

**Through a Semiotic Lens: The Representation of Photographers  
and Use of Photographs in Popular Media**

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## What is Semiotics?

At the most basic level, semiotics is the study of signs and ultimately how they behave within society. This science was originally developed by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early 1900s. His theory says there are multiple ways that are important in how we understand signs and communicate to each other: language and speech, and an image and its concept. We interact with signs every single day through billboards, television, magazines, and other types of mass media. They aren't something that we have to spend too much time thinking about unless they are used as purposeful thought experiments. The signs allow us to understand reality because every sign means something different; how we use them and create meaning from them depends on the society and culture that we surround ourselves with.

The way we live affects how we interact with media. When children are born, there are sets of signs that already exist. We identify with different words and this can change as we grow up and these signs can shape our reality. Words, linguistic signs, don't affect anyone until there is meaning attached to them. This is visible in the way our brains work; people categorize everything from types of furniture to animals. When we are presented with a new sign that is unfamiliar, the only way to make sense of it is to figure out what it looks like and place it in a category. If it is an abstract sign, it can be unrecognizable. This works the same way with a foreign language or with gibberish. Linguistic signs don't make sense until we are able to decipher the letters and sounds. All of these elements are things that Saussure studied about a hundred years ago. In his studies, he came to the conclusion that language is dependent on time and signs work in order, they come one after the other. He showed us how we are surrounded by and shaped by sign systems (Jonathan Bignell). But, signs can also come in more visual formats.

In the mid 1900s, Roland Barthes further studied the theory of semiotics saying, “I have tried to define things, not words” (Barthes, 1957). Media as a whole, “communicates a complex series of meanings to their audiences through a range of codes” (A-Level Media Studies). When codes are repeated in multiple types of media, the public generates and agrees upon an understanding for what the codes mean. Barthes focuses on the dividing line between reality and representational symbols in film, photographs, music, etc. He analyzed contemporary media, the type of media we interact with today with more advanced technology (Jonathan Bignell). As well, Barthes realized that signs can come in different formats which include the gestures, facial expressions, and movements that people perform to show how they are feeling inside. These are nonverbal signs.

### **Five Codes of Semiotics**

Through his literature, Roland Barthes identified five types of codes: Hermeneutic, Proairetic, Semantic, Symbolic, and Culture codes (Roland Barthes: Understanding Text). There are two main differences between these five codes. There are those that must be read in sequential order to fully understand, and those which can be read in any order. Hermeneutic and Proairetic codes have similar elements; both of them are codes that propel the reader through the story. Hermeneutic codes are the mysterious elements. In order to understand their meaning, you have to pick up on the trail of clues throughout a storyline. These codes maintain tension by posing questions which could come from dialogue or hints left along and only reveal the truth at the very end. Proairetic, in tandem with Hermeneutic codes, make the audience wonder what will happen next. The individual actions imply that more actions are to come. A very specific example of how this code is used is a comic strip. Think about the individual cells-- each of them

represent a small action or interaction between characters. When read separately, they make sense and when read as a full story, they work together to move the story along, if they were to be rearranged, the story wouldn't make sense. Proairetic codes are like the cells (Roland Barthes: Understanding Text).

The three other codes that Barthes studied are the ones that are not dependent on the order of them to be understood. They are the codes that add to a storyline, make it more interesting, and help Hermeneutic and Proairetic codes flow. Semantic codes are made up of elements known as "semes" (Roland Barthes: Understanding Text). These codes are words or phrases that show rather than tell. Instead of writing that "Joe is sick," an author could use semes to give descriptive details of what Joe looks like, saying that he is pale with a red, inflamed nose. Semantic codes do not have to be read in any order because they can be understood if taken out of context. Symbolic codes used semes directly to gain meaning. They are the codes that represent something larger. A young girl could represent life when used alongside an old man in a story who could represent death (Roland Barthes: Understanding Text). It is the struggle between these symbols that makes a symbolic code effective. Symbolic codes are used a lot in current forms of media. Films and novels use opposing symbols in their storylines more than most other types of popular media. The last type of code that does not have to be understood in any order is a cultural code. These codes require a previous amount of knowledge for them to make any sense. There are times that cultural codes can be lost if read outside of a specific culture it was written in. Most signs work best when the public has a shared knowledge of their meanings, and when it comes to cultural codes, that knowledge is even more important.

