those years as a result of strong propaganda activities, individuals of society had the tendency to accept beyond question all messages coming from mass communication mediums. Developments in political arena had inevitable repercussions in daily life within society. Repressive and strongly propaganda oriented political system showed itself through the messages that it sent out every day. Propaganda movies filmed during and after the war reveal the importance of this new science especially for the art of cinema. Linguistics, semiology, and art of cinema constituted the essence of Charles S. Pierce’s and Saussure’s studies; because, cinema is a linguistic phenomenon. It is inevitable that their studies were based on the linguistics. Saussure studies meaning and structure linguistic that enables communication. For him linguistics constitutes a part of semiology. Rules that will be formed for semiology can also be used for linguistics. Semiology, which examines mechanism of signs, also correlates with the art of cinema. Semiology is the act of examining cinema’s own raw material in accordance

with certain aims and topics. It is about determining how to reveal a movie's effect on viewers. Sign calls out to any person and creates a similar sign in this person's mind. In this sense, cinema forms a perfect space. Particularly, Applied Semiotics puts semiology studies into practice and applies them to the fields, such as science, society, education, trade, and literature; and tries to find solutions to the problems in the related fields and suggests new sign systems if necessary ([www.labweb.education.wisc.edu/Semiotics](http://www.labweb.education.wisc.edu/Semiotics)). Image is the smallest meaningful unit of cinema. Motion pictures can have different meanings through semiology, which is about the mechanisms of signs. In order to read between the lines, it is necessary to conduct a semiological analysis of the message within the movie. In other words, film analysis is of importance so as to see more than meets the eye. Characteristics of the social structure, socio-economical life, and political events are also discussed along with the movie. Motion pictures form wholeness with their surroundings, and it is possible to analyze them with different semiological methods. R. Barthes criticizes the movie regarding the usage of signifiers. For example, when shot sounds are addressed that someone was shot there are three conditions, signifier, signified, and sign. According to Peter Wollen, a movie is consisted of a number of events; that is, it does not include limitless number of events. Syntagmatic deals with it to a certain extent (Andrew; 2005:65). Cartoons and dialogues are basic elements that determine the criticized picture (Babylon; 1992: 158). Semiology, at the same time, forms the focal point of the studies about aesthetic of film. Naturally, all critics depend upon understanding the points of text; in other words, grasping the text fully. Although Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the pioneer theorists of the science, does not deal with the visual sign, Charles Sanders Peirce, Christian Metz, Umberto Eco, and others are interested in the essence of the visual sign. So far as the cinema is concerned, cinema semiologists concentrated on studies about the formation of denotation and connotation of the objective images.

### **Cinema and Semiology**

Christian Metz is one of the forerunners focusing on cinema semiology. As he puts, go to a movie means to go to see a story (Metz: 1986:43). Starting from the first samples of movies, it is possible to see a developing narration power in cinema. In order to study cinema narratif, it is necessary to examine the fields from which that narration structure originated. The most prominent fields are "drama" and "literature". Metz's theory depends on the knowledge of the former theorists. He argues that cinema is series of sentences; but, for him it is not the case to form a dictionary for cinematographic language. He studies the problematic of the integration between viewer and movie. Metz concentrates on identification from the perspective of viewer and movie. The viewer identifies himself with movie, and finds a slice of his life. Metz determines this situation with three elements. First, viewer identifies himself with the characters on screen, second he identifies himself with the camera. Camera movements imitate visual perceptions as well as physical movements of human being; hence, viewers strongly connect with the characters on screen. Through this imitation camera creates an impression of "reality". Third, viewers identify with themselves. The purpose of Metz is to study the impression that a movie makes on viewer. The aim of Metz and other semiologists is to free cinema from the umbrella of arts like literature and theater. In 1970's Metz wrote an article, "Modern Cinema and Narrativity", in this paper he tries to explain the chaos caused by the changes in cinema by simplifying it. For him it is wrong that every director has a unique language. There is no such thing as "cinematographic language" there is "grammar of cinema". The grammar of cinema was set in first ten years of cinema, and it was



