

VISUAL SOVEREIGNTY IN SMOKE SIGNALS: A CRITICAL VISUAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

*The current research paper aims to see a film *Smoke Signals* by American Indian writer Sherman Alexie and director Chris Eyre as an attempt to define visual sovereignty. By applying Critical Visual Theory, the paper seeks to provide not just a close visual reading but also a broad study of American Indian indigenous film's meanings with the understanding that the film functions as a politicized way of giving voice to the marginalized indigenous community. The film nullifies Hollywood representation of Natives by its celebration of Native storytelling. My contention is that the film is not a passive response to mainstream representation and geographical inaccuracies but rather a creation of indigenous reality in a media saturated world. The film shifts indigenous experience from a victimized stance to a strategic one. It has its visual effects which cannot be extricated from the social context in which it is produced. The analysis intends to delimit the bus scene that includes 10 frames ranging from 21:31- 40:31(time line).*

Keywords: vision, visuality, visual culture, visual sovereignty, critical visual theory.

CRITICAL VISUAL THEORY

Theoretical visual analysis is based on a presumption that in pre-modern societies visuals did not enjoy a center-space owing to scarcity of these images. With the onset of modernity, visual images became center of cultural practices. "Ocular-centrism" as a term coined by Martin Jay (*Downcast Eyes*) points towards the same significance of visual in the contemporary life. Chris Jenks ("The Centrality of the Eye") points towards an inextricable link between seeing and knowledge in modern and postmodern world saturated with visual imagery. Jenks (1995) argues that contemporary world is nothing short of a 'seen phenomenon' (p. 2). Jean Baudrillard (1988), another media theorist also agrees that in postmodernity demarcation between real and simulation has become almost impossible so much so that we inhabit a 'scopic regime dominated by simulations or simulacra'. He posits that in technologically developed cultures rift with mediated imagery, visuals have become seminal in the process of meaning making. Visual technology such as photography, film, television, digital graphics, and acrylics surrounds subjects with a bombardment of TV programs, advertisements interspersed in them, and snapshots present a world view in visual terms. The worldview presented by mediated images is never innocent and transparent, rather these mediated images interpret and display worldview in a particular way.

This construction of worldview by mediated images is termed 'scopic regime' by Foster (*Vision and Visuality*, ix) who elaborates the distinction between "vision" and "visuality". Foster furthers the point that what a human eye can perceive physiologically is vision, whereas this vision is culturally constructed by those who have a vested interest in furthering a particular world view, so they shape our ways of seeing a particular image and dictate us to see in a particular way which is termed 'visuality'.

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Critical visual theory propounds that our visuality is a cultural construct rather than a natural predisposition.

A critical approach to visual analysis makes this distinction between vision and visuality as a theoretical foundation. Social scientists tend to assume that visual images are just a reflection of their social context and hence become guilty of overlooking the seriousness of visual images. Critical visual theorists propound that visual imagery should be questioned to unearth the prejudices behind it. Hence, critical visual approach compels readers of visual texts to reflect about social and material conditions which make a visual text possible and also its effects on subjects. As Grieda Pollock (1988) thinks that all cultural practices have substantial role in the construction of meanings and worldview (p.7). Donna Haraway (1989) also posits in her seminal work that visual culture produces and is produced by social inclusions and exclusions and a critical analysis of visual culture should take into account these practices as well as their cultural signification.

Haraway (1989) like other media scholars posits that postmodern scopic regime should be challenged and contested. According to her, the critical task of media critics is to differentiate between different ways of seeing and gauge the impact of these visualities. She reminds us that proliferation of visual technologies in everyday life accounts for the 'unregulated gluttony' which is assessable only to power elites associated with, capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy (p. 188). She propounds that visuality furthered by these power groups produces only those visions that benefit them, thus cementing the hierarchies in classes, races and genders. Haraway also posits that having technology at their disposal these groups claim the universality of such hierarchies, thus normalizing social differences and their acceptance. Such normalization tends to eradicate all resistance. Critical endeavor initiated by Haraway aims to see how a particular form of visuality is mobilized by institutions which shapes subject's worldview. Such visuality backed by technological regime denies ways of seeing that pose resistance to its invested interest. Haraway persistently argues that critical visual theorists need to proliferate 'oppositional visuality' that can question hierarchical visuality.

The importance and ubiquity of media images, their seductive potency, their contribution in world view construction and their impact on viewership is central to the theoretical discussions of many feminist, Marxist and postcolonial theorists. These scholars have studied the way how postmodern media culture has become the prime actor in reproducing hierarchical ways of visualizing femininity and blackness. Hence the sworn task of critical visual theory is to look carefully at images to examine what and how they present a particular visuality regarding class, race, and gender to its spectators.

