

Article

A Semiotic Analysis of Avatar Movie (2009)

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A B S T R A C T

Filmmakers have to ensure that their movies provide a sense of realism to the audience. However intense the dialogues are, the visual representation of objects, actors and everything else in a frame plays a key role in strengthening the movie's reality among the audiences. With Mise-en-scène the composition, lighting, costume, props, any other object on frame can carry a meaning to the audience. This study semiotically analysis the movie Avatar (2009) by understanding the role of mise-en-scène in effective narration. The movie's mise-en-scène is analysed for presence of signifiers that contribute to the narration of the film. These signifiers are semiotically analysed using Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics. This research paper uses a descriptive qualitative method of analysis. The relationship between the signifier and the signified has established the effective use of sign through mise-en-scène. Through the mise-en-scène the film makers have semiotically carried concepts of imperialism, corporate greed, importance of ecology thus, Mise-en-scène has also been useful in providing realistic visuals of the imaginary world of Pandora.

Keywords: Mise-En-Scène, Signifier, Signified, Saussure, Story Telling

Introduction

Full length feature films as a form of mass media have evolved a lot since it has begun in 1906. Science fiction films started pulling major audience since the 1960's. Any cinema reflects its contemporary period. Filmmakers use 'Semiotics' to convey the myth, history, legends, archetypes of the cultures in which their works are situated. In film semiotics helps in deepening its hidden meaning and that every sign which take form as words, images, sounds, gestures and things can be defined as semiotics. This research paper analysis the Semiotics in the film Avatar (2009) with the help of mise-en-scène. This movie has numerous forms of art and aesthetics in each and every shot, but the researcher has taken screenshots of 87 shots with the purpose of deciphering the signified. Shots which distinguish from

others in terms of their composition and the manner they hold signs that add to the storyline's narration are chosen.

Review of literature

Many research papers focus on semiotically interpreting a film as a part of film analysis, but there aren't many which also analyses the role of Mise-en-scène in effective storytelling. The researcher likes to discuss some basic concepts and articles journals related to the topic to study this paper.

Vujovic (2018) findings say that although the film reflects a reality itself, that reality is semiologically mediated. Irrespective of literacy, films are watched by everyone, but to make more sense of the content conveyed in the film, the viewer must have a basic knowledge related to the content and should know basic semiotics.

Amos Mochama (2020), interprets the mise-en-scène in Coca – cola’s audio – visual commercials. Shots and scenes are identified for elements of mise-en-scène and were interpreted as to how these elements provide the mood and value associated with the brand. Mise-en-scène was used to accentuate and emphasize the element that is synonymous to the company. Capturing the mood, the enthusiasm and enjoyment which is associated with the brand’s drinks and natural setting in coca-cola’s colours of red and white are on such elements. The findings reveal that mise-en-scène does convey the audience what the brand intended to.

Aminu (2021) semiotically analysis Black Panther (2018) movie based on Charles Sander Pierce theory while the sign is classified as Pierce’s type of signs – icon, index and symbol and also into elements of signs as the representamen, object and interpretant. Black Panther movie is significant as it uses the cultural aspects of many native African tribes in representing the tribes of Wakanda. The findings are the film maker has made use of icons the most (35 occurrences) and index the least (11 occurrences) to convey the hidden context through signs.

Okadigwe (2021) has semiotically analyzed the costumes in the Nigerian film – African bride to understand its role in expressing the socio-cultural attribute. The researcher has used descriptive analysis. The researcher has concluded that costumes of the period of the film are collected and based on themes these costumes are allocated for the individual authors. Costumes are non-verbal way of communicating the audience on socio cultural signals.

Abdelouadoud (2020) semiotically analysis the British stereotypes in Titanic movie in his research paper. Racial stereotypes are present everywhere like the Dutch are tall or Asians are good at math. It also identifies the different signs present in the movie to interpret the British stereotypes in the movie. On classifying the signs as Icons, Index and symbols, the researcher has interpreted them as Object, Interpretant and Representamen using Peirce’s triadic model. The findings are that the movie is abundant with British stereotypes. Americans are critical about the British attitudes, preferences and style of life.

