

# *Application and Interpretation of Semiotics in Movie Posters -- the Poster of Macbeth in 2015 as an Example*

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**Abstract:** The semiotics is unique to human society and develops with the fantastic spur of human society, and it possess its own unique vocabulary, semantics and context system. Umberto Eco, who states that “semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign” (1976: 7). Leeuwen (2005) conceived that semiotics obviously appears every aspect of people’s life, all of which own particular cultural connotation as well as cultural value. Theretofore, semiotics has played a guiding role in human's interpretation of various types of symbols. Semiotics involved in all aspects of human life. In this paper, the research perspective is mainly on movie posters, and the film poster of Macbeth (directed by Justin Kurzel released in 2015 )is selected as the sample for research. Movie posters, as a widely accepted and visual medium, can help readers better understand the definition and application of semiotics by different scholars through intuitionism.

## **1. Introduction**

From the perspective of the development of semiotics, it is mainly divided into two types. The semiotics that is based on the perspective of linguistics, represented by Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes; the semiology is formed in a logical theory, represented by Charles Pierce. This essay will analyse *Macbeth* film poster using semiotics with movie plots, specially theories of Saussure (1972), and Barthes (1973) to understand the tragic destiny view of characters and humanity facing irreversible karma written by Shakespeare (Cunningham,1963).

The purpose of film posters is to convey the theme, characters, background, relationship, tone and other information of the film, so that the audience has a preliminary impression and understanding of the film, so as to publicize the film and effectively increase box office (Rivadulla,2000,). That is to say, because of the functionality and aesthetics of the movie poster, it contains a lot of signs which closely related to the film itself.



*Fig.1 Macbeth (Directed by Justin Kurzel, Released in October 2015)*

Image is a vital approach to express characters and express emotions in movies (Freeman, 2004). In order to incorporate meaningful information into two-dimensional posters, the implication of signs is especially significant for publicity and attraction. Roland Barthes (1973) in *Mythologies* held the view that the process of decoding signs meaning can be divided into different levels: denotation and connotation. The first level of symbolic meaning is produced through the denotation (literal meaning of word), and the poster of the characters represent itself, for instance, fire is a substance existing in nature; the second level of expression in the connotation (common associations that people make with words), based on the first level of understanding, for example, when we see the poster of the characters decorated by a variety of elements, namely war, witches and the title of the movie, even without appreciating the movie, audiences can speculate that this is a movie about disordered war. After you saw the movie, you will interpret the movie poster more profoundly. Additionally, the encoder and decoders should belong to a cultural group firstly (Barthes, 1973). The common cultural background provides subjective consciousness for them. The message conveyed through the poster is that the film is about humanity, provided that the poster makers and viewers share a cultural background.

## 2. Encoding Samples from Saussure and Roland Barthes Perspectives

Saussure, a Swiss structuralism linguist, known as the “father of European semiotics,” found the Signifier and Signified and considered that signifier and signified constituted as the sign. The Signifier is a physical or sound existence which is the part of the sign with material form or references to the sign itself, and the Signified is the abstract conception of the Signifier (Saussure, 1972). In *Macbeth’s* film poster, the Christian stained glass becomes the signifier; however, its interpretation cannot be based solely on surface properties.

### 2.1 About Thechristian Stained Glass

Saussure (cf. *ibid*) ever stated that the relationship between the signifier and signified depends on culture as well as history. From decoding the script *Macbeth*, the signified of Christian stained glass represents the degeneration of humanity. First and foremost, *Macbeth* wrote in 1607, when Christianity dominated British society and the Bible became a moral standard. According to the model of Saussure (cf. *ibid*), understanding signifier and signified requires a combination of convention, the Christian stained glass reflects the cultural and historical background of the scenario. In the film, Lady Macbeth holds the Bible in her hands to pray many times, so Christian stained glass on the poster reflects the religious content of the film. The devotion of Christianity contrasts sharply with Lady Macbeth personal greed, and this element of film poster embodies theatricality. Besides, Battenhouse (1994) described morality that greed stems from ambition, and once greed is realized, it becomes a habit, and if addiction is not suppressed, it simultaneously will be inevitable. This description mentioned above is the same as *Macbeth's*, and when *Macbeth* was crowned at Cathedral with stained glass, his desire for extreme greed had manifested destruction. The audiences can also make decode the Christian stained glass through intertextuality, which can help the understanding of the audience to expand its vision to the whole literary tradition and cultural influence. *Macbeth* reflects the archetypes of the characters in the Bible, such as Adam in the Old Testament. Adam s explicitly know that it is guilty of stealing the Forbidden fruit, but he still eats the Forbidden fruit which the Lord has warned many times not to steal instigated by Eva. Adam's greed becomes the original sin. All of this is very similar to *Macbeth*, and Lady Macbeth, the first half of the movie *Macbeth* possessing loyalty killed enemies for the Duncan to stabilize the rebels, due to the appearance of prophecy, Lady Macbeth entice *Macbeth* to assassinate to the Duncan achieve the prophecy. This description mentioned above is the same as *Macbeth's*, and when *Macbeth* was crowned at Cathedral with stained glass, his desire for extreme greed had manifested destruction. Due to the appearance of prophecy, Lady Macbeth entices *Macbeth* to assassinate to the Duncan achieve the prophecy. Lady Macbeth even used the power of Satan in her prayers (Levin, 2002), she, in order to obtain the right to by hook or by crook ,which embodies the humanity degeneration of Lady Macbeth. Christian stained glass does not only represent an independent physical thing but also reflect the power of Christianity, which metonymy the fallen of *Macbeth* and Lady Macbeth driven by desire. Under the interaction of text and context, the signified of Christian stained glass highlights *Macbeth's* religious colour.

