

A Study on the Semiotic Approach used in the Kollywood Film ‘Mercury’

S Manoj Prabhakar

Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Periyar University.

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Abstract

Films are the rich tool of communicating ideologies to people ever since it was evolved. Each film maker has their own strategy and style in knotting up their story to the audience and it is up to the audience to perceive the essence of the portrayal. Usage of signs and codes creates the magic while reception of these content by the audience in the intended way.

The recent International release of Karthik Subburaj is the film titled “Mercury.” It is a movie often misinterpreted to be silent film but actually it is not. As a part of the movie is silent, signs and codes are used to convey message and meaning in the film. This aspect of this thriller movie and the different colour tone used, and the characterization of the affected people in the industry that includes Prabhu Deva, and their performance has lead to this study on the semiotic approach of this film.

The aim of this study is to decode the denotations and connotations in the film and verify the effective usage of signs and codes used by the director of the film.

Keywords: Movies, Signs, Mercury, Karthik Subburaj, Prabhu Deva

Introduction

“Mercury” is a silent thriller movie released on April 2018 internationally. The International release was planned and succeeded as the movie has no dialogues and hence no language barrier that caters to the audience globally. After 31 years, this movie is the Indian silent movie made and it is a very bold choice of the Director and team to prefer such genre in this digitized world. Even though the movie has positive reviews, it did not score well in the Box Office.

Intertextuality

This movie takes its initial knot based on a true incident on mercury poisoning in Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu in 2001. Hindustan Unilever owned a thermometer manufacturing company that affected the health of the labourers and the mercury contamination lead to various disabilities and diseases in the local residents. After several protests and support from environmentalists, the court order was passed to close down the company. This movie portrays the lead

roles in the movie to be the victims of the contamination and their helplessness at their hardships.

Style and Form

Synopsis

This movie revolves around the five young deaf mutes, victims of mercury poisoning, gathers for the celebration in their school “Hope Special School” as it is the anniversary of the closure of the corporate company named “Corporate Earth.” As they party in the farmhouse for Meera’s Birthday, they go out in a car with lots of fun and enjoyment. Meera is proposed love by one of his friends. With all happiness and fun while returning, they hit a person to death. They manage to dispose the corpse in the forest near the closed mercury factory and returns to farmhouse. Next day, they happen to notice the i-pod missing which could be identified by Police if caught. So they venture in search of it and find it near the place where the corpse was disposed and they notice the missing corpse. Meanwhile the girl goes

E-mail Id: prabhakarsmanoj@gmail.com

Orcid Id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7134-1211>

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missing from the car and happens to be inside the sealed factory. Four guys attempt to rescue her and get killed by the dead man. Rest of the story in the climax reveals what actually happened.

The Cast

This 108 minute movie has a very limited cast as the director has a list of confined roles to play in the movie. The movie show lots of characters in the start to set the atmosphere, later restricting only to the main characters. The five deaf mutes roles are played by Indhuja (Meera), Sananth Reddy, Deepak Paramesh, Anish Padmanabhan, Shasank Purushotham, and servant role is played by Gajaraj. Visually Challenged accident victim, Prabhu Deva, a musician and in guest role, Remya Nambeesan as his wife. The Director has chosen Prabhu Deva in specific as he wanted the actor who has not taken up such roles and Prabhu Deva has done justice to it.

Cinematography

S. Tirru, Cinematographer of the movie, has given his best in this film as it demands more self explanatory visual content for the audience to understand the film.

Setting

The location selected was Kodaikanal which is a hill station and it relates to the true incident too. The farmhouse and other spots shown are very pleasing and appealing to the eyes. Since the time film was shot is all late evenings and night, smoke effect has been used.

Art Director, Satees Kumar, has put in lot of cautious effort to match up with other visual elements used. No bright colours used anywhere in the set properties. To maintain the same mood of the film, even the interior of the farm house did not have bright colours, only tones of grey was used. In the second half of the movie, the long closed factory set was very much real with leaked mercury and other greasy substances, machineries, spare parts, etc.

