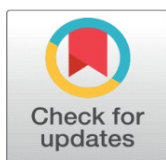
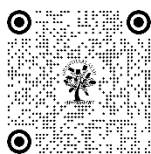


# UNFOLDING THE VISUAL ABBREVIATIONS: A SEMIOTIC READING OF ACADEMY AWARD- WINNING FILM PARASITE DIRECTED BY BONG JOON-HO

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## ABSTRACT

The film has a strong relationship with language as both are means of communication. Film's affinity to language is also because both carry ideas in the form of signs. When language uses graphic and phonemic signs for signification, films use visual signs. From a poststructuralist perspective, the signs in a visual narrative make multiple readings possible as in written and spoken language, and make film a visual art that gives its viewers an aesthetic experience. The transition of film from the silent era to the digital age as a result of the revolutionary developments in cinematographic techniques has increased the possibilities for multiple interpretations. This paper attempts a semiotic analysis of the Academy Award-winning film *Parasite* by applying the concepts of theorists like Christian Metz and Roland Barthes. The paper begins with the major arguments put forth by Christian Metz regarding the sign and its application in film and proceeds to explain the five codes in semiotics proposed by Roland Barthes. The paper concludes with the application of these concepts in analyzing the visual signifiers in the film *Parasite* to justify that semiotics have educated the audience in analyzing film to explore its connotative meanings.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Signs, Narrative Codes, Parasite

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is the analysis of signs and their possibilities of interpretation, and semiosis is the process of making meanings from signs. According to [Silverman \(1983\)](#) semiotics which can be traced back to classical times evolved into a theory through the concepts of Ferdinand De Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes, et al. (p. 3). It analyzed how signs assume meaning through their interaction with referents and are conveyed through recipients. When Saussure's primary focus

was on linguistic signs, Peirce applied semiotics in anthropology and cultural psychology. According to Peirce a sign "stands for somebody for something in some respect or capacity." Peirce, 1931, as cited in Silverman (1983) His triadic model of sign explained meaning-making as a dynamic and open-ended process. Barthes (1977) tried to bring signs close to the operation of myth and ideology. Volosinov (1973) too took semiotics to an ideological level and tried to connect social ideology and inner consciousness. Thus, semiotics ceased to concentrate on language-centric communication and embraced nonverbal communication which used multiple channels. Semiotics was used as a tool in linguistics, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and philosophy and was further extended to analyzing cultural products like literature, art, and film.

The concept of film as language gained momentum in the 1960s with the emergence of post structuralism that critiqued and questioned structuralism. Post structuralism analyzed and developed the concept of the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified put forth by structuralism. From a theoretical standpoint post structuralism radicalized the findings of Ferdinand De Saussure about the stable relationship between sign, signifier, and signified. When structuralism questioned phenomenology, existentialism, and humanism; post structuralism objected to the structuralist argument about the inherent structure. When structuralism gave importance to speech over text, post structuralism did a historical analysis of the process of signification Best & Keller (1991). Post structuralism argues that meaning cannot be confined to a single word, sentence, or text. This makes a text a "multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original blend and clash" Barthes (1977), p.146.

This post structural understanding of language and philosophy can be further extended towards analyzing films since films can be regarded as a form of communication or writing. According to French film theorist and film semiotician Metz (1974), in both literary and cinematic narrative the sequence of signifiers has a certain duration "for the literary narrative, the time it takes to read it; for the cinematographic narrative, the time it takes to see it" Metz (1974), p.19. According to Brunette & Wills (1989), studies initiated by Christian Metz and other film critics suggest that cinema can never speak directly. "Cinema like all other forms of writing, leaves something behind, something involving material effect..... like printed letters, words or reels of celluloid" Brunette & Wills (1989), p.61. Metz's primary concern is with narrative films because it has transformed film from a mere record of events to an aesthetic product with various signifying procedures. The way different literary techniques function as signifiers in literature, in films cinematic techniques such as lighting, performance, cinematography, dialogue, and editing are various signs communicating different information to the viewer. Signifiers in visual language have the potential for more than one signified. To Metz, "by moving from one image to two, film becomes language.....; film selects and combine images and sounds to form syntagmas, i.e. units of narrative autonomy in which elements interact semantically" Stam et al. (1992), 37-38. In addition to image and sound which Metz considers as raw materials for denotative meaning, there are other aspects namely filmic punctuation, various syntagmas, and different types of shots that contribute to the connotative meaning, making film rich with signification. The viewer's acquaintance with the relationship between the signifier and the signified of the written language enables him to decipher the meaning and interpret the visual language.

