

Semiotic Analysis of a Media Text *The Lord of the Rings:*

The Fellowship of the Ring

ANALYSE SÉMIOTIQUE D'UN MÉDIA TEXTE *LE SEIGNEUR DES ANNEAUX:*

LA COMMUNAUTÉ DE L'ANNEAU

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Abstract: The Lord of the Rings movie by Peter Jackson was an interesting genre for semiotic analysis. This brief analysis was looking at the manner of intertextuality, style and form, as well as a syntagmatic analysis. It also discussed the aspect of signs and the signified. The signs employed by filmmaker Peter Jackson in constructing this media text can be categorized into social codes, technical codes and representational codes.

Key words: Semiotic; Analysis; Lord of the Rings; Fellowship

Résumé: Le film *Le Seigneur des Anneaux* de Peter Jackson est un cas intéressant pour l'analyse sémiotique. Cette analyse brève se penche sur la manière de l'intertextualité, le style et la forme, ainsi qu'une analyse syntagmatique. Elle a aussi

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examiné l'aspect de la signalisation et des signifiés. Les signes employés par le cinéaste Peter Jackson dans la construction de ce média texte peuvent être classés dans les codes sociaux, les codes techniques et les codes de représentation.

Mots-Clés: sémiotique; analyses; Le Seigneur des Anneaux; communauté

1. INTRODUCTION

This movie is chosen for analysis because it is timeless in its appeal. It is a highly acclaimed movie and most theaters were always full house with people, regardless of age and from all walks of lives, were queuing to watch the movie. It was a blockbuster movie and grossed US\$860 million in theaters worldwide. J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" novels are dense epics that many felt could never be turned into a motion picture. Yet that is what New Zealand filmmaker Peter Jackson is doing. It would be interesting to have a semiotics analysis on this magnificent movie.

2. INTERTEXTUALITY

The Lord of the Rings is based on the book written by J.R.R Tolkien. It was voted as the greatest book of the 20th century by British readers. This is a groundbreaking epic of good versus evil, extraordinary heroes, wondrous creatures and dark armies of terror. The movie is the first of three adaptations of J.R.R Tolkien's fantasy. It cost £190 million and was directed by Peter Jackson.

3. STYLE AND FORM

3.1 Synopsis

The film follows the struggle of hobbit Frodo, played by Elijah Wood, to destroy a ring that makes its users invisible and have other dark powers. Set in mythic pre-historic times, this is a story of a desperate battle against encroaching evil. Frodo, has inherited a magic ring from his uncle, Bilbo. He and the other Fellowship of the Ring, must go against the Dark Lord Sauron, who desperately wants all the rings because it will enable him to enslave the people of Middle Earth. Frodo and a fellowship of friends and wizard, elf, dwarf and others are on a mission to destroy the ring by casting it into the volcanic fire in the Crack of Doom, although the ring unleashes its own power in the struggle.

3.2 The cast

The characters of Frodo Baggins, Gandalf the Grey, Aragon, Boromir, Sam, Pippin, Merry, Legolas and Gimli, (just to mention the cast that made appearance in the part chosen for analysis), are brilliantly represented by Elijah Wood, Sir Ian McKellen, Sean Bean, Sir Ian Holm, Christopher Lee, Billy Boyd, Orlando Bloom, Viggo Mortensen and Sean Astin. Their performances are brilliant and realistic. This of course contributes to the realism of the movie.

Sir Ian McKellen, who played Gandalf, testified to this by saying, "we've had designers Alan Lee and John Howe come in and visualize a much more wonderful world than anything I had in my head." His statement was supported by Peter Jackson, who happily declared, "The actors brought the characters to life in ways I hadn't imagined. So the vision of the film in my head was always changing."

It might also be helpful for the readers to know that in order to provide a more realistic presentation, the producers and directors went all length to make sure that the pronunciations and accents of the characters are compatible with the era portrayed. The casts even have Old English Dialect Coach-Andrew Jack to supervise accents, language and all things vocal. They have to learn the Old Norfolk accent to make the film realistic. For example, we can hear that some of the superior and respectable characters like Gandalf and Legolas spoke with standard British accent. Whereas, Aragon displayed a lesser degree of good spoken English. Frodo and Sam spoke almost standard British accent, though not as good as Gandalf. Pippin, Merry and Gimli used Scottish accents deliberately. This may be due to their portrayal of comical nature.