John Berger's seminal book *Ways of Seeing* (1972) is a landmark in history of mediascape. He substantiates that images of social hierarchies operate not merely by what the powerful groups offer to the spectators, rather they define the modality of seeing and invite their viewers to participate in visual culture. He contends that viewers do not look at only the object of vision, rather they look at the relation between the object of vision and presenters of that vision. Berger thinks that interpretation of a particular image is not possible only by focusing on inclusions of various narratives unless exclusions are also taken into account. Hence Critical Visual Theory aims to provide analytical tools and means of interpretation of various images by focusing on inclusions as well as exclusions of narratives that have explicitly or implicitly contributed in construction of spectator's worldview.

Critical Visual Theory presumes that interpretation of visual images needs to take into account three sites at which the meanings of an image is constructed, i.e. the site where an image is produced, the site where it operates on spectators, and the site where audience watches it. To put it simply, to analyze a visual text, the Critical Visual Theory concentrates on technological, compositional and social aspects of an image production.

Critical Analysis of Smoke Signals

Smoke Signals an American Indian film is a breakthrough in U.S. cinema. It is an innovative landmark in terms of production and viewership. *Smoke Signals* is the fruit of collaboration of renowned Native writer Sherman Alexie, acute perception of Native director Chris Eyre and Native artists' diligent effort to speak back to predominant media representations. Produced for the cultural insiders and outsiders, it became a Native Cinema Classic. Its arrival in 1998, challenged the stereotypical depiction of Natives in Hollywood's production particularly *Dances with the Wolves* which was released in 1990. With its ambitious project to restructure American cinema from within, it refuses to be dictated by outsider's guide to Native cultural signification.

The film uses established western formulas e.g. it uses road genre to construct tale of friendship in a family drama. But a close visual analysis shows that the conventional cinematic techniques have been used to subvert the predominant discourses disseminated by westerns like *Dances with the Wolves*. Native cinematic production thus takes possession of images as tool for telling American Indian version of Native culture which bears the weight of five centuries of colonization, blocked economic opportunities and silencing of Native versions of narratives. It, thus reestablishes relations of “speaking and listening”, in a media that has not only suppressed and silenced the Native voices but also disseminated an obsessively misrepresented and distorted version of Native culture and existence.

To gauge its meaning making process, the present research paper intends to observe critically ‘who is speaking, who is imagined as listening, and who is actually listening?’ It also pays attention to what kind of material realities surround the characters and what kind of social relations between people are shown. Since meaning making is premised on cinematic techniques, it also intends to pay close attention to film’s production and direction by analyzing cinematic conventions like narrative structure, flashbacks, voice over, and sound bridges in the form of songs.

The film depicts relation between two Coeur d’Alene men who are in their late twenties. The tough Victor Joseph is depicted as ‘stoic, quiet and composed’, whereas his nerdy friend Thomas-Builds-the Fire is androgynous, flexible, talkative and equipped with a prized and esteemed art of Native storytelling. The plot of the film revolves around recovering the dead body of Victor’s alcoholic father Arnold Joseph who ‘vanished’ twenty years back from Idaho Reservation[†] and died in Phoenix, Arizona. Victor and Thomas’s subsequent journey away from Idaho Reservation to Phoenix to recover Arnold’s belongings, his yellow pick up and his ashes.

Compositional Analysis

Critical analysis of any visual text depends on “the good eye”, a phrase used by Irit Rogoff in *Studying Visual Culture* (1998, p. 17). Acknowledging the power of visual images, Rogoff (1998) contends that the first criteria to analyze a visual text is to take image seriously, because the image itself has its visual effects which it would be fatal to overlook. He writes that these visual effects cannot be extricated from the cultural practices of which they are a part. Norman Bryson (1991) elaborates the same point in the context of paintings and their impact on spectators (p. 71). Bryson argues that paintings are invested with latent power which is materialized by millions of gazes seduced by its visual pattern. Hence, “the good eye” pays attention to the site of image itself and struggles to interpret its signification. Nigel Whitely (1999) also disapproves of neglecting the site of image by social scientists as an initial site of inquiry, where it is paramount to undertake visual scrutiny at compositional modality and then later it should be conjoined with theoretical discussions (p. 107).

In order to take compositional modality of moving images as the first step of critical inquiry, James Monaco’s book, *How to Read a Film* (2000, p. 179) offers valuable insights.

Monaco (2000) distinguishes between a film’s “spatial organization which is termed as its mise-en-scene” and a film’s “temporal organization, or its montage”. He writes, “mise-en-scene is a result of decision about what to shoot and how to shoot it, while montage is how the shots are presented” (p. 179).

The action in *Smoke Signals* is located mainly on Coeur d’Alene Reservation and off Reservation in rural and urban areas of the American West. The segment selected for this paper is the action that takes place in bus called “Evergreen Stage”. Most of the characters are Coeur d’Alene tribal, whereas in Bus scenes a majority of white faces are conspicuously present. Temporal organization of the film is not a straight chronological distribution of segments. Disjunctive editing brings together multiple time-frames posited through flashbacks continually giving spectators a peep into characters’ histories, thus helping viewers to reconstruct the past of individual characters and the particular American Indian tribes.

Screen ratio

Monaco (2000) thinks that screen ratio also plays an important role in furthering an ideology; hence compositional analysis must not overlook it. According to Monaco, the proportion of height and width of the image determines the effect on viewers.