Signs which are the fundamental units of film lead the audience towards something absent or abstract thus arriving at a specific meaning. Roland Barthes'

grouping of signs into different narrative codes took filmmaking and its reception towards a new aesthetic realm. Hawkes (1977) mentions Roland Barthes' grouping of signs into five different codes namely the hermeneutic code, the connotative code, the proairetic code, the symbolic code, and the cultural code providing a system of meaning. Hermeneutic code carries the story "by means of which the narrative raises questions, creates suspense and mystery" (p.94). It takes the movie forward by enhancing the interest of the audience. Mystery, concealed truth, and unsolved puzzles enhance the curiosity of the viewers. Connotative code on the other hand gives suggestions or hints about the characters and settings through different signs. Narration becomes possible through signs showing large and small actions and these action codes are also capable of narrating the inner actions of characters. "Symbolic code is the code of recognizable 'grouping' or configurations, regularly repeated in various modes and by various means in the text". Hawkes (1977), p.95 This code makes binary opposites visible which in turn determines the reception of the audience. Cultural code "speaks for and about what it aims to establish as 'accepted' knowledge or wisdom". Hawkes (1977), p.96. A film is made based on the shared assumptions within a culture or society which is referred to as cultural code or referential code. Every viewer is engaged in a semiotic analysis when he tries to decipher the meaning from the interaction of these different signs in a movie. This semiotic gaze into film vocabulary makes a novel cognition possible.

The South Korean film *Parasite* Ho (2019), directed by Bong Joon- ho which bagged four awards at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Academy Awards, articulates the harsh realities of class conflict, inequality, and economic disparity. The black comedy film got recognition in various categories like Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best International Film. The film takes us through the exploits of an impoverished Korean family. The Kim family comprising of father Ki-taek, mother Choong- sook, daughter Ki- jung, and son Ki- woo live in an impoverished semi-basement apartment in Seoul. They struggle through their life and manage their daily bread by folding pizza boxes for a local restaurant. Ki-woo, who dreams of getting out of the pathetic life grabs the opportunity when his wealthier friend offers to recommend him as a tutor for the rich Park's teenage daughter Da-hye. Ki-woo makes a fraud university certificate with the help of his sister and convinces the Parks about his qualifications to be a perfect tutor to Da-hye. When Ki-woo comes to know that the Parks are looking for an art tutor for their son Da-song, he suggests his sister as Jessica, someone he knew who has gone to college in Illinois and who would be perfect for the job. Both Ki-woo and Ki-jung now make a plot to expel the driver and the housekeeper from Park's mansion and succeed in bringing their parents under different identities. One day when Parks are out and the Kims come together and enjoy the luxury of the house, Moon- gwang the old housekeeper arrives. Only Choong-sook appears before her, to whom Moon- gwang tells that she has come to take something that she had left in the basement. Choong-sook allows her to get in and follows her to the basement, and to her surprise discovers an underground bunker into which the old housekeeper enters through a sliding wall. Choong- sook is told that the parks do not know the bunker as it was built by the previous owners of the house. She is even more shocked to hear that the woman has been living there with her husband Geun-se for the last four years to escape from the loan sharks. Choong- sook threatens to tell the Parks despite Moon- gwang's pleading. While eavesdropping on their conversation the Kims fall from the stairs and Moon-gwang now realizes that they are related. She too threatens to reveal their true identity which ends up in a fight, and Kims manage to get Moon-gwang and her husband into the bunker. Suddenly Mrs. Park calls and tells Choong-sook about their return due to a rainstorm. Kims get trapped in the house when parks arrive and hide

