



Journal of Communication and Cultural Trends (JCCT)

Volume No. 1, Issue No. 1, Spring 2019

ISSN_(P): 2706-9141 ISSN_(E): 2706-915X

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jcct>

Issue DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jcct.11>

Homepage: <https://journals.umt.edu.pk/iccsc/jcct/Default.aspx#>

Journal QR Code:



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Online Published: Spring 2019

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jcct.11.04>

Article QR Code:



Malik H. Danish

To cite this article:

Danish, H. M., & Batool, A. (2019). Visual signification in thematic concerns: A semiotic analysis. *Journal of Communication and Cultural Trends*, 1(1), 61–76.

[Crossref](#)



A publication of the
Institute of Communication and Cultural Studies
University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.

Visual Signification in Thematic concerns: A Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract

Visual narrative is a modern way of dispensing information or conveying a story to audience through elements with significations. Twenty first century is marked with the revolutionary trends of constructing narratives through images. Facebook and other social networking sites have made 'image' an easy way of communicating ideas, feelings and emotions. The researchers in the current study attempt to highlight the superiority of visual information using semiotic tools as the medium of decoding signs and their signification in elements appearing on a visual screen. Furthermore, the current research tries to elaborate the use of patterns, designs and concepts embedded in the video of the song by utilizing mise-en-scene, dexterously. The paper analyzes the visuals in the song by Sajjad Ali, 'Tasveer Bana Kay' semiotically, using Charles Peirce' model and assigns signification to the elements of the visual text. The theme of the song is constructed through camera shot and angle, settings, colour and gestures and abstract ideas are metaphorically presented. Six images have been selected from the song video and analyzed semiotically. The current study establishes that a message can easily be conveyed with the help of images, amplifying the main theme of a narrative. The study gives an impetus to work on the genre of film studies and specially mise-en-scene as a supplementing device to communicate more than what is presented on the screen by decoding and constructing meaning which are implicitly explicit.

Keywords: visuals, narrative, mise –en – scene, signs, film study, images

Introduction

Visual narrative is a hybrid term that comprises two words, 'visual' and 'narrative'. It can be defined as the visual depiction of or alluding to more than one 'event' that takes place sequentially in time and eventually alters the condition of one character at least (Murray, 1995). Action plays a crucial role in a narrative since it brings about change and so does time. Hence, the term 'narrative' is synonymous to story (Murray, 1998). A visual narrative

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(visual story telling) is basically a method of telling story through images using visual media. Still photography, illustrations or videos are used to tell story and additional effects are created with the help of music, audio or voice.

The current era comprises a world where information is available in abundance and it is ever changing. In this situation, when we know that we are over-informed and continuously bombarded with new information, meaning is hard to find. How can one access meaning? The audience decode meaning from their minds and the world around them. Eco (1982) takes text as a pattern of instructions operating in a variety of areas, having the capacity of denoting a variety of meanings based on the social and cultural context and the exposure of the reader. In this age overloaded with information, it is hard to strike a balance between meaning and information. Semiotic means in a visual text signify deeper meanings and lead the audience to infer the messages conveyed through them.

This incessant struggle to infer meaning from the given information has really given an impetus to visual story telling. Human beings visualize data such as in the form of animated movies to explore hidden systems of meaning around them and use infographics to extract and grasp human emotions. Pictorial superiority occupies human brain and it prefers visual over textual sources.

Despite the fact that we need some settings to comprehend an image, images are seen promptly in the most literal sense of the word. Human brain handle images without any medium of interpretation between seeing and comprehending. Individuals can read images without deciphering or interpreting them as they do words and letters; children can comprehend images even before they gain proficiency in language. Recounting a story with pictures makes the story simple, targets feelings as opposed to rationale, and allows it to reach a large group of people. This is one reason that pictures are said to be more intense than content and "worth a thousand words" as the prevalent aphorism says.

