After we see images, we need to “read” them to see what they really are.

A Fancy Word for Clues
I first heard the word “semiotics” in the 1980s. I had to take a course called Vocabulary of the Media Critic. I thought with a title like this, it had to be boring. Well, I learned not to judge a book by its cover, or in this case, a class by its title. This class was the most educationally mind-blowing class that I have ever taken. Dr. Alwyn Scott taught the course at the New York Institute of Technology. I have mentioned that he taught his class to aim for the heart by working at the structural level. He also told us that if we wanted to make significant films, that we should study semiotics. Study what?

I had never heard of semiotics. It was unfortunate that he didn’t teach us how to aim at the heart by working structurally and equally unfortunate that he didn’t tell us how to use semiotics. Well, with Dr. Scott pointing the way, I started studying it, and about 20 years later, when I was directing the *Pomp and Circumstance* sequence of *Fantasia 2000*, that I found that semiotics was exactly what I needed. But what is semiotics? For our purposes, we can think of semiotics as a fancy word for clues.

They say Eskimo have over 50 words for snow. This is because for them it is crucial to differentiate between the different types of snow. It could mean the difference between life and death for them. For filmmakers clues are important. A general word, “clue,” like the word “entertainment,” doesn’t give us a lot of information about how to structure our movies. Semiotics will show us that there are many different types of clues that we can use as tools to convey information to the audience in many different ways. The audience will use all of these different types of clues to construct the story for themselves.

Why Should You Care about Clues?
In the retelling of the Noah’s Ark story of *Pomp and Circumstance*, Donald Duck plays the role of Noah’s assistant responsible for getting all the animals on the ark. This idea brimmed with comic possibilities. We layered a secondary plot onto this to give the story great emotional resonance. Donald and Daisy both think that the
other didn't make it onto the ark, and they both mistakenly believe that the other has been lost to the storm. While this gave us great heart for our story, it presented a new problem. We needed to be careful with this idea because it could have easily gotten morbid. But a bigger problem was how do we refer to something that is missing?

We had to show that Donald was missing Daisy so we drew an image like this one. Unfortunately, this image doesn't say that Donald is missing Daisy. Look at it carefully. All it shows is Donald looking over the side of the ark looking sad. How is the audience supposed to know that he is not just seasick? Semiotics came to our rescue. No, semiotics is not a seasickness cure.

Now, Fantasia is known for creating visual stories to accompany great classical music. Fantasia stories contain no words; the stories are really like silent films. Therefore, we couldn't rely on the characters to say how they felt. We were totally dependent on the visuals to tell the story.

Our problem was how do we tell the audience, without words, that Donald is missing Daisy? Or in other words, how do we signify something is missing? When I remembered semiotics, the question was reframed to, “What signs could we use to signify to the audience that Donald was missing Daisy?” With the question reframed we knew what we were looking for—some iconic sign that represented each of them for each other, a symbol of their love. An icon is a type of sign that works by resemblance; in other words, it looks like what it is supposed to represent. Drawings and photographs are iconic signs. So we gave Donald a drawing and Daisy a locket. Now standing at the edge of the ark, Donald could pull out his icon of Daisy and the audience knew exactly what he was feeling. The icon signified something missing.

What other devices could we use to say that Donald is missing Daisy? The design principle of contrast is used to compare two things. If we showed Donald all alone on the ark and compared him with all of the animals of the ark paired off two by two, then by contrast he would seem even more alone.

Contrast of scale helped us convey the theme of Pomp and Circumstance. This was a love and forgiveness story set in a storm of epic proportions. We wanted to relate this to our audience, so I needed to convey the importance of scale to my art director, Dan Cooper. I drew a little sketch that looked like the next image.

I drew it from the center out and described it as I drew it for him. First, I drew Donald and Daisy. I told Dan that they were dwarfed by all of the animals that they had to get on the ark. The scale of the enormous ark dwarfed all the animals including Donald and Daisy. But the ark itself was tiny when compared to the biblical storm. However, that wasn't the end of the story. Finally, even the storm was dwarfed by love, indicated by the heart.

Donald's checklist was another great use of semiotic icons. We needed a device to show Donald's realization that Daisy was missing. Donald has a big list with pictures of all the animals and he checks them off as the animals board the ark. When he gets to him and Daisy he realizes she is missing and goes off to search for her. Once again semiotics helped us signify that something was missing.
How to Make Images Speak: The Hidden Power of Images

Pomp and Circumstance also had a semiotic gag, kind of like Magritte’s painting. Donald is directing the pairs of animals onto the ark and a pair of ducks walks by. What does that make him?

How Movies Speak to Us

Let’s start with an image. It doesn’t appear to say much. But don’t judge an image by its mere appearance.