The movie does not have a dialogue which is matched by the visual elements. For instance, inside the factory, the character tries to open the doors with difficulty, floor with spilled mercury and other greasy oils, black dusty floors, etc.

Lighting and Colour Tones

Lighting is another important aspect in this visual treat. Not much of lights used as the director have tried the subtle pattern. In the first few minutes in the movie, where fun, happiness and enjoyment were portrayed, vibrant colours were used. Once they leave the house, blue light had been used effectively to show the night effect and calmness in their life. The lighting used in the scene where the car lights on fog casting shadow of the couple was a good idea of

showcasing the romance.

Soon after the car hits the man, the colour tone changes to green. From then on, green tones are majorly used. These colour tones and lighting goes well with the weather of the place and the greenery around. Once the characters enter the factory, the colour tone is completely green and when it moves to the climax, the intensity of the green also increases to show the rage.

In POV shots of Prabhu Deva (haunted girl), the lights used are very different. Warm tone is used. Low light used when the haunted girl looks at the corpse of Prabhu Deva is a great combination of colours used where the girl in green tone, POV shot in orange and tint of blue colour on Prabhu Deva's face conveys a lot in the screen.

In the climax, lighting is very natural and colour tone is pale with no blue and green to convey the emotions.

Framing, Perspective, Camera Movements

The cinematographic aspect mentioned above goes hand in hand. The camera angles in some shots are highly appreciable. Like the top angle in the memorial where the five deaf mutes are looking at it, and in the same place after the accident, showing the upside down frame conveys a lot. In the scene where the guys have difference in opinion in going out to search the i-pod, framing is brilliantly handled – Difference of opinion is established by each character in different window frame. The usage of extreme close-up, close up, long shots are cleverly dealt. When the five deaf mutes are in the frame, mid shots are used to cover up all their activities. Point of view shots are used to show the perspective of the characters, especially the resolution part of the movie is mostly with point of view shots.

Tilted frames and the Dutch angle shots are very much used in the climax to build up curiosity about the next move.

Editing

Editor of the film is Vivek Harshan. His work in the film is most appreciable. His excellence was brought in the climax scene where the same scene presented in two different perspectives. The slow motion shot in the climax adds up to the vigour of the character. The camera rotation scene is seamlessly matched by the editor. Montage of the flashback of both the characters is expressed meaningfully.

Sound and Music

Music composer Santosh Narayanan has brought soul to the movie with the music. Lack of dialogue and efficiency is bridged so easily by the music in the movie and help audience understand the movie. Movie starts with random loud music and then the silence reveals the characters to be deaf mutes. The titling has the background score violin, to

showcase the sadness of the past. Music for the five friends is different and for Prabhu Deva's Story is differently given. The music in the film expresses the mood of the scene and sinks well with the visuals.

Sounds used in the movie is very realistic and no exaggerations. Most scenes are silent as the lead roles are deaf and story revolves around their perspective and hence sound is eliminated. In the climax part, after Prabhu Deva's entry in the factory, sounds are included as this character deals only with the sound.

Costumes and Make Up

The costumes are so natural and apt for the place and the story. All the characters except Prabhu Deva, wears subtle colours and the shades are more similar. Prabhu Deva as an exception wears a red sweater and white dhoti and his blue lens in eyes gives a horrifying feel and look. Red colour depicts danger and within the factory, he is the dangerous element. Only in the flash back he has mild colour clothes. As the movie revolves around the events happened in two just days, minimal number of clothes used for the entire movie.

When it comes to make up, real life appearance is achieved. Prabhu Deva's wounds after the accident are also decently portrayed. Inside the factory, dirt on the costumes and face was also very realistic.

Syntagmatic Analysis

This movie text is a narrative and reveals the knots at the climax only. The narrative moves through lots of confusions and changes in the flow of events which ultimately gets resolved. The whole story is about the life changing things happen in a day in the place where their lives were made miserable by birth itself. Until the second killing, it was not evident that Prabhu Deva is visually challenged.

When the fourth guy knows the killer's weakness, he plays with it and tries to escape by confusing him. But his own disability paves way for identifying the last surviving couple and kills the guy instantly.

