









ORIGINAL

## Branding on Screen: Cinema, Color, and Thought in Audiovisual Discourse

### La Marca en Escena: Cine, Color y Pensamiento en el Discurso Audiovisual

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#### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on analyzing semiotics in cinema, understanding that film goes beyond being merely a tool for entertainment to become a means of connecting language, culture, marketing, and emotions through semiotics. Through images, sounds, colors, and various narratives, it shows how objects or symbols become part of the story, also influencing the viewer's memory. Special emphasis is placed on product placement, where brands are naturally integrated into the audiovisual narrative. Finally, the article reviews the evolution of semiotics in cinema, from its origins in silent films to the digital age with platforms and social media. It also highlights the importance of color as a way to communicate the emotions within a cinematic narrative.

**Keywords:** Cinema; Color; Semiotics; Visual Narrative; Advertising.

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo se enfoca en analizar la semiótica en el cine, entendiendo que éste va más allá de ser una herramienta de entretenimiento, a convertirse en una manera de coincidir el lenguaje, la cultura, el marketing y las emociones, por medio de la semiótica. A través de las imágenes, sonidos, colores y distintas narrativas se muestra cómo los objetos o símbolos, se vuelven parte de la historia, influyendo asimismo en la memoria del espectador. Así mismo, se hace uso especial del product placement, donde las marcas se integran de forma natural en la narrativa audiovisual. Finalmente, se repasa la evolución de la semiótica en el cine, desde sus orígenes en el cine mudo hasta la era digital con plataformas y redes sociales, además se le da importancia al color como una forma de comunicar las emociones de una narrativa cinematográfica.

**Palabras clave:** Cine; Color; Semiótica; Narrativa Visual; Publicidad.

#### INTRODUCTION

From the beginnings of silent cinema to its current transformation into digital platforms, it has been a reflection of the cultural, technological, and symbolic changes of each era, along with semiotics that has allowed us to understand how audiovisual language has been shaped by images, sounds, colors, and symbols that convey meanings that go beyond explicit narration. Over the decades, theorists such as Saussure, Peirce, Metz, and Eco have contributed to the analysis of cinematographic signs, revealing how cinema not only tells a story but also represents ideologies, constructs realities, and generates emotional bonds with viewers, modifying their tastes, and behaviors. Product placement and the symbolic use of color have advanced this

communicative dimension, inserting brands and emotions into the diegetic universe of audiovisual works. Likewise, the spectator has gone from passive receivers to active agents who interpret and share film content on social networks.

It is essential to highlight the evolution of semiotics in cinema and its impact on narrative, advertising, and audience experience. This raises the question: How do contemporary cinema's visual, chromatic, and commercial signs configure new forms of meaning and interaction with the spectator in audiovisual discourse?

### Semiotic evolution in cinema

Semiotics focuses on the study of signs, words, images, gestures, and symbols. Depending on how the audience understands them, these convey contexts within some communication process.

Film semiology plays an important role. It studies how films communicate through images, such as how the camera moves and the incorporation of images, colors, music, and dialogue. This helps to analyze whether the film elements combine to convey the ideas the author wants. This allows the viewer to have a deeper understanding of cinematographic works.

One of the main ones was Ferdinand de Saussure, who considered language to be a system of signs. In film, there were already visual and auditory signs through simple acting.

Christian Metz was a film semiotician who studied whether film was a language, a narrative, or a psychology. His perspective was to integrate these tools to have a critical and theoretical analysis and thus to understand cinema. As noted in an analysis of his work, 'Metz chose to work on the interweaving of what for him were the two branches of the study of signification, before semiotics: psychoanalysis and linguistics',<sup>(1)</sup> which demonstrates his vocation for an empirical and transdisciplinary semiotics that could adapt to the complexities of the cinematic medium.

Umberto Eco also contributed to exploring how cinematic and literary signs are interpreted within cultural contexts, highlighting the importance of the spectator in constructing meaning from a semiotic perspective. In his own words, 'every text is a lazy machine that asks the reader to do its work for it',<sup>(2)</sup> thus highlighting the active role of the reader in the production of meaning.

Nowadays, semiology has taken a significant turn since technology has helped it to be considered an educational and cultural analysis tool. It helps analyze colors, form, and performances and reflects semiology. An example of this is the Barbie movie because it has a different narrative that goes from being a fantasy full of colors and visual or auditory performances, such as music. There is a life of reality with a lot of conflict and chaos.



