

THE SEMIOTICS OF MEDIA IMAGES FROM *INDEPENDENCE DAY* & SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup> 2001

Elliot Gaines

Wright State University

1. Toward a Relevant Truth of Media Images

The events of September 11, 2001 have altered assumptions about how people in the USA understand the context of their lives. Many people watched news coverage of the events on television. While unified by shock, grief, fear and outrage, media discourse surrounding the meanings of events and the subsequent matter of determining what to do, inevitably takes up different political points of view. Because of the complexities of politics, history, and the limits of information available, the pervasive public discourse seeking the meaning of the events is dominated in American media, not so much by facts, but by rational appeals advancing partisan perspectives. As Charles Sanders Peirce stated:

If one's desire is neither to excite an idea nor to record a fact but to make a rational appeal, the only sort of sign that can possibly answer that purpose is that which represents its object by virtue of the disposition of the interpreter,<sup>3/4</sup> that is to say, a Symbol (1998: 461).

Thus, the veracity of such appeals is limited to the symbolic nature of the discursive sign. Images of the events are also simultaneously symbols and signs of the meanings relating to things that actually happened. The sign functions as an index referring to the actual occurrences (of September 11, 2001) while the symbolic nature of the images evoke connotative meanings. Connotations are understood as the meanings implied as a consequence of something, perceived from within a particular context or cultural understanding. What one accepts as real is often based on beliefs that may or may not be true. Knowledge is an embodied sense of lived experience mediated through cultural myths traditionally conceived to account for the inevitable and inexplicable in life.

Televised images of the events of September 11, 2001 were repeated again and again to become part of a collective, intersubjective consciousness. The images broadcast that day, and repeated since, suggest an intertextual reference to the popular science-fiction, comedy, adventure film, *Independence Day* (Emmrich 1996). The purpose of my analysis is to apply Peirce's semiotic to explore those mediated images in an attempt to understand a basic, relevant truth that they represent to the observer.

2. Peirce's Semiotic and the Nature of Truth in Media

Communication accomplished through mass media such as film or television is always, by definition, remote from direct experience of actual events represented as real. Yet, for the receiver, perception is experienced as immediate and real. The authority and validity of media news and information is established through conventional signs, or symbols that represent objects or meanings understood from habit. A symbol is a kind of sign that is "connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist" (Peirce 1998, 9). Lanigan points out that communication technology is a sign, not of the media, but of the spontaneous conjunction of human expression and embodied perception (1997, 381-387). The semiotic process of a symbol simultaneously stands for its referent by virtue of its understood sameness (reality) and opposition (fiction) to an object within a televised system of signs. That is, a mediated sign can simultaneously represent reality, and be a symbol denoting something unique to the interpretant. For example, the image on the television screen is not the real thing that it represents in time and space, but it may stand for some aspect of reality—a real person or event. Herein lies the problematic of media and the nature of truth.

Peirce states that there is a "logical necessity...that a sign should be true to a real object" (1998: 306), yet he defines a symbol "as a sign which is fit to serve as such simply because it is so interpreted" (307). The symbol is a sign that "denotes a kind of thing" that may lack any resemblance, similarity, or existential connection to its referent (Peirce 1998: 9). The social world of communication shares the meaning of a symbol. "Television creates a form of embodiment that is the essence of capacity symbolized...captured in the cultural theater of memory. The World is spatially located and enframed in the TV set in front of which we sit and watch and listen" (Lanigan 1997: 388). "Symbols grow," and develop from other symbols, and thus their significance is shared among people (Peirce 1998: 10). According to Lanigan, "images on television symbolize

persons and a person is a symbol of consciousness speaking" (1997: 389). The nature of television is symbolic in that the text and images do not disappear when the television is shut off. Television discourse is a symbol that "...lives in the minds of those who use it" (Peirce 1998: 10). Thus, because of its discursive nature, media acts as the voice, the eyes, the ears, the mind, and the heart of a shared cultural reality.

The images of mass media necessarily take up a particular point of view that is understood to symbolically represent the world. The significance of a symbol is determined by its interpretant (Peirce 1998: 322), but is *true* only insofar as the meaning is shared. Peirce maintains, however, that truth only exists in the relationship between the sign and its object, and outside the necessity of the interpretant. "Truth is the conformity of a representation to its object—its object, ITS object, mind you.... So, then, a sign, in order to fill its office, to actualize its potency, must be compelled by its object" (Peirce 1998: 380). This hypothesis suggests bracketing interpretation in order to recognize the essence of the relationship between the sign as (first) expression of communication, and its (second) object or meaning. In so far as this is possible, a sign can stand for truth when semiosis is limited to secondness and a denotative meaning.

