

A Semiotic Analysis of *The Giver*

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It is common in Hollywood for films to be adapted from books. Some of the most successful blockbusters have been created from books, producing 53% more revenue internationally than original screenplays, (Frontier Economics, 2018, p. 3). *The Giver* (Noyce, 2014) was released in 2014, was a film adapted from the book written by Lois Lowry. *The Giver* had a worldwide gross of \$66, 980, 456, with its opening week bringing in \$12, 305, 016 (IMDb, 2014). Audience members had mixed reviews about the book turned movie, varying from those who thought of it as 'creatively portrayed', (Powell, 2014) to those who thought of it as 'a poor copy of those earlier pictures' (Dargis, 2014) referencing *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012) and *Divergent* (Burger, 2014). With such a wide spectrum of positive and negative critical reviews, simply choosing a side can appear extremely easy. However, further investigation is required to fully grasp the philosophical depth of the signs incorporated in the film and analyze it as a whole.

Director Phillip Noyce intertwines meaningful signs within the movie that audiences can view to create their own connotation. This essay seeks to show what meanings can be derived from certain signs present, throughout the film, by taking a close look at three potential signifiers. Some of the signifiers that can be seen throughout the movie is the sled, 'seeing beyond', and Gabriel. By looking into these signs, audiences can appoint meanings that are specific to them and their experiences. Using the work of Barthes and Hall as a reference, it expands on the idea of creating one's own meanings. What exactly a person gathers from these visuals depends on their own interpretations and influences. A plethora of meanings can be derived from these signs because each audience member comes from a different societal background. To build upon the underlying meanings of certain visuals in *The Giver*, one could use a semiotic approach and apply the different concepts that construct it, to examine this film.

## Setting the Scene

The young adult dystopian narrative, *The Giver*, is set in a futuristic world after something called The Ruin took place. As a result of this occurrence, communities were built protected by a boundary. Community members were stripped of emotions and color, as these could create conflicts, and all past memories were erased from these people. They created a new society, one that consisted of true equality. Rules were enacted to maintain this equality which included: use precise language, wear your assigned clothing, take your medication, obey the curfew, and never lie. The film follows teenager Jonas (Brenton Thwaites) and his two friends Asher (Cameron Monaghan) and Fiona (Odeya Rush), as they ride their bikes. A ceremony is to take place that will assign these three friends their positions in the community. The group stops at the Nurturing center where the newborns are kept and where the Father of Jonas (Alexander Skarsgård) works. The teenagers hear a crying baby, which Father refers to as Gabriel.

Jonas is then seen with his father, mother (Katie Holmes), and younger sister, Lilly (Emma Tremblay), having dinner. It is here they discuss their feelings for the day and Jonas explained how he is nervous for the ceremony. Father tells Jonas not to worry because the Elders have been watching him and know where exactly to place him. The following day the ceremony takes place. The Chief Elder (Meryl Streep), present through a hologram, assigns the teenagers to their positions. Asher is given the position of drone pilot, Jonas is skipped over, while other teenagers are announced, and Fiona is placed in the Nurturing Center. After they finish assigning all the teenagers their positions, the Chief Elder then returns to Jonas. She says that Jonas has all four attributes including intelligence, integrity, courage, and an ability to see beyond. With these attributes present in Jonas, it influenced the Elders to select him as the new Receiver of Memories.

Jonas starts his training with the Giver (Jeff Bridges) the next day. The Giver is the only one who is capable of passing memories of the past to the Receiver. The first memory that is given to Jonas is one of snowy woods and riding downhill on a sled. Jonas can look and feel himself becoming excited and is then met with a cabin at the end of the hill. After training, he leaves to go back home and when he arrives, he finds that Gabriel has been brought to his family dwelling. Jonas begins to feel this connection with Gabriel and starts to believe that he will be selected like Jonas had been. The next time Jonas goes to training, he is given the memory of riding a boat at sunset and gets to view color for the very first time. He begins to wonder why they have been stripped of something so beautiful. The Giver explains that color, as well as feelings, would give way to conflicting emotions that would produce difficulties. The following training session, Jonas is given memories of a party with dancing and people enjoying themselves.

The next time Jonas comes for training he is given memories of pain and war. He is first given the memory of an elephant being gunned down and then he sees himself in a memory as a soldier who's friend was killed via war. He rushes out of the training disturbed by the memories of hurt, pain, and anguish. He claims he is not strong enough to go on with being the Receiver of Memory. After discussing with Fiona, he returns to the Giver and learns that the previous Receiver, Rosemary (Taylor Swift), was also upset with these images. Jonas then sees a projection of his father with a baby that is being 'released too Elsewhere'. These series of events allow Jonas to create a better understanding of what death means, and he becomes terrified of what he once knew as 'releasing into Elsewhere'.