## 2.2 About the Flame

In the movie poster, the red flame becomes the most striking sign occupying the front of it. In Chinese culture, flame or fire usually represents a kind of warmth as well as enthusiasm and is often combined with the traditional Chinese festival Spring Festival (Bin,1998). Because of race, belief, and knowledge, the flame represents different meanings. However, red is endowed with other senses in this movie, namely The combustion of human nature of *Macbeth* and Lady Macbeth's, and even self-burning. Roland Barthes was a pioneer of French semiotics structuralism who followed Saussure's semiotic theory and applied it in his early works. Barthes (1973) stated that sign could have different meanings because of the differences in audiences, which can be ambiguous, polysemantic, and variable. Movies adapted from drama used to contain director's second creation (Cattrysse, 1992), the sign of fire is director Justin Kurzel's in-depth interpretation of Shakespeare's works, as fire is not a noteworthy sign in Shakespeare's original masterpiece. Combined with the movie plot, the first scene of the film opens with the *Macbeth* couple holds a funeral for their children, and the *Macbeth* couple watches their children cremated. The blaze in the opening movie has already seemed to indicate the tone of the film and the result of the tragic characters. Subsequently, witch's prophecy and Lady Macbeth's temptation awake *Macbeth's* ambition

(Coe,1976), and they play the role of psychological pander to induce Macbeth to assassinate King Duncan and frame the prince with the loss of humanity. The red flame-like Macbeth swelling desire is losing all rationality, and the blaze is out of control. Under the conflict of morality and desire, Macbeth immersed into miserableness, so that he lost his judgment and rationality and gave himself the sense of safety by killing. Under extreme fear, he burned the Macduff family (Figure 1). At this time, the burning flame not only represents the increasing desire but also embodies Macbeth's fear and insaneness. In other words, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth ignite the fire of desire, but they burn themselves. When Birnam Wood trees move and burn, it also indicates the end of Macbeth's life, and Macbeth's desire for fire became empty after the last battle (Figure 2). In general, audiences need to put a sign in a particular context to decode (Barthes, 1973), like posters in the fire which has been given a new meaning.



*Fig.2 The Macduff Family is Incinerated by Macbeth*



*Fig.3 Fulfillment of Prophecy, Birnam Wood is Moving*

### 2.3 About Witches and Castles

In the movie Macbeth's poster, witches and castles are placed at far left of the poster. Although those two signs are not conspicuous, they are vital elements that set the tone and drive the movie plot. Shakespeare utilised a lot of the Gothic narrative content and techniques commonly used in scripts (Salter, 2009), including *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *ghosts*, which use nightmares, terror and bloodiness to embody a mysterious atmosphere. With Barthes (1973) model of denotation and connotation, the castle of denotation is a kind of architecture, but after decoding, the castle of connotation is the cradle of crime. In the movie, castles appear twice, respectively Macbeth's Castle and Macduff's Castle. In Macbeth's Castle, audiences witness the fearful process of Macbeth from goodness to evil. As the owners of the castle, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth intrigue every murder case. Lady Macbeth, as an abuser of crime, also died in sin in this castle. In Macduff's Castle, Macbeth slaughters his family, and he becomes a pure beast, and this castle that becomes a

hell of death. Simultaneously, according to metonymy theory of Barthes (1973), Myth is the link between social meaning and symbols. Symbol becomes a signifier itself and presents new meaning. Castle can still be interpreted as a mysterious power and a place of religious authority, which Shakespeare wanted to express in a consistent way

Regarding witches, this is the supernatural element that Macbeth represents (Hibbs and Hibbs, 2001), and it is a Gothic element of literature. Witches of denotation is a character with extraordinary ability, but after analysing, the witches of connotation is the instigator of the crime. The witches written by Shakespeare (1901) with their beards, grotesque costumes and dry lips mean the beginning of the disaster. The Macbeth cannot fall asleep, due to sinning. Macbeth desire to confirm the accuracy of the prophecy, thus, he runs to the fogged plain. The appearance of witches mean catastrophe forthcoming which lead to the Lady Macbeth's death from mental strain and the last judgement of Macbeth (Figure 3). Ugly witches use their evil power to change the original good Macbeth completely, and ultimately lead to the tragic ending of Macbeth.



*Fig.4 The Appearance of Withes Forebodes the Catastrophe Forthcoming*

### 3. Summary and Rethink

This essay primarily uses the semiotics analysis of Saussure and Roland Barthes to encode Macbeth movie posters. A large number of signs represent in this poster, such as fire, Christ stain glass, etc., to make the abstract content more specific, which enables audiences to have explicit cognition and understanding before watching the film. However, some problems are also found through the analysis of this poster. For Macbeth poster, the audiences who know the plot of the movie or the outline of the story can better interpret and encode the symbols in the poster, but for the audiences who do not know Macbeth's works, the symbol only becomes a kind of figure.

With the increase in consumers demand, movie posters appear on different platforms. Thus, the interpretation of movie posters becomes a necessary process for the audience to appreciate the movie. It is also essential for that film manufacturer not only make highly skilled cinema but also needs to guide the audience understanding the film's posters to maximize the film connotation.

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