After drawing this image on the board, I always ask my storyboard class, “What is this?” The answer: a bundle of sticks. So then I ask, “What else is it?” The answers come back: a pile of trash, a whiskbroom without the handle, a bundle of firewood, a harvest.

Sometimes the first answer can get them stuck in a rut of only thinking about it in one way. I need to prompt them out of that rut. I ask how else they could describe it. One time, I was surprised when a student answered a “Christmas present for a beaver.” This got them out of the rut. I suggest it could be a drawing on a blackboard that represents a bundle of sticks. It reminds me of the surrealist painter, Magritte, who wrote, “This is not a pipe” over a picture of a pipe.

Pomp and Circumstance also had a semiotic gag, kind of like Magritte’s painting. Donald is directing the pairs of animals onto the ark and a pair of ducks walks by. What does that make him?

But our story digresses… I jump to another level and ask the class how the drawing of a bundle of sticks makes them feel. The answers now cover a wider range. It is warmth, strength in numbers, unity, togetherness, and uniformity. I then start to analyze each of the answers.

We start with the fact that it represents a bundle of sticks. That is what is called a denotation. This is the dictionary or literal meaning. The fact that it is a drawing doesn’t change its denotation. It is still a “bundle of sticks.” A whiskbroom or kindling wood are also denotations of the image. But there is another level. It has associations connected to it. These are the things like warmth, unity, or togetherness. These are what are known as connotations.

So the image has a denotation or literal meaning and a bunch of connotations. So what? Does this help us make a better movie? No, not yet. But, there is more. Some connotations are common. We have all experienced the warmth of a fire, so we know the connotation of “warmth.” What if someone said “pain”? Most of the class didn’t understand the connection, until the student explained that he had watched workers carrying big bundles of wood and they looked like they were in pain. Everyone now understood. They now shared a new connotation to the bundle of sticks.
What if we could make images speak for us? Then it might be useful for us as filmmakers. In the film *The Straight Story*, director David Lynch tells the story of Alvin Straight's journey across Iowa on a lawn mower. When he learns that his estranged brother is ill he decides it's time to make amends and visit him. The problem is that his eyesight is failing so he can no longer drive a car. Driven by his need to make amends, he embarks on a 300-mile journey across state lines driving a lawn mower tractor towing a small trailer.

Along the way Alvin passes a girl who is hitchhiking. That night at his campsite she catches up with him. He invites her to sit and share his meager meal. "When are you due?" he asks her. His worldly experience allows him to grasp that she is running away from home because she is going to have a baby. In other words, he saw and pieced together the clues.

He offers her some dinner and a metaphor. He tells her about his own feud with his brother. But now his brother is sick so he is going to visit, and that is why he is on his journey. Alvin tells her that families are like bundles of sticks. It is easy to snap one stick, but put them in a bundle and they have real strength.

The night grows late and he offers for her to stay in the trailer. She says she will sleep in the chair by the fire.

It was an extremely powerful shot that condensed multiple layers of meaning into one shot. The shot said, "Thank you. I am going home to my family." In addition, it implied that she could get emotional and physical strength and warmth from her family just as the sticks signified strength and their utility as firewood. The fact that the sticks were wrapped in a ribbon suggested also that this was a "gift" in return for his sharing his personal story and advice in the form of a metaphor.

What he did was stack the connotations upon each other and each one recalls the other and the whole stack. This stacking can become quite complex. Associations can stack up like, well, like a bundle of sticks. Let's look at how it works.

First, we have the denotation that it is a bundle of sticks tied with a string. Second, this image connotes strength, warmth, and unity. Third, this suggests the good qualities of a family. Fourth, it connotes the story as a gift given. Fifth, the image becomes a way of saying "thank you." There is another layer of connotation now that I have told you about *The Straight Story* that becomes a signifier of the movie.

What is going to happen the next time you see a bundle of sticks? What will you remember? Like the proverbial string tied around your finger, you will remember this lesson in semiotics and how images can be made to speak. You just have to share with your audience what the personal connotations to the images are and then you are free to call upon them at any point later in your film.

So can semiotics help us make better films? I will answer with the next image.

The following morning he comes out of the trailer and the girl is gone. I was expecting to see a shot of a note, but instead David Lynch chose to show a shot of the chair and on it was a bundle of sticks tied together with a ribbon.
Remember though, when leaving clues for the audience, it is important to point at them so they don’t miss them.

**Denotation**

Denotation is what a thing is in common language. It is the literal dictionary meaning of something. Let’s say we have a picture of a tree. The denotation is “tree.”

**Connotation**

Connotations are what are evoked in the mind of the viewer by what they see. They are the associated meanings to something. A tree can be something to climb or a place for shade. These associations branch out like branches of a tree. These can be stacked on top of each other so one thing will trigger another and then another and so on—every branch can have its own tree. These are the shared connotations that images evoke.

