

Exploring the symbolism behind Lovesick's audiovisual metaphor

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Abstract

Short film is a way of designating audiovisual works that are brief in nature. Despite the lack of definitive criteria, organizations such as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences establish that in order for a film to qualify as a short its duration may not exceed 40 minutes, including credits. Producing a short film presents great challenges to all involved, from screenwriters to editors and directors. In narrative terms, one must fit an entire storytelling cycle into a condensed timeframe, beginning, middle and end spanning only minutes. Two of the main tools employed by film makers in order to tell an audiovisual story that is rich in meaning in a short amount of time are symbolism and metaphor. The following article offers a brief analysis of the language of metaphors and symbols found in Dago Schelin's short film "Lovesick". By performing a study in intersemiotic translation, this article will present an interpretation of the non-verbal signs present in the Schelin's work, typical of the metaphoric strategies employed in short films.

Key words: Short film, symbolism, story, narrative.

1. Introduction

"Lovesick" is a short film written and directed by Dago Schelin in 2014. It tells the story of Tom Mate in his quest for love.

The film begins with Amanda N. Love driving a convertible. As the credits roll, the viewer spies a few ketchup bottles and the character's calling card.

During the next sequence, the main character, Tom Mate, goes on a digression fueled by his agony as he lies bloodied on the street, badly wounded. A flashback takes the viewer to a hospital's maternity unit. The character's father holds a newborn Tom and, as the camera closes in on the man's mouth, his lips form the words "I will always

love you as long as you live up to my expectations.” This single sentence guides the character’s construction, his identity and his personality and offers a wealth of information about Mate.

The sequence continues with a close up on the father’s eyes, which leads to a scene in a warehouse where Tom holds up a sign with two distinct pieces of information: one side there is a doctor’s head and upper body; on the other, there’s an ad for ketchup. The imagery points to the duplicity in love and work, in career and success.

The story continues with an apathetic Tom in a conference room where he browses a magazine while sitting on a toilet. Everything he sees relates to his search for love. In the office, he is haunted by the image of his father in doctor’s clothes. Tom’s father chases him out into the street. In an effort to put a stop to their argument, Tom steps onto the road where he is hit by a car. The viewer soon discovers the vehicle’s driver is Amanda N. Love.

Amanda leaves her car. She finds Tom on the ground and, as she runs a finger on his shirt, discovers what appeared to be blood to be, in fact, the ketchup she was carrying in her vehicle. Despite Tom’s love at first sight and signs of her own interest in him, Amanda calmly enters the car, rides over Tom and keeps on driving.

2. Cultural objects

“Lovesick” presents the quest for love in a creative way. A great deal of the plot is developed through the symbols found in the scenes. The relationships between these symbolic visual elements and the sequences’ themes tell much of the story in this short film. Had the director resorted to long, verbal explanations, the wealth of meaning conveyed by this dialectic correlation might have been lost. The effort to display these symbolic objects facilitates viewer comprehension and contributes to form connections between ideas. It enables the movie to fulfill its narrative purpose by creating and shaping the pieces of non-verbal language. According to Arlindo Machado (1997, p.175):

“Cinematic language is a form of narrative construction based on the linearization of the iconic significant, on the hierarchizing of camera shots and on the shaping role of continuity rules.”

Exactly how can a prop found in a scene with the purpose of communicating something form a logical bridge connecting viewer and image? Unlike an actor, an artifact has no given role. It also lacks the body language required in order to convey physical information that would be recognizable to the viewers, such as facial expressions. As an inanimate object, a prop is much less versatile.

A great majority of the objects found in film do not perform a leading role. Exceptions to this statement include moving robots, special effects and puppetry used to add an extra layer of expression to an inanimate prop. Therefore, one can infer that these artifacts bridge a gap between what is being shown and a body of common knowledge related not only to the object itself but also to its context in the story.

This “general knowledge” can be described as the object’s ability to be culturally recognized. Its identity allows for quick association with other concepts. The value placed upon these items is somehow attached to the audience’s memories and experiences.

With regards to image studies, Gombrich states, with a measure of good humor, that “not even the famous flower models from the Harvard University Museum could tell a Martian much about plants if it has never touched one.” (GOMBRICH, 2003, p.204). The art historian’s example illustrates the fact that the ability to extract meaning from an object requires previous knowledge of some model of that object that will, in turn, allow the viewer to distinguish it from all other objects. Perception is, therefore, connected to a wide range of cultural and linguistic elements. Cinematic language has developed over time largely due to these symbolic loans and the viewers’ acquired knowledge.

Everything in the universe of audiovisual form can be described in terms of cultural phenomena, that is, as a result of a certain stage of development in techniques and means of expression. (...)

and also of the imaginary, subjective, or aesthetic, if you will, demands found in a particular time or place.(MACHADO, 1997, p.175)

Therefore, the image's representation, the object's aesthetics, reaches the viewer in a rather fluid way. However, if the item displayed is intrinsically rooted in a given society, or holds unique cultural meaning, possibilities for subverting the message can arise.

