A SEMIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF FILMS

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Abstract. *The subject of this research paper is a semiotic analysis of films, as part of media semiology. From the moment when film art, also called the seventh art, appeared by the end of the 19th century, it has become a popular medium of the modern age. Films represent media content which can be watched by people all over the world, without literacy as a prerequisite. However, one of the requirements for the viewer to enjoy the film is to understand the films language. It is therefore necessary to know the basics of film semiology. This paper, in addition to being addressed to the professional public, that is, to audio and visual media theorists, is also intended for the general public. This goal is to be achieved through theoretical examination of the basic concepts and directions in the semiology of films.*

Key words: *media, film, semiology, meaning*

THE SEMIOTICS OF MEDIA

The term media, derived from the Latin term medius – which means *in the middle*, is used in this paper to imply mediators in communication, and any "...natural and/or artificial substance, that is, a set of natural and/or artificial conditions through which communication is achieved" (Radojković and Miletić 2005, 95). Any discussion about the media necessarily leads to semiology. In general terms, semiology is the science of signs, or more precisely, of sign systems. The term itself is derived from the Greek words *semeion* – sign and *logos* – science.

The term *semiotics* is often used as a synonym for semiology, (according to Giro 2001, 6). Šuvaković has recently said: "Semiotics is defined as a formal science of signs and linguistic and non-linguistic meanings. Semiology is defined as the science of the creation, transfer, functions and transformation of signs and meanings of linguistic

and non-linguistic origin in social life, so semiology can also be defined as the semiotics of culture" (Šuvaković 2011, 635).

Although semiology has emerged from linguistics, it does not only include the study of language but also goes on to research other sign systems using knowledge in the field of linguistics, information theory, sociology, and psychoanalysis. Roland Barthes, one of the founders of the modern semiological theory defines semiology in the following way: "Semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of a ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not *languages*, then at least systems of signification"(Barthes 1971, 317). This leads to the emergence of applied semiology, including the semiology of media and film. More precisely, the semiology of films is a part of a broader concept – the semiology of media, which appeared in the second half of the 20th century, and some of the first theorists were Roland Barthes (Barthes 1972), Umberto Eco (Eco 1979), Christian Metz (Metz 1974).

Media semiology examines the structure and meaning of signs in the media, the ways in which they spread and the way they affect the recipients in different or particular contexts. Semiological analysis of the media, just like meaning, is an analysis of the media process. "The signs are intermediary instances (mediators) between the so-called reality, which is, according to Charles Sanders Peirce, a reality mediated between the earlier processes of semiosis and our interpretation of this reality with the use of signs" (Nöth 2004, 469). Media as such do not convey the "natural" reality, but it is always semiologicaly mediated.

Barthes believes that every communication process which includes media messages consists of two systems: **denotation** – literal, obvious, primary meaning (which he dismisses in some of his later papers, assuming that there is only connotation), and **connotation** – the secondary meaning of media messages, including cultural, social and personal associations depending on code systems. In addition, codes can be defined as groups of social rules and conventions that are learned throughout living in a particular culture and which are socially and historically predetermined. Media messages can make sense only within certain code system of signs.

Stuart Hall's observations are important in order to explain the polysemy of media messages. By adopting Barthes' semiology, and his definitions of denotation and connotation, a system that admits that the denotative level is ideologically colored, Hall distinguishes the coding process, which is the intended meaning the creator of the message initially implied, and he also mentions decoding, which is the ability of the audience to understand the messages differently. Stuart Hall proposed that there are three ways of decoding the meaning of a message:

- the dominant reading that matches the intent of the creator of the message and which is, for example, the goal of the creator advertising for messages who use manipulative techniques trying to limit several meanings to one dominant meaning;
- negotiated reading which partially coincides with the intent of the creator of the message;
- oppositional reading that is completely the opposite which means that everything in the message is rejected.