The underground secret is that trees also have roots. These are the hidden or private associations that can be evoked. Once the filmmaker uses them they can be recalled just as the branches can. It is up to the filmmaker to decide how explicitly he or she wants to bring out the association. Not only every sign, but structures can also have emotional associations.

So how can we create these associations for our audience? It is thought that primitive people and children think mainly through association as a form of magic. The clearest expression of this type of thinking is the Voodoo doll. The idea behind Voodoo relies on the association between the person and the doll. When a part of the person (hair, fingernail, etc.) is put on the doll, whatever happens to the doll is supposed to happen to the person by association of the piece of them attached to the doll. The fact that, in some cases, it appears to work is based on the power of suggestion.

We all have experienced this type of behavior. It is known as superstition. Let’s say someone calls and then we get hurt. If they call again we may worry about being hurt. We have unconsciously associated the call with getting hurt.

So what is responsible for the association? Our minds are always searching for patterns of cause and effect. Things that are similar in some way or happen at the same place or time often get connected together as cause and effect. Remember gestalt? Things that are in proximity get clustered into a group. It is like magic.

**How many signs do you see?**

In the last image, how many signs do you see? If you just said some road signs, then turn in your detective badge because you missed a lot of clues. Just for starters there is the type of terrain, style of architecture, utilities, clothing style, modes of transportation, weathering signs, types of materials, types of vegetation, colors, and more. Every image is filled with signs, and that is why they can say a picture is worth a thousand words.

Sometimes signs can compete with each other as in the stop sign in the next image that doesn’t allow you to stop at anytime.

**The Mind Makes Associations**

Our minds basically work by using associations. Logic requires a lot of thought. Associations are immediate. Remember logic doesn’t persuade people, stories do, and stories evoke associations.
Semiotics studies how signs signify something and how meaning is constructed from sequences of images. Signs refer to things in our world. Semiotics began with the splitting of the sign into the signifier/signified pair. For linguistics, this event was equivalent to the splitting of the atom for physics. The sign is comprised of two parts, the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the physical support of the sign. It is what we hear or see—the verbal phonemes (parts of words) or images. The signified is the concept that the sign represents for us in our minds.

\[
\text{Sign} = \text{Signifier, the physical support of the sign} \\
\text{Signified} = \text{the concept created in the mind}
\]

There are three types of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols.

**Iconic Signs**
Icons speak by resembling what they are. Film is iconic. We recognize what we see when we watch a film. It is based on images. Drawings, pictographs, photographs, and computer screen images are also iconic.

**Index Signs**
Indexes are connected by a causal relationship. The expression “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire” refers to an indexical relationship between smoke and fire. Smoke indicates that fire can’t be far. The speedometer in a car is an index of how fast the car is going, just as a heart monitor tells how fast a heart is beating. Windblown trees are an index of how hard the wind is blowing. Shadows on the wall are indexes of the objects that cast their shadows and of the fact that there is a light to create a shadow.

A footprint is an icon and index. It looks like the foot and signifies that someone walked there.

**Symbolic Signs**
The last type of sign is the symbol. These are signs that have an arbitrary relationship to what they signify. They don’t resemble their referent or have a causal relationship. Their relationship is based on an agreed-upon convention; in other words, you have to be taught what they mean. Language is symbolic because we must learn what letters and words mean. If you don’t know the code you won’t know what the symbol means.

There are other types of symbols as well. Religions and other organizations have symbols that bring up a whole host of meanings for those who understand them. For those who don’t know them, these signs are an enigma. Sometimes symbols are unconscious. In other words, even those who created them do not understand them. Ultimately, the audience decides the meaning of what they see.

When we last left Scheherazade, she left behind a sign. Read on to see what it signifies.
Only ashes remain.

It can be put out.

The drawing continues to burn as they leave.

A hand reaches in and picks it up.

It shows the sultan toasting wine laced with poison!

The evidence burns before …

It can be put out.

Only ashes remain.
Crime Story Clues and Signs

I don’t think that crime and detective stories could be told without semiotics. Detectives look for clues. Clues are nothing more than signs of a crime. In fact, they rely on them so much that these stories could also be called semiotic stories. They are also filled with significant objects, in this case, incriminating objects. These suggest nothing less than a character’s guilt or innocence.

As most detective shows make clear, clues are ambivalent. There are always multiple possible stories to apparently account for them. The detective’s job is to narrow down those stories to the true one that accounts for the facts of the crime with the motive and opportunity of the criminal. The director’s job is to misdirect the audience into thinking of those other possible stories. What if this person did it or suppose it was that person? That is part of the fun of watching crime stories—playing armchair sleuth.

