ISSN (Print): 0974-6846 ISSN (Online): 0974-5645

# A Semiotics Analysis on the Artistry of Paul Gauguin in Popular Culture Focusing on Saussure's Semiology and Barthes' Myth, the Gaze and the other, and Binary Oppositions

# Man Ki Kim<sup>1</sup>, Hak Soo Han<sup>2</sup>\* and Eun Mi Park<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Ads and PR, Namseoul University, 91 Daehak-ro Seonghwan-eup Sebus-gu Cheonan-si Chungcheongnam-do, Korea; kapr@hanmail.net <sup>2</sup>Department of Broadcasting and Digital Media, Chungwoon University, Namjang-ri,Hongseong-eup, Hongseong-gun, Chungcheongnam-do, Korea; susuhan@chungwoon.ac.kr <sup>3</sup>Department of Art Market Apprisal, Kingston University, Knight Park Grange Road, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey - KT1 2QJ, United kiiingdom; k15522241@kingston ac.uk

#### **Abstract**

**Background and Objectives**: This study anticipates a glimpse into Gauguin's outlook on life, worldview and vision of the universe through his paintings. The scope of this research is limited to seven of Paul Gauguin's masterpieces. **Methods and Statistical Analysis**: The research methodology uses Barthes' framework of myth, which was Saussure's semiology inverted by Barthes, as the foundation for analysis in this study. This study analyzes the language of the signifier and the signified, the language of the first order of signification; denotation, the second order of signification of myth; connotation, as well as Barthes' myth and Louis Althusser's ideology. **Findings:** Additionally, this study analyzes the gaze and the other, which are inherent in the paintings, and binary oppositions. The analysis results anticipate the referent of the life between the present and the past in the painting background and characters, the tension amidst material wealth and prosperity and everyday life about the future, anxiety and anguish, anticipation of death, ideal perception and reflection on nature of Gauguin and ourselves, mysticism, original sin, civilization and barbarism, the myth of the frailty of human life and the ideological mental world. **Improvements and Applications**: Through a semiotic analysis of Gauguin's paintings, the meaning, interest and enjoyment of the paintings within popular culture can be discovered.

**Keywords:** Denotation and Connotation, Ideology, Myths, Sign, Signifier and Signified

## 1. Introduction

The gaze helps to establish a relationship of power. The act of looking generally empowers the agent that is observing, rather than the subject under observation<sup>1, 2</sup>. Diverse races have been photographed and categorized; the conventions of categorized produced photographs are associated with visual anthropology, or the conventions of travel, and the people of so-called exotic locations are associated with painting conventions. Although there is a difference in degree, this all has a function of reproducing codes of dominance and submission, of difference and

the other. Observers of Paul Gauguin's paintings, who was devoted to painting on the island of Tahiti during the late nineteenth century, will take into account Gauguin's aesthetic forms and bold color. Institutional paintings has the function of reproducing the gaze of foreigners and the control and submission of the exoticism of the other within the conventions and tradition of photography and paintings, and the difference and codes of otherness<sup>1, 2</sup>.

The works culminating Paul Gauguin's imagination and the world of art, "Where Do We Come From, What Are We, Where Are We Going," and "The Yellow Christ" (1889) are masterpieces depicting the human suf-

<sup>\*</sup>Author for correspondence



**Figure 1.** "Where Do We Come From, What Are We, Where Are We Going," Paul Gauguin(1897-1898) <sup>3</sup>.

fering he faced throughout his life though the language of painting, resonating within the hearts of the modern person.