completed. All directors should use the same basic grammar. As a result, cinema has a single grammar. However, elements that constitute this grammar can be used differently, and unique manners of narrativity can be created. According to Mertz, images are visual products that are shaped by the socio-cultural accumulations. Once the codes are expounded the messages in themselves are also revealed. Signs that are flourished by the previous knowledge of viewers reach different dimensions and meanings. Every viewer has different previous acquisitions and contributions. Each viewer expounds the code between him and the sign, and puts his own meaning to the text. In his theory Metz combines his ideas of the mechanism of cinema with constructivism and psychoanalysis. He advocates that cinema is different than other texts, it is not entirely auditory or visual, and for this reason it is more complicated to determine a certain sign. He interrogates the way how an artist produces the message. For him semiology aims to better understand the course of events. It focuses on the act of understanding. Each movie is perceived within its own features. It is important to know the method and culture. According to Mertz, each image and shot have a meaning, they create new connotations with other images. Scientists from other disciplines highly contributed to the development of semiology by providing different perspectives of thought and they created an interdisciplinary arena. Receivers of messages, within the framework of text-human-culture, produce new meanings along with their own experiences. As Mertz also underlines that it is not enough to be a semiologist so as to make a semiological analysis of a country film. It is necessary to know that particular country and be knowledgably about its cultural assets. In addition to that it is also important to know that country's language. Cinema provides a productive structure with the plethora of images and sound effects. Naturally "there are differences between written messages and symbolic messages" (Bernard: 1978:59). The messages that cinema reinforces through images, do not disappear from minds for a long time. Accordingly, "motion pictures, film or television productions ask less power from their viewers, compared to the readers and audiences." (Chaumely: 1992:104).

### **Conclusion**

M. Mac Luhan classified the mass communication mediums as hot and cold. According to this classification, which was created according to the density of viewer contribution, cinema is described as a hot mass communication medium. The reason is that this medium can transmit all kinds of messages without enabling its viewers to participate. In this sense, facilities about the expression that sound and image provide are discussed. Chaumely's argument underlines the easiness of transmission provided by sound and image. Accordingly, "thanks to movies today it is easier to take a factory to a work place, rather than to take someone to a factory." It has already been mentioned that in cinema several images are sent to the viewers through conventional symbols. As French theorist and cartographer Jacques Bertin also argues, symbols are 'language of the eye'. On the one hand target group receives a message with pleasure, and on the other hand they are informed. The purpose is to keep alive the attention via dynamic images (Ozan; 1994:80). It is not enough to watch a movie that will be studied and provide its analysis conducted by a semiologist. Just like the viewers/audiences that receive messages from other visual/audial mass communication mediums, cinema viewers read the cinematographic language. In other words, there is a visual reading. In this sense, the place of image and dimension of its function become more important. Metz argues that cinema is different than other texts, it is not completely audial or visual, and for that reason it is more complicated

to determine a sign. He mainly questions the way how an artist produces the messages. For him the purpose of semiology is to better understand the course of events. He makes descriptions for the sense-making function of cinema. That is, he focuses on the act of understanding. Each movie is perceived within its features. While describing the context, it is important to know the culture. It is a must to read between the lines of a movie's and blend it with the social events. As a result, knowing the culture and language features is one of the important and necessary elements for the semiological analysis of this country film. Knowing cultural openings has a significant place in film analysis. Today, the concentration on motion picture analysis through semiology, constructs basic steps of an interdisciplinary path.

### References

- Andrew, M. Butler. (2005). *Film Studies The Pocket Essential*. London.
- Babylon, C. & Mignot, X. (1992). *La Communication*. Ed. Fac Paris.
- Büker, Seçil. (1991). *Meaning Making in Cinema*. İmgekitabevi Press. Ankara.
- Chaumely, J. & Huisman D. (1992). *Les Relations Publiques*, Ed. PUF, Paris.
- Christian, Metz. (1986). *'Essays on Meaning in Cinema'*, İzmir.
- Erdoğan, İ. & Alemdar, K. (1990). *Communication and Society, Mass Communication Theories*, Bilgiyayınevi press. Istanbul.
- Ozan, Rengin. (1994). *'The Usage of Image in Public Relations'*. Master These, Istanbul University, Communication Faculty. Istanbul.
- Saussure, Ferdinand. (2001). 'General Linguistics Courses' Translated by Berke Vardar. Ed. Multilingual İstanbul.
- Toussian, Bernard. (1978). *Qu'est-ce que la Semiologie?*, Toulouse.
- Vardar, Berke. (2001). *'Basic Concepts and Principles of Linguistics'* Ed. Multilingual. İstanbul.
- Vardar, Berke. (1980). *Linguistics and Dictionary of Grammar Terms*, Ed. Turkish Linguistics Society. Ankara.
- Vardar, Berke. (1982). *Basic Concepts of Linguistics*, Ed. Turkish Linguistics Society. Ankara.

### Electronical References

- [www.labweb.education.wisc.edu/Semiotics/definitions/inde](http://www.labweb.education.wisc.edu/Semiotics/definitions/inde)
- [www.ege.edu.tr/ege-edebiyat.org](http://www.ege.edu.tr/ege-edebiyat.org)