Design ideas for set designs are inspired and collected from Magazines, Illustration from books, original location pictures and photographs from various sites. Paintings are also an important source when it comes to period films that are set in times that happened before invention of photographs. Fictional literature too delivers ideas for set design. Colour can communicate a time and place, it can define any atmosphere or emotion. It could also convey psychological sensibility. A costume can portray the difference in social status, economic status, people of different gender, different ethnical background and it can

also show the different in mindsets of people. Femininity and Masculinity are also expressed by the costumes.

Objectives

- To identify the Signifiers in the mise-en-scène of every scene in the Avatar movie
- To analyze the signifier to interpret the signified in the movie

Methodology

Avatar movie is taken into consideration for this research for semiotic analysis to determine the role of mise-en-scène in effective narration. Qualitative methods are used for semiotic analysis. Analysis is to be done by Ferdinand de Saussure’s Dyadic model. Every scene is interpreted and only relevant shots that contribute to the main narration is analysed for the role of mise-en-scène in semiotically adding to the narration of the movie. Sampling would be done by collecting sample frames in every scene from the movie Avatar and analyzing the mise-en-scène for signifiers. 87 unique shots that contribute to the main storyline is identified and the signifiers in the scenes are interpreted semiotically to establish the role of mise-en-scène in storytelling.

Theoretical Framework

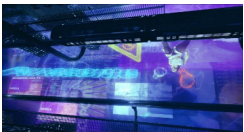
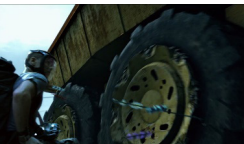
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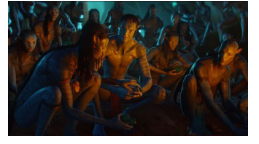
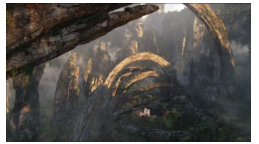
Semiotic Theory

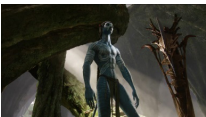
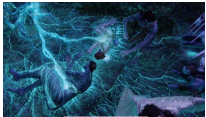
Semiotics is the study of sign systems. In semiotics, a sign is something that represents anything other than itself. In semiotics there are two dominant theories on what sign constitutes: the dyadic theory and the triadic theory. The Dyadic theory was put forth by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure which says that the Sign constitutes the Signifier and the Signified. The Triadic model is put forth by American philosopher Charles Sanders pierce which says Sign constitutes three elements The representamen, An object and an interpretant.

Data Collection and Interpretation

The data collection can be interpreted in short synopsis. 87 Screenshots are taken from the movie ‘Avatar’ and interpreted semiotically. mise-en-scène is used to analyses the film and to identify signs in the frames. Data is collected by the researcher based on the context of the situation or the presence of hidden meaning in the scene. The sampling is done by collecting screenshots. Each and every shot is interpreted based on the elements present in the shot, their significance in the story development and similarity to the contemporary world.