The monumental masterpiece of Gauguin's artistry (1897-1989) is representative of Gauguin's time in Polynesia and a testament to the symbolism of Gauguin's artistry. This work, depicting a human life in stages from birth to death, is a monumental painting that carries Gauguin's artistry philosophically, holds the key to not only understanding Gauguin's life philosophy, world view, universal philosophy and perspective, but understanding his art. With a width reaching 4metres (139.1X374.6 cm oil painting on canvas) this large scale mural is the largest of Gauguin's works, valued at three hundred billion Korean won, is it stored at the Boston Museum in the United States of America<sup>3,4,5,6</sup> This study focuses on a semiotic analysis of this masterpiece(Figure 1)

# 2. Research Scope and Methodology

The research scope is kept to the paintings of Paul Gauguin. (Figure 1)<sup>3</sup>. The research methodology analyses Saussure's semiology, Peirce's semiotics, signifier/referent, signified/interpretant, denotation and connotation, and expands to Barthes' myth to Louis Althusser's ideology. (Figure 2)<sup>2,7-14</sup>

Additionally, the method of interpretation deconstructs the gaze and the other, and binary oppositions <sup>17,18</sup>.

# 3. Theoretical Background

The signifier and the signified of Saussure's semiotics are comprised of 'social and cultural practices'. Saussure

claimed meaning-making as the sign as signification; a combination of the signifier and the signifier. Here, the signifier is physical entities such as sounds, letters, and images. The signified are mental concepts representing the sign. The signifier is the carrier of meaning and the signified is the meaning or definition. The first order of signification, where the signifier and the signified is combined, is denotation. Denotation is the objective meaning that anyone knows and agrees upon. However, the mental concept of all entities possesses a second order of signification. This second order of signification is arbitrary, polysemic and often subjective.

On the other hand, Peirce was interested in signs and symbols regarding human thought and understanding, and constructing a science of signs for logic applied in knowledge and the pursuit of truth. The three-part relationship of a sign is the icon, index and symbol. Thus, the three factors of a sign phenomenon are the sign/representant, the interpretant and the object. When examining Saussure and Peirce's theories together, Saussure's 'sign' is Peirce's 'representamen', which is Saussure's signifier/sr, and Saussure's signified/sd corresponds to Peirce's interpretation. Roland Barthes, who systemically organized the two theories, the first order of signification is similar to Peirce's interpretation, and at the second order of signification, denotation being suggestive and meta-language and myth, and it can be seen as pertaining to ideological interpretation(sign). According to Barthes, signification begins with characteristics connoted by the signifier and the signified. Namely, myth and ideology are created from connotation. In other words, myth is a chain of concepts(Figure 2) <sup>2,7,9,10-14</sup>. Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. This imaginary relationship has a material existence. "All ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects," <sup>15</sup> this process meant that Althusser regarded 'when the sign encounters the user's emotion, culture and values, the meaning is created according to the mutual process, and this is connotation and myth. Here, myth refers to a system of meaning created by a specific social group through hidden rules, codes, and practices. This myth is transformed into ideology, seamlessly and naturally accepted into the wider society as a whole<sup>2,13</sup>. Here, semiotics is fundamentally a study of types (形), and ideology is concerned with themes<sup>11,12</sup>. Let us consider the limiting qualities of today's myth revealed by Barthes' myth. Barthes claims myth is 'a system of communication,' 'a form, a type, of signification,' and that 'everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a dis-

course' (Barthes). Therefore, the characteristic of myth is where it is a type of communication with an intention or motive for the producer of myth; it implies the myth producer expects a certain sign action on the myth consumer. Additionally, myths are historical. Thus, as a reading of popular culture, this research analyses the works of Paul Gauguin. (Figure 1), the creator of myth, through semiotics, the gaze, the other and binary oppositions to examine their cultural meaning, the socio-historical background and reception, and economic value<sup>1</sup>.