Peirce distinguishes that which is true from what he calls real, and he is careful to explain that something can be real and still not exist beyond thought (1958: 419-20). A sign in the mind of an interpreter is real, but as we know from experience, sometimes we can be mistaken and that notion may turn out not to be true. Peirce uses the term "Denotation" to express the "Object of a Sign" and according to his critical logic, the object of a sign is true regardless of what anyone or any group believes (1958: 421). For example, the "World Trade Center" denotes a collection of buildings—physical structures where people live or work in a controlled space. At the denotative level, the World Trade Center is not yet taken as a symbol.

A symbol uses the denotative sign to refer to its object and "essentially takes a part for its whole" (Peirce 1998: 322). Eco further defines denotation as having a "cultural unit or semantic property" corresponding to its referent, whereas connotation does not necessarily correspond to its referent (1976: 86). As arbitrary signs, symbols such as words determine the semantic correspondence between the sign and its object. Connotation uses the denotative sign, but "not necessarily corresponding to a culturally recognized property of the possible referent (Eco 1976: 86). Connotation takes the denotative sign to a second order of signification. That is, the denotative, or a specific, culturally agreed upon meaning of a word or any sign, can be taken in a unique and specific context to add to, or embellish the meaning. Connotation, then, is a denotative sign that retains its symbolic nature, but adds another, higher level of interpretant (Gaines 2001). The "World Trade Center" denotes a collection of buildings, but on a connotative level, they represented specific, distinguishing qualities of the sign—perhaps interpreted as the awesome power of world commerce. Depending on cultural perspective, the connotative sign of the World Trade Center can be read as a symbol of multiple and even conflicting values. Following Peirce, then, the *truth* is necessarily limited to the sign/object relationship, yet the meaning of a symbol is by definition determined through shared interpretation. Therefore, while a symbol is always *real*, it may not be *actual*.

The purpose of the following analysis is to look for what is *actual* in the intertextual relationship between images of the film, *Independence Day* and the broadcast images of the destruction of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

### 3. Analysis: Independence Day and the Destruction of the World Trade Center

Two media clips are thematically linked for the analytical purpose of my analysis. The first is the broadcast of the events of September 11, 2001 and the World Trade Center. The second represents similar events, but is taken from the popular commercial film, *Independence Day*. The events are similar, but the film was enjoyed as entertainment while the destruction of the World Trade Center was understood as an all-too-real tragic event. The analysis will test Peirce's theory that the true meaning of any sign (*representamen*) is embodied within the relationship between the expression of communication and the object, or meaning to which it refers.

Peirce insists that sign relations always exist in threes; the interpretant relates individually to the sign, and to the object (1998: 482). The interpretant necessarily occupies a distinct embodied knowledge that defines its own context of perspective. So, each potential interpreter inhabits an individual embodied history and knowledge that makes the meaning of the sign specific to the conditions of perception. Only in the relation between the sign and its object is there a potential for objectivity. But of course, Peirce's triadic sign relations already assume the impossibility of objective truth. Thus, in order to avoid presuppositions of any objective truth, performing a phenomenological epoché isolates the sign and its object (Lanigan 1988: 29-30). By bracketing the interpretant, thick description explicates the nature and essential characteristics of the sign and its object.

### 4. Abduction, Intertextuality, and the Hermeneutic Circle

The events of September 11, 2001 have altered the significance of much in peoples' lives. Images of the devastation in New

York and at the Pentagon were broadcast around the world. Like most Americans, I was drawn to the TV when I heard the news, and I was stunned and horrified when I watched the second airliner enter the image on the screen and crash into the World Trade Center. After a while, I felt that I didn't want to watch any more. Partly out of habit, and partly because I was afraid to miss anything, I put a tape in my VCR and recorded NBC for the next two hours. Later, several people described what I had sensed; for many Americans the televised images seemed like they were right out of a contemporary movie. The popular film, *Independence Day* immediately came to mind.

This seems to have been a shared perception. During the broadcast, an NBC reporter Ron Insana, who had been close to the buildings when they collapsed, was interviewed. He commented that his experience was "like a scene out of *Independence Day* (Insana 2001). According to Peirce,

When it happens that a new belief comes to one consciously generated from a previous belief—an event which can only occur in consequence of some third belief (stored away in some dark closet of the mind, as a habit of thought) being in a suitable relation to that second one—I call the event inference or reasoning (1998: 463).