3. Symbolism in Lovesick

From a cultural standpoint, one might think that all of these props were creating narrative threads that would complement the plot by conveying information gleaned by "translating" these signs.

In Stuart Hall's reflections on culture (1997), the author combines analysis regarding social elements, contextualizing cultural conception as group of shared meanings. It is usage that creates meaning and interpretation as ways of perceiving become common practice. It contributes to meaning-making role of language:

It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them -how we represent them- that we give them a meaning. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them. In part, we give things meaning by how we use them, or integrate them into our everyday practices. (HALL, 1997, p.03)

In "Lovesick", we can observe these processes in action in situations such as Tom's relationship with his father, evidenced in the sequence starting with the statement "*I will always love you as long as you live up to my expectations,*" followed by a close up shot of the father's eyes (Picture 1) and ending with Tom in a warehouse holding up a sign featuring a doctor's torso (Picture 2).



Picture 1 (1:26) – close up of Tom’s father’s eyes

Picture 2 (1:30) – Tom holding up medical sign

Both shots – the close up of the father’s eyes and the transition to the image of a doctor – convey the father’s preference for that particular career. The viewer is led to believe that, “in Tom’s father’s eyes, a career in medicine would equate to being successful.” If one focuses on the image’s background, however, one will notice the word “love.” One can infer, therefore, that Tom is “turning his back on love.”

Tom clashes again with his father in the next sequence, set in the conference room. The main character sees his father dressed in a doctor’s uniform. This shot establishes a connection between past (the day Tom was born) and present. It also underscores the traumatic relationships that have plagued Tom’s life since birth, a notion that is also conveyed in the wardrobe choices (Picture 3) for the scene. Júlio Plaza (2008, p.205) states that:

The translation among different art forms finds in history’s synchronous view the most fitting approach. The relationship between past and present is actually established in two dialectic poles, whose joining is necessary as they can be found in any poetic work (...). In a translation, this is an even more marked characteristic. The translation’s space-time dimension, and that of coincidence, as well as the synchronicity between past and present that it evokes, makes for resonance among artistic forms.

The use of wardrobe, in this case, continues to underscore the film's initial lines: "*I will always love you as long as you live up to my expectations*". As a result, it bridges the gap between the moment of Tom's birth and the present-tense narration that takes place as the character is haunted by the vision of his father. The doctor's scrubs places the character within that resonant time-space.



Picture 3 (3:39) – image of Tom's father in a doctor's scrubs, haunting Tom in the conference room

Another element found in the same scene is the toilet where Tom appears seated after the line "*maybe I'll put all of my energy into making my business prosper*". This prop adds a surreal, ironic tone to the scene. At the same time it also emphasizes Tom's denial of what was contained in the aforementioned line. The toilet, as a symbol, represents Tom's lack of interest in what is happening around him. (Picture 4)



Picture 4 (2:04) – Tom sitting on a toilet in office

The fact that a toilet, an object used primarily for physiological release, as well as the main character's father, are present in the conference room without prompting any reaction from the rest of those present, means that only Tom and the viewer are aware of them. One can therefore surmise that these two elements do not exist in the scene physically but, instead, subjectively. In doing so, the filmmaker manages to convey the main character's feelings without resorting to words.

In this scene, the toilet is a metaphor for Tom's lack of motivation at work. His father's presence, on the other hand, represents the emotional traumas, negative experiences and psychological harassment the character has experienced throughout his life. This feeling is further underscored by the fact that Tom's father is shown in scrubs. Meanwhile, in the main character's eyes, his work colleagues, sitting at the conference table with him, are the ones who are truly invisible. He sees the word 'love' in everything he hears and also in the words printed in the magazine that he is shown browsing. The filmmakers resort to synesthesia in order to convey the depth of Tom's misery and despair. His emotions are conveyed via images that elicit multiple senses: sight, sound and even smell. As Jacques Aumont (2002, p.14) would argue regarding visual perception, images and synesthesia:

How does an image and these perceptive phenomena relate to the viewer? Vision, visual perception, is a complex activity that cannot, in fact, be separated from other major psychic functions, understanding, memory or desire.

3.1 Object, feeling and color

Up until now, all issues raised by Tom clash across past, present and future. Each of these time frames offers its own set of plausible meanings. In the film, these separate narratives are integrated in a way that enriches their collective meaning. They are all found in the scene, despite the fact that only Tom and the viewer are capable of recognizing them.