Figure 1. Evolution of the semiotics of cinema

As can be seen in the graph, the importance of the meaning of semiotics in cinema, in its beginnings, could be relevant, but it was not so much seen by the public. As the years went by, this idea became much

stronger, implementing sounds, images, and colors, making today the mechanism much easier, and the audience understands what is to be conveyed, generating emotions and different opinions.

### **Beginnings 1900-1950**

In these early years, the pioneers gave silent films their importance and visual significance, where they were forced to tell important, unique, and interesting stories with images, gestures, and montages. Peirce and Saussure applied their theories directly to cinema, with their ideas and abstract meanings helping to inspire other early theorists.

### **Structural Consolidation 1950-1970**

At this time, an organized structure (shots, sequences, cuts) began to be given importance and/or significance. With the rise of structuralism, the aim was to understand how film, through signs, produces narrative “grammars” as a language of broad meaning, communicating its ideas through visual, sound, and emotional codes.

### **Ideological criticism 1970-1980**

During this decade, cinema has been analyzed not only as a language but also as an ideological apparatus, where it reproduces dominant worldviews. Jean-Louis Baudry proposes that cinema functions as an apparatus, where the editing, projection, and camera give spectators a realistic experience where they feel trapped by the story or narrative.

### **Active reception 1980-1990**

The importance begins to be given to how the spectator perceives the signs and how the audience interprets and re-signifies them. This begins to be given under social class, gender, culture, and age. In this same decade, importance begins to be given not only to the film but also to the trailers, posters, merchandising, etc.

### **Cultural hybridization 1990-2010**

The mixture of visual and thematic styles begins in cinema with a variety of genres and/or cultural icons, such as *Pulp Fiction* (1994), where pop culture and black humor are mixed, and *Matrix* (1999), where fiction, action, and philosophy are combined, analyzed, and experimented with to create simulated realities, replacing the real.

### **Transmedia Expansion 2010-Present**

It expands in media such as films, series, comics, networks, and video games, where the viewer becomes active, creates theories, participates, and gives opinions in networks that attract attention, which is interesting. Social networks and streaming platforms (TikTok and Netflix) use algorithms to decide what we can watch, what we might like, and/or what might catch our attention.

### **Semiotics of color in film**

When we talk about semiotics, we are talking about the inherent relationship between the human being and the sign; since the beginning of humanity, has been interpreting and creating signs as new ways of communicating. Since the caves, human beings began to capture on the walls of the caves the drawings of the animals that they were going to hunt, that is to say, the cave paintings (icons). With the passage of time and evolution, other ways of communicating began to be created, through words (verbal), but also the use of images captured through painting, the use of color, and other elements that detail each of the stages of history, the social and cultural aspects of each era based on the elements of the image.

Likewise, it is worth mentioning that in the 19th century, painting was replaced by photography with the appearance of the daguerreotype created by Louis Daguerre in 1839, and 48 years later, hand in hand with photography, cinema appeared with the first cinematographic camera designed in 1887 by Louis Le Prince.

The *Jazz Singer* is the first sound film; in the text of <sup>(3)</sup> it is said that the silent film era ended. It was not until 1961 that the color additive technique appeared in photography, created by James Maxwell, who began adding three sources of three primary colors to a succession of photographs. This technique was later implemented in cinema. From this, it is established that images and sound are fundamental elements that impact the spectators. In such a way that sound determines the spectator's points of view and defines the cinematographic narrative, semiotic concepts such as those proposed by Pierce in classifying signs, Indexical, iconic, and symbolic, are used in cinema to improve the narrative and visual communication.

Semiotics is a fundamental part of cinema because there are concepts that help to perfect film development. ‘It focuses on working on indexical signs, icons, and symbols (verbal, visual and audiovisual) that help to have a better narrative in the movement of the image; all this is part of the signification’.<sup>(4)</sup>

Another aspect of utmost importance in cinema is related to the semiotics of color used for artistic and cinematographic expressions. The visual perception of colour is transmitted according to how it is used, either to convey a message or emotions. According to <sup>(5)</sup> colour has the particularity of transmitting an immediate message and creating a language with several interpretations. Therefore, man has resorted to colour to provide a message and to associate it with concepts or feelings; in this way, using colour as a particular symbolic language, a better result is achieved if it is used with semiotics.

In this way, different chromatic colour are used to define the situation one wants to raise, give it adequate use, and provide knowledge of the primary colour.



Figure 2. Structured Colour Circle

Source: <sup>(5)</sup>

It is said that the colours displayed in the chromatic circle capture the audience's attention more quickly in auteur cinema, i.e., where the director dominates the narrative, aesthetics, and the whole production. Directors also use it to stylize the film project and create greater sensitivity to the viewers.