## **Who is Roland Barthes?**

To understand the above codes, which are purely technical, we must understand who Roland Barthes was and what he believed in. Roland Barthes, among others, is a theorist who, as aforementioned, has studied this topic at a great length. Born in France in 1915, Barthes started writing his work in 1953. His most well known work, a piece entitled, *Mythologies*, was published in 1957 which is composed of over 50 essays that he wrote talking about aspects of French culture. In each of these essays, he used semiotics to better understand the topic. When he was younger, he struggled with the concept of when travelling in a car, you cannot see the window and the countryside at the same time (Stafford). As a theorist, he wrote in essays to help understand how forms construct our world. It was his constant need for knowledge that encouraged him to keep writing, claiming that it was like an illness that became obsessive (Barthes, 1957). He wrote about anything and everything, noting how meanings are produced and consumed, even investigating the materiality of the sign along with the feel and sensuality of communication objects (Stafford). He dipped his toe into travel writing but overall, his work was focused on semiotics. He died in 1980 having written dozens upon dozens of essays that allow others to understand this world. His work on image and moving picture, however, proves to be especially intriguing.

## **Semiotics and Photography**

One of the things that Roland Barthes was fascinated by was photography because of the number of signs that are present at one time. As Saussure wrote, language is dependent on time. Photographs are much different considering the fact that they are fully visual while only sometimes including linguistic signs. Photographs are much more realistic, perhaps a completely

real representation of the world. They are snapshots and naturalistic truths (Photography and Electoral Appeal). As well, photographic signs can trigger emotions especially if the subject means something to the individual admiring the image.

Roland Barthes has written extensively on the subject in at least two of his books, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, published in 1982 and *Camera Lucida*, published in 1980. In both, he explains that a photograph is a message and it “is constituted by a source of emission, a channel or transmission, and a medium of reception,” (Barthes, 1982) and fundamentally, “whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see” (Barthes, 1980).

This is what makes the field of photography so interesting. There are many levels to which it can be analyzed. Is it an art form? What is the content of the message? How do we understand photographs? How do we read them? What do we perceive? All of these questions can be answered by looking through one critical lens: culture.

It is hard to look at an image, or even imagine one, without culture. Photography is an unpredictable art form, unless previously set up. The photographer does not always know exactly what they will be shooting until they do. But these images that are then reproduced are understood by a wide range of people who interpret it based on their culture, meaning their social status, understanding of the world, and their knowledge. Barthes breaks visual communications into two parts: the signifier (the physical or mental object) and the signified (its meaning, including connotation) (Stafford). As humans, we attach meanings to the art we come in contact with and they signify something. What happens if there is text associated with a photograph? Think, for example, about a photograph that you saw in the newspaper, preferably not a

traumatic one. When an image is understood in tandem with words, it is as if the text projects a new signified onto the image (Barthes, 1982). Previously, the image helped to illustrate the words, the text surrounding it physically, but now, “it is the words” (Barthes, 1982) and the image is loaded with culture. The words do not *represent* the image. That is impossible. A photograph stops a crowd. Would a newspaper or magazine be as successful without photographs? Sure, it is meant to share news or information in general but the images make you think. They help add context; there is a sense of adventure. Nonetheless, there is another aspect of photography and semiotics which Barthes identifies as “degree zero.”

In regards to images, it is the photographic non-signification. Photography is made up of signs that are in fact, “the gestures, attitudes, expression, colors or effects endowed with certain meanings by virtue of the practices of a certain society” (Barthes, 1982). As previously stated, we “read” images through culture and it will always be historical, it depends on the individuals knowledge base. And photographs will only be intelligible if the reader has already learned the signs, similarly to learning a new language (Barthes, 1982). The exception here is traumatic photography simply because it triggers emotions that block the signs.

