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Barthes' Semiotic Theory and Interpretation of Signs

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ABSTRACT

The current survey paper aimed to shed light on the science of signs in general, and Barthes' semiotic theory to interpret signs in particular. In order to achieve this objective, the researchers reviewed the prominent works of Barthes on this respect to develop an understanding of his semiotic theory. They also displayed some conducted research applying Barthes' semiotic theory. The researchers also intended to answer the question: How can researchers interpret signs using Barthes' semiotic theory? Barthes' major studies reviewed were Mythologies, Elements of semiology, The five codes, The rhetoric of the image, The death of the author, and From work to text. The conclusion answered the question in that the focus of the theory is on three levels: denotative which describes the literal meaning, connotative which is related to the mental concepts, and mythology which is related to the history, and culture of viewers.

Keywords: *Barthes' semiotic theory, Barthes interpretation of signs, connotation, denotation, mythology*

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INTRODUCTION

People usually need language to express their ideas and emotions, communicate with each other, and exchange information. These different kinds of expressions require using different kinds of signs since human life is filled with natural and artificial signs; all of which have their specific meaning according to different kinds of interpretation. Hence, scientists have had to think seriously about those signs and study their features. Being considered the fathers of semiotics, the French Ferdinand de Saussure and the American Charles Sanders Peirce worked on the same topic although each one of them was in a different country; they established for studying signs scientifically. The current survey paper aims to shed light on the science of signs in general, and Barthes' theory of the interpretation of signs in particular. In order to achieve this objective, the researchers reviewed the prominent works of Barthes on this respect to develop an understanding of his semiotic theory. They also displayed some conducted research that have applied Barthes' semiotic theory. The researchers also intended to answer the question: How can researchers interpret signs using Barthes' semiotic theory?

The study is important for researchers of semiotics to know how to analyze visual texts, and images.

Roland Barthes, the French essayist and social literary critic, was born in November, 1915 in France, and died in March, 1980. He studied classical letters, grammar and philology at the University of Paris. He was the first to hold the chair of "Literary Semiology" at the College of France in 1976. His writings were on semiotics (Editors of Britannica, 2021, March).

Niski (2006) described Barthes' presence stating:

Barthes' presence as writer continues today with the same power and luminosity that his insights have brought to many aspects of culture, language, art and society. Barthes' famous statement in Writing Degree Zero that – "Literature is like phosphorus: it shines with its maximum brilliance at the moment when it attempts to die" – seems curiously to have become a metaphor his own impact as an intellectual force: his brilliance continuing to glow long after his mortal extinction had occurred in bodily form.

SEMIOTICS

Etymologically, the term ‘Semiotics’ can be traced back to the Greek word semeiotikos that symbolizes “the study of signs” and forms the theory of semiotics. Semiotics, according to Hartmann and Stork (1972), “is the systematic study of linguistic and non-linguistic signs”. The sign, according to Eco (1976), is a term, a word, a notion, a voice, and also a visible picture that achieves the mission of a sign. It symbolizes objects, in reality, hence, subtitled something into another object is the main function of a sign (Chandler, 2007). In semiotics, the concept of meaning is formed through diversity between signifiers and signified. The signifier is a picture that symbolizes something or a graphic exemplification of words, letters, and something outside context. On the other hand, the signified is the rational aspect of the idea and something that can either be real or imaginary. So, the signified does not necessarily be treated as concrete.

Saussure (cited in Sebeok, 2001), defined signs as entities that consist of physical objects such as gestures, letters, postures, etc. that characterize as signifiers, and pictures or notions to which signifiers indicate as signified. From his collected lectures of 1915 (cited in Dweich & Muwafaq Al Ghabra, 2020), Saussure

stated that the link between the signifier and the signified is not completely arbitrary since they have their fundamentals in society as the example of showing the scale for “Justice”. Saussure used the term “semiology” to refer to the science of signs.

Short (2007) described Peirce’s triadic way of interpreting signs, in which he explained that a (sign) refers to something given the symbol (A); this thing symbolizes an object or fact given the symbol (B) to some interpretant thought given the symbol (C). Hence, the sign or as Peirce called representamen is a First, its object or fact is a Second, determining this object or fact is a Third - interpretant. Peirce used the term semiotics to refer to the science of signs.

Barthes (1957) identified semiology as it is the science studying ideas-in-form because the focus of the study is on significations away from the content. Yet, it is important to consider the unity of the interplay between form, and ideology “historical” explanation. According to Barthes, semiology is the correlation between the signifier, and the signified to form the sign, all in one process.