Stuart Hall ended the practice according to which media messages are viewed as a reflection of reality, the audience is viewed as a passive audience, and the communication process is a linear process. Hall believes that media messages are ideologically colored

and encoded in a way that suits the dominant society groups, and in a way, that it is in line with formal features of the particular media. Therefore, the media do not present, but rather represent a reality based on interests. An active audience decodes the meaning from the media messages. "Before this message can have an `effect`, however one defines it, satisfy a `need` or be put to a "use", it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which "have an effect", influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioral consequences" (Hall 2008, 277).

Once decoded, the message becomes social practice. Hall answers the question of whether and how encoding codes may differ from decoding codes, and emphasizes that this is conditioned by the differences between the sender and the recipient. "Wrong" understanding is possible.

After investigating visual communication, in particular television, Hall says that the television sign is an icon following Peirce's trilogy[1] and emphasizes that such characteristics are always encoded, although sometimes they look as if they were natural. His point is that, "Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed – the effect of an articulation between sign and referent – but to be "naturally" given (Hall 2008, 279). However, even apparently `natural` visual codes are culture-specific, claims Hall. Actually, when it comes to naturalized codes, there is a fundamental alignment and reciprocity, sort of equivalence between the encoding and decoding sides of an exchange of meanings. Hall uses the domestic animal *cow* as an example and talks about the link between the visual sign for `cow` and the linguistic sign for this animal. Both the image of a cow and the word cow are not `natural`, they rather conventional. "Iconic signs are, however, particularly vulnerable to being `read` as natural because visual codes of perception are very widely distributed and because this type of sign is less arbitrary than a linguistic sign. The linguistic sign, `cow` possess none of the properties of the thing represented, whereas the visual sign appears to possess some of those properties" (Hall 2008, 280).

These rules also apply to the film as a medium of mass communication.

SEMIOLOGY OF FILMS

According to Radojković and Miletić (Radojković and Miletić 2007, 122–123), films can be defined as content that is communicated very widely, as an aesthetic message above all, and as an audio and visual medium of mass communication, although it is also broadcast in other mass media. Film is also defined as artwork "...which is put in place of the potential, expected or random individual fantasy of the viewer. In this way, the films create a paradoxical development of the imagery or a simulation of fantasies for a large number of mutually unrelated individuals..." (Šuvaković 2011, 211). Moreover, "... the film is the display of a display (mimesis of mimesis) because it does not only show what the eye sees (the scene, the body, the person in the scene, the event, the presentation and storytelling of the event, the chronology of the scenes), but it also shows what cannot be

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[1] Icon – a sign has a similarity to the object that it represents, the sign points to an object based on its properties; Index – there is a direct physical connection between the sign and the object, it is causally linked with it; Symbol – the sign is conventionally linked to the object.

shown and experienced visually (pain, passion, death, pleasure, orgasm, thoughts, divine, general, ideology, ethics, subconscious, fantasy – what the eye wants to see but never sees in real life, etc.)" (Šuvaković 2011, 213).

From the 1960s, film theorists have begun semiological analysis, first in France and Italy.[2] The semiology of films is a part of the theory of film, and among the topics it deals with, what we should emphasize as the structure and meaning of the signs used in films, the communication processes in the making and reception of films, the relationship between films and the cultural context. According to Nevena Dakovic, the theory of film could be defined as a science about the media and communication nature of films (Daković 2012, 19). The semiology of films deals with the kind of meaning a film will communicate. Film studies appeared a little later, in the second half of the 20th century, first in the United States, as part of the Culture Studies. By nature, film studies are interdisciplinary, studying the film comprehensively. The film is above all analyzed as a cultural text in a particular context.