The significance of Insana's reference to the film is that his *real* experience was "generated from a previous belief" suggesting that stored away in his mind was the notion that scenes from *Independence Day*'s fiction narrative could represent reality. Without thoroughly articulating theoretical distinctions, this process of *abduction* or inference also suggests a hermeneutic circle or intertextuality that necessarily builds new knowledge upon previous experience. Similarly, Peirce called this process the argument cycle in the application of logic thought (Lanigan 1995).

Explaining this phenomenon through intertextuality, the narrative text of *Independence Day* established a sequence of events and images representing a particular quality of destruction as a visual spectacle. The visual spectacle is heightened by the symbolic significance of buildings being destroyed in both September 11<sup>th</sup> and *Independence Day*. A *paradigm* is represented by the characteristics of mediated imagery depicting famous US landmarks dramatically destroyed by attacks from the air. September 11<sup>th</sup> thus paradigmatically refers to *Independence Day*.

Signs always refer to other signs, and meaning grows from this semiotic process of abduction [rule + result = case]. The language of film and other mass media have become conventional, but were introduced only a short time ago in the context of human communication history. A naïve audience, uninitiated to cinematic codes of signification, would necessarily make inferences based upon previously established knowledge and beliefs. Consider the situation on December 28, 1895 in Paris when Auguste and Louis Lumiere showed their films to one of the earliest audiences in the world to ever see motion pictures. The films were short, simple recordings of everyday events including "The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat" (Barsam 1992: 3). The train was a sign and an emblem for the industrial revolution, a symbol of progress and the grandeur of the times. Just two months earlier in October 1895, there was a well publicized news item about a railroad accident that occurred when a train went out of control and killed a pedestrian at the station. With no previous experience with the medium, people watching the film only saw what they recognized as a real train coming directly at them, and the naive spectators were frightened that the image would emerge from the screen and overrun them (Barsam 1992: 3-7). A spectator is not "outside" an event since consciousness only knows itself by perceiving things (Madison 1990: 147-8). Perception of an incident or spectacle in the media is an intersubjective, situational perspective of the lived body in relation to the world. So, knowledge and familiarity with media has normalized the perception of signs that might otherwise be read as threatening. Such a semiotic shift in the meanings of signs is built upon knowledge and repetition. In the NBC News report selected for this analysis, six video tape clips of the World Trade Center towers collapsing were repeated in less than three minutes.

The following analysis focuses on two video subjects of approximately six minutes each. In order to look for the semiotic truth within the broadcast images of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the criteria for selection emerged from a spontaneous abductive insight (Peirce 1998: 227). *Independence Day* serves as the ground of comparative analysis, because I argue that the mind searches knowledge and experience in order to understand new phenomena. In this context, the sample from the film *Independence Day* provides the narrative qualities that embody the paradigmatic character of the situation and images of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. The video sample of September 11<sup>th</sup> was captured coincidentally around 10:30 A.M. when I decided I could no longer watch the televised reports and began a two hour video recording of the broadcast of NBC News.

The semiotic method of analysis of video begins with a concise denotative description of the syntagmatic narrative. Each paradigm in the story is defined within its assumed, mediated context, suspending disbelief, and focusing on the spatial/temporal structure of its sequence of events. The two narratives are distinctly coded as fiction and reality. These opposing identities are bracketed so that the essential qualities of signs from the two samples can be analyzed. In the final interpretation, the character of reality and fiction are reconsidered.

#### 4.1. Analysis: Independence Day

The scene from *Independence Day* depicts an attack from alien space ships. The attack is timed and coordinated around the world, but the film specifically features the destruction of the Empire State Building, the White House, and another prominent skyscraper in Los Angeles. The Empire State Building is struck from above by the aliens' weapon blast that implodes the top stories causing them to collapse the successive floors below. With graphic detail from various visual perspectives, this imaging is repeated with the White House and the Los Angeles skyscraper. The repetition and alternative points-of-view constitute a visual parallel to the visual spectacle of NBC News coverage of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the World Trade Center collapsing, the Pentagon attack, and the Pennsylvania plane crash.

The filmic sequences jump from location to location in order to develop the main characters of the story. Aside from codes of science-fiction and adventure, *comedy* is significant in that the filmmaker is essentially telling the audience to take the film lightly.

