

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2021.17.2.092>

**COMMUNICATING MORALITY TO AUDIENCES:  
SYMBOLIC INTERACTION IN FILMS  
(with reference to G. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*)**

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Through research methodology of case study the present paper promotes the connection between Symbolic Interactionism and film theory, the symbolic film world and the audience's emotions, intellect and behavior. My purpose of focusing on the modern theory of Symbolic Interactionism is justified by the notion that the mentioned theory provides an ideal concept to achieve the objective of shaping the perceptions of massive audiences into possible positive directions, creating shared positive symbols in the society and making people react to the given symbols accordingly via film media. The analysis of the film version (*A Game of Thrones*) of George R. R. Martin's series of epic fantasy novel *A Song Of Ice and Fire* (1996-2019) discloses the firm connection between Symbolic Interactionism and film theory, between symbolic interaction and communicating morality to audiences.

**Keywords:** *Symbolic interaction, symbols, film media, communicating morality to audiences, socialization/interaction, behavior, A Game of Thrones.*

### Introduction

In the modern era the film media strongly impacts people's perceptions and influences them not only emotionally and intellectually, but also behaviorally. Film as a type of media and a powerful tool of communication, presents the reality of life with its positive and negative aspects and impacts massive audiences. The aim of a film presenting the results of both good acts and bad acts is to let audiences recognize the truth. Presenting only positive aspects of life without comparing them with the negative ones, would not lead to the comprehension of the true meaning of goodness. Thus, films can portray

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Received: 05.02.2021

Revised: 15.03.2021

Accepted: 02.04. 2021



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symbolizations of all sorts of human behaviors either good or bad, and influence the audience's morality effectively. The film morality is a major concern for communicating morality in general and developing goodness in society in particular. Therefore, if used skillfully, a film could serve through creative persuasion techniques as a way to make people think and act positively. The modern theory of Symbolic Interactionism provides an ideal concept to achieve the objective of shaping audiences' perceptions into possible positive directions because it is a perspective of creating shared positive symbols in the society and making people react to the given symbols accordingly. This is the reason why there exists a firm connection between Symbolic Interactionism and film theory, between symbolic interaction and communicating morality to audiences via film media. Now let us discuss Symbolic Interactionism in general and its connection to film theory in particular.

### **The symbolic interactionism theory in films**

The key scholars that originated and contributed to the theory of Symbolic Interactionism in early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century are G. H. Mead, C. H. Cooley and H. Blumer. According to Mead, people are social products, their selves are purposive and creative and develop through interaction tradition (Mead, 2005; Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2015). Cooley argues that society and individuals could only be understood in relationship to each other, a relationship that includes the self and the natural and symbolic interaction (Major Theories of Symbolic Interactionism: Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929)). Mead's student Blumer was the theorist who coined the term *symbolic interactionism* and presented it to the world. His approach is based on the notion that social reality is constructed in each human interaction through the use of symbols, such as words, gestures, images and characters that have meanings and are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the symbols s/he encounters (Blumer, 2005).

Hence, the sociological theory of Symbolic Interactionism is a frame of reference to better understanding of how individuals interact with one another to create natural and symbolic worlds, and in return, how these worlds shape socialization/interaction and individual behaviors (West & Turner, 2014). Socialization, in its turn, represents the processes of teaching and learning, internalizes the norms and ideologies of the society, teaches morals and ethics, and is a central influence on behavior, beliefs and actions of adults and children

who perceive things through the meaning of symbols (Clausen, 1968; Burke & Stephens, 1974; Cromdal, 2006). In other words, interaction usually leads to desirably positive moral outcomes, to individual views and behaviors that are considered acceptable and normal in the society. Therefore, the key elements of Symbolic Interactionism, i.e. interaction and individual behavior, depend on the shared understanding and interpretations of meaning within social context in both natural and symbolic environments.

Observing the perspective of symbolic interaction and Blumer's approach, scholars claim that cinematography has a strong influence on human senses (Harper & Rogers, 2011; Sutthithepthamrong, 2019) and can result in behavioral intervention: moral and emotional impact, behavioral influence and behavioral change (Ellis, Englebrecht & Streeter, 1983; Wiley, 2003). In other words, symbolic interaction means conveying meaning to audiences through film symbols. Even though symbols do not present the real aspect of things, the audience believes in the meaning of the symbol presented.