According to Albers, the practice and direct use of colour semiotics improve viewers' visibility and increase their sensitivity when watching moving images. They also delight the audience with their complexity of understanding.

The commercialization of cinema has made its content more superficial, and it is necessary to go deeper into the artistic-poetic foundation. Based on Sáenz's arguments, authorship only recently shows the proper functioning of film culture and its meaning as art. Many films use the semiotics of colour to develop a message's decoding and enable the audience's critical side in audiovisual projects.

The semiotics of color in auteur cinema become one of those essential elements of film language, which is why many auteur filmmakers use it by adapting different areas and stages of color. Thus, in auteur cinema, various colors have been highlighted in many films, such as monochromatic colors, in which the same tone is used only by varying the lighting.

### Cinema and advertising

Cinema and advertising are tools that share codes, languages, and semiotic strategies. Both concepts seek ways to influence the perception and behavior of the viewer and/or consumer within their target audience and the attraction of new audiences. As the seventh art, apart from encompassing the other six arts, cinema functions as a means of entertainment with its narratives and the composition of images with ideological and symbolic significance, allowing marketing to take advantage of the audiovisual medium for its strategies and brand impulses.

The semiotics of cinema allows us to understand how audiovisual images communicate complex meanings beyond telling a story. As Metz points out, cinema 'does not reproduce reality as it is, but represents it through a series of codes', <sup>(1)</sup> by which cinema is not limited to showing what it sees and that is why through the language of cinema the shots, the music, the characters... interpret reality or a fictitious world and give it meaning through their use.

This includes what is known as product placement, which functions as a passive and active symbolic representation and strategically places brand products within the audiovisual story. According to <sup>(6)</sup> 'the advertised object is not presented as an intruder in the fictional universe but is inscribed in it in a naturalized, functional way,' which means that the viewer does not perceive the brand as an advertising invasion, but as an integral part of the diegetic world, and reinforces their emotional bond with the product because the brand is narrated, humanized and fulfills its commercial and remembrance objective in the viewer.

An example of this marketing strategy use is seen in the famous Netflix series *Stranger Things* and *The Paper House*. In *Stranger Things*, brands such as Coca-Cola, Eggo, or RadioShack not only set the narrative in an eighties aesthetic but also actively contributed to the construction of the series' symbolic universe.





Figure 3. Output as part of the narrative story  
Source: <sup>(7)</sup>

The presence of these brands is not for free; they have value in generating an effective and cultural memory, thus facilitating a win-win situation between the audiovisual product and the brand in question. This causes identification with the characters and situations represented. As pointed out by <sup>(8,9)</sup> cinema and series create a system of signs that allow viewers to project their values and emotions onto the screen.

Now, with the narrative of *The Paper House*, the branding of specific products is used symbolically. Dalí masks and red suits, although not connected to particular commercial brands, function as powerful visual signs converted into emblems of global cultural consumption. The series has achieved with its history a worldwide impact, that these elements are recognizable icons in multiple contexts (social manifestations, merchandising, social networks), 'it is not only an object of economic exchange, but also a bearer of values, meanings and cultural belongings',<sup>(10)</sup> which shows how the current audiovisual medium converts signs into symbolic merchandise.



Figure 4. Dalí's mask as a sign of resistance  
Source: <sup>(11)</sup>

From Charles S. Peirce's semiotic theory, product placement can be analyzed as a triadic process that defines every sign as a relationship between the representamen (the form of the sign), the object (that which the sign represents), and the interpreter (the effect that the sign produces in the interpreter's mind).

In this triadic structure, in the film *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986), the use of Ray-Ban Aviator sunglasses represents one of the most effective examples of product placement in cinema since, in this case, the representamen is the constant visual presence of the glasses in key scenes of the protagonist, Pete 'Maverick' Mitchell (Tom Cruise), when he is in the flight scenes as well as in casual contexts. The object is the product, the Ray-Ban glasses, an accessory historically linked to aviation and fashion, with a prior burden of aesthetic and functional significance. The most critical part, the interpreter who builds its true symbolic power, here in this phase is where the viewer recognizes the brand and associates it directly with attributes such as bravery, masculinity, and style, thanks to its link to the character. The brand became an aspirational symbol, and it is

no coincidence that Ray-Ban Aviator sales skyrocketed after the film's release. This phenomenon demonstrates that in the semiotic framework of cinema, the product is not only present, it is interpreted and desired