BARTHES’ WORKS

The current paper focuses on Roland Barthes, who is a French philosopher, linguist, essayist, semiotician,

and critic. In the fifties and sixties, Barthes was a pioneer of structuralism which studies the underlying structure using analytical concepts from different fields, such as linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and others in order to understand the cultural products. In the sixties and seventies, Barthes moved to post-structuralism which viewed that history and the various cultures have impact on the interpretation (Jurjensen, 2014). He played the main role in developing the field of semiotics after developing it from linguistics to visual images. The followings are some of his works:

- **Methodologies, 1957:** Barthes identified the word “myth” as a system of communication bearing a message; it has a form of signification. According to Barthes, everything can be a myth if it comes by a discourse; it is defined by its message. Hence, uncountable myths can be produced since there is no restriction on describing things; the language of description is chosen by history. In conveying the message, the myth may have different types of representation, such as written discourse, photographs, cinema, etc. Mythical language has been done in away to be appropriate to open communication in order to reach

values, and meet facts indirectly through tokens. Barthes introduced many kinds of criticism concerning the culture of bourgeois society, and employed a set of hypotheses about this culture to identify the values of other related cultures. Mythologists must feel free from the restrictions of the society in order to be truthful because they have to build their myths on ethical foundations; they may find themselves estranged due to this situation. The following quotation (p. 61) shows how Barthes formed one of his myths talking about wine as it is a good substance, and referring to its producers, the French capitalists:

For it is true that wine is a good and fine substance, but it is no less true that its production is deeply involved in French capitalism, whether it is that of the private distillers or that of the big settlers in Algeria who impose on the Muslims, on the very land of which they have been dispossessed, a crop of which they have no need, while they lack even bread.

- **Elements of Semiology, 1964:** Here Barthes categorized the signifieds into three observations: the first one

is actualization which refers to either separate words or a group of words through articulated language; these words do not need effort to analyse them using meta-language. The second observation is extension of semiological signifieds which refers to the function of a whole system serving communication, and sometimes overlapping the form of other systems as it is in the garment system, and the food system; both of which are articulated in the different situations of life in work, parties, or activities. Thus when analyzing, one must predict a complete ideological description covering the whole systems at the time of analysis. The third observation is the final one referring to correspondence of the different systems of signifiers with those of the signifieds. These signifieds can be deciphered differently according to the different cultures, and the readers' knowledge. Concerning signifiers, Barthes stated that they have the same observations as those of the signifieds; the difference is that the signifier serves as a mediator characterized by materiality. In semiology, the signifier is always one of these materials, "sounds, objects, images". It is necessary for analysis to collect

all the typical signs as they are born; among which are the verbal, graphic, gestural, and iconic signs. Precisely, signification is the process of connecting the signifier to the signified to produce the sign.

- **The five codes, 1970:** In his book *S/Z*, Barthes came out with a textual analysis theory in which he categorized signifiers into five types of codes believing that any text has plurality of meaning, and all the events can be given codes and names. The five codes are: the proairetic code refers to all the actions as they are understood through reading leading the reader to construct the plot, and they are usually related to earlier and/ or later actions; the hermeneutic code refers to any mysterious or unexplained elements in the text as they are seen in detective, and open-ended stories (Booryazadeh & Faghfori, 2014); the semantic code points to the connotation of the implied elements as they appear through reading; the symbolic code points to the connotation of organized sets of meaning in a way to be understood differently; finally, the cultural code focuses on indisputable texts, such as science, religion, or profession (Jureczek, 2017).

- **The rhetoric of the image, 1977:**

Barthes saw images as direct analogy conveyers of meaning, and he identified three classes in the image: the first class is the **linguistic** message referring to the text which may be analyzed denotatively and connotatively. This kind of message, according to Barthes, has two functions in order to attract the the viewer's attention, **anchorage** which is the most frequent in linguistic messages having the responsibility of directing the focus on a specific meaning among multiple ones; this meaning is mostly relying on the morality and ideology of the society, and **relay** which is less frequent with fixed meanings; here, the text is only a snatch of dialogue completing its intended meaning by images that are either cartoons or comic strips (Barthes, 1977 & Hugh, 2009). The second class is the **non-coded iconic**, the natural message which points to the denotative analysis of what Barthes called "first degree of intelligibility"; images are explained as they are seen without codes. Yet, Barthes maintained the necessity of employing connotation together with denotation in order to understand the image well; he rejected the

denotative explanation only. The contradiction between denotation and connotation is a reference to man's revolution, and the third class is the **coded iconic or symbolic**, the cultural message which refers to the connotative analysis of the image as what Barthes called "rule-governed transpositions" referring to the viewer's cultural background. The meaning of the image, here, does not rely on the creator's meaning; the image may have different meanings according to the receivers. Hence, there is no a particular language for analyzing the image concerning the signifieds because of metalanguage interference; the signifieds are always the same in a certain society and history, and this is the ideology whose signifiers Barthes called "connotators", and the set of connotators "rhetoric". Thus, rhetoric is the signifying aspect, and rhetoric of the image is the classification into its connotators focusing on the physical properties of the vision away from phonatory aspect. (Barthes, 1977).