Throughout history, it is possible to distinguish a first and a second semiotic level. The first, classical semiology of the film was developed in the spirit of structuralism[3] and the center of interest was the structure of the movie code. The synonyms of the film semiology of that time were these metaphors: the grammar of the film language or the language of the film. There is an analogy between films and language. The structure of the film is compared with the structure of the language, and the grammar of films is compared with the grammar of verbal language. One of the first authors, Robert Bataille, compared a film frame with a word (Omon 2006, 154). Thus, Sergei Eisenstein, a representative of the Russian films semiology, for example, equated the film image with the word, and a combination of images obtained by editing – with a sentence (Nöth 2004, 500). According to Radojković and Miletić, the basic unit of motion – photogram is analogous to phonemes or graphs, a film frame is equated to a word, the scenes are syntagms, and a film sequence is analogous to a sentence. "A film frame is everything that is seen and heard during one continuous recording step, from turning on to shutting off the camera. More frames create a scene, multiple scenes – a sequence, and a series of sequences – a short film or a feature length film" (Radojković and Miletić 2005, 125). Frame[4], as the basic unit of the film language is determined spatially, so the film space include everything that can be seen, as well as all that cannot be seen, and is just assumed. It is also defined temporally, so we are talking about film time.

The ideological, social, political, psychological dimension of the film, the context, the communication processes in the process of making and reception of the film, are at the center of the attention of the second semiology, within the framework of post-structuralism.[5] In addition

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[2] However, the founder is considered to be Reymond Spottiswoode, who published the book *A Grammar of the Film: An Analysis of Film Technique* in 1935, in London, where he talks about film structure and its specific elements (according to Omon 2006, 153).

[3] Structuralism is a theoretical movement that appeared in France in the 1950s, and it is predominantly used in the research of culture and its creations, as well as in the mass media. The basic concept of structuralism is that human activities and their products, as well as thinking itself, are constructed, and not naturally given. The representatives are Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Ferdinand de Saussure, Louis Althusser.

[4] Frame is determined by the relation between the camera and object which is being recorded, and in that relationship film plan is very important, as well as the angle of the camera, the motion of the camera, the composition of the frame.

[5] As a criticism of structuralism, the theoretical stream of post-structuralism appeared in 1960s in France, but it only became famous in 1970s in the Anglo-Saxon world. As a theory of postmodernism, it encompasses several theoretical schools, among which are: semiology, discursive analysis, deconstruction, text theory,

to the syntactic, the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of the semiology of films began to be studied. "Whilst the first semiology, as linguistics and media-centralized, deals with denotation and description, the second semiology is focused on the social aspect, and focuses on the ideological, psychological and political aspects and influences of films ... applied within the framework of the Theory of Film, and exploring the ways and methods in which films construct the subject and his position, determined by a sense of belonging to an ideological or social group" (Šuvaković 2011, 39).

Some of the representatives of the second semiology of the film are Jean Louis Baudry and Christian Metz who is also associated with the first, classical semiologist. Within the framework of the Marxist ideological criticism, Baudry points out that the film, due to its technical characteristics to reproduce a three-dimensional image of the world is able to create a civil ideology. According to him, the film with its technical characteristics enables a `way of representation` of the three-dimensional world that places the viewer in the position of the `subject of transcendence`, the bearer of an idealistic sense which originates in the circumstances where the viewer sees the recorded scene from a central position that suggests a monocular perspective of the Quattrocento. From the `mirror role` of the media and the viewers', `security about their own identity`, arises due to the `artificial regression` to the state before the formation of the ego, where the difference between oneself and the other is not yet established, and therefore there is no differentiation between the perception and the performance, it is something similar to a hallucination, to the vision of reality that is not real. It is the `belief mode` where the impression of reality is enhanced by the similarity to a dream, the so called `fiction effect`, which stimulates the `subject effect`, the place where the subconscious desires are created. They are the source of meaning and thus generate a civic ideology regardless of the mode of use and of the intentions of the author" (Stojanović 1991, 8–9).

The work of Christian Metz, the French film semiologist, the leading name of European film semiology (Stojanović 1983, 31), could be defined as work aimed at discovering meaningful structures in the film message, inspired by the works of the linguists Saussure and Peirce. In his research, Metz prefers narrative, feature films, but he does not exclude the possibility of carrying out semiological analysis of other types of films as well.