Frame 1 (21:31):

[†] After the General Allotment Act, A tract of waste land was set aside to accommodate American Indians who were dispossessed of their land.

Victor Joseph and Thomas wait on a bus station with their travel bags. The bus stops and the driver extends to open the door to admit them. Victor and Thomas recalculate their decision to travel and finally ascend the bus.

Framing in 1st frame works on both levels. As the characters ascend the bus, an open screen frame captures the space beyond the screen to include details of the landscape. When the characters sit on their seats, a close frame captures scenes where no reference to the landscape is made. The faces inside the bus are framed exclusively.

The second aspect of moving images mise-en-scene is their shots. Shot distance refers to how much of a figure is shown by a particular shot. Hence a shot can be extreme long shot, a long shot or a full, three quarters, medium head and shoulders or close up shots. The shots are also important in terms of creating effect on the viewers. The director decides whether a particular scene demands close-ups or long shots. In 1st frame, the shot was long before the characters ascended the bus, whereas the camera takes close ups of the drivers' face, his hand struggling with the gear. Then the camera takes close-ups of co-passengers' faces and dresses to show their races and predispositions. The camera focuses particularly a white female gymnast to show her self-assertiveness. The frequent use of close-ups inside the bus suggests claustrophobic intensity in a bus driven by white male driver and populated heavily by white co-passengers, with an exception of one black passenger.

Point of view

The point of view displayed by shots is also seminal to a film's impact on viewers. The camera may see through the eyes of any of the characters, or it may take up a 'third person point of view' where the camera participates like a character having a distinct entity from rest of the characters. The opening scene of the frame is captured through the driver's point of view. It becomes an establishing shot, which offers the audience information about driver's perception of Victor and Thomas who are waiting on the station to be allowed entry.

Angle: The angle of shots also needs to be considered. The angle of approach is square in first frame. And the angle of elevation is overhead where the camera looks down on the scene of capture.

Focus: The bus scene is shallow focus, where all geographical location is not focused, rather the scene of action is captured.

Frame 2 (22:25)

The camera moves from inside of the bus to capture outside landscape where it shows reservation with an expanse of HUD[‡] houses. The camera direction is oblique and it is eye-level. The time is afternoon. Victor is sprawled on the seat, whereas Thomas is confined, even squeezed.

Frame 3 (24:02)

Camera takes a third person vision and captures from a distance. Bus is focused then it moves to capture landscape, expanse of land is shown. Reservation with its entire desert like wasteland is shown, where there is no single tree in vision. The first building is Church with a big Cross inscribed on its outer wall. The time is afternoon. The female co-passenger brags about her fame and importance whereas Thomas is impressed by her description and physical flexibility. Victor takes control of speech and exposes her bragger, thus she is quieted and humiliated, leaves the seat and moves towards back of the bus.

Frame 4 (26: 04)

It bridges the present with past, when Victor was ten years old boy. Red blanket transmutes him through a flashback to the party held at his house. Alcoholic parents are shown stumbling, hugging each other, supporting and enjoying themselves. Apart from them, a lot many other Indians are shown in the same party, all drunk with bottles in hands and an unsteady gait. Victor enters the party after peeping through a wooden door having glass in it. He is embraced by both of the parents. The mother Arlene Joseph seems more intimate with the boy, whereas, the father asks a question which is unanswered, hence the compositional modality gives a clue to the rifted father-son relation. The locale of the action is a dingy place with stringed small bulbs which are used as a trope of celebration. The camera assumes third person point of view looking like a distinct character at all the characters from a distance.

[‡]HUD houses stand for Housing and Urban Development plan that made cheap houses for American Indians on Reservation. These houses are notorious for poor ventilation and sanitary conditions. (For further information see Boldt, Menno. *Surviving as Indians*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993, 176.)

Frame 5 (28:06)

It locates the characters in a restaurant at a stopover during their Westward journey. The camera direction is vertical that is at eye-level. Thomas takes control of speech and starts narrating story of his boyhood, when Arnold Joseph took him to Disney's for breakfast. The scene shifts to the past through flashback of Thomas who sat on bridge constructed over Spokane River. The story narrated by Thomas tells Victor that he went on the river to catch fish and have vision but there were no fish and he waited for two hours there. From his flashback, he tells that he was interrupted by cold voice of Arnold Joseph who took him for breakfast at Disney's, where he ate "two eggs, two sausages, two pan-cakes, some juices and milk". His closed eyed narrative ends with his assertion, "sometimes it's a good day to die, sometimes it's a good day to have breakfast."

The frame also depicts the present restaurant at a stopover with a wooden table full of commodity[§] food and juxtaposes with fresh, white foaming water of Spokane River devoid of fish. The table in the stopover restaurant has coke bottles, and fry bread with ketchup bottle and three glasses. The frame ends with Victor's offended expression, who has been stopping Thomas to talk about Arnold Joseph. He leaves the frame by entering into washroom having a broad mirror on the wall. The mirror serves as a bridge between his present and his past, conjoining the two, thus in a flashback giving viewers a peep into his troubled childhood.