Harvey Firestein is specifically developed as a comic relief character—a side-kick to the hero, Jeff Goldblum—early in the film. His exaggerated, humorous stereotype is stuck in traffic, trying to make a phone call to his analyst while the aliens get into position to bomb the city. There are street sounds from cars and chaos.

Cut to the First Lady evacuating Los Angeles by helicopter, and adventure music becomes audible. As naïve onlookers gaze up at the aliens positioning themselves over the Empire State Building, the music shifts to dreamy, angelic voices. Meanwhile, government workers scurry away from the White House and pulsing adventure music is heard again.

The Presidential party boards Air Force One. Passengers include the Jeff Goldblum as the hero/science wizard that is out to save the world. As the adventure music comes to a peak, Goldblum refers to his computer that has been tracking the alien's countdown. The music peaks, then quiets, as a wide-eyed, close-up of Goldblum appears, softly saying "time's up!"

At that point, the alien ships open and fire a destructive, explosive flaming ray with an electronic hissing sound. Buildings explode radiating flames with wind and a blast reminiscent of images of atomic warfare. Explosions and fire sweep through a sequence of images. Eerily quiet hissing and whistling sounds suggesting that they are so loud that they manifest as a deafening roar. As the Empire State Building explodes from the top down, debris, cars and bodies fly through the air. Coded as comedy, Harvey Firestein gets a laugh from the audience as he looks up and sees the explosion coming toward him. He says, "Oh crap" just before a flying car appears to land on him. Seen from the perspective of a couple sitting in a car, another body falls with a thud on to the hood. Fire tears through buildings and over fleeing people. Slow motion emphasizes the panic, and especially the spectacle of explosions and flames and flying objects. The sequence ends with adventure music as Will Smith's girlfriend finds shelter from the explosion with her son, and her dog leaps into her arms just as the flames fly by. The entire sequence was intentionally crafted with artistic precision to be perceived as an amusing entertainment spectacle.

#### 4.2. Analysis: September 11, 2001 on *NBC*

There are three separate video tape clips selected from the NBC broadcast of September 11<sup>th</sup>. The first is a sequence based on an interview with Ron Insana, a reporter for MSNBC, not long after the collapse of the World Trade Center buildings in New York City. Insana appeared with his hair and suit coat covered with debris because he had been at the site of the World Trade Center at the time of the collapse. Katie Couric, Tom Brokaw, and Matt Lauer ask him about his experience. Insana (2001) describes his story with animated hand and eye gestures saying:

... as we were going across the street, we were not terribly far from the World Trade Center building, the south tower. As we were cutting across a, a quarantine zone actually, the building began disintegrating. And we heard it and looked up and started to see elements of the building come down and we ran, and honestly it was like a scene out of *Independence Day*. Everything began to rain down. It was pitch black around us as the wind was ripping through the corridors of lower Manhattan.

Insana's reference to *Independence Day* is significant. As a reporter in front of an international audience, he knows the intertextual reference to the film will be understood as a commonly known cultural text. In addition, his reference indicates his cognitive process for making sense of his own experience. He goes onto say, "It was a very deep gray smoke. It was, it was, in all honesty it looked like a nuclear winter, the type of thing you see in the movies with ash all over the ground, on top of cars, on police cars, on windows . . ."

Again, Insana made reference to nuclear holocaust film genre in media entertainment. As he begins to speak, his name and affiliation with CNBC's Business Center appears on the lower third of the TV screen. The camera moves to a single shot of

Insana and zooms in slowly for dramatic effect as he speaks. He gestures with his hands, and looks up as he says, "I looked up!" The image cuts to the smoking south tower, which then collapses. Insana says, "What that looks like there was mild compared to what it was like to be at the center!" The immediate sign is his embodied experience. As he watches the video, his memory and the dynamic sign of the recorded image, both of them mediated signs, negotiate the final interpretant.

During this short interview, six edited video clips appear over the voices describing the plane crashing into the second building with different views of the subsequent collapses. Brokaw comments, "America has been changed today..." Couric interrupts to read an "upsetting wire that just came across the wire from the West Bank." She continued saying:

Thousands of Palestinians celebrated Tuesday's terror attacks in the United States chanting 'God is great' and distributing candy to passers by even as their leader, Yasir Arafat said he was horrified. The U.S. government has become increasingly unpopular in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the past year of Israeli-Palestinian fighting (NBC 2001).