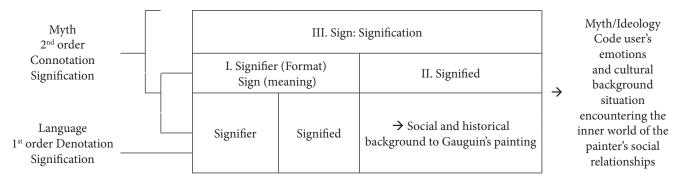


Figure 2. Analysis Model for Gauguin's Painting Using Signs<sup>2,8,10</sup>

Table 1. Sign Analysis<sup>2,9,13,16</sup>

shots	Signifier/sr		Signified/sd			
			Language, First Order Signification	Language Myth, Second Order Signification		
			Denotation	Connotation	Myth Ideology	
1	Central figure	Representative Figures (Female+Male=Androgyny) (Unknown identity)	·Work through vertical ·Male- >Female(chest) ·Central figure perspective	·Salient presence ·Both hands outstretched (tense composition: moment of rising from earth towards the heavens) ·Rembrandt painting ·Birth to the right of central figure ·Shows death and nature to the left	·Rejecting existence of Adam & Eve ·Noah(Genesis figure) ·Banishment from the Garden of Eden	
2	Fruit	·Nourishment ·Harvest	·Life ·Abundance	·Unknown fruit (forbidden fruit) ·Landscape rejected ·Lifestyle	·Minimize original sin ·Reproduction	
3	·Fruit and child ·Kitten	Child eating fruit	∙Life ∙Lifestyle	·Emphasis on reality ·A reality according to instinct	·solitude and destiny ·born bearing original sin ·reject western marriage/ family system ·Miro child care perspective applied	

(continued)

A Semiotics Analysis on the Artistry of Paul Gauguin in Popular Culture Focusing on Saussure's Semiology and Barthes' Myth, the Gaze and the other, and Binary Oppositions

4	Child	Head turned towards left	·Tension ·With three women	·Communal baby ·Baby's kinship ambiguous ·Child born from Pau'ura ·Dark shadow towards daughter Aline	·Ignores original sin ·Garden where desires are satisfied ·Reproduction
5	Three Women	·Woman wearing clothes ·Unclothed women	·Clothes represent civilization and culture ·Nude women	·Clothes are knowledge and suffering ·Innocence of nude women (idyllic lifestyle) ·Reverse the audience's attention and sense of the flow of time, return to the realm of life from the realm of death	·Barbarism and civilization ·Cultural difference of original sin ·Theme of Paradise Lost
6	Two figures	Two figures clothed in dark colors near the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil	Darkness and anxiety	Suffering from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil	Original sin
7	Old woman	Hugs her knees to her chest, both hands resting on her cheeks	·Posture reflecting fear of old age, melancholy ·Decay	·Death and anxiety ·Understanding of Gauguin's world of people	Banishment from the Garden of Eden
,		Woman's sharp glare directed at audience	Although a figure facing death, her eyes are full of the will to live	·Asks the question 'Where are we going?', Gauguin's situation, survived attempted suicide of consuming pesticide	Prediction of the afterlife and the future world
8	·Old woman ·Woman beside her ·Three women	Her gaze is towards the audience, as if closing in from the left and right	Conception, life, suffering, death	Past, present, future	
9	·Sculpture of female deity	Blue-colored idol	·Gentle facial expression ·Round, protruding breast ·Curves of waist	·Mysterious, both arms raised rhythmically, indicating the nirvana stage of death ·Hina, goddess of the afterlife ·Polynesian period, Miro cycles of death, rebirth and life ·Overseer of the birth of life and reproduction ·Gauguin's imagination ·Hina is the mystery water of the fountain of life ·Hina is looking at the light ·The face has the physical aspect and warmth of Tahitian women ·Primitive symbol of the soul, comfort for future pain or origin of humankind ·Mystery of idol situated between life and objects ·Mediating role between life and death ·Question of hope for a chaotic world	·Ancient culture and cosmology ·Death and rebirth ·Nature ·Comfort for suffering ·Mysticism ·Transcendence(material and spiritual) ·Origin ·Intention to die in December ·Masterpiece of passion before death

(continued)

