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Film Analysis of *The Ice Storm*: Using Tools of Structuralism and Semiotics

Structuralism in film criticism is the theory that everything has meaning. Semiotic is when signs are analyzed, and interpretations can be made from certain symbols (Biemann). Semiotics studies in film usually structures a concept or theme that the director is trying to evoke. Structuralism and semiotics are used in film analysis because they provide different techniques, conventions, devices, which are used to understand the main message. From the beginning of film to present day, methods of filming and conveying meaning have evolved tremendously from *The Great Train Robbery* to arguably, *Avatar*. Mise-en-scene, pacing, rhythm, shots, camera angle, color, sound, symbolisms... (kcvi.limestone) are all important factors to examine when analyzing a film from an academic point of view.

Ang Lee is a renowned director with a large and varied body of work ranging from: *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* (1994), *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Hulk* (2003), *Crouching Tiger to the Life of Pi* (2012) ... Lee is acknowledged for his use of transactional objects in depicting relationships. In *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* a film about a father-daughter relationship, family ties are mediated by food and preparation of food as a transactional object. His latest film, *Life of Pi* uses an allegory where the animals reflect the elements of human drama in the story. Lee has treated a variety of themes and used different style and technique in directing movies yet; his work can be analyzed as that of an auteur.

The Ice Storm is a movie about a dysfunctional family in modern day New England, who appears to be normal when, in reality, each member is dealing with personal issues and struggles. Lee conveys much of the central themes by relying on several analogies, allegories and metaphorical meaning, in a way that provides greater power and more significance.

The opening scene starts with Paul coming home for Thanksgiving and spending the long weekend with his family. He is reading “The Fantastic Four” comic book, and quotes “we weren’t like other super heroes, more like a family”, “family is the void you emerge from”. The comic book is iconic because it is a work reflecting broader themes. It is symbolic because it is the fantastic four, and indexical because of its role as an allegory and analogy. Lee’s choice using “The Fantastic Four,” was intentional as a metonym to parallel this story with elements of foreshadowing (kcvi.limestone).

Beginning and end scenes are always of note because they retrace the journey from point A to point Z. In “The Ice Storm”, the start and the end both happen at the train station, but leave the audience with different emotions/feelings. In the first scene, the father is the only member of the family who goes to pick up Paul. This is significant, in that it establishes an obvious lack of cohesion in the family. In the last scene, we see the whole family now coming together to pick up Paul at the station. The Hoods family does overcome a long journey, only to become closer with each one and other. At the end of the movie, their relationship appears stronger than they were at the beginning because the

father finally shows real emotions when he breaks down and cries with his family in the car.

Another crucial semiotic device used in the film is the theme of ice in different forms. The ice storm reflects the state, which the family finds itself in. It is a metaphor that Lee uses to illustrate these static and permeated liaisons. When the ice storm happens, everything is frozen, physically and metaphorically. Lee uses the weather as a transactional phenomenon to emphasize the built up emotions from the characters. The climax and the weather are complementary and reflexive. Ice represents frozen dead weight, but it also evokes the lack of communication. The family rarely converses. The relationships are frozen. Ice would then allude to this block or wedge that stands between each character from engaging in normal conversation. They become socially paralyzed when they are put in the same room. A metaphoric sheet of thick ice covers the father's desire to open up, which is constantly ignored by his wife, daughter and son.

The weather is not the only instance where Lee makes reference to this idea of freezing relations. There were two shots where the father had ice cubes. The first time, Elena rejected Ben's offer for ice, which reinforces this notion of passivity. By not accepting the ice, it is as though she is not accepting what is going on with her husband. Elena's decision is perhaps an extension of the bigger problem, and her want to move forward and rebuild what is lost. The second shot with ice cubes is when Ben is at the key party and grabs the ice with his bare hands. The idea behind this shot is to show Ben's anguish towards this situation, where both his wife and his mistress might each leave the party with another man. Ben cannot cope with this shift; therefore, tries to remain cool with this transactional object, ice.

Water and liquid are another “object” that Lee uses to associate with ice. Water is a form of ice. Janey’s bed is one made of water; when her husband comes back and sits on it, she almost bounces off. Lee is playing with this idea of balance through ice but in the form of water. Another scene with water is just before the ice storm, when Ben carries Wendy back home. It starts to rain, and the rain represents this progressing relationship. Ice is melting, and water is fluid.

Having explored the various meaning behind ice and water, snow is another semiotic device that Lee uses. In James Joyce’s short story, “The Dead,” snow is employed as a controlling metaphor. Gabriel wants to escape this Irish society and move to the West, but his feeling of alienation/attachment from his family, friends and eventually wife end up conflicting with his decision. At the end of the piece, the snow is what made Gabriel realize that alienation is inevitable and make us connect. This common feeling is what brings people closer. The snow was the catalyst to his epiphany. Gabriel also puts this social façade when he is with certain people. Relating this allusion to the film, the family appears to be normal, but it is just a built up image of what they would like to be, or what society expects from them (similar to Gabriel and his unconventional desires). The snow represents a range of contradictory emotions.

The parents can be compared to their children because of similar behavior. When the Hoods are seen in the first gathering with their friends, they are smoking. The following scene is that of Wendy smoking with her friends. She then rides her bike to the pharmacy and steals. Her mother sees her daughter on her bike and envies her. Wendy always wears this red poncho, and it was blowing in the wind just like her hair. The bike represents freedom and nostalgia. Nostalgia of the good times,

“You never forget how to ride a bike,” just like one would never forget certain events in your life. Elena then does the same thing as her daughter, takes her bike, rides to the pharmacy and steals.

As the two families are preparing for Thanksgiving dinner, Lee uses another key image to foreshadow the coming storm: Janey gets into the freezer to take out the Turkey. She drops it. The exact same scene is reenacted with Ben. Lee chooses to include this to give the audience a hint that the climax is coming (just like the weather forecaster announcing the ice storm). The turkeys could also represent the burden, and the falling can allude to the secret being too heavy to be held, as well as the actual Thanksgiving dinner. During supper, the family is for the first time, in the same room. Lee builds tension in this scene by using awkward silence.

The notion of emptiness is also evoked through several objects. The broken record for one. The family is living in this empty void, with repeated actions and nothing left. The mug is also another device that Lee uses to illustrate this void. Ben's excuse to Elena for being at the Craver's house was that he was returning the mustache mug but she knew that he was lying. Wendy is supposed to say Grace as she would always do, but turns it into a controversial statement. Sandy carries his toy soldier with him, and it always repeats the same message: “May day, may day, get this message back to base”, Wendy and Sandy eventually hang the broken toy soldier. Another sign of crisis and loss. At a certain point, the same cannot be the same because it becomes empty and dull. Each member searches for stimulation because his or her life is so empty. This is the point from where the law of unintended consequences strikes.

What we see here is Hemingway's iceberg principle at work: words on a page are what can be seen like the tip of the iceberg, with most of the message submerged between the lines. It's the same in *The Ice Storm*. Ten percent of the drama is apparent, while ninety percent is embedded in the symbolism that Lee uses. But it's all there to be understood emotionally and implicitly by the audience, but also intellectually when using semiotic and structural analysis tools.

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