Hitchcock’s Rear Window

Speaking of armchair sleuths, Hitchcock’s Rear Window demonstrates this process of trying to make up stories to fit the evidence and a metaphor for the film viewing process itself. Film viewers search for clues and makes up stories to explain to themselves the things that they think they see, just as the characters do in the film. As filmgoers we are all guilty of this voyeurism—a desire to know. Stefan Sharff analyzes this process in Rear Window in scene by scene detail.¹

Hitchcock and His McGuffins

Objects in Hitchcock’s world can be very functional. He uses three types of objects. First are his McGuffins. “It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says, ‘What’s that package up there in the baggage rack?’ And the other answers, ‘Oh that’s a McGuffin.’ The first one asks ‘What’s a McGuffin?’ ‘Well,’ the other man says, ‘It’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.’ The first man says, ‘But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,’ and the other one answers, ‘Well, then that’s no McGuffin!’ So you see, a McGuffin is nothing at all.”² McGuffins are objects that set the story in motion, an object that everyone wants. It doesn’t matter what it is, only that everyone wants it.

Besides his McGuffins, Hitchcock used two other types of objects, symbolic objects and threatening objects. Symbolic objects become dangerous when you know what they signify.

In A Shadow of a Doubt, the ring that Charlie gives his niece is one object that takes on different significations depending on how much information is known about it. First, his niece accepts it as a gift of love. At this point all she knows is that her loving uncle gave her a piece of jewelry. In the next phase, it becomes an object of suspicion as she discovers someone else’s initials on it. When she learns the initials match a murdered woman it becomes an object of horror. When she returns the ring to her uncle, it signifies that she knows that he is the murderer. Mladen Dolar describes this transformation of Hitchcock’s objects in great detail in Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock.³ If objects could talk, oh, the stories they could tell.

Hitchcock’s other type of object are those oppressive objects that threaten with their sheer silent presence. The house in Psycho does not have the appearance of a happy home inside or out. Height functions as a continual threat with the tower in Vertigo, Mount Rushmore in North by Northwest, and even the Statue of Liberty in Saboteur. Finally, in Hitchcock’s world we are not even safe from The Birds.

Significant Objects

How do you represent something that is not there? The value of semiotics comes into play when we need to refer to something that is not present onscreen. We do this with language all of the time. Words continually refer to things that are not physically present: the gold of Fort Knox, the ends of Earth, the planet Mars, or dinosaurs. Semiotics gives the filmmaker tools to refer to what is not currently on the screen visually, without resorting to words by the play of signs. Sometimes these signs can be very significant and carry great meaning in a film. Here is a sampling of how significant objects have been used in various films.

Even names can be full of significance. In Star Wars, the name Darth Vader signifies the dark father. The name sounds like dark invader. Luke Skywalker has the prophet’s name, Luke, and the description of walker of the skies. We meet Luke living in the desert signifying that he has nowhere to go. The cars are hovercraft signifying advanced technology. The light sabers signify high technology while their swordlike qualities invoke memories about swashbucklers and codes of chivalry. Then there is the planet that isn’t a planet. It is the fully operational death star. (Credit: Art by Aernout Van Pallandt.)
In *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey during a string of bad luck wishes he never existed. In order to earn his wings, Clarence, the angel, must help George. He does so by showing George what the town would have been like without him. George can’t believe that this is happening. He reaches in his pocket for flower petals that his daughter, Zuzu, gave him. They are not there. She never existed! Later, when George learns the lesson that his life is valuable to others, the return of Zuzu’s flower petals signifies that the nightmare, that George didn’t exist, is over. The bell ringing on the Christmas tree signifies that Clarence got his wings. The bell has additional significance for us, the audience, and George for we know that it is Clarence getting his wings. The book signed by Clarence signifies that George’s experience was indeed real.

Timothy the mouse believes the way that Dumbo got into the tree was that he flew up using his ears as wings, but Dumbo isn’t convinced. The crows, standing in for Dumbo’s missing father figure, give him the added push he needs to believe in himself in the form of a wonderful symbolic placebo, the “Magic Feather.” The scene is driven by a wonderful narrative question: Will Dumbo really be able to fly? He flaps his ears and the scene is enveloped in a cloud of dust. We don’t know if the Magic Feather worked. It is only when we see his shadow, an index of where he is, that the question is answered. During the death-defying circus show Dumbo loses the Magic Feather. The placebo, like Alfred Hitchcock’s infamous McGuffin, means nothing, except that it enables people to believe something that they normally can’t. Finally, in the crisis of falling, Dumbo accepts the truth that he can fly, and he soars above the crowd! With Timothy’s help he changed the impossible to the possible.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Tiny Tim’s cane signifies Scrooge’s redemption or damnation.

Popeye, of course, has his spinach, a symbol of strength. (Credit: Art by Aernout Van Pallandt.)

In *Piglet’s Big Movie*, Piglet’s book of memories “remembers” him. His friends use it to find Piglet. (Credit: Art by Aernout Van Pallandt.)