S.No	Figure/ Running Time	Mise-en-scène					
		Lighting/ Colour	Actor blocking	Composition	Set design	Costumes	Props
1	 00:01:05	Practical lighting is used in the available area. Blue and cyan the major colours in the shot to represent a futuristic look. Cyan colour is majorly used which represents uneasiness and materialism	The lead character Jake Sully is shown among a crowd that is dull	This is the establishing shot. long shot is used in this shot. The lead character Jake Sully is placed at the emphasis according to the rule of thirds	The shot is set to a melancholic/cold mood. The signage and holographic advertisements are shown to depict how advanced the earth has become. It also includes overhead tramps and speedy trains	Most people have a formal wear, while the others have rugged clothing like savages. All of them except Sully is shown wearing a Mask	Face masks and Sully's wheelchair
2	 00:03:21	Practical light is used. Violet, purple and cyan hues are seen the most in this shot. Violet symbolises creativity and cyan symbolises technology	-	This is a perspective shot shown from the point of view of the lead character Jake Sully	This shot is set in the Alley behind the bar after Jake is thrown out	-	-
3	 00:10:19	Two-point light is used to merge with computer graphics in this shot. They used two points to mimic natural light	Jake sully is puzzled by the arrows stuck to the wheels on the dump truck	Medium shot set on a low angle frame emphasizing the arrows on the wheels. This low angle is used to convey how the gigantic the vehicles are	Set on Pandora where a mining is happening with mining vessels moving	Jake sully is in causal marine clothes. He is shown to be wearing a face mask	The arrows of the endemic species, Jake sully's face mask
4	 00:17:39	2-point light is used. Fill and Top light are used. This is done to bring up a low-key light set up. Parker is placed more in the shadow than grace that indicates the greediness of the character	Parker is focusing on the Unobtanium. Grace seems not to be accepting Parker's terms and reasons	Mediums shot is used in this two-shot frame focussing the conversation between these two characters	The shot is set in the office of Parker which is seen to have a lot of books and resources, articles of Na'vi for research purpose	Parker is in a formal attire. Grace is in her casuals under her lab coat	Unobtanium, Na'vis weapon Hunting arrow and bow, a Na'vi accessory

5	 00:38:21	Backlight and fill light are used to mimic the natural lighting and the white colour of the woodsprite indicates purity	Neytiri is in attack position. As the wood sprite lands on her arrow there is a change in her decision to attack Jake	Rule of thirds and medium close-up shot is used in this shot	The shot is set in the forests of Pandora where Neytiri is aiming for Jake sully from a high tree branch	Na'vi costume which is made from flora of pandora	Hunting arrow and Banshee bow
6	 00:53:44	Lighting is set as to represent that a fire is set to cook the meat. Hence, natural lighting is added through computer graphics. Orange colour is dominating which shows warmth and enthusiasm and teal is used in some areas that denote peace	Jake is happy that the Na'vi accepted to teach him their ways of life. He is portrayed to be sitting among the other clan members while having dinner.	Medium-full shot and Rule of thirds used	The shot is set in the home tree of the Omaticaya clan	Omaticaya clan Outfit	Plates made of leaves
7	 01:10:52	Key light is used on the right side, Light is diffused on the other side to simulate the natural lighting	Jake is placed close to Neytiri to convey the growing bond between them.	Medium close-up shot is used to represent Jake and Neytiri's emotion.	This shot is set in the home tree of the Omaticaya clan.	Loincloth, Na'vi primary outfit and battle band	Banshee bow and hunting arrow
8	 01:25:33	Natural lighting setup using computer graphics, orange colour represents positivity and warmth	-	Ariel shot and established shot, Ariel shot is used to showing the entire bone-like environment	This shot is set to cover the whole environment around the tree of souls with the rib cage like tree structure that forms a shield around it	-	-