Another one of the things that Roland Barthes briefly studied is the use of signs in film. This is quite different from photographs in one very obvious way: one is moving and the other is not and in movies, the presence of signs is abundant. The screen is continuous. If you were to close your eyes while watching a movie, when you opened them again, a different image would be in front of you. As well, more directly, films use space and time in order. When photography and movies are used in tandem with each other, they are enhanced notably in the case that photographers or videographers are the main subjects.

While it is crucial to understand the academic side of semiotics, it is perhaps even more crucial to understand the personal connections that individuals have to signs and how the affect of them can change. Semiotics is not a “dead” theory as signs are still incredibly prevalent in everyday life and it is still something that is currently studied.

### **Semiology in Popular Media**

The theory of semiotics is one that is hugely present in all sorts of media, especially films and documentaries. The most engaging concept of semiotics is the use of signs in photographs and how they can be interpreted differently depending on the person interpreting them. As a photographer myself, there is something so captivating about seeing my passion portrayed on the big screen. It is common for almost every individual; people like to see themselves represented in media. However, sometimes producers do not get this right. To fully understand the representation of photographers alongside the use of photographs in popular media, I watched three films: *Rear Window*, *One Hour Photo*, and *Chasing Ice*.

#### **Rear Window**

This particular film was directed by Alfred Hitchcock in 1954. While there are a lot of old movies centered around photographers, I picked this one to contrast it with other more recent films. Even just by reading the title, there is a sense of “watching” and eeriness. The word ‘rear’ almost emphasises that this window is not visible to many people and is not looked out a lot. In a car, the rear window is the one behind the driver and passengers. The only time one actually looks out this window, and doesn’t look through the mirror, is to back up or if you happen to turn around and something catches your eye. In a house, the rear window represents a hidden window. And a window is traditionally looked out from the inside and not usually as often,



looked through from the outside. Generally, a window can loosely represent a viewfinder in a camera. In *Rear Window*, this metaphor is emphasized as the main character is an injured photographer who spends the entire day staring out the window in his apartment.

The film opens by setting the scene where the whole movie takes place. Picture an apartment courtyard where seven other apartment windows are visible to look into. Immediately we are introduced to a couple sleeping on their patio, a woman stretching, a man playing his piano, a man tending to his garden, a woman sitting in her lawn chair reading the newspaper, a new couple moving into their apartment, and a woman in green setting up a dinner for two. These are the characters who are consistently watched by the main character, L.B. Jefferies, "Jeff," but they are unaware. He is the photographer. He is the "peeping tom." He inserts himself into his neighbors' lives and ethically, it sounds wrong. But isn't this what a photographer, subconsciously or even consciously, does?

There is a field of photography known as street photography. It is widely controversial because, essentially, they are people watching, a common practice that is not usually regarded as polite. But photographers watch in the way that they are understanding the way people move and by doing so, they're deciding how to capture them in a photo which is interesting for the general public to enjoy. Photographers in nature, put themselves in positions where they study people's movements and capture them in a split second. They are trained to notice the composition of a scene, even when they're not actually working. This is exactly what Jeff is doing with his broken leg, sitting in his wheelchair.

It's clear from the start that Jeff is a professional photographer because his apartment is cluttered with lots of cameras and equipment. He even picks up his camera at times to look closer through his "portable keyhole."

Conclusively, *Rear Window* is a murder mystery. There is a lot of built up tension between characters and the relationship between the inside and outside moves the film forward. This comparison and the stark differences from in to out or behind the camera to in front of it, is a symbolic code. Jeff watches everything, notices every detail. It's a common trait for this career, but then Jeff puts himself into the action and physically becomes involved with the outside. It happens because he contacts the police when he believes his neighbor has been killed. The officer, a friend of Jeff's, makes assumptions about this photographer as he is just that. The private investigator doesn't believe that a person can realize what is actually happening by just watching.

The way that the photographer is represented in this film, is just a career. It should have been noted that because Jeff is a professional watcher, he understands when something is "off." People are fascinated by other people's lives so it makes sense as to why Jeff was undermined through the entire film but it did not do the career the justice it deserves. I'm not explicitly saying that photographers are only watchers and should be considered only that, but this is a critical skill of one; they need to know what to photograph.