After this revelation, he goes back home and is then informed of his father releasing Gabriel to elsewhere the following day. He then decides to take action and forms a plan with the

Giver to travel past the boundary of memory. This is not only to save Gabriel but return the memories to the community. He leaves after curfew on a mission to rescue Gabriel from the Nurturing center. After encounters with both Asher and Fiona, he is able to rescue Gabriel and by hopping onto a bicycle he rides off the edge of a cliff and starts the journey to the boundary. After nonstop walking, Jonas, now in snowy woods, finally reaches the boundary of memory and crosses it using a sled found in the snow. Memories and color are restored to the community and people are beginning to feel again. It ends with Jonas coming across a cabin and walking towards it. He acknowledges that the Giver is who brought them here and it leaves a sense of hope for the future.

### **Finding Meaning**

Further, discussion is needed to fully understand what semiotics entail. Semiotics can be traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Pierce before the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Semiotics is, “the study of signs and how they signify,” (Benshoff, 2016, p. 294). Signs can be anything from words, an image, a sound or even a symbol. There is no right or wrong when deciding what a sign is. When studying signs, one must keep in mind there are two parts that make up the basic semiotic theory. In a semiotic analysis constructed by Animbom (2020) he stated, “These two continuums (signifier/signified) function inseparably in the process of communicating with the viewer,” (Animbom, 2020, p. 116). The signifier is referred to as the part of the sign that exists in the real world. While the signified, is referred to as the significance of the sign that arises in the mind of the person viewing it. As stated by Houssain and Fu (2014), “On the one hand, society provides the basis for the construction of meanings; on the other hand, it also leaves the room for the interpretations by the audience,” (Hossain & Fu, 2014, p. 99).

From these signifiers, one begins to decode the text and understand what particular signs, signify.

By examining the work of Barthes and Hall, one is able to fully grasp what the process of 'decoding' looks like. In semiotics, Barthes distinguished the difference of denotation and connotation. Denotation is, "the first order of signification that arises from a given sign," (Benshoff, 2016, p. 275). While connotation is, "all the meanings a sign gives off after its first order or denotative meaning," (Benshoff, 2016, p. 273). Both of these are important in understanding the idea that signs give rise to other signs in a chain of signification. One concept to keep in mind is that a code must be shared between senders and receivers of messages in order to create signification. This is discussed in more detail in an essay written by Hall (1973), which examined how social context can make the process of decoding a text open to interpretation because of the viewers surrounding influences. When applied to audiences he stated, "He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference," (Hall, 1973). The audience sees a specific quality that they take and apply to their own interpretations of the sign. These are concepts that can be applied when audiences are viewing the film to help determine the significance of different visuals throughout, *The Giver*.

### **A Future of Freedom, Hope, and Faith**

Within *The Giver*, there are a lot of signs present throughout the film. These signs can be picked out by the people who are viewing this movie; however, it is up to the spectator to decode what exactly these signs can signify. Keeping in mind the work of Hall (1973), what one person views as the underlying meaning, may differ from another person who is viewing the same text.

The work of Barthes' denotation and connotation will be applied to help further the understanding of the significance of the sign that is present. This section will look at three signifiers evident throughout the film and describe what they are signifying. The three signs include the sled which signifies freedom, 'seeing beyond' which signifies faith, and Gabriel who signifies a future.

The first signifier that was observed in the film was the sled. The sled is present in two scenes throughout the entirety of the film. The first time the sled was seen was Jonas' very first memory, (Noyce, 2014, 17:59). The memory started out with Jonas in snowy woods. He experiences the feel of snow and the cold. It is then he notices a sled and gets on it. This is the first time he experiences riding a sled and he is immediately overcome with joy and amazement. The next time we see the sled is towards the end of the film, (Noyce, 2014, 1:24:00). Again, the audience is shown Jonas in snowy woods, after he had escaped the community in search of Elsewhere. He and Gabriel are seen laying in the snow after continuous walking to reach the boundary of memory. Jonas is completely beat and has little energy left when he discovers a sled in the snow. Remembering the memory of the sled he sits on it with Gabriel, and they are off. This sled leads them downhill and over the boundary of memory. Everything that was taken from the community- color, emotion, memory- has now been returned to them. The sign will be taken a step further, to discuss why the sled signifies freedom. This sign signifies freedom because it was the way Jonas escaped from his community. He was freed from a world that had taken so much from him and was now able to do and see what he wished rather than being tied down or having things stolen from him.