Along with other elements in the visual screen, *mise-en-scène* alludes to everything that shows up before the camera and its composition—arrangement, sets, props, performing artists, outfits, and lighting. "*Mise-en-scène*", alongside the cinematography and editing of a film, impacts the verisimilitude of a film, according to its viewers. The different components

of configuration help express a film's vision by creating a feeling of time and space, and additionally, by setting a temperament, sometimes even proposing a character's perspective. Human understanding of this world is essentially dependent on the imitating media such as television, cinema, video and radio.....so imaginary world belongs more to reality than reality itself and representation has a greater value than reality (Kearney, [1988](#)).

The current research endeavors to highlight text in linguistic form and to delineate its themes by utilizing the auxiliary nature of visual narrative. The visual narrative conveys a message which is perceived by the audience and this message corresponds with the linguistic message conveyed in the background. Visual narratives include visual stories, picture stories, narrative pictures and narrative images. The main purpose of visual story telling or visual narrative is to narrate a story. It can be fiction, mythology, folklore and fable etc. The narrative form, through actors, sets forth the action of the story as per sequence. Visual narrative may use different media such as stones, paper, canvas or electronic media including films and animated movies. The current research invites the scholars and academicians to locate perspectives and interpretations in the visual text using semiotics as the theoretical framework.

2. Literature Review

The history of visual story telling is as old as image itself and dates back 30,000 years to cave paintings in Egyptian hieroglyph and Chinese characters that presented a picture which actually depicted a related story. Visual storytelling pertains to a universal nature and can be seen in Greek vase representations of myths and frescos painted on the walls of churches in Italy, Emakimono from Japan and Manga of twenty first century, embellished manuscript of middle ages and pictorial magazines of the current age, all are examples of visual story telling. Visual story telling has a long history of progress and development and one cannot give a reliable version of this history. Narrative forms rely on pictures and clips for the sake of communicating a story which makes it easier for viewers to understand what had been narrated from the past and what will be narrated after the current scene. Movies are also made by using animation with the help of images (Collins & Muireadhaigh, [n.d.](#)). Visual Narrative (VN) has been explored and studied by many researchers and this term has been used in their researches.

The term visual narrative may be defined as an image which narrates a story. The idea visual denotes everything related to 'sight' and the term narrative means 'to know' (Abbot, [2008](#), p.10). The term narrative and story have different meanings; story means a sequence of imagined incidents and ideas (Cambridge University Press, [1995](#)). What makes us attentive towards a story is its narrative, when story is a series of events in itself. So, in a visual narrative, the story is revealed and unfolded with the help of images presented to the audience. A narrative, according to Ali ([2012](#)), is a mutual communication between the creator and the viewers in the shape of a discourse which is purely visual and relies on the knowledge of the onlooker.

Images and visuals have been studied by many scholars like Kress and Van Leeuwen ([1996](#)); O'Halloran ([2004](#)); Thibault ([2000](#)); Unsworth ([2006](#)); Martinec and Salway ([2005](#)). On the other hand, sequential images have also been studied by Lim ([2007](#)), Baldry and Thibault ([2006](#)); Matthiessen ([2007](#)) to explore their hidden meanings.

All the studies done previously, focusing on different types of images from various media, have highlighted the significance of this particular genre. The current paper probes into the images presented in the form of visuals to understand their semiotic aspects in order to find the connection between them and their potential to narrate a story.

Besides the concept of signs in Saussurean tradition, the triadic model presented by American pragmatist, logician and philosopher Charles Sander Peirce added to the taxonomies of signs. He introduced three interconnected parts of the semiotic model given below:-

- 1 The representamen: the form which the sign takes.
- 1 An interpretant: not an interpreter but rather the sense made of the sign.
3. An object: to which the sign refers.

Peirce further categorized signs as iconic, indexical and symbolic in their signification. The iconic sign resembles the object it signifies, the symbolic sign signifies something 'thrown together' by means of convention or cultural connotations, and the indexical sign engrosses the link between the cause and effect relation among the sign and the interpretant. According to Peirce, indexical sign is 'determined by its dynamic object by virtue of being in a real relation to it.' (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman, [1992](#), p. 06). An indexical sign engrosses an existential link

between the sign and the interpretant.