On this topic, Plaza (2003) offers an analysis of linear history and research, based upon studies of artistic practice in multiple media, that is multimedia and intermedia. Grounded on semiotic theory developed by Charles Sanders Peirce and on Haroldo de Campos's and Walter Benjamin's theories on translation, Plaza discusses signs' structural relationships and the procedures that are used in the creation of these exchanges. In order to do so, Plaza focuses on three distinct types of translation: **iconic translation, index translation** and **symbolic translation**. The icon is the sign that establishes similarity, the index suggests something and the symbol is an abstract representation. The three tenses can each be thought to designate one of these types of signs where the past is the icon, the present is the index and the future is the symbol:

As long as creation looks at story as language, with regards to translation we can draw a parallel where the past is an icon, as possibility, as the original to be translated, the present is the index, as creative tension, as operational momentum, and the future is a symbol, that is a translation in search of a reader.
(PLAZA, 2003, p.8)

In Lovesick's case, one might therefore view Tom's father as the iconic translation of the character's past, a past that defines and torments him at the same time. By always portraying his father in scrubs, Tom indicates the timeframe where this vision hails from, suggesting he has been struggling with his identity and his feelings

for his entire life. The medical outfit also represents the father's expectations with regards to Tom, his wish for his son to have a successful career further emphasized by the sign that the main character holds up as seen on Picture 2.

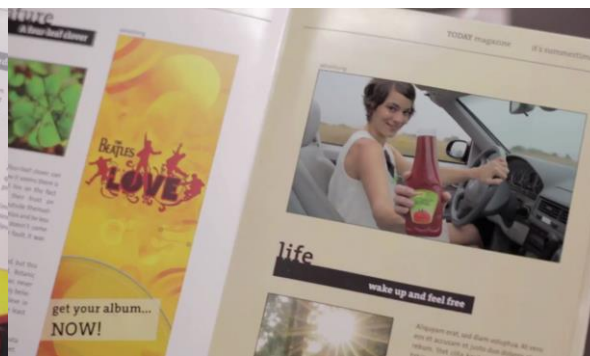
The present, Tom's index translation, is seen in the way he begins in the now. The creative tension is expressed in Tom's search for love and dissatisfaction with the present. In the scene that takes place in the conference room, while Tom sits on a toilet, the viewer is privy to something that is not visible to the other characters in the scene: Tom's deep frustration with work.

The same scene displays a clash between future and present: there is the father who torments Tom and the toilet that represents his career and life choices.

But what about the future? In this case, the symbolic translation, the abstract representation is found in the object of the main character's primary search: love. We find the word love scattered in many places throughout the movie. These placements, however, have one thing in common: the show love out of its implicit context of care and affection. One finds love on the sign that is visible in the background, as Tom holds up his own sign, displaying a doctor's torso. Love can also be found in the advertisement for gloves in a magazine, by subtracting the letter "G" from the copy (Picture 5). It is present in the ad for the 2006, remixed collection of Beatles songs entitled Love and it is displayed as a brand of ketchup (Picture 6). The term also appears on Amanda's employee badge featuring her name and the company's brand (Picture 7).



Picture 5 (2:33) – *Glove and Love*



Picture 6 (3:53) – An ad for the Beatles's album "Love" and Amanda holding up a "Love" ketchup bottle.



Picture 7 (5:00) – Amanda’s badge

One is led to think that the objects that represent love in the movie are in conflict with one another and appear disconnected from the care and affection that Tom seems to be searching. Even so, their correlation is made obvious by a line created due to a cultural construct, colors, more specifically the color red.

Colors can be treated as items in a cultural construct as they are identified by and associated with objects in the same manner that an artifact. They are recognizable and, once identified, quickly trigger associations with experiences and people within a culture. As stated by Silveira (2001, p.183):

Regarding colors’ as symbolic constructs, it has been established that, besides the construction itself, its presence in dictionaries, myths, images, books, film as well as its effects are derived from a cultural construct.

However, in a broader sense than an object or prop, color trigger a much wider range associations, both cultural and personal. Color can be attached to objects as well as to synesthetic experiences, through its application on different shapes. In his studies, Kandinsky (2000) comments on the color red and the different ways in which it can be perceived and sensed through a variety of stimuli. All of these different ways of experiencing red are related to emotions and the person’s body of knowledge:

Colors, provoke, therefore, a psychic vibration. Its superficial, physical effect is, in sum, its way of finding the soul. If this second action is, really a direction, as it is safe to assume from what has just been explained or if, in the contrary, it is only obtained by association, is difficult to decide. Since the soul is deeply connected to the body, any emotion can, by association, produce in him a corresponding reaction. For instance, as a flame is red, red can trigger an internal vibration similar to a flame's. Hot red generates excitement. No doubt thanks to its similarity with blood, the impression it produces can be troublesome, even painful. Color, in this case, triggers a memory of another physical agent that acts upon the soul in a troublesome way. Kandinski (2000, p.67)

However, this process may be perceived as wide-reaching as it may point the same color to different, potentially conflicting situations. Love's representation as a red heart, for instance, triggers associations with passion or affection in many cultures. It can also, however, lead to thoughts of blood, blood crimes or forms of violence. As stated by Kandinski, the same may suggest intense, truly extreme pain.