The second signifier that was observed in the film was 'seeing beyond'. 'Seeing beyond' was present throughout the whole film. Jonas had the ability of 'seeing beyond' which allowed

for him to see and feel things no one else could. This ability allowed for him to experience and understand a world that was stripped of him through the memories he received from the Giver. Through these memories given to Jonas, he was able to understand the past, present and future of his world. As the Giver said, “Memories are not just about the past, they determine our future,” (Noyce, 2014, 39:54).

The sign will be taken a step further, to discuss why ‘seeing beyond’ signifies faith. ‘Seeing beyond’ signifies faith because, when paying close attention to the movie, there is a line that Jonas said describing what seeing beyond meant. The line was, “Have Faith, the Giver told me. He said faith—that was ‘seeing beyond’,” (Noyce, 2014, 39:32). ‘Seeing beyond’ allows for faith that there is something better out in the world, that has yet to be discovered. It signifies the ability to recognize that faith and to stand strong with it. This is what keeps Jonas going throughout the whole film. He has the faith needed to help return to the community what has been taken from them. He has faith that leads him on a journey to something bigger and better. This faith keeps him believing there is more for the community than what they know.

The third signifier that was observed in the film was Gabriel. Gabriel was the little baby that was present in the film from beginning to end. The first time Gabriel is seen is when the three friends visit the Nurturing Center, (Noyce, 2014, 3:14). It is here Jonas was introduced to Gabriel. The next time we see Gabriel is when he is brought to Jonas’ family dwelling and stays with them for a little bit, (Noyce, 2014, 22:34). For the duration of Gabriel’s stay, he and Jonas create a bond. It is mentioned that Jonas was able to feel that Gabriel was like him and that one day he, too, would be chosen. Throughout the rest of the film, Gabriel makes little cameos. It is not until the end Gabriel is shown again. When Jonas receives word, that Gabriel is to be

released, he immediately takes action in order to save the baby, (Noyce, 2014, 59:00). It is the very last scene of Gabriel and Jonas crossing the boundary of memory that they are shown again.

The sign will be taken a step further, to discuss why Gabriel signifies a future. Gabriel signifies a future because again, if one were paying close attention to what is being said, Jonas has a line that discussed what Gabriel meant. The line was, “I knew...that I held the future there in my arms,” (Noyce, 2014, 1:27:31). Gabriel signifies a future filled with color and memories from the past. With Gabriel being a baby, it is evident that he signifies a new beginning. He is a baby untouched by the lies the Elders created within the community. He represents a future where the truth is not hidden from him. He is free to grow up knowing what the world has to offer. He signifies a future for not only Jonas, but for the rest of the people in the community they escaped from. Gabriel signifies a future of freedom, faith, and hope.

## **Conclusion**

*The Giver* provides many signs that can be interpreted by audiences who encounter them, to determine the underlying meanings that arise from them. The signs that were described throughout this essay may not have the same meanings to another person, who views the same text. The sled, ‘seeing beyond’, and Gabriel were some signs obtained from the film to help understand what meanings can be taken away from them. By applying denotation and connotation, it allowed for further understanding of the significance these signs had to the film.

At first glance, the sled can give the denotation of having fun, as we see Jonas enjoying it. After taking the sled a step further, it can give the connotation of freedom, after all, it was the one thing that led Jonas to his freedom from the community he was once part of. ‘Seeing beyond’, at first glance, can give the denotation of the ability to receive memories, as we see

Jonas capable of seeing things no one else can. After looking into ‘seeing beyond’ with a little more depth, it can give the connotation of faith. Jonas would not be able to see the things he is able too if he did not have faith that there are better things out in the world. And finally, Gabriel, at first glance, may give the denotation of a regular baby. We are shown Gabriel in just that light, a baby with no underlying significance. After diving deeper into Gabriel, he can be given the connotation of a future. Yes, he is technically a baby, but he is a baby that represents a future of freedom, hope, and faith.

There are a number of symbols that, if taken the time to find, can be derived from a film like *The Giver*. These symbols can have a multitude of different meanings. Depending on the people consuming this film, different concepts may arise in their minds when encountering the sign that create different meanings. What one person perceives can be different from what another understands. The different perceptions that each person acquires can affect their understanding of a certain symbol which ultimately changes the understanding of the film.

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