Later in the same report, she read the identical copy to narrate video of Palestinian demonstrators. Graphics on the screen identified the footage as "Earlier This Morning." NBC later acknowledged that it had committed a breach of ethics by using archive video footage with an unverified wire report. Only through convention do we assume the indexical nature of an image grounded by the text of the news. The image was not actually acquired September 11<sup>th</sup> as an authentic Palestinian celebration of the attack against the US. The image was selected from an archive as a global sign to imply Islamic extremism as the enemy.

Tom Brokaw narrated another exemplar video clip from NBC, September 11<sup>th</sup>. He said, "we are not going to do this in a gratuitous way, but to give you an idea of what happened we have an astonishing piece of video tape of the second airplane going into the World Trade Center" (NBC 2001). The image was played in slow motion "so you can see that is, in fact, an airliner" (Brokaw 2001, NBC). The video was astonishing, but it was also gratuitous in that the inference of the horror of the event was re-signified as an entertainment spectacle. So, the aesthetic appeal of images of September 11<sup>th</sup> entertainment (*Independence Day*) grounded the semiotic process of interpreting images of, and finally the images of September 11<sup>th</sup> became an attempted, but failed, entertainment spectacle.

If these video clips were all reduced to only images out of the context of fiction or reality, could they reasonably stand as signs that share an essential iconic quality in relation to their respective objects? Regardless of politics or perspective, they denote violence and destruction. Playing the video images back to back on the same TV, the only things that distinguish the character of the signs are the *codes* that ground our understanding of one intended as real and the other as fiction.

Repetition does not alter the sign's relation to its object. Repetition does engender familiarity, which further promotes conventional interpretation, but only in a context already coded for the interpretant. The violence in *Independence Day*, coded as fiction, constructs a narrative binary opposition that clearly identifies good against evil. The available images representing the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, using inferences drawn from *Independence Day*'s sign/object relations, construct a narrative paradigm based upon the same themes, but coded as reality. The analysis indicates a shift in the potential to interpret fiction. While audiences may claim to understand the distinctions between images coded as fiction from those representing reality, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> suggest that the pleasure and entertainment value of images of violence coded as entertainment will henceforth be interpreted from oppositional knowledge of images experienced as real. The truth of the two images is consciously the same in *actual* experience.

## 5. Critical Media Analysis and the Semiotic of Peirce

The comparative analysis of the media clips reveals several signs of the postmodern condition. First, the human experience of being in the world, or seeing and hearing the world on television, are already mediated by memories of other media experience. Fiction and non-fiction are both mediated popular texts—the convergence of human experience expressed through technology (Lanigan 1997: 381-387). Ron Insana narrates his memory of *Independence Day*, broadcast on television, while watching images of his own experience on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Second, the television image is a symbol of *real* human experience, but the iconic qualities of the sign are arbitrarily, and conventionally signified as true. The stereotypical images of Arab, mid-eastern-looking people celebrating on a street could be falsely anchored to a specific people from a designated time and place.

Finally, cinematic techniques coded as real or fiction, are freely exchanged to represent its opposite. When Brokaw narrated the slow-motion video of the plane crashing into the second World Trade Center building, he accomplished the same accent

on detail, tension, and spectacle, as any cinema director making a movie.

In order to confront the complexities of media analysis from critical perspectives, audiences need to recognize the structures of meaning embedded in the processes of media communication. Semiotic methods offer ways to organize and structure one's observations of the world. Learning to think semiotically helps one to recognize the characteristics of perception and experience that communicate meaning. Media images constitute particular representations of the world. Peirce theorized a necessary trichotomy of relations that are always present in the process of communicating meaning. Following Peirce, my analysis approached the nature of truth as it exists in the relationship between a sign and its object or meaning. The third component of the sign relation is the interpretant, which is always situated within an historical embodiment of experience and knowledge. The interpretant always manifests a potential for multiple interpretations of meaning. Meaning then, always depends upon the context of knowledge based on past experience.

The notion of objectivity suggests the possibility of bracketing such a personal perspective in order to recognize the essential qualities of the relationship between the expression of meaning and the object to which it refers. But considering that the interpretant is situated in time and space, limited by a particular point-of-view, the truth is obscured by the intentionality of an interpreter. Media, in contrast, can be used to shift the communicative aspects of time and space, and image and text. Thus, if we are to explore the notion of truth, the interpretant must recognize the conditions of individual perspective, knowledge, and bias. Still, the discourse of media is a sign that represents, but is not that which it represents. Meaning is the *fallible*, socially constructed interpretation of the truth located in the relationship between the sign and its object, but finally interpreted from an arbitrary embodied perspective.

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