According to Dušan Stojanović, Metz's work can be divided into four stages: In the first stage he believed that the film image is analogous to reality. He made a distinction between denotation and connotation in films, presented and expressed an aesthetic instance of the film, perceptually and affectively annotated. When it comes to denotation, he talks about diegesis: "…the story itself, but also the fictitious time and space which are intertwined and interwoven within it, as well as the personalities, landscapes, events and other narrative elements, provided they are considered in their denotative sense" (Metz 1973, 90). Metz rejects the double articulation, and recognizes codification only in large syntagmatic units (rational dimensions), in scenes, sequences, syntagms. He believes that the basic parts pertaining to film semiology are film editing, frames, sequences, large syntagmatic units, camera motion, image and word relationship (Metz 1973, Metz 1978).

At a second level, Metz talks about film codes, which make up the language of the film. "…The term *language* in the narrow sense of the word, which refers to everyday language,

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intertextuality, the theory of signifying practices. The representatives are Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Judith Butler, Jean Baudrillard and Julia Kristeva.

Metz replaces with the word *code* and defines it in opposition to a complementary term, *message*. The *code* is a logical relationship that allows the message to be understood. A code is composed of signifying elements, while a message is composed of the tagged ones. In order to earn his name, the code must be instantiated in several texts: the text can have one or more codes, or none" (Gavrić 1983, 48).

The code is defined as the system, and the message as the text, and the relationship between a code and a message is parallel to the relationship between the system and the text. Metz also mentions the syntagms as a horizontal set of messages which make up a text, from the paradigm in a movie, which reflects the code as a system. According to Metz, in addition to this, semiology often studies the syntagmatic relations, because paradigmatic relations are partial and fragmented.

He also makes a distinction between the extra-cinematographic codes that exist outside the film in other signifying systems, and the cinematographic codes that exist only in films. He further divided them into general ones that apply to all the films (driving a camera with a panorama, for example), and special ones, which he calls sub-codes, and are characteristic to certain epochs and genres (for example, classic western).

In this stage of his work, Metz rejects the idea that signifying units are only found within large syntagmatic units, and believes that in films, in the code, there is no common signifying or non-signifying minimum unit, and that each code has its own. For technical codes, that is a photogram, in editing – it is a frame, in narrative codes – syntagmatic units, in psychoanalytic code – a symbolic object. "This denial of the film's reliance on codes has developed under the influence of ideas that emerged in the late sixties in a French magazine *Tel Quel*, by authors such as Jacques Derrida, Philip Sollers and Julia Kristeva. Starting from one ideological point of view, they questioned Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of the sign as a relation between signifier and signified, claiming that these are a product of a civic ideological need for a speaking subject, which should be replaced by the concept of signifying production in which the sign does not appear as a solid link between signifier and signified. Only the relation between the independent signifiers would make what Derrida called the difference" (Stojanović 1983, 39).

On a third level, Metz is under the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis and speaks of the film as the "institution of the signifier"…while the forms of the signifier can be found in the subconscious and archetypal, imaginary and symbolic of the whole civilization. The experience of the film text arises on a dynamic mid-point of the imaginary and the symbolic, bordering with scopophilia/voyeurism and fetishism, and through primary film identification (identification of the viewer with the act of watching, that is, with his own view, similar to the Lacan's Mirror Stage, the initial establishment and simultaneous loss of the pre-Oedipal ego, where the fantasy and desire are triggered by the subconscious), and secondary film identification (with personalities, actions and all symbolic constructs), such as the present in the absent, similar to a dream" (Stojanović 1991, 62).

On a fourth, and final level, Metz puts forward the thesis about *statement* as a 'semiological act where parts of the text speak of that text as an act', combining the 'fireplace' and the 'target' of the statement and becoming a non-personal statement embedded in the film itself (and in the experience of the viewer), which in its own way speaks for itself. He thoroughly analyzes the forms of such statement as direct-camera address, voice off, inscriptions, screen on the screen, mirrors, technique detection, film in

film, subjectivity, first person speech, figures of speech, 'neutral' images and sounds)" (Stojanović 1991, 62).