Frame 6 (30:00)

In the flashback, viewers see Victor's parents sleeping in a narrow bed through Victor's eyes. The camera shifts from Victor to a third person, where it captures Victor breaking alcohol bottles in the mid of the night whereas juxtaposing the scene with his mother trying to wake the husband, who is dead asleep after an over consumption of alcohol after the party was over. The room is pretty shaggy, with old furniture and deplorable situation. Alcohol bottles can be seen in every nook and corner of the room, thus drawing attention to the amount of alcohol consumed during night. The camera takes close up of Arlene's face, thus focusing on her disturbed facial expressions over the disruption and turmoil in the child's life.

Frame 7 (31:37)

The Frame starts with the continuation of Victor's flashback, where he is sitting on a chair and watching an apparently black and white movie on television, with explicit violent contents and a lot of noise. The violence in the television is matched with actual violence between his parents and performed in front of him as a spectator. Arnold wants money for alcohol and snatches Arlene's purse which is emptied of its contents and thrown away. In the struggle to repossess the purse, Arlene is also beaten violently. While this action takes place sound of bell is heard persistently that hammers the viewers with its alarm like shrillness and loudness. The camera focus is deep in this frame, where the action of the scene along with geographical location surrounding it is in frame. The same frame describes Arnold leaving in his yellow pick up, Arlene runs after him, yelling on him and throwing his clothes and reminding him not to come back. Victor is also shown running after his father, and in this attempt, he jumps over an iron bar. He reaches with difficulty to the pick-up and manages to ascend it. Arnold stops the car and holds his son, hugs him and leaves him in Arlene's arms weeping. His pickup moves swiftly, leaving behind the trail of dust.

Frame 8 (32:51)

The camera focuses on Victor's face and shows his seething pain and desperation. The camera assumes a third person vision. Victor stands close to a table lamp, and switches it on and off. The door is knocked and Victor leaves to answer Thomas' call. Thomas asks a string of questions, regarding Victor's father, his departure and his relation with Victor, whereupon Victor unleashes his anger by beating violently his friend Thomas. After bullying Thomas, Victor runs on a road, which conjoins frame 8 with frame 9.

Frame 9 (34:36)

The road transfers character from past to present. The camera sees through Victor's eyes and operates on low angle, where the camera takes shots from inside the bus, the boy running on the road. From outside coverage, the camera moves inside the bus and face of Victor is focused. Thomas again starts

[§]Commodity Food is State provided food to American Indian residing on Reservation. This food is low quality food, with more calories and less nutrition. It is estimated that commodity food is the cause of type 2 diabetes among American Indians.

telling a story, where upon he is precluded by Victor who articulates that Indians should pose more stoic and avoid laughing or grinning, otherwise they will be trampled upon by white people. The camera is focused on Victor and Joseph exclusively.

Frame 10: (36:58)

The camera is outside the bus and focus the driver who is looking at watch, and Victor who is waiting for Thomas. The camera takes a long shot from its position and takes a purview of Thomas, who gets out of a dressing room. He has changed his dress from a black suit to a blue T-shirt with 'fry-bread power' inscribed on it. He has unbraided his hair in deference to Victor's dictates. Camera is outside the bus. The transformed demeanor of Thomas is approved by Victor. The driver enters the bus, followed by Thomas. Victor is the last person to enter.

Their jubilant mood is marred by two white men who have occupied their seats in their absence. As Thomas leads the narrow alley within the bus, he inquires about the capture of their seats, whereupon the white men dressed as cowboys answer that, "the seats are ours... and you can find some other place to have powwow"^{**}. They go to find vacant seats and get seated at the back of the bus. A small dialogue ensues in which Thomas is scolded by Victor. After a moment, Thomas again starts conversing that cowboys are the toughest people in Hollywood movies. Victor does not agree and asserts that no one has ever seen John Wayne's teeth, which is an indication of a problem with his mouth. Victor starts singing a song about John Wayne. Voice bridge connects his song with professional singers singing the same song to the tune of drum and other musical instruments. The bus passes through cross-roads of Butte, Phoenix and Boise.

Montage/ Editing

Monaco writes that Montage refers to placing and editing of different scenes to maintain an impression of narrative flow and spatial coherence. The kind of editing used to achieve this is known as continuity cutting. Since the film's narrative pattern is premised around intertwined past and present, so the shots are edited in order to allow the clear development of the story and to give a peep to the characters into the past events of their lives.

Sound

Moving images are incomplete without sound. Monaco identifies three types of sounds i.e. environmental, speech and music. An environmental sound refers to noise effects, whether 'real' or artificial. In the segment of the film carried out in bus, sound of bus is conspicuously audible, along with character's speech. Within the bus, the white girl speaks consistently who is later quieted by Victor's interruption. In Frame 5, cowboys speak, whereas rest of the characters are silent listeners in the film.

In flashbacks, Victor's parents converse with each other. In Frame 7, Television is on, where a loud movie is being played which aggravates the already violent atmosphere within the private sphere of the family in focus.

