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Semiotics for Creators of Popular Culture  
Semiotic Analysis #1  
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Image: Still from Les Miserables (2012)



**Signifier:** The somewhat subtle signifier in this image is Javert, the inspector who upholds the law and chases down all who dare disobey and defy it. In the film Javert relentlessly chases down an escaped convict in hope of bringing him to justice. This would allow Javert to fulfill his purpose as an officer and mask his own hidden past of having been born in a jail. Javert as a character is played by Russell Crowe, acclaimed actor from strong period pieces such as *Gladiator* and the soon to be released *Noah's Ark*. Javert is relentless, strong, and has a desire to uphold the law even to the point of misunderstanding the true meaning of love and forgiveness.

**Signified:** The statue of the eagle and the cross erected at the top of the building are the signified in this image and translate their meaning to Javert. The eagle is often seen as a symbolic bird representing freedom, strength, and an unbroken spirit. It is also one of the most powerful birds of prey and respected for its majestic qualities: being able to fly above storms and the ability to pinpoint prey miles above the ground. The cross, on the other hand, can also be seen as a sign of justice and judgment since Jesus was nailed to the cross as the ultimate sacrifice for sin. The cross is the place where sin met its judgment. Belief in God was extremely present in the 18th century, and in the film Javert makes a prayer to God asking for help in his mission of apprehending Jean Valjean, the escaped convict.

**Overall Sign:** As the eagle is a symbolic bird of prey Javert is a symbol of the law, seeing high above to apprehend his prisoners of prey. While he believes he's upholding the law, he is actually preying on Jean Valjean and hunting him down from a crime he doesn't deserve. Still, Javert is a relentless ambassador of judgment and justice. One could also suggest that as the sky is night, Javert is an agent of darkness since he's acting opposite of the film's protagonist. Additionally from a cinematic point of view, this particular shot is considered a low angle, forcing the audience to look up to him as being on high.

**Image:** A cross, an eagle, Javert, and a night sky.

**Icon:** While Javert isn't claiming to be God, his position indicates that he's acting like God, bringing judgment upon the sinners of the world. Also, being on the rooftop could give him the feeling of being close to God. He's not the classic, maniacal, evil iconic villain; rather, he's extremely misguided "good cop gone bad" character type.

**Symbol:** The eagle and the cross are symbols. The cross being a symbol of religion and the law and cross representing Javert as a character who sees all.

**Index:** The eagle is made of stone, or at least another type of hardened material. Like the stone eagle, Javert can be considered an emotionally hardened character, unmoved and unmerciful.

**Denotation:** Javert is a man on top of a building somewhat close to the edge. Behind him is a statue of an eagle and above him is a cross attached to the top scaffolding.

**Connotation:** Just as the eagle is an immovable statue, Javert is unmovable and determined to bring justice and judgment to those he perceives as deserving. He sees himself as above them and as God's enactor. I don't believe this building on which he is standing is a cathedral/church, for in a previous shot we see the main church in the distance. This could be implying that he's not actually in the will of God (the church) doing but deceived which is why he's on the outside far away.

**Synchronic / Diachronic Analysis:** In the scene prior to this, Javert was in a candlelit room contemplating before going out on the roof. Historically and even in some instances today people will still go on a rooftop or elevated deck to clear their head and be alone. In the context of the film, the night signals the end of the first act of the story and helps us transition into the second act in future where it is daytime.

**Paradigmatic Analysis:** Say there wasn't a cross posted at the top of the building, the symbol of holiness and justice wouldn't be present. What if there was a wolf or lion erected on the tower instead of the eagle? Instead of being seen as a noble officer, Javert would be seen as a ferocious hunter. Instead the eagle provides a balance of nobility, power, and controlled freedom while the cross conveys justice and right doing.

**Syntagmatic Analysis:** This still is from Javert's soliloquy "Stars." Personally for me this song brought to light a softer, different side of Javert's character. Had this sequence not been present, Javert's true intentions of wanting to do the right thing would have never come to light, and he would have been seen as a ruthless villain, not a devout officer.

**Intertextuality:** While there is no text on the screen, the eagle has been used as a sign/symbol in the past as a the national bird for the United States of America and on the Mexican flag. This is confirmation of the strong symbolism this bird holds. The cross is also a a symbol of purity, righteousness, and God.

**Metaphor:** Javert is like an eagle, strong and swift in his execution of justice, flying and surveying his domain.

**Codes:** Most often if you're not the hunter, you're being hunted, and if you're not the good guy, you're the bad guy. Being symbolized with the eagle Javert is the hunter and he's the main antagonist under the guise of being the good guy as he's acting out the law.

**Interpellation:** In the context of the film, this sign is addressing that crime could have been more rampant with the crumbling society at that time and it was Javert's job to restore order.

**Ideology:** The ideology of the cross is a strong sign and relates to Christian and Catholic faith. It's seen as sacred and sometimes even as a religious totem acknowledging God's presence. Some even keep a pocket cross or a rosary because the mere presence of it is esteemed. The cross is the highest elevated object in the shots.

**Structuralism:** The genre of Les Miserables is both a musical and also a drama. Originally from the epic novel, director Tom Hooper created a film fitting of the original novel but still added his directorial style of symmetry, symbolism, and vision. Most often musicals are seen as light,

comedic, and “fluffy” films. Yet, *Les Miserable* plunges us into the perilous nights of the French Revolution, a convict’s journey to redemption, a mother’s struggle, and a threefold love story where musicality is the primary form of communication. *Les Miserables* is one of my all time favorite films.

**Auteur Theory:** Tom Hooper is a director I’m beginning to learn more about, having seen *Les Miserables* after *The King’s Speech*. One style I’ve picked up from him is his use of symmetry. In *Les Miserables* he uses it to establish an imposed order in the world of the story. While it’s not completely necessary to understand his style, due to the cinematography being splendid, the film goer can appreciate a deeper meaning in the shot composition.

**Obfuscation:** In this shot itself, I don’t think Tom is trying to hide the meaning of the eagle and the cross. It’s actually very obvious but well executed.

**Jingoism:** One emotion I felt very strongly in this aspect of Jingoism was the acknowledgment of God. As a Christian, I find it so refreshing seeing films that do this effectively and artistically. *Les Miserables* was set in a time when God was acknowledged and there was a consensus of only one God, especially in late 18th century France. Earlier in the film, my mom and I felt like we were at church when the Bishop (a different character in the film) redeemed Val Jean’s life through the payment of silver.