The girl communicates with the killer explaining their innocence in the accident happened with him. Sudden change in the antagonist's mind and revealing his story to the girl indicates the innocence and justified revenge.

The final revealing of the one who was killing all four guys was the spirit of the dead man puts every audience in shock and unties the knot of the two Prabhu Deva's shown in the first killing in the factory.

Signs: Signifier and Signified

This interesting Cinematic Venture has used numerous sign

throughout the movie which adds up to the meaning of the story. Though the deaf mutes in the film are not using the exact sign language used by the disabled people, to put down the message for the common man it is acceptable. Otherwise subtle would have been relevant to watch this movie.

In Semiotics, the Saussurean Dyadic model prescribes two components of a sign: Signifier and signified. The movie is comprised of numerous signs in the form of audio (music, sound and sound effects), non verbal aspects like eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, colour tone, lighting, editing (montage, slow motion, shots), camera angles and movements, and symbolism. For analysis and convenience, selective signs of importance are chosen and interpreted.

I-pod with the caricature of a musician behind was shown as an element of importance in the film when it was seized by the policemen and received it back and expresses his happiness. Later after disposing the corpse, i-pod is the material that makes them go back and get trapped to death.

While discussing about going back to search the i-pod, the friends have difference in opinion which was signified by showing each character framed in different window of the car.

Deer acts a communicator in this film. In three scenes, the role of deer is predominant. First, the sign board about deer crossing communicates the guy to look for the surveillance camera when attempt to dispose the corpse. Secondly, when they carry the corpse for disposal in the forest area near the factory, all five of them notice the deer watching their move, and they ignore it by further advances to find a place for disposal. Thirdly, when the guys come back next day to search for the lost i-pod and find the missing corpse, they again see the deer watching them and communicate with its eye contact about something wrong with the girl in the car. When the guys rush to see the girl in the car, they find her missing.

In front of memorial, first day the couple proposes and dance with glee and on the second day, in the same place, the camera shows them upside down portraying the complete change in the mindset and sadness in their life.

After they hit the man (Prabhu Deva), as they start driving, the hanging key chain of a man oscillating is shown which depicts the man's life in threat. The blue tone on the key chain shows the helplessness of the man hit by the car.

Top angle was used when the friends hide the corpse in a shallow pit with dried leaves and wood and when the corpse was found missing, the guys are shown in low angle. This indicates the superiority of the living men over the corpse and discarding it in the forest and their feel of achievement was established. While latter, their disappointment and

helplessness was shown.

When the guys enter the factory, a symbolism of cockroaches roaming around the mercury spill was shown with the guys walking inside in out of focus. This indicates the life of men also is roaming around in that place which is poisonous. Top angle showing the hanging iron hook in focus and the guys out focus reveals their death.

Symbolism of the nest with two eggs and a hatched egg shell amidst the chemical bottles in the iron locker and in the next shot, the guy was strangled by a piece of iron and falls down to see a just hatched disabled bird trying to survive. It refers to the corpse is the other cupboard and its soul detached is trying to show its potential. In another perspective, it refers to the life of the people who are affected by the chemical factory and difficulties in leading their life.

The sounds from materials are given after the appearance of Prabhu Deva inside the factory as sound is the only mode of communication for him.

The top and low angle of Prabhu Deva and the second guy killed conveys the power and superiority of Prabhu Deva and the helplessness and fear of the guy respectively.

Remaining two guys who are alive gets to see their dead friends hanging. The frame was set in such a way that the mid shot showing the two friends amidst the iron bars and spider webs depict the confused and unstable state of mind.

The scene that reveals Prabhu Deva is visually challenged is a top angle one. The guys sitting in the top notices Prabhu Deva watching both of them and look horrified. The guy trying to climb up slips down and tries to escape that resulted in him pushing down the iron tables and he sits in a corner. Both the friends are shocked to see Prabhu Deva not attacking the fallen guy even if he was sitting in front on him. The guy sitting at the top reveals it by his eye movements and distracts Prabhu Deva by throwing an iron material to a distant place.