3.3 Cinematography

3.3.1 Setting

Shot in New Zealand, this film sees a series of stunning special effects-laden set pieces as the party of hobbits, humans, elves and dwarves cross Tolkien's fantasy land of Middle Earth. It is revealed in The Lord of the Rings' website that some shots take place in Wellington Studios. New Zealand has the perfect location in the wide gravelly valley that leads down from the alpine range west of Canterbury Plain, right in the centre of the South Island of New Zealand. The digital workshops Gandalf's image, shot against bluescreen, will be matched to backgrounds of deepest Moria or the highest sky, with a computerized battling Balrog. It actually took months to complete a shot.

Their sets were amazing. They were so realistic, with details like we were in Middle-Earth. It might also give more information to the readers that they have designed Hobbiton and built it a year before filming so it has weathered and allowed the vegetation to grow round about. They got John Howe and Allen Lee, two famous Tolkien illustrators, to help build it into the existing New Zealand landscape. Elijah Wood said "...but going there, after letting the earth grow around it and weather it, it felt like home. Ian McKellen put it best. "When I went to Hobbiton, I believed."

3.3.2 Lighting

The chosen section of the film mostly portrayed the darkness of Moria, enclosed by great grey wall. It emphasizes on the vast and intricate dangerous area, full of evils. Dim lights, pale gleams and numerous techniques of eye catching features gives the preferred reading that this is full of suspense, fear, thrill, magic, excitement, adventure and emotions.

3.3.3 Framing, perspective, camera movements and editing

All the above cinematography goes hand in hand to make the audience feel like the fellowship of the ring in actions. The dramatic increase in tempo, super close-ups, medium close-ups and fading images are cleverly manipulated. We could feel the arrow attacks by the orcs and the greatest fear of all, the presence of Balrog. Then, we have the dangerous bridge, The Bridge of Khazad-dum. We are made to see how very curvy and narrow it is, without kerb or rail. The pit is very deep and it is no surprise if for a second, our heartbeat stops when we witness Gandalf fell into the dark, grave pit.

3.3.4 Sound and Music

The sound effects and music, simply put, had my jaws hanging open from beginning to end. Examples are a great noise "doom doom", feet sounds, laughters of orcs, harsh horn-call, shrill cries. Then, came the solemn moment after Gandalf fell into the pit. The music is slow and sentimental to evoke the feelings of sadness in our hearts.

3.3.5 Costumes and make-up

All forms of realism are made possible through these artistic creativities, which are appropriate for the time and characters intended. The actors had to wear the ears and the feet, which changes the way they feel. The cast also claimed that the wardrobe and swords also felt very real. If we take Gandalf, for example, it is actually very difficult for them to bring him to life from the book. Peter Jackson said they don't want to be get trapped into simply copying them. A two-dimensional, painted Gandalf who looks good on a book-cover might be impossible for a flesh-and-blood actor to reproduce.

The visual effects experts have solved how to make the Hobbits appear to be the right size, in any number of ways, most too complicated for viewers to understand. (<http://www.lordoftherings.com>).

4. SYNTAGMATIC ANALYSIS

This text is a narrative which follows the sequence of an epic. The narrative moves through countless changes of scenes and characters in an imaginary world which is totally convincing in its details.

For the purpose of analysis, the climax of the narrative is chosen. The horrifying adventure began when the group of the fellowship of the ring entered the Mines of Moria. There, after series of terror, they had to face Balrog, the 40 foot-tall winged demon whose skin crackles with fire and smoke. However, Gandalf the Grey heroically held the monster at bay long enough for the fellowship to escape.

There are elements of surprise and unexpected twist in the development of the plot. For example, the scene which Gandalf fell from the bridge while fighting with the Balrog is unexpected by those who are not familiar with the book.

All the criteria discussed earlier contribute to the whole ensemble syntagmatic structure of the film. The choice is made purposefully to indicate a representation of an epic. In this syntagmatic structure of a narrative, all signs are interlinked with each other. It is a product of all structures.

5. SIGNS: SIGNIFIERS AND SIGNIFIED

According to Saussure, a sign consists of a signifier (the form which the sign takes) and the signified (the concept or values it represents). In the selected scene, a variety of signs have been employed to construct the preferred meaning. These signs include audio signs (dialogue, music and sound effects), facial expression, gestures, colour, lighting, editing (length of shots and slow-motion), camera angles, movement and distance and symbolism. For the purpose of organization and convenience, only important signifiers are chosen for discussion.