In *Bladerunner*, a dove flies off when a replicant dies. Does this signify that they have a soul? (Credit: Art by Aernout Van Pallandt.)
Objects can suggest a vast variety of ideas such as love or hate. Clocks, calendars, seasons, weathering and erosion, and the rising tide all signify time. Uniforms, medals, clothes, costumes, and masks all suggest character and social class. The weather, lighting, architecture, environments, and open and closed spaces, as well as the sound ambience of places provide the filmmaker signs to suggest meanings.

Love can be expressed in myriad ways—love letters, flowers, and gifts. But objects can also signify changes in love, such as buying a crib for a coming baby, or taking off a wedding ring signifying a divorce.

Death has its own collection of objects that silently state its presence. At one end of the spectrum we have the pirate’s skull and crossbones and at the other we have the flat line of the high-tech heart monitor.

Doors represent the passage from one place to another. These places might be states of mind. Doors, windows, and mirrors are all objects that have great potential to speak without words telling us what is going on between characters or inside a character’s mind.

How Images Ask Questions
We continually ask questions. That is how we think. We ask a question and decide the answer for ourselves. When we see images we want to know what they signify. It is like a child playing in an airplane cockpit—they want to know what all those buttons do.

- What is it?
- What is going on?
- Why do I care?
- Why should I care?
- What do the characters depicted want?
- What will happen next?
- What may change that can set something in motion?

We think in terms of stories. Then the director presents images that ask questions that are driven by character desires, wishes, and fears, and then delay the answers.

And speaking of delays, let’s go back and see how Scheherazade handles the news that the sultan is an insane murderer. How will her state of mind affect her storytelling? How can we show that it does?
The group gathers for the story session.

The vizier enters.

He approaches the sultan.

And ...

Whispers in his ear. The sultan's expression changes.

Scheherazade lights the lamp.

Scheherazade isn't paying attention.

She burns her finger.
Dunazade and the sultan watch concerned.

Her new knowledge of the sultan makes it difficult to draw but she continues on.

Clover's tower.

Daisy and Weed approach.

Clover waves.

Daisy and Weed wave back.

Clover struggles to open her locked door.

She slams into the door.

[Crash!]
Unfortunately, she knocks out her third eye.

It rolls out the door …

Bounces down the stairs …

Past Daisy and Weed …

And out onto the street.

VOICE: “Hey, look what I found!”

A wild-haired kid holds up the eye.

KID WITH HAT: “Throw it over here.”

The wild-haired kid throws it, but the kid with the hat can’t reach it.
He turns to watch it fall over the edge.

It sails down into the chasm below.

KIDS: “Sigh.”

Deep in the chasm …

The eye reaches the bottom and continues to roll …

And stops by the hermit cooking dinner.

Goo tries his latest scheme to return to his true love.

Goo takes aim …

Fires!
Right over the roasting fire …

The arrow flies skyward.

And carries Goo up with it …

The rope goes taut.

Just as the hermit sprinkles salt on his wild boar.

The sultan laughs.

Scheherazade struggles to hide her contempt but she must continue on …
Or suffer the fate of her friends. SULTAN: “Vizier, let the wine flow.”

VIZIER: “Yes, sire.”

The sultan holds out his glass, unaware of changes it may bring.

The sultan toasts.

Dunazade wonders if her sister could have followed through with her threat.

Scheherazade pauses from drawing.

She holds up her glass …

And drinks.
Dunazade watches her sister and ...  
The sultan sip the wine.  
Dunazade is relieved.

Scheherazade holds up the next drawing.  
The sultan continues to be lost in the story, unaware of the events happening right under his nose.  
CLOVER: “I'm seeing something.”

DAISY [Offscreen]: “What is it?”  
CLOVER: “It’s Goo. He’s lost in the underworld.”  
Clover races to her bookcase and pulls down a book.
How does Scheherazade’s new knowledge affect the story she tells the sultan? Clover and Goo are both trying to escape their respective trapped situations. This is exactly how Scheherazade feels, wanting to escape. Now, I could say that this pairing up was totally planned letting one part of the story comment on another, yielding greater resonance, but I would be lying. I didn’t see this connection until I wrote the text for this section. It was unconscious. That is how to use intuition. Look for these types of connections and build upon them. In contrast to Murphy’s Law, happy accidents are those times when things go right.

Scheherazade’s regained some control in deciding not to poison the sultan. Does she have a new plan? Clover has a new problem: Can she save Goo from the soul-eater demons?

**Speaking Indirectly**

Semiotic signs have shown us some ways that images speak. All language is used to say something else. We always say more than we literally mean. We can’t help it, because once we release a signifier onto the world it mingles with others, growing in complex webs of associations like six degrees of separation. Besides, most of the time we are not just conveying information, like giving someone the time, but rather we are implying, insinuating, and suggesting. As filmmakers we can also reveal information in a way that is not direct and the audience has to put together the information and decide for themselves what it means.