Film communication, according to Metz, is mostly one-sided, and the viewer has the role of a voyeur (Nöth 2004, 502–503). The audience can react only when the film is finished and shown. Therefore, the film is more a means of expression. On the other hand, the audience is more involved in film than in many other media, due to the fact that there is an impression of reality, which Metz speaks about in the first stage of this work. Referring to Barthe's conclusions that photography can also give the impression of reality, but with the illogical connection of "here and once upon a time this happened", Metz also believes that the impression of reality on film is greater because this connection exists here and now. Film, unlike photography, contains movements and "... creates a feeling of actual life and perception of objective reality" (Metz 1973, 8).

When it comes to film signs, while following de Saussure's division, Barthes describes it as a blend of film signifiers (decor, costume, landscape, music, gestures) and signified (concepts). He states that "in general, the *signified* has a conceptual character, it is a single idea" (Barthes 1978, 421). It is a conceptual entity which exists only in the spirit of the viewer. In the film, claims Barthes, there are non-signifying elements. Barthes, just like Metz, thinks that the relationship between signifier and signified is analogically motivated, and that there is a short distance between the signifier and the signified in films because of the given iconic nature of the film sign, and the impression of reality. Yet, there are disconnected signs when the connection between the signifier and the signified is weak. Metz claims that the signifier in the film is the picture, while the signified is what that picture represents. Due to this close relationship between the signifier and the signified, the other articulation is not possible, and the film is universal.

Barthes also distinguishes film expression from film signage. Film expression is being displayed to the audience directly, while the signage exists outside the film picture, too.

Eco makes a distinction between film code and cinematic code. The cinematic code implies the ability to reproduce reality by using technical means and applies to all audio and visual media. On the other hand, the film code is based on narrative rules, it creates narrative messages, and relies on a cinematic code.

When it comes to film icons, theorists go from the view that the film sign is completely motivated iconically due to the analogy with reality, a position that negates the iconicity of the film sign. Eco is one of the first semiologists who denied iconicity, emphasizing the importance of cultural conditionality. Metz negates that the structure of the film and the structure of the language match. He rejects the double articulation as well, explaining that there is nothing in the film that could be compared to language phonemes or language monemes, since the basic film unit (the frame) is closer to a statement than to a word. However, Metz does not reject methods of language analysis which can be applied to analyzing the structure of the film. "Semiology can and must firmly rely on linguistics, but it should not be confused with it" (Metz 1973, 35).

According to the early papers by Metz, film is a type of language in the broader sense of the word. Still, "the concept of film language in the broader sense is a methodological abstraction: in films, that language never appears alone, it is always mixed with various other signifying systems – cultural, social, stylistic, perceptive ..." (Metz 1973, 55). Unlike language in a narrow sense of the word, and unlike double articulation, the film, Metz claims, has codifications, and different types of articulation. He mentions five levels of codification (Metz 1973, 55–56):

- *perception* – a system of acquired intelligibility, which varies according to different cultures;
- *recognition and identification* – of visual and auditory objects appearing on the screen, which also varies according to different cultures, and leaves open the possibility of manipulation at the denotative level;
- *Symbolisms* and connotations of various kinds and their relationship in film, but also in culture;
- *Great narrative structures* – in films and culture in general;
- *Proper cinematographic systems* that, in a specific type of discourse, organize the diverse elements furnished to the spectator by the abovementioned codification levels.

Therefore, film has no double articulation, no phonemes and no monemes. All the units are signifying. Frame, as the smallest unit of the film, a minimal part of it, as Metz calls it, is more like a sentence, a statement, rather than a word. He gave the example of an image of a revolver, which, Metz tells us, does not signify "revolver" but "Here is a revolver". In addition to the frame, which is the minimum section, but not the minimal element of film meaning, Metz speaks of minimal parts, optical acts, such as masks, dissolving, etc., which are also signifying.

Pier Paolo Pasolini claims that the film language, similarly to linguistics language has double articulation (minimum units are real objects or persons that make up a frame, kinemes, units of secondary articulation, which are not the same as phonemes, because the images of real objects or persons can be recognized, which is why they are signifying units, and therefore they more resemble a seme, which when grouped create a frame, while at the level of the first articulation, he compares a single shot (frame) with the monemes).