Realizing that more orcs are coming, Gandalf and his friends head for the Bridge of Khazad-dum. The high angle shot shows them running across what seems to be a huge hallway, making them look weak and insignificant. The orchestral background music represents triumph and victory as they have killed some orcs and a troll in the previous scene. In the next scene where the companions were chased by the orcs, there are sound effects of hurrying feet, underscoring the tension that prevails. There are also shrieks a la Red Indians indicating the strength and brutality of the enemies. Sounds of flying arrows further enhance the battling situation. Tracking shots are widely used in this scene for they put the viewers in one of the characters of the film or in an imaginary character, with the effect of positioning the audience 'on the stage' which results in the audience occupying a position of superior knowledge.

The sounds suddenly fell into silence. The purpose is to direct the audience's attention to what they are about to hear. We then hear a roar followed by a close up of Gandalf who then immediately turns his face to his left signifying that the sound comes from that direction. The next shot shows the orcs in the foreground and, at the background, what seems to be darkness has now lit with flickering of flames. There is a middle-close up of Frodo whose facial expression and body movement signify confusion. A middle-close up shows two orcs looking around them and shrieking, indicating fear. The next couple of shots show them running off the scene and climbing up the pillars emphasizing retreat.

There is a middle-close up of Baromir, Gandalf and Legolas. Gandalf is at the center of the screen indicating his dominant role over others, thus his knowledge of the sound. Legolas is at his left, lifting his arrows indicating his readiness to fight but slowly lowers it as if realizing that fighting is of no use then. Close ups of other companions' facial expressions encourage similar emotional involvement in the viewers. The length of shots here is also a signifier. There is a succession of quick shots signifying a sense of tension and suspense. The camera then zooms in on Gandalf. The close up focuses the viewers' attention on what he is about to say. His eyes are tightly shut signifying the ongoing of some intense mental activity. He is shown here without his hat, which could indicate the absence of his protection.

A tracking shot shows the companions running headed by Gandalf, a position signifying superiority over others. This shot is accompanied by fast-tempo orchestral music signaling the need to hurry. The companions arrive at what seems to be the edge of a chasm. The low angle shot depicts the depth of the ravine and the larva-like substance that lies at its bottom, signifying the danger of the surrounding. The background blows of trumpets further enhance this feeling. Aragorn is shown turning to Gandalf saying "Gandalf". His turning to Gandalf signifies his need for advice and his soft voice tone indicates loss of hope, as if he is saying, "There's a deep ravine ahead, so what should we do now?" Gandalf in turn orders "Lead them on, Aragorn. The bridge is near". The phrase "lead them on" could be symbolically seen as the handing down of the leadership from Gandalf to Aragorn. This foreshadows Gandalf's perish. At this point, there is an extreme long shot of the bridge. Looking at the bridge from this perspective gives the impression that it is an impossible task to reach the bridge. Symbolically, the bridge here signifies a transfer from danger to safety, from evil to good. There are rhythmic chanting voices and beats of drums as if warning of impending doom.

There is the voice of the roar again and Aragorn is shown turning his head to where the sound is supposed to come. He shoves his way past Gandalf indicating ignorance of Gandalf's order. In response, Gandalf pushes Aragorn back saying "Do as I say!" in a firm, high voice tone indicating anger and authority. Aragorn's facial expression is that of wonder and amazement, as if wondering the rationale of Gandalf's reaction. Gandalf then continues, "Swords are no more use here." The word "swords" here can be understood literally and figuratively. Figuratively, it refers to strength and power, thus signifying the supreme power the enemy possesses for it cannot be defeated by ordinary human power and strength.

The companions are shown crossing the broken bridge that spans the chasm in shots taken from several angles, exacerbating the inherent chaos. There is a tracking shot of a flying arrow, which again, serves to put the audience in an active role. Sound effects of flying arrows and their right-at-the-target thuds evoke the feeling of horror in the viewers. The background sounds of tribal-like chants and beats of drums switch to victorious blow of trumpets once Aragorn and Frodo manage to jump to safety.