Cultural meanings, since they are culturally constructed, may vary from one place to another. Since these constructs are all conveyed within a certain medium, they possess meanings that are generic (as mentioned in the previous paragraph) and particular, resulting from the unique sensations that they produce in each person.

In Lovesick's symbolism, one can detect several relationships among image, object and color. The values contained in these relationships are critical to the movie's understanding. They also add to the film's dialectic quality, contributing advance the narrative. An image found in day-to-day life can become a cultural element. In other words, different signs may have a different relevance depending upon culture. The use of color is one way to create such imagery. The representation of these "mental images", seeks to reproduce, in a condensed way, coded elements that are interpreted

both individually and collectively. The physiological, as well as the cultural, sides to a human being contribute to the way in which we interpret a scene in a film. Regarding this condition, Flusser explains:

Images are surfaces that intend to mean something. In the majority of cases, something that is external to it, in space and time. Images are, therefore, a result of the effort to make two of the four dimensions abstract, so that only two dimensions are left on the plane. They owe their origin to the specific abstraction capability that one could call imagination. However, imagination has two sides: if, on one hand, it allows us to make two of a phenomenon's dimensions abstract, it also allows us to reconstruct two dimensions that had been removed from the image. In other words: imagination is the ability to code four-dimensional phenomena in plane symbols and then to decode those messages. Imagination is the ability to make and decipher images. (Flusser, 1985, p. 7)

These individual meanings are built on an individual's unique experience with the synesthetic nature of color. As a simplified, hypothetical example, one might imagine that a person who dislikes the color red might develop a deep dislike for the taste or the smell of red apples. The same person might, on the other hand, deeply enjoy green, Granny Smith apples. According to Silveira (2011, p.183):

Consider studying the collective, symbolic, cultural construction of colors and consciously separating what is a collective construct and what is one's individual construct of the meaning of color. This process of awareness is important in order for one to identify the same, collective basis for symbolic construction that both professional and their projects' targets will engage.

In the movie, one finds some elements that can be associated with the color red. The main character's name is Tom Mate. In the English language, the verb "to mate" means to have sexual intercourse, to procreate. Carnal love and its emotional corollary,

passion, has long been represented by the color red. Meanwhile, Amanda N. Love's last name suggests the color red due to its direct association with the concept of love. It is worthy of note that, based upon their names, each character appears to represent a different version of love. Amanda would seem to stand for the stereotypical, female ideal of romantic love, while Tom, judging only by the character's name, would represent the male stereotype of physical, non-committal love. Their actions, however, tell a different story. This conflict itself serves to illustrate the many, individual meanings one can extract from a single piece of information, in this case, the color red and its cultural associations.

Amanda also happens to represent a corporation called **Love n' Ketchup Enterprises** (Picture 7). The company's logo is done in red, in what appears to be a conscious decision on the part of the filmmakers. In fact, bottles of ketchup as well as advertisements for that product are displayed multiple times throughout the film. If one were to revisit Picture 2, one would find precisely one such ad, printed with the word "Love" in the background and, on Pictures 3 and 4, the ketchup bottles are actually shown in the forefront of the scene.

Several elements in the film point to the color red and its cultural meanings: the word love, Tom Mate (to engage in intercourse), Amanda N. Love (to fall in love), ketchup, the quest for love and affection and, finally, blood. One can infer that blood is something related to sickness, as it is portrayed in the film's beginning. Cinematic language has often resorted to ketchup as a way of representing blood due to their physical similarity. To this day, ketchup is used for that purpose on several productions.

As the movie comes to an end, the viewer is left with the sense that love had been there all along, sprinkled across props, embedded in the character's very names, in literal and metaphorical associations with the color red. The love that appears throughout the movie, however, has multiple meanings much like the different cultural interpretations inherent to our perception of color. Red can mean romance but also blood. The film's narrative is significantly enriched by this very ambiguity.

Love as an object serves as a metaphor for its own representation. It can mean many things, have many facets, it can be a brand, a last name or something much more intangible and abstract. These mixed feelings are not made clearer by Lovesick's ending. The film's final scene has the opposite effect on the viewer and further deepens the notion that love is an extremely subtle feelings, subject to many forms of interpretation.

The movie, therefore, subverts and criticizes the idealized notion of love between two people. It suggests that these relationships have been standardized to the point in which they can now be classified according to several, superficial categories. The film's props, its wardrobe and other artifacts, however, contribute to create a feeling of unease regarding this oversimplification. In the end, one is left with the sense that, ultimately, love is as personal as it is difficult to define.

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