

Detecting Meaning with Sherlock Holmes*

Screening Sherlock Holmes

based on slides by Brian Bergen-Aurand

Francis Bond

Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies

<http://www3.ntu.edu.sg/home/fcbond/>
bond@ieee.org

Location: LHS-LT

*Creative Commons Attribution License: you are free to share and adapt as long as you give appropriate credit and add no additional restrictions: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Overview

- 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

Sherlock Holmes Baffled

- directed by Arthur Marvin in 1905 (music added)

Sherlock Holmes Baffled

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

-
- 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

- 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

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

A Semiotics of the Cinema

“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.”

Christian Metz (2015). *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* p.11, Columbia University Press

Reception: A Semiotics of Holmes

- Analyze the stories as detective fiction
 - Structure, logic, and the nature of detection
 - * Genre, technique, narrative
 - Story & Discourse
 - * Similar to the books, but with a different vocabulary
 - easy to show
 - hard to explain
 - limited in space and time
- 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

- The Case of the Speckled Band (1/2) (12min)
- The Case of the Speckled Band (1/2) (12min)
- *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

- 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 (the original story)
 - Women in a society in which they can own property (the TV story)

Screen Language — Signs

- 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

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.



Watch: [The Adventure of the Dancing Men](#) (22 min)

A more diverse cast

- Inspector Beth Lestrade of New Scotland Yard
- The French rogue geneticist Martin Fenwick
- A clone of Professor James Moriarty
- A rejuvenated Sherlock Holmes (he had been preserved in honey)
- A droid Watson
- The new Baker Street Irregulars
 - football player Wiggins
 - the Cockney Deidre
 - paraplegic Tennyson

Compare / Contrast

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

- **Audience surrogate** A focus character (or characters) who voices or experiences the thoughts, reactions and emotions which the writer desires the reader to have. Usually the point-of-view character, usually observing a scene or being acted upon.
- Who is this in the Sherlock Holmes stories?
- Who is this in *Sherlock Holmes in the 22nd Century*?



Screening Sherlock Holmes

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

Adaptions: Films

- Guinness World Records lists Holmes as the "most portrayed movie character": more than 70 actors in over 200 films.
- The first screen appearance was in the 30-second 1900 Mutoscope film: *Sherlock Holmes Baffled*
- New films appeared almost every year since then
- Basil Rathbone appeared in 14 films, starting with [HOUN](#) in 1939
- Robert Downey, Jr. (2009, 2011)
- Ian McKellen (2015) *Mr. Holmes*
- Henry Cavill (2020) *Enola Holmes*

Adaptions: TV

- Jeremy Brett appeared in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*
 - Granada Television films made between 1984 and 1994
 - 41 episodes
 - He had previously appeared as Watson with Charlton Heston as Holmes in *The Crucifer of Blood* (1980)
 - Often thought of as one of the greatest portrayals
- Benedict Cumberbatch appears in *Sherlock* (2010–2017)
- Jonny Lee Miller appears in *Elementary* (2012–2019) with Lucy Liu as Joan Watson — most TV episodes as Sherlock!

Bibliography

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