9	 01:33:19	Key light is used on the left side of Jake and light is diffused, God rays and fog effects had been given in visual effects to mimic the natural lighting. The white symbol in Jake's body represents purity and perfection	Jake is proud to be included in the Na'vi clan. Yet as a foreshadow that he will one day be a Toruk Macto, he is made to be appeared in the frame alongside the skull of Toruk	Low-angle pan shot is used to show the might and power of Jake which has been increased simultaneously, Centre frame is also used to concentrate on Jake	A place set in the home tree, the Toruk's Skull is placed behind Jake to foreshadow the future	Loincloth.	-
10	 01:52:03	The shot sets in a sunny climate so they have used natural light set up by Computer graphics, yellow colour in the dragon symbol represents impatience	-	Medium shot and pan shot are used in this shot to establish the dragon symbol in the Assault ship	The shot is set when the air force is about to destroy the home tree	Military camouflage-patterned uniform and Airman Battle Uniform	Colonel Quaritch holding a coffee mug that indicates that he is not worrying to annihilate the home tree
11	 02:14:13	The shot is lighted by the emission of the soul tree through Computer graphics. Cyan is majorly used to symbolize communication and balance	The shot is set that the human form and Avatar form of Grace are placed in balance on the roots of the tree of soul	Top angle and Full shot are used to establish the roots of the soul Tree	This shot is set in the soul tree where the consciousness transferring ceremony is happening	Na'vi primary outfit	Grace's Research bag
12	 02:19:27	Computer graphics and VFX are used to mimic natural light. Blue is the major shown colour in this shot which symbolizes protection and security.	Jake as the commander is shown in the forward and the background is depicting the strength of the Na'vi that is flying in	Low angle zooms in and Rule of thirds frame are used, Low angle indicates the increase in force of Jake sully and foreshadows his leadership of the Omaticaya clan	This shot is set in the Tree of souls area	Omaticaya clan outfit worn by Jake sully and warrior crown which indicates leadership	Banshee bow and arrow
13	 02:49:05	Natural lighting is used Orange is the more dominant colour in this scene which symbolizes encouragement	All humans are shown terrified as they are evacuated by the Na'vis. Some are sad as they are injured by the war	Long shot and high angle is used in this scene to establish the Human's defeat	This shot is set at the campsite of the humans placed in the centre of the mountains	Na'vi primary outfit, safari outfits, military outfits, casual outfits	

Data Interpretation of Signifier in the Mise-en-scène

S.No	Time	Signifier	Interpretation
1	00:01:05	This shot has tall and high buildings in cyber punk style. Vehicles are having a sleek futuristic design. Most of the people are shown wearing mask. Mc Donald's sign board is seen in the background. The crowd is dull	The cyberpunk style and futuristic structures and vehicle designs depict that this scene is set in future. The gruesome state of pollution increase in the future is depicted by most of the people wearing mask. To have a connect with the real world, the Mc Donald's sign board is shown. A dull crowd depicts that their world is monotonous and falling apart
2	00:03:21	After Jake is thrown out in the alley behind the bar, he is seeing a holographic advertisement that shows, Atmospheric mask 2.0 – Discover a new world	The holographic advertisement usage depicts that the Earth has been advanced. Although it is advanced, its atmosphere has become so polluted such that a human cannot survive a day out without wearing a mask, which is symbolised by that ad of the mask which is saying Discover a new world subjectively as people wear the mask
3	00:10:19	A common dump truck crosses Jake sully. Its wheel has arrows stuck to it. Jake sully is wearing a face mask	The dump truck depicts there is some kind of mining process happening. The arrows on the wheels show that there might be a chance of living things that are against the action of mining and has attacked the truck. Although Pandora is looking Earth-like its atmosphere is poisonous for humans, hence Jake sully is wearing a face mask
4	00:17:39	Parker, the Resource development administrator is showing a piece of mineral to Grace, the head of the Avatar program. Background to their conversation is weapons and some artifacts	The piece of mineral is Unobtainium, which is being mined by the humans. It is revealed that this mineral is why humans are at Pandora. This shot symbolises Colonialisation in our world context where the European East Indian companies were colonising other countries for its resources. The weapon – bow and arrow and properties belonging to the Na'vi is found depicting they are trying to completely get to know the Na'vis. The Na'vi Artefacts are similar to Native American artefacts. This is to symbolize the past events when cultured European explorers attack over the Native Americans when they found America
5	00:38:21	A dandelion like floating structure sits on Neytiri's arrow as she is aiming for Jake sully	As seen before, the native Na'vis are people who are in closely connect with the nature and respect it. This shot is one such proof to their belief in nature. The dandelion like structure is called the Woodsprite which is the seed of Tree of souls which the Na'vis consider sacred. Hence, when the woodsprite touches Neytiri's arrow, she believes that it conveys that Jake is a pure soul and stops from attacking him. She then decides to follow and know him
6	00:53:44	Neytiri gives food to Jake Sully. All Na'vi of the clan are sitting around the bonfire	The clan member all sit together for their meals. Neytiri gives Jake their food symbolizes that he is accepted and is allowed to teach the Na'vi way of life
7	01:10:52	Neytiri is teaching the bow and arrow to Jake Sully. Jake and Neytiri look eye to eye.	The eye dilating is to signify that Jake and Neytiri are starting to fall in love with each other. They are looking in this perspective about each other for the first time