- **The death of the author, 1977:**

Barthes described the text as a mixture of writings from different cultures; the writer can only imitate, and mix them in a way deleting the

original features. The author's thoughts are not necessarily to be acted in reality as they are because inside everyone a certain interpretation deletes the original thought, and starts to develop another one. At this point, the voice of the author disappears.

- **From work to text, 1977:** At the period of structuralism, Jurjensen (2014) displayed how Barthes considered texts as they have innate meaning basing on the analytical concepts of the different fields. Later on, when he moved to post-structuralism, he considered texts as they have variable meanings according to the interpretation of the different cultures. Hence, in this period, Barthes saw that there is no need to know the history of the text or even its structure rather than knowing whether it has significant impact on spread time. His focus was on the system of knowledge and effects of the text. In this case, the text has more than one meaning differing according to the different systems of knowledge "different cultures"; therefore, one can see more than one interpretation for the same text.

CONDUCTED STUDIES

Researchers have adopted Barthes' theories to analyse different kinds of data. Here are some of their studies:

- Permana (n.d.) conducted a study, entitled "Meta-language analysis of Robert Frost poem 'Fire and Ice'" to understand the denotative and connotative meaning of the words of the poem using Barthes' levels of signification. Results have shown that the human being is the main reason for the destruction of the world connoted by the term "fire" symbolizing the desire of humans to govern the world during the world war in 1920, the same time of the poem's appearance. The poem show how those who persist to govern the world do not care about the loss of others' lives.
- A'la (2011) conducted a descriptive qualitative study whose aim was to know the connotation meanings of verbal and non-verbal language used in mild cigarette advertisements. The researcher used Barthes' theory to know the denotative and connotative meaning, and identify their mythology.
- Zaib and Mashori (2014) applied Barthes' five codes to the analysis of the selected story "A Pair of Jeans"

from Moniza Shamsie's anthology entitled "And the World Changed". Dividing the story into texts, the researchers could decode many hidden meanings. Worn by the main character, Mariam, the pair of Jeans with the short vest became a symbol of spoiled innocence and perfection. Then the story displays the conflict between her modernism and her parents-in-law traditionalism. The researchers found that applying the five codes enhanced the comprehension of the story meaning.

- Al-Bahrani, Al-Saadi, and Yousif (2016) conducted a study to examine the two contradictory statements in that the language of image is "universal", or a "source of ambiguity and creativity". Accordingly, the study aimed to "examine the students' ability to identify the denotative key-signs that help access and share the intended denotative meaning and/or highlight other denotative meaning potentials from a detextualised image caricature". Barthes' theory of mythology was one of the models adopted to achieve the objective.
- Rehman, 2018 aimed in his study to reveal how the American media used political cartoons to show Islam's type of ideology applying Barthes'

model of semiotics. Relying on the terrorist activities which happened between 2001 and 2016 to collect the data from sites on the internet, the researcher has inferred that the ideology of Muslims are being distorted by the American media that they always link all the terrorist activities to Islam; this has led to build a negative view toward Muslims.

- Isnain et al. (2019): they employed the same model to analyze the content of the English textbooks of Indonesian secondary schools aiming to investigate the multicultural principles that are embedded. The researchers applied the layer of denotation to describe persons, locations, symbols, and signs in the pictures, and the layer of connotation to analyze ideas and virtues connoted from the denoted pictures. Through their analysis, they categorized the pictures into four principles which are: respecting other people's tradition (ROPT), appreciating other people's perspective (AOPP), appreciating other people's cultural products (AWER), and appreciating women's equal rights (AOPCP) (Isnaini et al., 2019). They have inferred that only one image has shown the principle of

ROPT while the principle AOPP has appeared in three images; the principle AWER has existed in five images, and AOPCP has existed in six images. In addition, they have found that there are not any cultural values in the selected textbooks that represent a specific culture.

- Naif, (2020): she conducted a comparison study to examine the linguistic strategies and non-linguistic devices used in English tourism brochures in Iraq and Malaysia adopting Barthes' Visual Retic Theory (1977). She found that the non-linguistic devices are far more persuasive than the linguistic ones. In addition, the Malaysian visuals showed superiority to the Iraqi ones.

CONCLUSION

The core of Barthes' theory is as Allen (2003) stated that the sign is the relationship between the signifier and signified which was Saussures' view that he called a "**first order system**", e.g. the **word or image** of a "scale" is the signifier "denotation", and its **concept of measurement** is the signified "connotation"; the sign is the relationship between denotation and connotation. Basing on this sign of the first order system, Barthes applied myth to construct a "second order system" in which the sign of the first order system becomes the signifier of another sign as in the example of the "scale" to produce another sign which is "justice". This process of "signification" is the concern of analyzing texts and visual texts.

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