This triadic model by Peirce is used as the framework for the analysis of images in a visual. The interpretation of these various signs help a semiotic mind infer significations encoded in the visuals. Peirce, in his essay 'Logic as Semiotics' writes,

“A Sign may be termed an Icon, an Index, or a Symbol. An Icon is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses, just the same, whether any such object actually exists or not....An Index is a sign which refers to the

Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object....A Symbol is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object”. (Peirce, [1931-58](#), p.08)

Peirce's typology of signs is not mutually exclusive; a sign can be iconic, symbolic or indexical. He insisted that it would be difficult if not impossible to instance an absolutely pure index or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality (Peirce, [1931-58](#), p. 2.306).

Semiotics was adopted as a major approach to explore cultural studies in 1960s. Roland Barthes' popular essays were translated into English with the title 'mythologies' (1957) and trailed by an increasing number of scholars and academicians in 1970s and 1980s, taking into consideration the awareness of scholarly approach. Barthes argued in his writings in 1964 that

Semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification (Barthes, [1967](#), p. 9)

The term 'semiology' is sometimes used to refer to the Saussurean tradition, whilst 'semiotics' sometimes refers to the Peircean tradition, but now the term 'semiotics' is more likely to be used as an umbrella term to embrace the whole field (Nöth, [1990](#), p. 14).

Semiotics and semantics share common apprehensions regarding the meaning of signs. John Sturrock argues that semantics centers on the aspects of the meaning of a word, while semiotics focuses on how signs come to

have meaning. Semiotics is applied to analyze text that may be verbal or non-verbal, or even both. The text, generally referred to, is a message either in written form or it has been recorded as audio and/or video, which is autonomous of its 'sender' or 'receiver'. A text in semiotics is a collection of signs employed such as gestures, images, sounds or words. All the signs are constructed in accordance with the conventions and the particular way of communication of the relevant genre.

Thematic concerns in the visual have been well interpreted by scholars but the interpretation pertaining to visual signification has been ignored. Mostly, the researches focus on dialogues or any other written text of the visual narrative to be put to test in critical discourse terms. The current research manages to investigate the thematic concerns or to signify the messages in the visuals by locating meanings encoded in settings, video frame, gestures and cinematography.

3. Analysis

The term visual narrative or visual story telling signifies all sorts of images whether still or moving, on paper or in the form of a video, having an idea to communicate to the audience, displaying a certain order or sequence. VN is as old as human history and it was developed to support the textual messages lying within the text to tell a story effectively. The images are pinned together in such a way that they present the details and support the process of storytelling. Story telling needs one to be as skillful as a film maker, however, it does not require one to be technically trained.

The thriving mode of storytelling presents distinctive qualities as images in the stories to communicate a series of events in a restricted manner. Other contributing factors include camera, arrangements, settings, props, outfits and lighting and they also play a vital part in discerning and connecting the chain of thoughts running through the story. The process of semiosis studies signs and symbols, particularly as a part of language or other media of visual communication. Semiotics is concerned with anything that can be taken as a sign.

Differences of techniques and ways are significant in probing and reaching the meaning and implications in a wider sense. For example, print and electronic media are different from each other in many ways. Linguistics plays a crucial role in the whole process, although language can communicate only a limited range of sociological process. For the last few

decades, social dimensions have also been added to semiotics. Hence, methods have been enumerated to function for users to work in wider social and cultural settings for understanding the meaning.

The paper aims at targeting the richness of meanings scattered in the form of images through semiotics. The visual text originates in the linguistically supported text. To serve the purpose, a song video 'Tasveer banakay' has been selected. The song is sung by the renowned Pakistani semi-classical, pop and rock singer Sajjad Ali. The song is written, produced and directed by Sajjad Ali himself. Different images from the video narrate a story with the help of signs serving as text. The signs are analyzed and connections between signs and meanings (signifieds) are interpreted and explained in detail by using Peirce' triadic model. The visual narrative discusses different aspects of the visuals providing support to the story running through the background.