Eco, on the other hand, believes that there is a third articulation in the film, which should divide the dynamics of the film image into constituent parts, and its basic unit is a kinemorph (a signifying unit, a sign or a seme, which is a blend of kines, the smallest parts of motion without any specific meaning). Eco considers figures to be the smallest units of film, and that they do not carry any meaning. The iconic sign corresponds to the words in a sentence, while a seme corresponds to a sentence. A frame is a syntagm or a seme. Eco borrows the example from Pasolini: a frame where a teacher is holding a book in his hands is a syntagm (one man reads a book) and it is the first articulation, which can be further divided into iconic characters (eye, nose...) which are the second articulation, and in their turn can be divided into visual figures (angles, shadows), which are the third articulation.

When comparing a film to a photograph, Metz claims that photography cannot speak. "One isolated photo cannot tell us anything, that's for sure! But how is it then possible, by means of some strange consequence that two photographs following each other can tell us something? Switching from one image to two images means moving from image to language, in the broader sense of the word" (Metz 1973, 41). Unlike the film where denotation is codified, this is not the case in a photo; it is only a print of reality, while the connotation is created by photographers. "Speaking via an image, regardless of whether it is a language or art, is an open system that cannot be subject to codification so easily with all its basic 'non-discrete' units (images), its overly natural readability, its lack of distance between the signifier and the signified. Regardless of whether it is art or language in a broader sense of the word, a finished film is an even more open system, consisting of signifying units that are directly conveyed to us" (Metz 1973, 52–53).

Metz claims that meaning in the film is not arbitrary, it is more or less motivated at the level of denotation through analogy, while at the level of connotation it is symbolic.

DISCUSSION

It is possible to define a film in two ways: as content that is massively communicated, and as an audio and visual medium of mass communication. Although the fact that it is a visual medium suggests that it reflects reality itself, that reality is semiologically mediated.

Semiological analysis of the film, as part of media semiology, started developing in Europe in the second half of the previous century. Just like semiology is a science of the sign systems, the semiology of the film is a science of sign systems used on film. In order for viewers to enjoy watching films, they do not have to be literate, all they need is to understand film language, and infer meaning from the context. According to Metz "film is not only film language in the broader sense of the word, it also includes thousands of social or human meanings that have been created in some culture, and which appear in films" (Metz 1973, 67). That is why the semiology of the film relies on the theory of information, but also on sociology and psychology.

What the film will mean depends on its creator, but also on the recipient of the film content. It also depends on the social and historical context, the cultural system, as well as on the personal characteristics of both sides. Decoding meaning may be done in different ways, and it does not necessarily have to coincide with the intentions of the filmmakers. Therefore, the topics film semiology deals with are the structure and significance of the signs used in film, the communication processes between the creator and the film audience, the relation between the film and the cultural context, as well as the ideological, political, social and psychological dimension of the film. Semiological analysis is therefore important because, "it is a characteristic of the film not only to transform the existing world but also to create a new one, which will be independent and partly virtual, where the media and the seventh art become an important link and mirror of the interaction of man with the world" (Daković 2012, 22).

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SEMIOLOŠKA ANALIZA FILMA

Predmet istraživanja u radu je semiološka analiza filma, kao deo semiologije medija. Od kada je nastao krajem veka, film, nazvan i sedmom umetnošću, je postao popularan medij savremenog doba, medijski sadržaj koji mogu pratiti ljudi širom sveta, a pritom pismenost nije uslov. Ali uslov da gledalac uživa u filmu, jeste razumevanje filmskog jezika. Zbog toga je neophodno poznavati osnove semiologije filma. Stoga je ovaj rad, pored toga što je usmeren ka stručnoj javnosti, teoretičarima audiovizuelnih medija, namenjen i široj javnosti. Cilj se postiže teorijskim pregledom osnovnih pojmova i pravaca u semiologiji filma.

Ključne reči: *mediji, film, semiologija, značenje*