Compositional interpretation is crucial at the first stage of getting to grips with an image intended to be deciphered critically. It, thus provides tools to describe spatial and temporal organization of various scenes in a film. However, in terms of critical visual methodology it has many flaws. It is only concerned with the discussion of the production of an image in accordance with the technical aspects. Also, it does not probe into the modalities of 'how an image is being used; to what effects? With its obsessional adherence with, 'the image itself' it does not entertain any reflexivity regarding 'why images are produced; by whom; for what purposes? Thus this analysis revolves around the notions of 'connoisseurship or art'. Thus compositional modalities need to be conjoined with other more developed methodologies to unravel the broader ideological configuration working behind construction of an image.

Semiotic analysis

An approach to visual images that overcomes the flaws of compositional interpretation is semiotic. Its prominence owes to the fact that it pays attention to meaning making process. Unlike compositional analysis which is descriptive, it offers myriad of analytical tools for scrutinizing an image and unveiling

^{**}Dancing and singing is an integral part of natives' lives. They conduct such ceremonies throughout the year where ceremonial and symbolic dances are done to celebrate their unity and oneness. Powwow is one such festivity conducted by the natives in which various kinds of dance competition are held at the beat of drum. (For further discussion see Daily Life of Native Americans by Donald Fixico, Greenwood Press, 2006. p 187)

its relation to broader systems of meanings. The most important tool used for analysis of a text is “the sign”. As Bryson in “Semiology and Visual Interpretation” (1991, p. 174) writes that all cultures comprise of signs, which stand for something other than the explicit sign and people living in that culture try to make sense of these signs in accordance with their cultural signification. Semiotics has been developed into a complete science, with its developed accounts of the precise ways of making meanings of signs.

Judith Williamson’s *Decoding Advertisements* (1978) contends that semiology provides a method to penetrate the surface meanings of the visual images and helps to reveal the ideological configurations behind the apparent innocent use of signs. She also suggests that semiology is the knowledge that lays bare the legitimated social position of any dominant group. Hence semiotic studies also relies on scrutiny of the image itself that entails that semiology also depends on compositional modality of an image to decipher it. But it moves a step further to examine the social effects of the image’s meaning. Williamson ((1978, p. 9) writes that in order to conduct semiotic analysis, an extensive knowledge of the type of image is crucial in addition to the social, cultural and economic context in which that sign is used.

Gillan Dyer in *Advertising as Communication* (1982, pp. 1982) writes that visual images in many advertisements symbolize particular qualities to the audience. These qualities serve as signified and are shifted to the product that the ads try to sell. Dyer provides a complete checklist to analyze a visual text (p. 104).

1. Representations of body

Characters’ age, gender, race, hair, body, size and looks are paramount in the analysis of a text; hence they should be taken as signs. In the film *Smoke Signals*, characters belong to various age groups. The protagonists of the film, Victor and Thomas are in late twenties. They belong to American Indian tribe Coeur d’Alene, and that race is visible on their physical features. Victor has a strong, healthy, heightened body. They both wear long hair in accordance with their tribal custom. Apart from them, there are many other characters, such as Arnold Joseph, Arlene Joseph who also belong to the same native tribe. They are middle aged parents of Victor Joseph. The co-passengers in the bus also belong to various age groups. With the exception of one black character, the rest of them are white.

2. Representation of manner

For a precise semiotic analysis, expressions of characters must not be overlooked. Thomas is shown as a happy, flexible person, whereas Victor is shown as a stoic, arrogant and somewhat haughty. On the mention of his father’s name his expressions change altogether giving a clue to the troubled relation between father and son.

Eye contact: Gillian Dyer pays particular attention to the eye contact. Dyer writes, “who is looking at whom, and how? Are these looks submissive, coy or confrontational? These questions help in unraveling the ideology behind the work.” In the bus scene, most of the times Victor and Thomas communicate with each other, making a direct eye contact that shows their familiarity with each other. The frame 9, in which white people dressed as cowboys take their seats, Thomas and Victor make eye contact with them, whereupon, the eyes of white are full of scorn and contempt for Indians. Whereas Victor’s eyes reflect seething resistance. Thomas’s eyes mirror pain and anger.

Pose: Answering the questions like ‘Who is standing and who is prone’ also helps in meaning making process. In Frame 9, white people take their seats and are seated comfortably on the seats, whereas Victor and Thomas are dispossessed and subsequently displaced from their seats.

3. Representation of activity

Touch: Dyer writes that it is also important to see ‘who is touching whom and to what effect? In Frame 5, flashback, during the party, Victor’s parents are shown hugging each other, and Victor thus showing intimate relation. But Victor’s expressions show disgust for his alcoholic parents and party. In frame 6, Arnold Joseph beats his wife indicating towards seething violence in Arnold’s psyche.

Body movements: A minute analysis must also question who is active and who is passive. Since the film is to revive the storytelling tradition of Native Americans, Thomas is active in weaving the stories and thus commemorating the tribal history celebrating the tradition.