themselves. Ki- taek who hides under the table overhears Mr Park telling his wife about the unsavory smell of his driver. When Moon-gwang gets out of the bunker, she is kicked by Chung- sook, killing her. Kims manage to get out of the mansion in the torrential rain. The next day Parks throws a birthday party for their son Da-song and Kims are also present. When the party is going on on the lawn Geun-se attacks Ki-woo when he goes into the basement, he then comes out and stabs Ki-jung. As Da-song faints in fear, Mr. Park asks Ki- taek to throw him the car key, but it falls under Geun-se who is fighting with Choong- sook. When Park takes the key from under Guen-se he frowns at his smell. This provokes Ki-taek, who stabs Park and escapes to the basement bunker. When the film ends we see Ki-woo in the woods looking at the Park's house which is now owned by Germans. He tries to read Morse code: light turning on and off in a pattern from the bunker, a message from his father. The film ends with Ki-woo dreaming about buying the house and bringing his family together.

A semiotic analysis of Bong Joon-ho's Oscar-winning film 'Parasite' unfolds many connotative meanings that signifiers of visual language carry within them. The film explicitly shows the hierarchical opposition between rich/poor through metaphorical signifiers of host/ parasite. Here both host and parasite are humans: parasites are the Kim family who feed on Park family. These symbolic codes also suggest the film's implicit attempt to deconstruct the hierarchical position. In the essay "The Critic as Host' by [Miller \(1991\)](#) states:

Para' is an 'uncanny' double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, sometimes at once inside a domestic economy and outside it, sometimes simultaneously this side of the boundary line, threshold or margin and at the same time beyond it.....It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside, confusing them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between one and the other. (p.144)

Miller carries out an etymological investigation of the words 'parasite' and 'host' to prove that these words have contradictory significations in themselves. In the essay, he tries to prove that both parasite and host have a reciprocal relationship. This deconstruction of binaries is articulated in the film 'Parasite'. Even though the parasitic behaviour of the Kim family is very evident, from a close analysis of different scenes, we realize that the rich Park family also is a parasite who leeches off the labour of the poor. The connotative codes such as house, attire, food, smell, body language, etc. take the viewers through the contrasting features between the two families. Within this same narrative, the viewers come across shots that also show similarities between the families. The similar interest of the sons in the two families who have been Boy Scouts and know Morse Code, the shot showing achievements won by Mr. Park on the wall of his house is juxtaposed with similar shots showing the medals that Chung – sook of the Kim family won in shot put. These different shots deconstruct the rich/poor or host/parasite dichotomy.

The male/female binary also gets redefined through the female characters in the film. The female characters in the film extend great support to their family. In the Kim family the mother Choong – sook and daughter Ki – jung contribute to the family's survival. Ki - jung's expertise in Photoshop and art to create a university degree certificate helps her brother infiltrate the Park family as an English tutor to Park's daughter. Ki- jung herself appears before the Park family as an art therapist for their son. She also succeeds in bringing her father and mother as driver and housekeeper to the same house. She is a strong character who is prepared to do

anything to make her family ascend the social ladder. In the portrayal of Choong – sook the film has underplayed what a patriarchal society expects in a woman. She is awful at cooking and cleaning. Choong- sook, once a student-athlete, preserves her love for the sport within her, and her affinity towards the shot put is revealed through the shot which presents her throwing shot put in the Park family mansion when the Parks are out. Another female character that breaks the male/female binaries is Moon- gwang, the old housekeeper in the Park family who falls victim to Kim's plan. She is the character who takes the viewers to yet another unpleasant reality of the underdogs. She takes care of her husband Geun -sae who lives hiding in the unknown bunker of Park's mansion. These female characters in the film prove to be more powerful than their male counterparts. These symbolic codes enable the audience to ponder on the privileged position enjoyed by particular sections of the society and the film tries to prove that those are mere social constructs by subverting the hierarchy. [Scholes \(1985\)](#)

