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Semiotics for Creators of Popular Culture
Semiotic Analysis # 8
Date: 3.31.14 | Revised 5.14.14
Media: Monsters University | Sully's Confession Clip & Image



Signifier: The full moon above and the water below are the biggest signifiers in this image. Normally in narrative stories, a full moon signals the start of a change or something being revealed, for instance when a werewolf transforms. Water is also a signifier as it's used in films to pose a question of reflection when characters go through defining moments.

Signified: Mike, the green eyeball, and Sully, the polka dotted monster, are the signified in this image. In the midst of this vast forest clearing they are the smallest objects in the frame, and rightly so since this is a point in the film where they're at their lowest.

Overall Sign/Metaphor: In this moment of darkness and reflection, a true friendship is revealed as Sully and Mike share a silent moment. It's in the darkest moments, that the most beautiful things can begin.

Image: A lake in the midst of a clearing in the woods, a full moon, trees, a few rocks, Mike, and Sully.

Symbol/Index/Icon: Water. Water is a symbol of reflection and inner questioning. It's encompasses being transparent. Mike looks at his reflection in the lake as he realizes his dream of being a "scarer" is over. He questions his beliefs and concludes he's not the monster he thought he was.

Moonlight: Again, Light is a representation of being truthful and not hiding anything.

It's also a hint of change something being transformed. In many movies, any great transformation that has happened has always been triggered by the presence of light.

Denotation: Two monsters sitting on a log at a lake.

Connotation: Mike and Sully are discovering new things about each other in this dark moment together. In the darkness, secrets are coming to light, and in this raw emotion a friendship is born and is what makes this shot beautiful.

Diachronic Analysis: Sitting in silence is often the true mark of friendship. Sometimes the best thing a true friend can do is share in silence with you. Here Mike and Sully share a silent moment as they realize their bond.

Syntagmatic/Synchronic Analysis: This particular scene takes place after Mike and Sully become stranded in the human world. Sully has accidentally told Mike that he doesn't think Mike is scary which is an insult to any monster. Mike realizes this hurtful truth when he fails to scare a human girl who laughs at him. The realization of failure sinks in, but Sully doesn't let Mike face it alone as he confesses his own shortcomings. Mike and Sully needed this moment to establish and confirm that they are friends, since up till this point in the film, they had been "frenemies."

Paradigmatic Analysis: Had this sequence/shot taken place in the day time? I don't believe the tenderness this scene has would have been present. Night is normally when a character endures a defining moment. It casts a dark mood on a character in contrast to a sunny day when a character might feel like he can conquer the world. Yet the world isn't completely dark as there is a glimpse of light in the distance.

Ideology/Codes: It's the ideology of the world of Monsters University that if a monster desires to be a "scarer" for his future occupation he must be scary. What Mike lacks in scariness, he makes up for in knowledge and tries hard to overcompensate. Yet, he just doesn't have it, and fails to frighten a real child. This is an earth shattering moment for Mike as he's realizing he's not cut out to be a scarer. His dream is ruined. It's then that Sully confesses to Mike that "he's not the only failure here" and confesses his failures to his family and as a friend. This brings in the code of friendship.

Auteur Theory/Structuralism: Pixar has established a unique animated world with *Monsters University*, the prequel to *Monsters Inc.* Fans were ecstatic to see the world of *Monsters Inc.* expanded. They did a terrific job of establishing the rules and occupations of the world. This film was unique from other animated films in that they deny Mike his goal: to be a “scarer.” Mike’s character design was intentionally so he wouldn’t be scary in comparison to other monsters. Yet, they make you root for Mike as the underdog. Pixar has finds a way to deny Mike his wants and give him what he needs. Mike to use his wits to help inspire other monsters. In conjunction with inspiring and coaching others, he’s able to help them scare more effectively which helps him be connected to the “scaring” process.

Obfuscation: Sully appears out of the darkness only when he’s confessing to Mike what a failure he is. All throughout the film, Sully put on a “scary” persona when deep down he’s “terrified.” It’s in the full light of the mood, Sully seems to become completely transparent and confesses his inadequate feelings to Mike.

Jingoism/Interpellation: We all dread the idea of our dreams being crushed or being told we’re not cut out to do what we love. It’s human nature to want to beat the odds. Mike’s situation is relatable and resonates with those who have to try extra hard to achieve their dreams. Those who want it, whatever it is, more than anything will relate to Mike’s passion, fire, heartbreak, and redemption.