4. Props and settings

Props: objects in adverts can be used in a way unique to a particular advert, but many ads rely on objects that have particular cultural significance, e.g. spectacles often connote intelligence, golden light indicates tranquility, and so on.

Setting: Settings of a visual text can range from an everyday locale to an ‘exotic or fantastic place’ to create special impact on the viewers. The film uses Idaho Reservation and off Reservation spanning from rural set up to urban areas of the West to capture its action.

To make semiotic analysis more profound an American philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce (*Collected Papers*) offers a comprehensive typology of signs to help us consider different modes which enable us to consider how different modes of signification work in a visual text. Pierce elaborates that three kinds of signs, differentiated by the way in which the relations between the signifier and signified is understood. In the film *Smoke Signals* a number of objects are used that should be analyzed with respect to their iconic, indexical and symbolic significance. The research paper however intends to focus only on a few of the articles e.g. money box, long hair, alcohol bottles, “Evergreen Stage” and television.

Icon: In iconic signs as described by Pierce are those in which the signifier and the signified have an apparent likeness. Pierce discusses the photograph of a baby which stands as an iconic sign for a baby. Money box in the hands of Thomas has iconic value as it stands for money. The box is full of coins used to fund the travel towards Arizona to retrieve the body of Arnold Joseph.

Hair have significance in Native American culture. Long hair worn by a male most probably signifies a Native American. The native characters including Victor Joseph, Thomas and Arnold wear long hair. Victor braids his hair, and later on hangs them free, whereas Victor and Arnold wear loose hair. Bottles of alcohol are ubiquitous in the film. In Frame 6, in the party at Arnold’s place, everyone holds bottles of alcohol that represents consumption of alcohol in Idaho Reservation. In frame 7, Victor watches television. Televised images as well as references to television are also rampant in the film. Image of the television stands for a broadcasting service provided to the population, which is used for “infotainment”. “Evergreen Stage” the bus represents a vehicle used to transfer the protagonist from Idaho Reservation to Phoenix.

Index: Objects have their indexical signification where there is an essential association between the signifier and the signified. This signification is culturally determined for instance photograph of a baby outside a shop signifies availability of objects for babies. In the film, money box stands for economic resources needed to start a journey. Hair also serve indexical signification, they stand for cultural tradition. An American Indian wearing long hair is considered steeped in tribal tradition where hair serve as marker of cultural sanctity. Indexical signification of alcoholic bottles present the characters’ over consumption of alcohol that tends to make them insensitive towards their own and others destruction. Indexically, the presence of television in the dingy atmosphere of HUD houses (where there is no proper food and sanitary arrangement) stands for penetration of US dominated media. “Evergreen Stage” stands indexically for journey away from home to Phoenix undertaken to retrieve the remains and belongings of Arnold Joseph, hence it stands for bridging the conflict between father and son and thus mending the relation.

Symbolic: Symbolic signification depends on an arbitrary relation between signifier and signified. This relation is pretty conventionalized in every society. Hence photograph of a child can mean hope, future, vitality, innocence. The money box stands for money itself, but it also shows the destitute conditions and blockaded economic opportunities of the Native Americans who can’t afford to carry out travel on their own and need help of their cousins and friends to bring back dead body of the fathers. It also stands for close communal bond between native tribes who prefer maintaining family ties to accumulating money for their personal use. Symbolically, the hairs are attached with religious value. They also serve as a marker of grief and personal loss. In American Indian culture, hairs are cut to mourn the death of a beloved family member. In the film, Arnold Joseph cuts his long hair to mourn the death of Thomas’ family of which his careless firework is responsible and then never wears them long.

Symbolically, the bottles stand for deranged and disorganized social structure which has been incapacitated by five centuries of colonization. Ubiquitous bottles also represent the vicious cycle of self-destruction in which the characters are thrown by strategic marginalization of the native inhabitants. It also shows despondency and extreme desperation of the indigenous population which is part of a dysfunctional society. The alcohol bottles stand symbolically for a deadened spirituality and hope to get out of the vicious cycle of violence carried out against self and others. It also symbolizes the diseases prevalent in American Indian communities that are caused by alcohol consumption. It is estimated that alcohol caused diseases like diabetes, cardio-vascular pathologies and liver cancers are on the rise in American Indian communities, which further indicates a cumulative death wish on the part of a community. It connotes that rather than striving to come out of depraved situation the characters focus

only on immediate gratification of physical needs and forgetting their pain through over consumption of substance and alcohol.

Television is part and parcel of Victor's household which stands for the devastating effect of colonization on identity and character formation of the indigenous population. The film shows the power of mediated images in the discussion of Victor Joseph who teaches Victor to behave in accordance with the stereotypical images propagated by US dictated television. Television has become a virtual reality that has distorted the reality for the Natives making them denigrate their own culture and race. Images and narratives broadcasted through television represent the incursion and invasion of foreign values as well as racial slurs poured upon the native communities.

