

Joi-Noelle Worley
 Semiotics for Creators of Popular Culture
 Semiotic Analysis # 4
 Date:3.3.14 | Revised 5.14.14
 Media: Chicago (2002) - The Cell Block Tango



Signifier: The 6 Merry Murderesses who have murdered their husbands and boyfriends. These women are quite attractive for convicts and are bitter over their partner's illicit affairs. Murder never looked so good.

Signified: The tango as a genre is dance is signified hugely in this sequence. While usually performed with a male partner, its a genre that's passionate, sultry, and sexy. Normally the male is the leader in the dance and controls the power of the performance. But in this tango, the women are the ones who receive power in taking their partner's lives as they dance. They're the ones in control.

Overall Sign/Metaphor: Murder is sexy and empowering. These women aren't in cells moping around feeling sorry for themselves. No! They know what they did and they would do it again if they had the chance. These women are empowered through this act of violence, having taken control over their man and in the dance. They give no visual reason to feel sorry for them as they perform but, rather, leave you in awe at the overwhelming power they hold.

Selected Image(s): While there are a lot of images in this sequence, several that I have noted are six provocatively dressed women in black and their male partners, red handkerchiefs, jail cells, and various settings of intercutting flashbacks while in jail.

Icon/Index: Several times in the sequence, bars and stripes emerge through lighting techniques, silhouettes, and props. These bars can be connected to being locked up in jail as these women are. Actual jail cell bars appear in the beginning of the sequence as the women emerge from behind bars to tell their story. For a brief moment they're able to live in the space while telling their story.

Symbol: The color red is a symbol or representation of the act of murder.

Each woman's red handkerchief is also somewhat of a symbol. When watching movies where the setting is based before the 20th century, I noticed handkerchiefs were often used as a ploy to gain a man's attention. A lady coyly dropped it hoping that a steadfast man would be kind enough to retrieve it for her. The murderesses in this sequence have flipped the use of the handkerchief, using to strangle and symbolize their partner's death instead of their coy affection.

White is a representation of innocence as one of the women claims to be innocent and "not guilty" of her husband's death. Smoke is a symbol for Velma Kelly's character. Smoking is often a sign of power and control in film.

Denotation: Here are six women reciting musical monologue as to why they are imprisoned.

Connotation: This is a sequence taking place in Roxie's mind during her first night in jail. She's getting to know the women and admire them for their acts of murder just as she has committed the same crime. Instead of

feeling down about her situation, Roxie sees these women as strong performers and strong individuals and sees herself in them; therefore, empowering herself.

Synchronic Analysis/Diachronic Analysis: In the context of the film this sequence takes place when Roxie, the protagonist spends her first night in the Cook County Jail after murdering a man she was having an affair with. According to the director's commentary, Roxie imagines these performances, as life is just a big show to her. Roxie has just committed an act of murder and is getting to know these ladies and their crimes. She, in turn feels empowered as well as she begins her comeback as Roxie Heart.

Syntagmatic Analysis: The "Cell Block Tango" captures the idea of dancing behind bars and it was one of the legendary numbers that made *Chicago* iconic. This scene was needed in the context of the film to transition to the prison life Roxie would experience.

Paradigmatic Analysis: These women are called the 6 Merry Murderesses! They're merry! They have no shame, no regret. This isn't a lament for their fallen partners but a declaration of why their partners deserved to die.

With the exception of the Hungarian woman's ballet performance, most of men are all the one to blame, justifying the women's motives. Had the men not deserved it, this tango of death wouldn't exist.

In modern society, women are often seen as the lesser gender and this, in turn, helps spark feminist movements. Because the society is male-dominated it's the act of putting another gender in a place of power that makes it entertaining; the tables have been turned. Had this been the men murdering or beating their partners, the tango wouldn't have the same entertaining effect; rather it would come across as brutal. The women are being praised for violent acts in being able to overpower the men.

Lastly, the way they are dressed is a great example of a paradigmatic shift. In normal situations, women in jail aren't dressed like this. The uniforms are unflattering, maybe a bit oversized, and they all look the same possessing a bland orange color. In contrast, these women are provocatively dressed in black clothing. Black to me is a powerful color because it possesses all the values of every color known making it the strongest in that way. Each outfit is different and unique to the women wearing it.

Intertextuality: While there is no text on screen the words “pop, six, squish, cicero, lipschitz” are mentioned in the beginning and ending of the song as the defining words that are associated with each woman's story of killing their partners.

Codes: “He had it coming.” It's a phrase these women repeat in the chorus but its also an element of code at the time. If you do something deserving of vengeance, it's fitting when you get what you deserve.

Interpellation: This sequence addresses those who are in similar situations like these women whose partner has cheated on them. While these women are glamorous in this sequence, the truth still stands that if you do the crime you will do the time as well. While this number is entertaining, the women eventually resume their positions behind bars as punishment for their deeds.

Ideology: Faithfulness and trust are a overlooked ideology in the midst of the scandal. Each of these women killed their husband due to marital unfaithfulness of multiple partners, illicit affairs, cheating accusations, and gum chewing.

Auteur Theory/Structuralism: In the genre of musicals, Chicago was an acclaimed Broadway play before being a made in this 2002 cinematic version. The directors allowed the musical numbers to be performed on the

stage through how Roxie sees the world. And she sees the world as one huge performance. I applaud the directors for approaching the film from this angle because it allows the audience to have a justified suspension of belief that allows the real world to co-exist with the staged, performance world in Roxie's frame of mind. The Cell Block Tango was the fourth song in the musical and one of the most memorable. It succeeds because it combines song, dance, story, stage, and image design successfully to a dramatic musical scene.

Obfuscation: "It was a murder but not a crime." This seems to be a contradictory statement because in normal society murder is a crime except in the case of self-defense. The women declare that because the victim "had it coming" it wasn't a crime at all but a deserving, justified recompense. The tagline of the film is "With the right song and dance, you can get away with murder."

It's interesting to note that we never get a good look at the men's faces or their eyes. Normally not allowing the audience to see the eyes of a characters is a way of not allowing them to identify with the subject on screen. We're not to feel sorry or relate to these men and the creators ensure that by not allowing us to see their faces as the women are the main focus.

Jingoism: While not everyone has murdered their husband, we all want faithfulness, respect, and trust in a relationship. We've all been so angry at someone we love we may have felt like hurting them, but our nature kept us from doing so, but even so we can relate to the feelings of spite and rage these women have.