Figure 1. Hand with a chain

In the process of interpreting the images, the signs and the signifieds, the researcher highlights the multiple connections between the series of images on screen and the story board of the song. Images are selected and effects are enhanced with the help of light, props, settings, outfits and settings to create an understanding of the hidden meanings in the visual text. The data for the analysis include visuals from the video. Images are analyzed by using Peirce' triadic model. Images are analyzed in terms of decoding elements of visuals including settings, costumes and props, video frame, gestures and cinematography. Interpretation of the visuals will

enlighten the semiotic perspective in conveying the thematic concern by the video director, even if there is no character other than the protagonist himself in the video.

The video of the song narrates the journey of a sole person driving across the roads aimlessly. The driver is the protagonist who is alone and has a gloomy past. Overall, the video is shot in black and white and without colours as his life is colourless.

The very first image in the video which captures the attention of the audience is a hand with a chain. The chain in the image is a sign of adherence to some old memories, ways of life, customs and traditions. It represents cultural norms and social barriers which force a person to live accordingly. The person is made to wear it or he wears it with his own choice. The chain symbolizes his association with someone. The use of black and white colours connotes the monotony of life in the face of certain norms and traditions. He can do away with these articles but being in use for such a long time, they have turned to be his second nature. The chain is



Figure 2.

symbolic of living in the past and trying to find solace in the past happenings. An extremely close up shot magnifies the importance of the object in the image. All other details are omitted except the wrist and the chain which have been placed in a close relation to the audience. The ‘bondage’ is signified in the image in terms of the protagonist’s association with the past picture shows darkness, with lights flickering on the road. The



Figure 3.

element of melancholy is enhanced by using black and white colour scheme in the video. An aura of mystery has been created by using dark grey colour that engulfs the whole video. Deep spacing scheme has been utilized to show the actual situation of the character in the face of his circumstance. A full view has been given and camera has not been focused on any object in the image. All parts of the image are placed away from camera. Camera spacing can be taken as an indexical sign, signifying the distance that the protagonist maintains with the outer world. Darkness is a sign of sorrow, disaster, chaos, death and mourning. It signifies some disaster that has taken place and its darkness prevails all around. Although the overall situation is chaotic, yet the vehicles on the road are moving in their respective lanes. No matter how bad a situation may be, one has to conform to the social and cultural norms of the society one lives in. The road symbolizes the universal truth **'life goes on'** and it never stops when we lose someone in life. Road is an iconic sign signifying the journey of life, dark but dotted with light, that is opportunities, dreams, hopes, happiness and sorrows. A dark road with lights is another iconic sign that signifies the dark side of modern life. It depicts affluence on the face of it but dull and dark from within. Urban life also symbolizes alienation and emotional distance. The road may also be a symbolic sign of an unbridled desires of an individual. It has no end and after reaching a particular destination, one sets new goals and aims. The road may lead to a journey towards self-recognition and also to the final destination.

The protagonist in the video is driving aimlessly. Overall modern civilization has turned man into an introvert who is less engaged in collective and social activities. Modern man is strangled in the clutches of a schedule. The situation gives rise to an introvert behavior on an individuals' part and individuals are compelled to be isolated. The person travelling in the car is watching the world through the window, an indexical sign of isolation and emotional distance of modern man in the face of technological advancements. People are made to see through the given window. The only given passage can be electronic or print media that feeds information and paves the way for certain ideologies, dictating what to think, how to think, how to behave and how to live. One is only allowed to think and see things, permitted according to social and cultural norms of the group, otherwise he/she may be declared an outcast. On the other hand, the window may be treated as an outlet to change, to what remains unknown, to opportunities that can be availed and the new world possibly waiting to be built after disaster. The scene outside the window is a mixture of light and darkness. No colours are found, instead a monotonous darkness is the main feature perceptible outside the window. The situation outside the window is ambiguous and has both negative and positive aspects. One who wants change will face all the ordeals to bring about that change. Everything is looked at through the window is a symbol of subjectivity and individuality.