This movie, though filmed in the late 50s, allows the audience to get a glimpse of a photographer's potential life, from their apartment only. It is not a perfect representation due to the fact that the murder seems to shine more than the main character. The cameras and the job simply help the story move forward. As well, photographs are not very prevalent throughout,

again not showing the full scope of the career. Presumably, the more important aspect of the film were the cameras used to look out the window and because of the time period, it would make sense that the cameras only used film reels and he could not develop them from his home.

### **One Hour Photo**

*One Hour Photo*, a 2002 thriller starring Robin Williams, truly brings photography to the forefront of the storyline. From the start of the movie, a camera is in almost every single scene and every scene is precisely shot with every frame carefully considered. The movie, more accurately than the last, uses a few types of photographers and hundreds of photographs which help us to understand the field of photography.

We are first introduced, in a mug shot and then from the inside of a police interrogation room, to a man named Seymour Parrish, “Sy,” who is being questioned for the photographs he took in a hotel. Similarly to *Rear Window*, we are seeing a window framing the scene just as a camera viewfinder does. Immediately following the short conversation, his character is heard narrating the next scene when we meet the Yorkin family. We hear Sy saying things like, “family photos depict smiling faces,” “people take pictures in the happy moments of their lives,” “no one takes a photograph of something they want to forget.” Without reading the synopsis, only relying on the movie title and the first few quotes, which are the senses we are picking up, the film sounds like it will be relatively upbeat. But the last quote becomes a pulling force as we learn about Sy’s career.

Known as “the photo guy,” which young Jake Yorkin calls him, Sy works in the one-hour photo developing lab at the local mall. When Nina Yorkin goes to the mall to get her photos developed from Jake’s birthday, Sy acts overly friendly and he knows an unusual amount about

her life. As well, she has one photo left on her reel so Sy takes one of himself. Here is where he begins to act fishy. We then see the entire process of developing film without a dark room which is accurate and representational of how delicate it needs to be. This was an unexpected scene purely because many films do not show this usually boring, long process. Given the precision, it tells us that his job of developing photos by himself is something worth noting. When Sy leaves the mall, it feels eerie as he goes to a diner and looks at printed photos. Later we see that he is looking at photos of the Yorkin family, the same images he just printed for Nina. He even tells the waitress that Jake is his nephew which is obviously not the case. And perhaps the weirdest moment that becomes hugely important for the plot of the movie is when Sy is sitting in his apartment and the camera pans to the largest wall in his living room showing that it is covered with pictures of Will, Nina, and Jake Yorkin. It becomes very clear that he has an obsession with this family.

As this film progresses, Sy, through the narration, discusses the concept of a “snapshot” and how they are the stand that people take to stop the flow of time, the shutter clicks, the flash goes off, and low and behold, they’ve stopped time. While this is true for many professional photographers, it is more true for beginners, especially parents. Now more than ever before, photographs can be taken anywhere, anytime. They used to be private but because other people usually develop them and look at the final products, it is making images less private and more shareable, the overall concept for *One Hour Photo*. When people have a camera, they photograph the things that mean something to them so their pictures tell a story about the person who took them. Sy, who has been developing photos for over 20 years, is even better about reading the photographs for the stories. This is when the other major character is introduced:

Maya Burson. Sy develops her pictures and finds a lot with Will Yorkin in them, revealing his affair. The movie goes downhill, meaning Sy's character begins to break down as he goes into full distress, from here when Sy subtly sneaks a photo of Will and Maya into Nina's images. He follows Nina for a little while and eventually ends up following Will to a hotel where his plan is to catch him and Maya in the act. A camera is still involved when Sy uses the zoom lens to watch people.

Using Roland Barthes "Five Codes of Semiotics," we can see the Proairetic and Hermeneutic signs in full effect. If, for example, the first scene in the police station was not there, we would not get the original strange feeling from Sy Parrish. This film only works in order and the little cues allow us to figure out what is going on and make us try to guess what will happen next. In the case that someone with opposing cultural beliefs watched this, it is possible that they would interpret it differently due to all the little things that must be picked up along the way.