Once a director has mastered how to tell a story with pictures clearly and directly, then real persuasive power comes from learning how to speak indirectly using rhetorical devices and figures of speech, or tropes. In Chapter 1, I told you to say one thing at a time. My reviewer, the director, animator, and author Nancy Bieman, pointed out that I was wrong in suggesting that we can only say one thing at a time. Yes, she is correct, but we needed to walk before we could swim, so in the beginning I suggested to tell one thing at a time. I have seen so many beginners presenting two centers of interest in a shot without even realizing it. However, I didn’t say that what you present couldn’t be multilayered. Nancy pointed out that double entendres do just this. Language is always multilayered, but even though a double entendre may branch off into multiple meanings, it is clear. Let’s now look at some ways to speak indirectly.

**Four Master Tropes**

Tropes are figurative uses of words. When I say a trope is like a tool for understanding, I am comparing a trope to a tool. They help us understand the world by rendering the unfamiliar more familiar. How can figurative uses of words help us with visual stories? We are using a speaking metaphor, and it so happens that all of the tropes can be used in a visual form. The vast array of tropes with their fancy-sounding names can be broken down into four main types: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Let’s look at each of them and see how they can help us visually speak indirectly.

**Metaphor**

Far from being a fancy device used in poetry, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that “Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is
largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.  

Consider another wonderfully surprising image from *The Straight Story*. Alvin’s lawn mower tractor has died. We see him depressed and taking out his gun. He is not going to end his misery, is he? We are in the kitchen when we hear the shot. We look outside the window to see what happened and we are presented with the lawn mower tractor on fire. Alvin put the lawn mower out of its misery.

In this scene, David Lynch misdirects us leading us to think that Alvin may do something to hurt himself out of his frustration. He gives us the sound of the gunshot, but lets our imagination fill in the blank as to what happened. Then after a perfect story-delay he shows us the tractor in flames. We laugh with relief.

Lynch is using a visual metaphor here. Alvin is a farmer and in the context of farm life, when an animal is hurt, one shoots it to put it out of its misery. Lynch is comparing the tractor to a dying animal. Metaphor works by taking something that is known and mapping it onto something that is unknown. This mapping process provides a flash of insight allowing us to understand the unknown a little better.

In terms of the signs involved, “Metaphor can be regarded as a new sign formed from the signifier of one sign and the signified of another. The signifier thus stands for a different signified; the new signified replaces the usual one.”

Metaphors are based on a resemblance between two things, and in this sense they are iconic in nature. “Metaphors need not be verbal. In film, a pair of consecutive shots is metaphorical when there is an implied comparison of the two shots. For instance, a shot of an aeroplane followed by a shot of a bird flying would be metaphorical implying that the aeroplane is (or is like) a bird.”

Since film is composed of pictures and pictures are particular and concrete, metaphors allow us to express ideas that are abstract such as the theme of a film. Some of the metaphoric uses listed by N. Roy Clifton include using a metaphor to convey a character or using a metaphor to convey an inner state. Alan Parker’s *The Wall* is one extended metaphor about the difficulty of the main character not being able to break down mental walls that prevent him from connecting with others.

Intercutting two parallel stories is a way to invite the audience to metaphorically make comparisons between them. Camera angle, lighting and shadows, movement, sound, manipulation, and using montage or juxtaposition are all ways to use the structure to make metaphorical comparisons.

Metaphor is also a way to utilize the film frame to convey relations of power to the audience. Consider this shot from *Ivan the Terrible*. Without a word, Sergei M. Eisenstein makes it very clear who is in charge.
Metaphor and metonymy are the major rhetorical devices used to speak indirectly. In *The Straight Story*, director David Lynch uses a pile of sticks to say “Thank you very much. I’m going home to my family.” Hitchcock in *A Shadow of Doubt* uses a ring to imply love, betrayal, discovery, guilt, and acknowledgment. That is powerful filmmaking. They do it by going beyond the denotation of the objects, to connotations that have been defined earlier in the sequence or by new information that changes the perception of the objects. Most intuitive filmmakers don’t know that connotations can be stacked upon each other to give these very resonant meanings in a film.

Everyone who has had a high school English class has heard of metaphors. Metonymy doesn’t have the same claim to fame but it is very valuable for filmmakers. Let’s go back to professor Daniel Chandler for some illumination on the subject. “While metaphor is based upon apparent unrelatedness, metonymy is a function which involves using one signified to stand for another signified which is directly related to it or closely associated with it in some way. Metonyms are based on various indexical relationships between the signifieds, notably the substitution of effect for cause. The best definition I have found is that ‘metonymy is the evocation of the whole by a connection.’” Metaphor and metonymy are both ways in which we understand the world but function differently.