		Stream in the shadows of the forest	Small stream Adjoined to the sea Peaked island	<ul> <li>Beginning of life cannot be discovered</li> <li>Life and rebirth</li> </ul>
10 B:	Background	Sacred forest	∙Green and blue tones ∙Orange color	·Gloomy landscape surrounded by dim light connotes tranquility ·Dominance of blue gives sense of stagnant-like space, sense of distant depth ·Orange throws the poses and gaze of the dimly lit figures frozen in time towards the audience

#### 4. Research results

Ten shots have been divided and analyzed for the masterpiece Table 1. "Where Do We Come From, What Are We, Where Are We Going," Paul Gauguin (1897-1898) (Figure 1). The denotation of the symbol, the vehicle of meaning, brings the referential relation between the background and the figures within the first-order signification of language representing life, everyday tension and anxiety amidst material wealth, anxiety, suffering and death. The additional meanings from these linguistics meanings, derived from second-order signification of language and myth, concerning the figures in the painting are ambiguous identity, good and evil, anxiety and death, predictions of the past, present, predictions for the future, reflections on nature, mysticism, original sin, barbarism and civilization, the frailty of human life; these are Gauguin othering his self-portrait.

#### 5. Conclusion

Within the referential relationship between the signifiers of meaning, which bring the background and the figures, is the present and past life, anxiety about the future and suffering from living in an abundance of material wealth, and foreseeing death. Not only are these additional meanings internalized by Gauguin but the reflections on nature, mysticism, original sin, civilization and barbarism, the frailty of human life are myth and ideology created out of a mutual process with the emotions and cultural context of us the audience, viewing the painting.

# 6. Acknowledgement

Funding for this paper was provided by Namseoul University.

## 7. References

- Sturken S, Marita M. Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture, Oxford, Understanding Visual Culture translated by Youn, Tae-jin et al., Communication Books. 2006; 75–90.
- 2. Kim K, Man Ki. Understanding Popular Culture and Ad & PR, Rishum Press. 2014; 48( 299-313):355-407.
- 3. Kim K, Hee H. Voyage into Myth GAUGUN and after, Seoul Museum of Arts. 2013; 120–35.
- 4. Ma M, Young S, Gauguin P. Inventory of 'Primitivism', Journal of Modern Art History, Society of Contemporary Art Science. 2011; 99–123.
- Baek B, Hong J. Encountering Gauguin in Seoul. After the Painter of Paradise Gauguin, Art World, Art World, 2013; 106–9.
- Baek B, Sook H. Christianity and Art, the Eternal Free Spirit Paul Gauguin Saegajeong Press. 2006; 76–9.
- 7. Park P, Soon Y. Semiotics for Mass communication, Communication Books, Inc. 2009; 101-135:179–97.
- 8. Park P, Soon J. Semiotics for Mass communication, Nanam Publishing house. 1995; 8(9):1–9.
- Su YS. The Semiotic Analysis of the Meaning of Television Political Advertisement Image, Department of Media Arts, The Graduate School of Kyung Hee University. 2005; 38–63.
- Barthes R, Zero WD. Element of Semiology, Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1985; 115pp.
- 11. Barthes R. Mythologies, Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, New York: Hill and Wang. 1972; 1–111.
- Barthes R. The Photographic Message, Image, Music Text, translated by Stephen Heath, London: Fontana Press. 1977; 109–59.
- 13. Kim K, Man K. Political Advertising and Public Relations, Namseoul University Press. 2012; 440–63.
- 14. Young K. What is the Semiotics? Minumsa. 1995.
- 15. Althusser L. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, New Left Books. 1971; 109 pp.

A Semiotics Analysis on the Artistry of Paul Gauguin in Popular Culture Focusing on Saussure's Semiology and Barthes' Myth, the Gaze and the other, and Binary Oppositions

- 16. Gi BS. Advertising semiotics, Communication Books, Inc., 2010; 263-81.
- 17. Ki KM. Image Culture Communication, Korean Studies Information. 2008; 72–90.
- 18. Gyeong C. Modern and Post-modern Social Thought, Hangilsa. 1999; 136-57.