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Semiotics for Creators of Popular Culture

Semiotic Analysis # 7

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Media: Pride & Prejudice (2008) - Ball Room Tracking Scenes & Dance (Time: 35:30-45:00)



Signifier: In this large sequence there are several signifiers that affect the overall sign of Elizabeth, the signified. (1) The Music, while lively and classical varies different from the public, raunchy balls that Lizzy has attended in the past. (2) Mr. Collins, who implies the “safe” future she could have as his wife, should she accept. (3) Mr. Darcy, the man who is above her class and therefore is out of her league. (4) The Act of Hiding: Several times Elizabeth hides in a secluded room to avoid Mr. Darcy and he does the same.

Signified: Elizabeth Bennet, who is hiding and suppressing her feelings about love.

Overall Sign: Through the shot composition and screen direction it's clear that Elizabeth is hiding from her feelings toward Mr. Darcy and refuses to confront them until she decides to confront her fears and confess her feelings.

Image: In this sequence there are multitudes of dancing women and men all in fancy classical clothing.

Symbol/Index/Icon: Music is a standard of status. In the beginning of the film, Lizzy attended a public ball where the setting was wild and the music lively. Here in this private ball, like a chameleon Lizzy has transformed herself to fit into her surrounding as classical music plays.

White is a color used to represent purity and modesty as all the women are wearing white at his ball.

Denotation: A inside look at a ball as the guests mingle and dance.

Connotation: At this ball, Lizzy is defining her relationship with Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy. While she sees Mr. Collins as an unfit partner, she also loathes Mr. Darcy due to her own pride. While she can't bring herself to admit it, in secret she hides emotionally and physically from him.

Synchronic Analysis: Dancing is often a fun way to get to know someone in any age, and it's where Lizzy has two different interactions with potential suitors. The first dance is more of a joke as she dances with Mr. Collins just to be polite but not pay him any attention. Yet, her dance with Mr. Darcy is ripe with tension and seems more like a dance battle.

Syntagmatic Analysis: In the first sequence, Lizzy dances with Mr. Collins. The sequence is very awkward as Lizzy doesn't give him the time of day. The music in the background is very playful and lively. Lizzy doesn't take him seriously and shocked by his confession.

Lizzy then dances with Mr. Darcy and there's a huge change in mood as the music is stringed with tension. Mr. Darcy and Lizzy's movements seem to intimate that of two predators sizing each other up as they prey on each other. Lizzy is very engaged and spars intense dialogue with him. This is partly due to the fact that previous in the film Lizzy unknowingly dared him to dance, and now Mr. Darcy is seeing that challenge through.

In the conclusion of the film both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy confess their love for each other as the sunrises over a darkened plain, symbolizing that their love for each other has come to light.

Paradigmatic Analysis: Lizzy could have confided in her friend on the dance floor about not wanting to dance with Mr. Darcy, but instead she took it to an inner room hidden from the light of the house. It's the act of whispering in an inner room that makes something a secret. Lizzy returns to a similar dimly lit room after the dance to collect herself.

In the tracking shots, so much happens as we observe the party unfolding. It not until where we're in the inner room with Lizzy do we get a glimpse of her emotional state. The lack of movement this establishes her emotional state.

Codes: I Dare You!: There's a silent battle of subtext going on between Mr. Darcy and Lizzy as they dance. To start with, Mr. Darcy only asked her dance to meet her previous challenge of when asked what one must do to encourage affection. On the dance floor Lizzy questions him about a man named Mr. Wickham, who Lizzy was starting to like. Yet, now here comes Mr. Darcy trying to defiantly gain her affection as well, meeting her previous challenge.

Another code is playing hard to get. Both of them pretend to detest each other in the beginning of the film, yet when the ending comes their confessions of love couldn't be sweeter.

Interpellation: Anyone who's had a secret crush can relate to the feelings that Lizzy and Mr. Darcy have for each other. Sometimes you can't just come out right and say it especially if it's a love-hate relationship initially

Ideology/Diachronic Analysis: It was the notion of that time to marry within your class. Lizzy would do well as a woman to find a husband suitable for her status. Lizzy is making herself dislike Darcy knowing he's out of her league in hopes of putting out the fire of her affections for him. Darcy does the same as well but his attempts prove futile as well, even though Lizzy is a woman below his status. The fact that they're falling in love with each other, they are going against the grain of society.

Structuralism/Auteur Theory: The director Joe Wright is famous for his elaborate tracking scenes. These scenes take a long time to prep and shoot, but they establish so much visually that it's worth it! He's one of the masters of motion when it comes to tracking with the camera.

In the genre of period pieces, *Pride & Prejudice* is one of my favorites and the only few I can stand because of the strong sense of subtext and character niches the actors bring to the stage. Joe Wright has worked with Keirra Knightly and Mathew McFayden on other films, so his work is strong because of the performances of the actors.

Obfuscation: Both Lizzy and Darcy are hiding from their true feelings behind brash words and firm tones. It's a defense mechanism that proves to be a failure as they both fall for each other more and more.

Jingoism: Fans of prior Jane Austin novels with enjoy the film as well as Joe Wright fans and anyone who enjoys a well placed image.