In addressing symbolic interaction in relation to movies and film, Harper and Rogers (2011) explain that actors have selves, they present symbols using their ability to take on the roles of others. The audience perceives the characters as real selves and communicates with them. Self, then, becomes a necessary component for the mind able to communicate, change and develop. Communicating morality to mass audiences and their positive development depend on three simple features:

- ✓ the variability of the media's content;
- ✓ the variability in audience's responsiveness;
- ✓ the interdependent connection of all forms of communication (Blumer, 2005).

The **content** usually relies on the demands of the audience, and filmmakers try to present films to satisfy their audiences. However, even when presenting negative aspects (not mentioning the positive ones) communication of morality to audiences should be the main concern, and ethics should be symbolized to serve moral values. The **responsiveness** of the audience depends on people's ability to understand and interpret the content of the film correctly. As moral standards and intelligence are not the same for everybody, responses are different. However, despite the fact that variable factors (age, sex, religion, education, morality, etc.) are different, the perceptions of good and evil, moral and immoral are at large universal. The **interdependent connection** of all forms of communication envisions that different communication modes and

forms intertwine and merge in today's huge communicative processes, and the audience interacts with those selected, imitating and developing role integration. Social roles are gained from perceiving and observing symbolic meanings in real life after watching a film or TV media. Then the individual relates the roles to the accepted norms of behavior. Denzin (1991) argues that the creation and generation of stereotypical roles and ideologies through films and impact of video versions of reality are not only upon self but on the society as well. As negative stereotypical roles can also be imitated and strongly influence audiences, presenting the negative habit of a character should be extremely concerning and should be done very skillfully to evoke opposite/positive sentiments.

Now let us focus on how symbolic interaction and symbolic meanings function to render morality to audiences in the innovative fantasy series *A Game of Thrones*.

### **Behind the symbolism of *A Game of Thrones***

Though technology is rapidly growing today (a good example of the fantastic growth is the mentioned film itself), people are still seeking moral insights of the human mind and actions. Therefore, moral symbols are still preserved in a time of technological globalization and tend to improve human physical, mental, spiritual, and moral well-being.

An overview of the series under consideration shows that it accurately reflects the empirical world in which the symbolic interaction influence is operating; that sensitivity of the audience towards the film is great; that the communicated morality enters the experiences of the audience and is in line with the audience's foregoing perceptions and considerations of what is moral and immoral. Evidently and undoubtedly, the film presents the reality of life, including positive and negative aspects. And again, this is a good technique in communicating morality because showing only the positive aspect without comparing it with the binary definition of bad, could preclude audiences from comprehending true meanings. Hence, presenting symbol options to approach and influencing target audiences, makes morality a major concern for developing goodness in the mass audiences of the mentioned feature film.

There are numerous symbols and innumerable symbolic representations of the desired outcome in the film, and we will discuss only the most striking ones. Among them the symbol of the **direwolf** – the sigil of the House Stark – is a moral symbol of children and adults caring for animals and nature. In return

to this care, Robb's wolf, Grey Wind, helps him defend Bran from wildlings and fights fiercely in the battle. Man and wolf's devotion makes the wolf a fitting symbol for the house as a whole. In addition, Jon's lone albino wolf symbolizes his own feeling of being a bastard outsider in the family. However, this symbolic character overcomes inferiority, thus demonstrating that a strong willpower and devotion to moral values are worthy tools in any situation.

The **Iron Throne** made of swords communicates brutality necessary to gain power. This symbol represents forceful military power, danger, treason, betrayal, inhumane actions. The physical discomfort of sitting in the throne reminds that rule and power are not easy pleasures but tremendous responsibility. Finally forged by the fiery breath of the dragon, the throne symbolizes termination of any formidable power, thus communicating the morality that no power is eternal and worth the obsessive effort to achieve it, and that the aim does not justify the means.

**Dragons** are usually considered to be magical symbols. The sad thing about them is that they are extinct, and this means they also symbolize lack of creativity, imagination, fiction in this world. Dragons are the desirable past that we can never come across again. They also teach us to preserve the good values and the legacy of the past and awaken them in the present or future. Dragons are also a symbol of power that shifts over time: the one who owns it at the moment without considering past mistakes, may not achieve success again.