Figure 5. Visual emblems of style and rebelliousness

Source: <sup>(12)</sup>

Cinema and advertising establish a strategic alliance where both benefit in a win-win situation: cinema gains funding, and advertising gains access to a highly emotional and narrative symbolic space. Well-executed brand placement promotes products and, more than that, makes them part of the metaphorical and affective fabric of the spectator. Semiotic analysis becomes fundamental to understanding not only brands' presence but also their effectiveness and cultural impact. <sup>(13,14,15,16)</sup>

## RESULTS

Based on the theoretical review, the main semiotic approaches underpinning the analysis of cinema as a system of signification were identified from the study of the most relevant works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles S. Peirce, Christian Metz, and Umberto Eco that have been adopted and adapted to film semiotics. Table 1 summarises the central findings of this review, highlighting the key concepts proposed by each author, the historical moment in which they emerged, and their specific application to the analysis of film language.

Table 1. Main theorists of film semiotics, their categories and contributions			
Theoretical	Work / Year	Key semiotic categories	Film application and main contribution
Ferdinand Saussure	de Cours de linguistique générale (1916, póstuma)	Signifier Meaning Arbitrariness of the sign	Founder of structuralism. Although he did not apply his theory to cinema, his binary model of the sign was the basis for treating cinema as a language structured in units and rules.
Charles Peirce	S. Collected Papers (1931-1958)	Representation Interpreting Object Icon, Index, Symbol	It allows us to classify visual and audiovisual signs in cinema according to their form of representation. It is central to the semiotic analysis of cinematic images, objects and gestures.
Christian Metz	Le signifiant imaginaire (1968) Essais sur la signification au cinéma / Denotation (1971)	Language without language Paradigm / Syntagm Coding Denotation	Considered the founder of the semiotics of cinema. Proposed that film, although not double-articulated, functions as a language. Applied linguistic structures to filmic narrative.
Umberto Eco	The absent structure (1968) Treatise on general semiotics (1975) Lector in fabula (1979)	Open work Cultural Model encyclopaedia reader Coding levels	It introduces the interpretative dimension of the spectator. The filmic text is open, and its meaning depends on cultural codes and the interaction between text and reader-spectator.

Within the analysis of product placement in various audiovisual works, it is possible to identify how the brands and objects inserted in the film or serial discourse act as signs of significance. For this purpose, four representative cases were selected, which allow us to observe the practical application of the theorists

in *Stranger Things*, *The Paper House*, *Top Gun*, and *Barbie* (2023). Table 2 below synthesizes the foremost associated theorists and the analysis of the symbolic functioning of the brands within the story.

**Table 2.** Application of semiotic concepts to product placement in audiovisual works

Audiovisual work		Featured brand(s)	Applied theoretical approach	Semiotic analysis of product placement
Stranger (Netflix)	Things	Coca-Cola (“New Coke”), Eggo	Charles S. Peirce	The ‘New Coke’ appears visually (representamen), refers to the real product with its cultural history (object), and generates a nostalgic and plausible reading of the context of the 80s (interpreter). The brand becomes part of the emotional and generational universe of the series.
The Paper House (Netflix)		Dalí mask, red dress	Charles S. Peirce / Umberto Eco	Dalí’s mask functions as a visual icon (through its form), an index of resistance (through its use inside and outside the series), and a cultural symbol of collective struggle. It is a sign of identity culturally re-signified by the spectator.
Top Gun (1986)		Ray-Ban, Kawasaki	Ferdinand de Saussure / Peirce	The Ray-Ban glasses act as visual signifiers associated with the meaning of masculinity, power and style. The Kawasaki motorbike functions as an aspirational sign that reinforces the protagonist’s identity.
Barbie (2023)		Barbie (Mattel), Chevrolet, Birkenstock	Umberto Eco / Christian Metz	The Barbie brand is re-signified from a commercial toy to a symbol of feminist reflection. The spectator activates multiple interpretations according to his or her cultural encyclopaedia, making the brand an open, ideological and discursive sign.

## CONCLUSIONS

Finally, the importance of cinema as a means of communication is established, in which all those semiotic elements that are amalgamated are used, such as images, sounds, colors, and different narratives, which give shape to the audiovisual code; symbols that connote different meanings, which the different receivers interpret, giving meaning to the production. At the same time, its use is evidenced within an advertising strategy through product placement, where brands are naturally integrated into the audiovisual narrative. The value that the evolution of semiotics has experienced from silent films to the digital era with platforms and social networks is highlighted, as well as the transcendence of color as a way of communicating emotions in the cinematographic narrative

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