Symbolically, "Evergreen Stage" stands for a microcosmic social mix of various ethnicities genders and races. It becomes a performative space that allows various characters to enact their prejudices. Victor and Joseph are allowed to enter the bus, but the expression of the bus driver shows that he did not expect Native Americans to travel outside Reservation. Before they rode the bus, they took a ride from two Native women who reminded them of keeping their passports along as they were leaving Reservation, which is tantamount to entering a foreign land. The remarks of these women and the facial expression of the driver show that not only the Natives are not welcome in USA (Off the Reservation), rather they are not approved of. Hence, they are allowed to enter, but they find place only at the back of the bus. Later on when they leave to transform their appearance in deference to stereotypical norms, they return to find their seats occupied by whites; hence they are further relegated to the far most corner of the bus, marginalized further in the social realm of bus as a multivalent symbol of society.

Appropriateness of semiotic interpretation for mediated images is beyond any suspicion, for it provides a fruitful and precise way of reflecting about images and their role in cultural signification. Being concerned essentially with construction of hierarchies and social differences it brings ideology into limelight. But a more detailed theoretical scrutiny of a visual text is possible only after inquiring about the conditions that helped a particular ideology penetrate in the cultural fabric. Discourse analysis provides tools for such kind of penetration.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse is defined by Michel Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge* as a particular knowledge about the world that shapes the perception of the subjects (p. 8). Lynda Nead in *Myths of Sexuality* (1998, p. 4) includes 'art' into discourse category. She believes that in a technocratic world visual images constructed through art should not be left out of discursive knowledge category. She posits that art is a specialized and extremely potent kind of knowledge used to shape the world view. Nead posits that visual and verbal modalities are used to articulate discourses. Nead also argues that in postmodern visual culture "intertextuality" becomes a very strong element to develop a discourse. Intertextuality refers to interdependence of one discursive form on another form. This interdependence also helps in construction of the meaning in an elaborate way. Nead thinks of visuality as a discourse where the media team constructing a visual text invests it with a particular meaning and strive to make it visible, while other narratives and voices are quieted. Thus an image maker intepellated by patriarchal ideology would construct an image showing woman as an aesthetic object and man the bearer of aesthetic gaze. Such a construction of worldview will contribute in making not only femininity visible, but masculinity as well. Power of the discourse can be discerned from its contribution in disciplining subjects into certain ways of perceiving. In fact Foucault emphasized that discourse makes subjects.

Discourse however is not always repressive. It can be subversive, meant to subvert the dominant discourses floated by dominant culture. Undoubtedly, power works from above to suppress counter voices and legitimate the privileged position of elite groups, but there is also power in resistance. Foucault posited that power operating from top down is countered with resistance. Hence Power is not something imposed from the top of society down on to its oppressed bottom layers. Foucault claimed that where there is power, there is resistance (1989, p. 95). Foucault's argument entails that many discourses operate in a culture and compete for dominance.

Rosalind Gill "Discourse Analysis" (1996, p. 18) posits that discourse is perpetuated through a wide range of visual, verbal, written texts and practices and all of these make legitimate subject matter for discourse analysis. To conduct a discourse analysis then according to Tonkiss and Gillis to forget preconceptions about the material and subject it to fresh gaze (p. 248). As Foucault (1989) says, "pre-

existing categories must be held in suspense” (p. 25) for an analysis. Although, they must not be rejected out rightly, but the “tranquility with which they are accepted must be disturbed”. He offers strategies for discourse analysis. Discourse analysis demands familiarization with the text to chart out major ideas. He suggests that visible and invisible both must be paid attention to.

The film *Smoke Signals* by Native American team subverts the dominant representation. It tends to assert visual sovereignty. The screenwriter Sherman Alexi in his interviews emphasized time and again, “The primary thing that people need to know about Indians is that our identity is much more political and much less cultural. That we do really exist as political entities and sovereign political nations”(interview). Alexie asserted that one of the most serious problems faced by American Indians is the “challenge to our sovereignty- artistically, politically, socially and economically”. The film is an attempt to develop aesthetic definition of sovereignty through its mediated images.

The film particularly speaks back to cinematic representation of Native Americans in Hollywood movie “*Dances with the Wolves*”. Mass media including print and electronic has been dictated by white focal characters, writers and directors who concocted imaginary narratives about American Indian agency and resistance. Native crew of writer, director and actors present *Smoke Signal* which uses media to counter the stereotypical representations, thus to dismantle hierarchies developed by imperialistic discourse and to give voice to marginalized and silenced Native version.

The film is depicted in Idaho Reservation which becomes a privileged landscape and epicenter of *Smoke Signals*’ action. The sovereign position of the film is also furthered through selection of the locale for its depiction. The film makes frequent references to Spokane River; the conversation of Victor and Thomas regarding Salmon is also interspersed throughout the film. On the one hand it makes the River a privileged space of action giving it a visual representation, on the other hand it highlights expropriation of Native resources by European Settlers, thus depriving the indigenous population of fishing rights and the only means of sustenance. It also refers to the construction of Grand Collee Dam, which caused devastating drop in the growth of Salmon fish, which is not only a source of food for the local tribes, rather it had its cultural significance. The frames referring to rivers bereft of fish are conjoined with discourses of hunger and commodity foods in the character of Thomas, who says, “Sometimes it’s a good day to die. Sometimes it’s a good day to have breakfast”, thus highlighting the opposition between food and death.