By the end, there is a scene when Sy works his way up onto the same hotel floor as Will and Maya to take pictures of them. However, when Sy is talking to the police and when they eventually allow him to look at his images they found on his camera that was left behind, the pictures were of little things that don't matter very much like the shower curtain, sink pipes, or door knobs. In doing so and after Sy says to the detective, "you'd never take sick, degrading pictures of your children doing horrible things, you'd never treat your children like animals," it is understood that Sy had a horrible experience with pictures, suggesting child pornography. But it is worth considering why we only saw those pictures of little things. At the beginning of the movie, Sy explicitly says that people take pictures of things that matter. By saying this and taking

pictures of things you may find in a bathroom, isn't he showing us that these things do matter and we should care and talk about them? The perspective of how we analyze this film changes the signs that we understand. Comparably, the perspective of how the film was physically shot does this too just as the perspective of how a photographer chose to compose an image changes how the audience will interpret it.

By the end, even though I was confused about the "fantasy" that Sy may or may not have imagined in the hotel room, this film accurately uses photographs in their most raw form. Photographers come in all shapes and sizes and professionals have to start somewhere. There were not any clear professional photographers in *One Hour Photo*, but the film shows that there may be some in the process. This is visible through the way that young, amateur photographers are known for constantly getting their images developed. Photographers get better over time so when someone starts, it is hard not to progress and given the number of people who Sy first met and the regular customers that he interacted with, if those people were to use their memories to push their own creative minds further, the movie could even be about more than just one photographer/photo developer.

### **Chasing Ice**

*Chasing Ice* is a documentary that was released in 2012. I specifically chose to watch a documentary because it is so different from a popular movie in the way it is filmed and how the story is told. It reads and is understood as "real." As far as the audience knows, the people we are seeing are "normal," unpaid actors. This is the exact reason that documentaries are so enjoyable, and have gained as much respect as they have.

This particular documentary was quite popular for some time. The film opens with footage from the news about natural disasters and broadcasters are seen discussing climate change. Before even introducing the photographer who is the focus of this documentary, there are some scenes where people are bundled up in warm clothing, standing in freezing water taking photographs, uttering things like “I have to get this picture,” and “light won’t last forever.” Instantly, we understand that this is a hard-core photographer who cares deeply for his career and the subject. His name is James Balog. After spending much time in Iceland taking pictures of the beautiful ice structures, he realized that he wanted to do more, reach more people. With a background in science and no previous knowledge of photography, he was very interested to see what he could photograph to *show* climate change in action. So, he started a project called, “Extreme Ice Survey.”

For the course of a few years, Balog set up cameras surrounding some of (what used to be) the largest glaciers. The concept of the project was to set up cameras that would automatically take a picture every hour as long as there was daylight. The documentary meticulously showed this entire process of trial and error and frustration. For me, it was frustrating just watching the team of engineers and photographers experience that failure even though it pushed them further through the project. It just goes to show that if you really want to make an impact by going to such extreme lengths, this career path could end up being intense. That being said, the film is very inspiring.

Throughout the entirety of the documentary, when a still image was shown, usually a before and after comparison of a glacier, an audible “click” from the camera was heard. It is a widely understood sign, a some recognizable by most of the general public. The images were

beautiful and in a film like this one, it was necessary for the still images to be included with the shutter sound. Otherwise, it would not have been nearly as successful. Now, this documentary is not a walk-through of how to complete the same project. The goal of a documentary is to literally document a person or event and it was rough to watch at times as if I could feel every single emotion Balog was feeling. Like in many other careers, it is utterly devastating to try so hard and fail. In photography, this comes in different forms such as, taking a brilliant image and looking back to see it was totally black. Or in Balog's case, realizing after six months of your cameras sitting in the freezing temperatures, that the timers were not working, or your hugely expensive cameras were buried until piles of snow. He also experienced finding exploded batteries and in other, more rare cases, finding out that animals had chewed on the cords connected to his camera. While extreme, these are real problems that photographers can face throughout their career.