The **seasons** (summer and winter) last for years, and nobody knows how long they are going to last although the scholarly-minded maesters at the Great Citadel are trying to keep track of seasonal changes. Symbolically, summer indicates a young life - relatively pain-free and fear-free. The older members of the Night's Watch mention that the new recruits still *smell of summer* - untested, weak, inexperienced, unprepared to face dangers of the north and winter. The symbolic value of winter is harshness and ruthlessness, i.e. maturity (A Game of Thrones Symbols, Allegory and Motifs, 1999-2021). The House of Stark slogan *Winter is Coming* – repeated constantly in the film – is a warning symbol intending to make people get ready in time to face dangers and enemies, hardships, any kind of evil and even death.

**Crows and ravens** are first of all a symbol of communicating morality and interacting with the audience through associations of devotion to homeland (the Night Watch soldiers wearing black and defending the borders of their country are called *crows*). Traditionally, as well as in the film, they also symbolize wisdom (Bran's mentor is a prophetic three-eyed crow). They see the whole

world from the height and, as heralds or messengers, are responsible for communication between people separated from each other physically.

What I would consider a general and universal symbol for *A Game of Thrones* is its most compelling evidence of being a **political symbol** of all times. The power games have always been relevant, both in the past and at present when the world is grappling more cynically for new divisions and influences. Symbolically communicating through ravens and flying on dragons, the film characters face the same political scenarios and problems as we do in the real world: inequality, injustice, corruption of power, poverty, discrimination, dictatorship and tyranny, hazards to public safety, wars, crises, recessions, etc. In addition, religion and politics get mixed in the real world as controversially as they do in the film.

*A Game of Thrones* is a powerful tool that can shape the way of society and play a crucial role in social and behavioral development of audiences by communicating numerous moral values. The concept of symbolic interaction can help shape audiences' perceptions into possible positive directions. Hopefully, the symbolic audiences – film interaction, the mighty morality communicated to us via *A Game of Thrones* will help modern audiences perceive the symbol of White Walkers as an eternal threat to the world and motivate leaders and society to do only what is right.

### Conclusion

The film media acts as a powerful tool that can compellingly impact massive audiences. Film words, light, sound, music, color, time, space, symbolic meanings are components combined onscreen to powerfully impact the perceptions of audiences. Therefore, a film is a way to make people think positively through different interactions, including symbolic interaction. The study of the theory of Symbolic Interactionism and symbolic interaction in the film *A Game of Thrones* shows that the film provides an ideal concept to achieve the perspective of creating shared symbols in our society; people think a certain way about the given symbols and tend to react accordingly. The present study shows that

- ✓ audiences are influenced by symbolic interaction and a cinematographic sense of vision;
- ✓ communicating morality to film audiences using symbolic interaction would be an option for creating an ideal world;

- ✓ the symbols in the mentioned film are connected with universal human vice and virtue;
- ✓ literary symbols created by the novelist, science fiction and fantasy writer G. Martin make a strong emotional, cognitive and aesthetic impact on the audience;
- ✓ the symbols in *A Game of Thrones* are related to power, knowledge, brutality, evil, courage, honesty, change, the past, wisdom, the value of communication, wealth, strength, reason, family values, dishonesty, loyalty, treason, etc.;
- ✓ the complex set of the film symbols interacts with mass audiences to give meaning to the world in the perspective.

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**ԽՈՐՀՐԴԱՆՇԱԿԱՆ ՓՈԽԱԶԴԵՑՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՏԵՍՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ.  
ԲԱՐՈՑԱԿԱՆ ԱՐԺԵՔՆԵՐԻ ՍԵՐՄԱՆՈՒՄԸ. ՄԱՐՏԻՆԻ  
ԳԱՀԵՐԻ ԽԱՂԸ ՖԻԼՄՈՒՄ**

**Գայանե Մուրադյան**

Սույն հոդվածում խորհրդանիշների փոխազդեցության տեսության լույսի ներքո քննարկվում է նշված ֆիլմում առկա խորհրդանիշների ազդեցությունը հանդիսատեսի հույզերի, բանականության և վարքի վրա՝ հնարավոր դրական ընկալումներ և բարոյական նորմեր ձևավորելու ակնկալիքով: Վերլուծությունները, լայն առումով, բացահայտում են խորհրդանիշների փոխազդեցության և կինոյի տեսության, ֆիլմերի և բարոյական արժեքներ ձևավորելու գործընթացի սերտ և անբաժանելի կապը:

*Բանալի բառեր. խորհրդանշական փոխազդեցություն, խորհրդանիշ, ֆիլմ, բարոյական արժեքներ, հաղորդակցություն, վարք, Գահերի խաղը:*