8	01:25:33	A white colour tree is found inside a branched tree like structure that is around it like a shield.	The white tree is the tree of souls. It is spiritual and the Na'vis believed it has the connection to Eywa. The branch like trees is made to resemble the rib cage in the human body. As, the heart lies inside the rib cage, the tree of souls, which is the most spiritual amongst the Na'vis lie inside this shield formed by the trees
9	01:33:19	Jake is seen in body paintings on the day of ceremony where he is going to be taken into the Omaticaya clan. The skeleton of Toruk is shown behind Jake is sully.	It is a Na'vi custom to wear sacred markings on the day of the ceremonies. Jake is wearing one as he is the one who is going to be taken into their clan. Toruk is kept here for foreshadowing that Jake is the sixth and the next person to ride the Toruk.
10	01:52:03	The fighters of the humans equipped with missiles and weapons are headed towards the home tree. The helicopter has a dragon sticker in it.	This symbolises that the Colonel is ready to demolish the home tree. The dragon in the helicopter symbolises strength and fierce. This is shown to convey the might of the human weapons and fighters.
11	02:14:13	Since Grace is dying, the Na'vis try to save grace by transferring her consciousness from her human body to her Avatar form. The roots of the Soul tree are seen to be connected to both the Avatar form and human form of Grace. Grace's bag is lying near her human form.	This shot symbolises that the soul tree's roots are like nerve cells that transmit synapses. Similarly, the roots are having a function of transmitting the consciousness from Grace's human form to the Avatar form. Even during her last minutes, Grace wants to take samples for her research wherever she goes. This is conveyed by the presence of the bag near her human form.
12	02:19:27	Jake has called out every Navi clan and all of them come in support of the Omaticaya. Jake's sees the reinforcement that is arriving.	Jake is now seen to be wearing an ornamentation on his hair which is too lavish. His posture and looks are braver indicating a change in personality, more like that of an army general. He also has cut his hair at sides like how the Na'vi have, indicating he has fully now transformed as one of them. Also, his every dilating look of his eyes is so focussed, conveying his determination.
13	02:49:05	The Na'vi along with few Avatars of the Avatar program is evacuating the humans to send them back to Earth. Few Avatars are fully dressed.	Those who are fully dressed are the ones who are a part of Avatar program. This symbolises that the Avatars has also joined the Na'vi in driving away the humans. Historically, in British India many people of Ireland, Scotland and even some from Britain itself were supportive of India, like Annie Besant and they have fought for the people of India against their people.

The above data collection can be interpreted in a brief synopsis. The researcher took 13 photographs shots out of the total of 87 photographs collected and evaluated.

Findings

Totally 1180 shots in the film are interpreted for scene interpretation and it is founded that this film has followed certain themes. It has followed themes such as Corporatocracy, Imperialism, Militarism and also social themes like Spirituality, Deep Ecology. As the data collected from the shots is interpreted, the findings decked that the film is brilliantly crafted as to involve all these human and nature conflict themes and other political themes to create a whole new world. Also 87 unique shots that contribute to the main storyline is identified and the signifiers in the scenes are interpreted semiotically to establish the role of mise-en-scène in storytelling.

Conclusion

Films don't always convey the message intended to convey directly. They make use of every pixel of the screen in a way to convey message indirectly or to have a hidden meaning. To completely understand the nuance of a movie, semiotic analysis is an important approach. This approach intends to establish the relationship between the Signifier and the Signified and how they produce a meaningful interpretation.

From the Interpretation and Findings of the data collected from the movie Avatar (2009) we could see that the color, lighting, set design and other artistic aspects like the costumes and props have played a major role in carrying the hidden message to the audience.

This study has been useful as to explore the usage of mise-en-scène in films in in-depth storytelling. Although, understanding them would require knowledge on art and aesthetics used in the film, they are indeed needed to express the story almost close to the creator's visualization.

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