Towards the end of the documentary, James Balog sends his team on another expedition while he, in the meantime, is speaking at Universities or conferences. The trip entailed his team staying in a tent for 30 days on the edge of the Ilulissat Glacier in Greenland, the same glacier rumored to have produced the iceberg that sank the Titanic. They were "glacier watching." One of the known drawbacks of photography is the waiting game that we all play where we're waiting for one very specific thing to happen. In their case, it was waiting for a massive part of the glacier to break off. On day 17, they captured the spectacular yet horrible calving on camera. Lasting over 75 minutes, it is the longest iceberg calve seen in person. In capturing this along with the other images that became time lapses, Balog made it possible to actually see climate change happening. The longest time lapse was 4 years, 6 months and it's incredibly powerful.



This project and all his work is a perfect example of the passion that many photographers share. Balog finishes by saying he hopes that he is viewed as a person who did “everything he knew how to do.” Even during the credits, his work was emphasized; the documentary succeeded in every definition of the word. It was real, honest.

### **Representation of Photographers**

As predicted, the representation of a photographer in the documentary has met the standards of the career more accurately. Photographers are perceived as talented, yes, but also it always seems that they are not valued as much as they should be in film. This is not true for every single form of media but think about the careers that photographers have. For starters, a photojournalist faces an incredible amount of backlash for just doing their job and capturing what is necessary. A wedding photographer, or family photographer in general, is hired across the world to capture the very best images on some very important days. It is not easy and they too face a lot of pressure. And then they delicately edit their images to be as perfect as they can be. I don't think I have ever seen, in popular film, a photographer of this ideal represented to the fullest. You may also be able to make this argument for a ton of other careers. However, when you lump creative careers together, including any sort of artist, movies usually show that it's a lot easier than it is in real life, a concept visible in *Rear Window*.

Going back to semiotics, we process film, photographs, etc. through the different uses of signs. Think about the other media in which photographs are prevalent. What comes to mind? For me, the word “watching” sticks out.

As Roland Barthes studied, when this sort of sign is evident enough, the world begins to agree upon a general code for the sign. What does this say about photography? That in media,

when a photograph is used, it feels creepy, eerie, just like the way they were used in *One Hour Photo*. When we have these rare occurrences where we are able to peer into a real-world photographer's life, such as James Balog's, the code begins to shift, though slightly. I would agree that photographs work especially well in crime shows to represent a strange character who is stalking another character. Due to the climate and culture of the show, we understand those photographs to be watching. One of my goals was to figure out what other sort of words would come to mind after engaging in other photography based media. This was not as easy as I had hoped. Popular media still uses photographs and photographers in this way and has been since at least the mid 1900s.

### **Semiotics Today**

I chose three films that I had never seen before and only barely heard of. My decision was purely based upon when they were filmed and they were recommended to me either by a real person or they were part of a list of the best films about photography. Two of three were mysteries, both of which ended, not necessarily with a happy ending, but we better understood where the characters were coming from in the beginning, when the film finished. I knew by picking a documentary, simply because of my previous knowledge of the way they are made, that this would be more real. Documentaries are understood as the truth, just as photographs are representations of the truth, most of the time.

We cannot be ignorant though due to the way that anything can be digitally altered nowadays. Photography or filmography, everything can be manipulated. This is the reality that we face and the truth of the current world. Previously, there were signs and codes that could represent when something was faked except technology does not allow for these signs to shine

through nearly as much anymore. This changes the way that photographers are represented. They still emphasize “watching” but now there is a heightened fear to question the truth of a photograph which adds even more pressure to the career. While it means that previously understood codes can change, they may not always change for the better.

How do we know if something is altered? Are we supposed to simply believe that everything which has been photographed is real? It pains me to say that we will almost never know. Only the artistic creator will. Ferdinand De Saussure and Roland Barthes reached a common ground that we need culture to understand every single thing around us. So we must put this to use. The visual communication that we encounter forces people to think and without realizing it, we are thinking while looking through a semiotic lens.

Films and photographs are not always supposed to be an exact representation of every single thing in real life because they are used as an escape from reality. But where is the line between sometimes representing a career accurately, and never? The actuality of real life deserves to be considered even in popular media.

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