The next scene shows Gandalf ushering others to go over the bridge. There are huge burning flames at the background, representing the rage and fury of the Balrog. They could also signify the evilness of the place, for fire is usually associated with hell and damnation. Sounds of burning fire enhance the prevailing mood. The low-pitched beats of drums and blows of trumpets underscore the tension that prevails. There is also a close up of the Balrog, zooming in on its widely opened fiery mouth, and hence evokes the feeling of terror. The Balrog runs towards the nine companions. There is a tracking over-head (high angle) shot showing the companions crossing the bridge, as if someone is watching the goings-on. This shot also makes them look small thus underscoring their inability to challenge the demon Balrog. A background orchestral music enhances the mood of suspense. There is a long shot presumably from one of the characters' viewpoint showing Gandalf standing in the middle of the bridge, with the fiery Balrog at the other end. Besides allowing the viewers to see how big the Balrog is, this

long shot indicates 'social detachment', and in the context of this story, could refer to the 'detachment' of the other companions from Gandalf for they do not have the means to help him fight the Balrog..

In the battle between Gandalf and the Balrog, there are two signs worth mentioning; the protective white light and the line "You shall not pass!" The bright white light that shields Gandalf (formed by Gandalf's stick Glamdring) underscores the purity of Gandalf's magical power. This makes a contrast with the Balrog's flaming red swords and whips signifying evil power. Towards the end of the battle, Gandalf screams, "You shall not pass!" The use of negative simple future tense "shall not" conveys negativity for present time as well as future, underscoring Gandalf's determination not to let Balrog pass the bridge, for that could mean the end of their mission. This linguistic code ties in well with the visual codes to show Gandalf's determination and courage in the battle.

The Balrog falls into the pit but as he falls, his flashing whip manages to curl around Gandalf's right foot, dragging him to the edge. There is a close up of Gandalf. The look of his eyes signifies loss and defeat but against all these significations he utters, "Run, you fools!" This phrase is ironic. The word "fools" means "idiots" but it is not Gandalf's intention to degrade his friends. Instead, this expression can be understood as Gandalf's ironical encouragement for his dear friends to move on.

There is a super close up of Frodo whose facial expression signifies devastation over the loss of Gandalf, which is enhanced by his all-out yell "No!" This shot encourages feelings of emotional involvement in the viewers. What follows is a close up of Aragorn whose facial expression indicates his hesitation to believe what has happened. There is also a medium shot of Aragorn looking back at the place where Gandalf has fallen while running up the staircases, as if bidding farewell to his friend. These shots are shown in slow motion, with the purpose of enhancing the grief stricken situation. The mood is further enhanced by Enya's soft slow melancholic tune, underscoring the grief and sorrow that prevail. These two mood enhancers undoubtedly encourage similar emotional reactions in the viewers.

In the last part of the scene, an aerial shot shows the companions coming out of the mine. The bright light signifies an outdoor setting, in contrast to the previous indoor setting of the Moria mines signified by the dim light. Symbolically, the bright light refers to victory and safety (at least temporarily) for the companions have managed to escape from the Balrog. The dominant colour here is white signifying purity and good, in contrast to the prevalent black colour of the mines. Again, the white and black colours here are symbolic references to good and evil.

6. CONCLUSION

The success of a movie in conveying the desired message depends on the carefully selected signs as opposed to other signs within the same paradigm, as well as the meaningful combination of those signs to build a comprehensive whole. This requires creativity and sensitivity from the part of the filmmaker. It is also evident from the above discussion that certain signs are shared by many media texts and some are unique to a specific medium such as tracking shot (the movement of the camera).

In sum, the signs employed by filmmaker Peter Jackson in constructing his media text can be categorized into the following:

Social codes

Dress, make-up, gestures and language of characters inform us of the characters' social class or importance.

Technical codes

Camera angles, lightings, sounds and music lead to the strong expectations of the movie and signify the genre of the programme, here the movie is not a documentary or sitcom. They also affect our mood.

Representational codes

The dialogs and the narrative structure are different from other forms of genres. They make us feel what the director wants us to feel.

Televsual codes constitute a kind of 'language' and we all learn how to interpret signs and symbols in order to put meaning to what we see. This process takes place orally and visually, and does not differ from what we do in perceiving reality in everyday life which makes the task of analyzing a movie a challenging yet an insightful experience.

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