Metaphor is principally a way of conceiving one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is understanding. Metonymy, on the other hand, has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to stand for another. But metonymy is not merely a referential device. It also serves the function of providing understanding. For example, in the case of metonymy, the part THE PART FOR THE WHOLE, there are many parts that can stand for the whole. Which part we pick out determines which aspect of the whole we are focusing on.8

“As with metaphors, metonyms may be visual as well as verbal. In film, which Jakobson, regarded as a basically metonymic medium, a depicted object which represents a related but non-depicted object is a metonym.” Thus in *Pomp and Circumstance* we were using the icons of Donald and Daisy to metonymically stand in for the real Donald and Daisy.

Metonymy also works visually by visual continuity. Consider a pan along a body. Each part leads to the next part. When one part is shown it evokes all the other parts, metonymically linked, even if the shots have been “Frankensteined” together from shots of different bodies.

N. Roy Clifton, author of *The Figure in Film*, offers some visual applications of metonymy. A thing can stand in place of its owner. The lawn mower tractor can stand for Alvin Straight. In fact, his name stands for him. A badge could represent a person. A map could represent a territory. Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* uses this in a great transition shot. We see Jack Torrance looking at a model of the maze at the Overlook hotel, and then the camera trucks into the model, which dissolves into the actual maze where his son is playing.

Each part of something can represent a whole web of connected ideas. A simple storyboard drawing could trigger all of the ideas in this book. Or a drawing of forty sails would lead you to expect the next image.

I bet you weren’t expecting this to be at the bottom of “Forty Sail.” How is that for metonymical misdirection? I draw this image in my storyboard class and the unexpected quality of this image never fails to provoke laughter. Monty Python uses metonymical misdirection to comic effect in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The scene is of the great knights of Camelot riding in quest of the Holy
Grail. The camera pulls back to reveal the knights riding pretend horses followed by serfs who clomp coconuts to provide the galloping sound.

**Synecdoche**

Synecdoche is often considered a subclass of metonymy. Synecdoche is a relation of the part to the whole or a relationship between the parts.

In photographic and filmic media a close-up is a simple synecdoche. Indeed, the formal frame of any visual image (painting, drawing, photograph, film or television frame) functions as a synecdoche in that it suggests that what is being offered is a “slice of life,” and the world outside the frame is carrying on in the same manner as the world depicted within it. Any attempt to represent reality can be seen as involving synecdoche, since it can only involve selection.  

**Irony**

Irony is the most radical of the four main tropes. As with metaphor, the signifier of the ironic sign seems to signify one thing but we know from another signifier that it actually signifies something very different. Where it means the opposite of what it says (as it usually does) it is based on binary opposition. Irony may thus reflect the opposite of the thoughts or feelings of the speaker. It can also be seen as being based on substitution by dissimilarity or disjunction. While typically an ironic statement signifies the opposite of its literal signification, such variations as understatement and overstatement can also be regarded as ironic. At some point exaggeration may slide into irony.  

A key point in this statement is that it appears that irony requires two signifiers. The one signifier represents something and the other signifies that it is meant to be taken ironically. A knowing smile could suffice as the second signifier. The context often is what provides the qualifying signifier.

Ironic juxtaposition is where one image or shot can comment ironically on another. This is a great way to create transitions between scenes where the last line of dialogue from the first scene comments on the opening image of the next scene.

*Singing in the Rain—ironic or sincere?*

**Speaking Indirectly in Time**

Once something is said or shown, the story is not over, it is also affected by what will be said or shown. It has a retroactive effect on the signified. The meaning of the signified can shift until the meaning is anchored at the end of the sentence or film. Mysteries make you connect a clue with one person so you begin to suspect that person of the crime. Then they reveal a new context so the meaning shifts suggesting another reading and another suspect. When the mystery is finally solved at the end of the film all the signified are anchored into place, like when Charlie’s niece pieces together the story of the ring. Only when the ring has traveled from the dead woman to Charlie, then to Charlie’s niece, and then back to Charlie, do we know the full story.

So can Clover save Goo from the depths? And what does it have to do with dental floss?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daisy and Weed approach the guard at the base of Clover's tower.</th>
<th>GUARD: “What’s that for?” DAISY: “Ah?” WEED: “It’s Princess Clover’s dental floss.”</th>
<th>WEED: “Can’t be too careful with your teeth you know.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goo is attempting to climb out …</td>
<td>And he is making some progress.</td>
<td>He pulls himself up to an overhang.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clover climbs up the edge of her balcony.</td>
<td>She tests the bungee cord around her waist.</td>
<td>She looks down.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Crash!

And sees Clover coming right for him.

Goo looks up …

CLOVER: “For …”

Meanwhile, Goo makes it over the ledge …

CLOVER: “Gooooooo”

To the top of the overhang just as Clover comes screaming down.

She shuts her eyes and falls.

CLOVER: “ooooooooooooooooo.

CLOVER: “Gooooooooo”

CLOVER: “For …”

And sees Clover coming right for him.