The sign also functions through expression and content which are autonomous units. In films, signs take different types of articulation namely phonemic and visual, whereas articulation of content is influenced by cultural background. We see that the film is developed on such cultural codes: class hierarchy in Korean society, semi-basement dwellings common in Korea, and social stigma faced by people forced to live in such dwellings, basements that became common due to the tension between North Korea and South Korea, etc. Even when the film is developed on a Korean cultural background the film addresses the universal subject of social hierarchy.

In the course of the visual narration 'smell' emerges as a dominant sign that is sustained till the end of the film. Smell as a major signifier enters the film when Park's son Da – song comments that their new housekeeper and driver smell the same. There are shots in which we see Mr Park rubbing his nose because of the 'disturbing smell'. Even when Parks are happy with their workers as they don't 'cross their limits', they often feel the smell crossing the limit. Here smell carries various significations. Smell defines not only Kim's identity but also the identity of the couple living in the basement; it reveals their social standing. It is a sign of their hard labour; unlike the rich, the poor have to toil day and night for their daily survival. Smell also stands for the neglect they face from society; they are forced to live in the basement and it is this neglect that is indicated in the shot that shows Park recoiling at the smell of Geun – sae. It is this gesture of disgust that provokes Kim to stab his master to death. But his reaction to the discrimination doesn't change his status, instead, he falls into darkness taking the place of Geun- sae to hide in the basement which again suggests the hopeless future of the downtrodden. Park's wife and children move from the mansion after the shocking incident and another family moves in signifying the endless domination and oppression in the society. These various significations throw light on the different interpretations that the signifier 'smell' leads to.

The connotative codes establish the characters and settings thereby preparing the viewers for the unravelling of certain grotesque realities. The dirty house with little natural light where the Kim family is forced to live, the pizza boxes that take away the majority of space at home, the costumes, the body language of the characters, etc suggest the pathetic situation of the Kim family. The claustrophobic house is used for more disturbing shots to communicate the shocking realities of the underdogs. The torrential rain, an aesthetic experience for the wealthy becomes a revolting experience when it floods Kim's home with a toilet bubbling with sewage.

The film takes the viewers to the luxurious mansion of the Park family where most of the actions take place and is the polar opposite of the poor dark house of



Kim. The great mansion of the Park family stands for social oppression. The class divide is very well illustrated through the architecture of the great house. The first floor of the house which opens to a garden is spacious and full of light while its basement is dark with limited space. These are different signifiers that carry multiple meanings. The first floor and the basement not only show the divide between the haves and have-nots but are also a sign of the domination of the rich over the poor. The spacious first floor shows the freedom that the rich enjoy and the narrow and dark basement that hinders the movement of the poor couple denotes the limitations the poor face to lead a decent life. As light and darkness are often used as a symbol of good and evil, the bright space the rich occupy stands for goodness, the civilized and high status attributed to them whereas the darkness represents evil, primitive and low status imposed on the poor.

The film, Parasite, in short, becomes a detailing of global realities. This detailing is achieved through semiotic codes that have made the film rich in interpretations. The various semiotic codes elevate the viewers' experience and make them feel overwhelmed by their role as interpreters. This richness in interpretations has enhanced the film Parasite towards its wide acceptance and critical acclaim as a social satire and become the first non-English film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. Parasite's recognition and wide acceptance is an acknowledgement of its brilliant articulation through images that make multiple readings possible to the global audience.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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None.

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