

# Detecting Meaning with Sherlock Holmes\*

## Screening Sherlock Holmes

based on slides by Brian Bergen-Aurand

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# Overview

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- How (Screen) Language Conveys Meaning—Christian Metz Screens Sherlock Holmes
- Sherlock Holmes Baffled—Signs and Interpretations
- The Language of Screen Theory
- Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema
- The Adventure of the Speckled Band 1 & 2

# Sherlock Holmes Baffled

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## Sherlock Holmes Baffled

- directed by Arthur Marvin in 1905 (music added)

# Sherlock Holmes Baffled

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## Signs

- Holmes alone
- Smoking a cigar
- Holmes unkempt
- Holmes draws and fires a gun
- Holmes is “baffled”
- A crime against Holmes
- Holmes in the *domestic* sphere

## Interpretations

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- Films start in 1895
    - standard viewing position (front)
    - charge admissions
  - Early films had a fixed camera
    - So drawing rooms scenes were common
  - What does Holmes look like
    - What is different in *Sherlock Holmes baffled*?
    - What is in the center?
    - What is he wearing?
    - What is the big difference in the narrative?
    - No Watson!



# Cinematic Signs / Cinematic Language

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- Themes and ideas
- Film and the other arts
- Realism, anti-realism, and *mise-en-scène*  
“telling a story through the cinematography, stage design and storyboarding”
- Composition and the image
- Sound

# The Language of Screen Theory

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- What is cinema?
  - \* Cinema is a language in the sense of a semiotic system.
  - \* The system of every film is constructed on the basis of codes that a filmmaker either adopts, transforms, or works against.
- How do we understand it?
  - \* Semiotics (semiology) is the science of signs and of the codes used to understand them

# A Semiotics of the Cinema

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“Everything is present in film: hence the obviousness of film, and hence also its opacity. The clarification of present by absent units occurs much less than in verbal language. The relationships *in praesentia* are so rich that they render the strict organization of *in absentia* relationships superfluous and difficult. A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand. The image impresses itself on us, blocking everything that is not itself.”



# Reception: A Semiotics of Holmes

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- Analyze the stories as detective fiction
  - Structure, logic, and nature of detection
    - \* Genre, technique, narrative
      - Story & Discourse (Enunciation)
- Analyze the stories as cultural representation
  - Social and historical implications and resonances
    - \* Institutional structures and relationships
      - Race, Class, Gender, Sexuality, Technology, Law

# The Speckled Band

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- The Case of the Speckled Band (1/2) (12min)
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- *Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson* is a television series created by Sheldon Reynolds in 1979
- It starred Geoffrey Whitehead, Donald Pickering and Patrick Newell in the title roles of Sherlock Holmes, Doctor Watson and Inspector Lestrade respectively.
- It was a joint Polish-English production with 24 episodes
- How is the story different?
- Why doesn't Holmes kill the snake?
- Nice use of music to build suspense, ...

# Speckled Band

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- Analyze the stories as detective fiction
  - A rethinking of the detective in general, of Holmes in particular
  - The detective in relation to the villain, Holmes in relation to the Count
- Analyze the stories as cultural representation
  - Women in a society in which they cannot own property
  - Women in a society in which they can own property

## Screen Language — Signs

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- The Adventure of the Speckled Band
- “Miss Stoner, you have not. You are screening your stepfather.”
- ➤ Count: Mr. Holmes do you ever hunt?
  - Holmes: In a manner of speaking, Count.
  - Count: Yes. Of course.
- Holmes: “I suppose we’ll have to think of the case of the speckled band as only partially successful.”

# Sherlock Holmes in the 22nd Century

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An animated television series from 1999–2001 in which Sherlock Holmes is brought back to life in the 22nd century to deal with a Moriarty clone. The series was nominated for a Daytime Emmy for Special Class Animated Program

The Adventure of the Dancing Men (22 min)

## Compare / Contrast

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Readership	Viewership
The reader's surrogate	The viewers' surrogates
Holmes's methodology	Holmes's methodology
Detection	Detection
Making sense of things	Making sense of things

# Screening Sherlock Holmes

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- In print (since 1887)
- On film (since 1900)
- On television (since 1951)
- In video games (since 1984)
- On the internet (since 2004)

# Bibliography

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- Christian Metz (1974) *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* [Essais sur la signification au cinéma], Oxford University Press, 1974