[Crash!]
Goo falls as Clover bounces back up.

DAISY: "Did you find him?" CLOVER: "I couldn't see anything."

WEED: "You want a flashlight?"

GOO: "Love can really knock the wind out of you."

The sultan is amused.

Scheherazade continues.

GOO [Voiceover]: "I've got to find a way back up."

GOO: "My true love waits for me."
So Scheherazade couldn't poison the sultan. What will she do next? Does she have a plan or is she making it up as she goes along? What will Goo do too?

**Everything Speaks, If You Know the Code**

Codes are like language, in the sense that we don't realize that we have learned them. They appear neutral. A code is a way to figure out what something means. Codes determine the genre of a film and gives you an overview of what you will be seeing. They provide a context to understand what happens. Actions in one genre may be totally out of place in another genre. What if a gun in a Western started acting like it belonged in a horror movie? The gun, quietly lying on the table, starts to aim at people, and the suspenseful music starts. It wouldn't be following the code of the Western genre.

What are codes? In order to demonstrate how codes let us understand the world, let's turn to two films that revel in codes: *The Matrix* and *The Golden Compass*.

In *The Matrix*, we are swimming in signs. The first five minutes reveal a plethora of signs determined by codes. The first scene opens with a flashing cursor. Instead of a current computer desktop, it is an old-style screen of text command
Directing the Story

In addition to our everyday codes and genre codes, there are codes specific to interpreting film. Cross-dissolves typically signify time passing. A split screen signifies two or more events happening simultaneously. Slow motion is for extreme actions such as falling or explosions. Slow motion can also signify danger, especially if children are around.

Semiotic Square

Semiotics, the world of clues, is a vast topic with many more areas of study. But in the limited space we have, I would like to present one more topic, the semiotic square invented by Algirdas Julien Greimas. Robert McKee, in his book Story, utilizes the square as a tool for analyzing the thematic variations involved in a story. First we have a primary value. To this we add the opposite or contradictory value to create a binary pair. These are placed in opposite corners. Then to each of these we add their opposites to arrive at the square.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive value</th>
<th>Contrary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negation of the negation</td>
<td>Negative value</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Various scenes or characters can take on each quadrant of the square to present a filmic argument that explores all sides of an issue.

Codes Specific to Film

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Semiotic Analysis of the Scheherazade and “Dumb Love” Stories

Let’s look at how Scheherazade and her story, “Dumb Love,” utilize semiotics or clues. In the opening scenes of the palace and in the town of “Dumb Love” it is raining. The palace is an elevated place not unlike the castle in “Dumb Love.” The scale of the palace is a metaphor for the sultan’s power. Setting the scenes at night is also a metaphor for the sultan’s state of mind that casts a shadow over his kingdom. There is daytime where he lives, but by choosing not to show any scenes in the full light of day we immerse the audience in his world of madness along with Scheherazade.

Scheherazade has used repetition to make a comparison between the places. Rainy weather connotes gloom and uncomfortable conditions. Lightning suggests forces out of control. The scale of the palace is a metaphor for the sultan’s power. Setting the scenes at night is also a metaphor for the sultan’s state of mind that casts a shadow over his kingdom. There is daytime where he lives, but by choosing not to show any scenes in the full light of day we immerse the audience in his world of madness along with Scheherazade.

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Scheherazade's task is not easy. She is like the lovers in the prologue, who brave the elements and risk getting caught in the name of love. The shaky rope bridge, which connects the two sides of the town, is a metaphor for the obstacles to love. It will not be easy to “reach” the sultan. The palace itself also metonymically represents the sultan.

Scheherazade’s charcoal is like one of Hitchcock’s symbolic objects creating stains, meaning one thing and later taking on another significance. Scheherazade’s playing with fire by going along with her curiosity. We could have put in a scene of her and her sister sneaking around thinking they are about to be caught, and then reveal it was only a curious cat. Scheherazade’s ritual of lighting the candle now has new meaning—she is guilty of opening the forbidden door.

Adding Cupid and his arrows to “Dumb Love” was a fun afterthought. Cupid’s arrows literalized the expression “love hurts.” A quick, free association on the theme of Cupid reveals a baby is the result of love; wings suggest flying, a feeling associated with love; Cupid’s nude, suggesting in love you are vulnerable; sometimes Cupid is blindfolded, suggesting love is blind; and his arrow tips are heart-shaped. Cupid’s power was supposed to be even greater than Hades over the dead in the underworld. This alludes to love’s power over Goo in the underworld. Love is what drives him to reach upward to return to Clover.

Semiotics covers everything in our world. Everything speaks and all speaking is unavoidably rhetorical. This speaking is different from everything calling attention to itself graphically where the images yell, “Look at me!” Here things are silent and have to be “read” for them to yield their meaning.

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6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.