Figure 4. An empty seat at the right side of the traveler

The next image portrays an empty seat at the right side of the traveler. The empty seat is an indexical sign that signifies the empty space in his life

after the loss of his beloved. No one else has yet occupied that place which ironically signifies the attachment and the association of the protagonist with the one who is lost. Empty seat may symbolize objectivity in a broader perspective in a world where one cannot evade one's own self. It has been used as an iconic sign to amplify the element of grief, loneliness, and sorrow. Moreover, it dexterously fashions the dominant mood of the video. Colourlessness in the video as an indexical sign emphasizes sterility. An impact of barrenness and detachment from the exterior or the outer world is created by using it. Emotional ambivalence and uncertainty on the person's part is obvious. Frontal angle is often used to feature human figures to openly defy the distance between screen and audience. The empty seat is featured using frontal technique to minimize the gap between the audience and the general milieu of the barren situation.



Figure 5. The facial expressions

The image introduces the only character in the video. The facial expressions are controlled and are supplementing the overall aura created by black and white settings of the video. White colour symbolizes purity while black symbolizes destruction and destitute. Camera is angled to frame the right side of the face while the left side of the face is kept in dark. It is symbolically signified since only limited information is revealed and the whole truth about the situation is yet to be discovered. Facial expression is an indexical sign of inner peace, stability, or total submission to some reality. The protagonist seems to have been overpowered by the situation. The facial expression is an indexical sign of internal motivation which is more powerful than that of external stimulus. Low-key lighting is used to create a contrast between bright and dark part of the image. Shadows are

created for giving an impression of obscurity and ambiguity. A shadow is an iconic sign signifying that the situation is not clear, a sense of confusion has wrapped up the character and the situation. The use of light signifies that an element of mystery has been enhanced about the hero and the situation. A low angle shot shows the character as dominant and bigger as compared to the situation. Seat belt is also a symbolic sign of precaution; while living on this social planet, one needs to be careful.



Figure 6. Travelling on the same old path

The turn on the road symbolically signifies a change in the present situation. The gaze of the character is fixed. It means that though a considerable time has passed, he is still travelling on the same old path. The turn is an iconic sign of unwelcoming traditional patterns of thinking prevailing in the society in the face of change and new ideas. Change is not embraced openly. People like to live according to old customs and traditions since it makes them feel secure and confirm them as a part of the group or society they are living in. Lanes on the road are a symbolic sign of social norms and ways which are to be followed, no matter how hard it is for an individual. An extreme long shot is meant to give general information about the scene, rather than any particular details. The image projects confusion and chaos regarding the situation. One scene dissolves into another, showing the link between the two, or to indicate time laps. The road ahead symbolically signifies the future of the protagonist, while the back view

mirror reflects the face and indexically signifies the past of the character and his association with it.

4. Conclusion

A story can easily be narrated through the images structured in the text of a visual. Visuals in a video are arranged, shot and presented in such a way that they support the story board and make the audience understand it well enough even without music and lyrics. Semiotics, by decoding signs, takes into account the images and factors which lead the audience to comprehend the narrative by focusing on images only. The situation is revealed by careful use of images and the meaning is conveyed through their apt use in a particular way. So, a sign can be indexical, symbolic and iconic and has multiple layers of meanings. It is upon the audience to extract the meaning according to the cultural and emotional significations attached to that particular sign. In the study of visual arts settings, camera angle, shot and props have great significance. These techniques play a key role in conveying certain ideas associated with images presented on the screen. The current study maintains that the use of props as a supplementing device to decode text has always been helpful in the genre of visual narrative. Visual narrative is a powerful medium to express and communicate through settings, shot and camera angles and an additional effect is created with the help of audio, music or voice. The signification encoded in the signs can be investigated through semiotic means. Charles Sander Peirce's model can be used in categorizing signs and inferring meanings in any visual narrative.

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