From a victimized and silenced minority, the Native experience gets changed to one of strategic and loud. Hence it redefines the scope and effect of mainstream media. By using conventional cinematic language and widespread mainstream stories about US independence, and European settlement, the film invests them with Native signification. Its continual allusions to bridges and cross road intersections suggest historical interaction and subjugation of the Native tribes, as well as the contemporary assimilation of them in mainstream American culture. The bridge on Spokane River alludes not only to Coeur d’Alene tribe’s geography and history but also the actual place where cultural genocide and ecocide took place.

By silencing the White woman co-passenger, Victor regains the apparatus of loud representation, whereas Thomas throughout the film narrates personal stories thus celebrating Native storytelling as an art matched with Hollywood media. The white cowboys relegate Thomas and Victor to rear seats of the bus and dictate them to enjoy powwow somewhere else. Victor undaunted by arrogant power of whiteness takes control of singing and thus captures attention of all white passengers including the driver.

The conversation between Thomas and Victor concerns ‘how to be a real Indian’. Victor’s description of a so called ‘real Indian’ is structured by the mainstream popular culture. He scolds Thomas for ‘talking about nothing’ like ‘some damn medicine man’. He reminds him of frequently viewing *Dances with the Wolves*, still Thomas cannot pose like a warrior shown in the movie. He forces Victor to change his perspective and dress in accordance with mainstream media portrayals. He also wants him to unbraided his hair, otherwise people would exploit them, he says. Adopting warrior look however does not save them from marginalization. The scene right after physical transformation of Thomas and explicit warrior look on Victor’s face depicts that mediated images of Hollywood are just myths and ‘mean looks’ suggested by mainstream media is only a tool for further colonization of the Natives.

The food is used as a symbol throughout the film in flashbacks and contemporary setting. Thomas during one of his story telling session narrates an actual event in which Arnold Joseph

participated in a fry-bread competition and won by consuming fifteen pieces of fry bread. This communication follows right after their verbal exchange about 'what is a real Indian' and frequent consumption of visual images of Hollywood cinema. Thus it links Thomas and Victor's gluttonous consumption of mainstream media with Arnold Joseph's avarice for fry bread. Although fry bread and film consumption are two different experiences, yet they can be unwholesome if taken in such quantity, the film suggests. In the subsequent scene, Thomas changes his demeanor from a nerd to superhero. He changes from a black suit to red T-shirt with 'fry bread power' inscribed on it. This trope of T- Shirt is designed by the Native team to mock the mainstream super-man's costume and myth, thus making Thomas a generic superman empowered by commodity foods symptomatic of not a healthy tribal food of the past, rather an unwholesome meal used only to survive in the face of imperialism.

The bus is used as a discourse to subvert the dominant narratives about American Indians. Forced to leave their seats, Victor and Thomas occupy reluctantly the rear seats. Thomas resumes his conversation about cowboys and asserts, "The cowboys always win", while Victor does not consent claims, "you know in all those movies you never saw John Wayne's teeth? Not once. I think that there is something wrong when you don't see a guy's teeth." He starts singing a Native song about John Wayne's teeth. This sound bridge "John Wayne's teeth" is taken up by a professional group, the Eagle Bear singers. The diegetic sound becomes non diegetic. This diegetic and semi-diegetic sound of Victor compels the co-passengers to become audience and participate in anti-imperialist drama played out inside the bus. Thus the transition from diegetic to non-diegetic music bridges the film and its audience and invites spectators to see the way the racial dynamics on the bus also operate in the world outside the screen.

Empowered by an oppositional gaze, Victor and Thomas raise questions about the reality and truth about the physicality of a super star John Wayne. John Wayne who enjoyed a reputation of 'the toughest cowboy of them all' is made vulnerable to scrutiny of the Natives. The song bridge "John Wayne's teeth" lays a Hollywood star's mouth (by connotation his speech) bare for analysis. Hence all the Hollywood stories of empowered heroes are raised to ground in the Native film. The film also rejects Hollywood's linear time frame and abides by the writer Alexie's desire to imitate 'the way time works in Indian culture'. Indian conception of the time is not dictated by watch; rather it is circular, determined by seasons of Nature. Hence, the film uses a non-linear plot by juxtaposes present with past through flashbacks.

CONCLUSION

The Native artists convinced of the power of visual images, use cinema as an antidote to the conventional, Euro-American representation of the Native tribes. It proves to be an intervention in the mainstream media by use of the established formula to challenge the widespread ideas about Indians. The film crew invests media space to give voice to marginalized and silenced indigenous population living in Reservation. Hence it indigenizes the hostile generic forms of cinema to take control of their own images as tool for telling native version of stories and share the actual personal and historical realities with a much wider audience.

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