Extreme close up of Prabhu Deva's ears when the mobile of the guy trying to climb vibrates, shows the effective hearing capacity of the visually impaired person. When the guy reaches out his phone in his pocket and cuts his dad's call, he was pulled down and killed. This depicts the connectivity between the son and dad getting disconnected.

Top angle of the three corpse hanging and Prabhu Deva stands in front it screams out loud. This shows the anger and vengeance he has on the people who killed him. As the scream mild down, he hears some sound that makes to move further.

The couple tries to escape from Prabhu Deva as the guy

knows about his blindness. So he plans to distract and trap him in a place and run away. The guy makes as much as noise with the hanging iron hooks and runs the machinery. When he enters the place, the couple escapes by locking him up inside. By knowing he was trapped, Prabhu Deva breaks the machinery so it could stop. He also breaks open the door and comes out. When the couple tries to escape, the music starts playing from the hand clock in the girl's pocket. This leads Prabhu Deva to find them. The frames of these shots are brilliantly chosen. The tilted frame shows the shrewdness and rotation of the camera depicts the change of game between the couple and Prabhu Deva.

When the couple realises that some sound attracts the antagonist, they find the hand clock and the guy throws it. Now the clock was caught by Prabhu Deva and in slow motion, the camera pan to show the hands of the guy is also caught by him and throws the guy to hit on the wall. This slow motion creates little suspense.

Prabhu Deva crushes the hand clock and drops it down. This depicts the love life of the couple is destroyed forever.

When Prabhu Deva realises yet another person alive, his facial expression showcases the hatred and anger at higher levels. But it soon drops down as she communicates with him in sign language holding his hands. After listening to her, he realises that these people whom he killed was innocent. This was exhibited in his blank expression on face with tears in eyes.

The camera zooms out to showcase the coupe in one side and Prabhu Deva on the other side but both inside the factory. This explains the mercury poisoning of the factory has made their lives helpless even if they have no role in it.

After conveying his flashback – he was a musician and lives with his wife. With all money they have planned for his eye operation next day but he was hit by the car. Here the scene showing his hit car, has red light of the car indicator flashing on Prabhu Deva depicting his dangerous moment. Listening to this she feels sorry and tries to take her hands off but he holds it firm. This creates tension as the doubts of he may kill her too was high. But he turns into dark black fumes and enters the girl's body. This portrays that it was Prabhu Deva's spirit that was taking revenge on the killers.

In her body, he sees things around him. The colour tone of his vision is warm (Orange). The haunted girl sees his body. This shot was captured with three tones of colours (Green, blue and orange) showing the poisonous factory, helpless body of the man and point of view vision. When he goes to his home, he sees all his things, photos and finally reaches out to his wife. A slight change in the body language and mannerism is observed in her as his spirit is seeing his wife for the first time. In this scene, the mild gestures communicate the whole idea. The girl wipes off his

wife's tears and nods her head not to cry and conveys that she is leaving. While leaving she takes his violin and leaves.

The haunted girl play violin and looks at the factory with anger and writes something on the car window glass. The black fumes come out of her portraying that he has left her with a message. She sees the violin and then read the message "Sorry. We end up fighting wrong war." She cries and pulls a string in the violin and feels strange. Then she realises that Prabhu Deva has bestowed his hearing capability with her. She cries out loud looking at the burning factory.

The complete movie has two colour tones – blue depicting the cool and silent world of the deaf mutes and green depicting the poisoned mind and place.

Conclusion

Overall, the movie "Mercury" is a visual treat to the audience. The silence and the music of the movie are loud enough in conveying the intended ideas and meanings. The signs are given in its simple to reach out to every common man all over the world. The performance of the artists are also not exaggerated and maintained subtly. This film proves the statement in the movie "Silence is the most powerful scream."

To sum it up, Karthik Subburaj has constructed the media text that can be categorized based of three categories:

Social codes: Costumes, habits, gadgets used, make-up, gestures, and body language explains about the social class of the characters in the movie

Technical codes: Colour tone, Camera angles, framing, sound and music, lighting has lead to the creation of mood and explains the content of the movie effectively.

Representational codes: The usage of the narrative structure for this film is the success of the movie and has justified the needs of the director.

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