Semiotic Analysis

The Dark Knight’s Vivid Movie Posters

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The Dark Knight is a power, dark, and dramatic movie. The movie posters hope to capture this magic of the film as best they can into a single image. They are rich with semiotic meaning, delving deep into the movie’s rich content. We look into these posters and uncover their signifiers and signified meaning.

The first movie poster, to the left, captures the mood of the film perfectly. In fact, the main scene is taken directly from the Hong Kong portion of the film, with incredibly bright lights and a winding urban landscape.

The interpretation of this image is simple: it is a man, who we assume is Batman, standing in a tower overlooking a city at night. We see the sprawling city lights that go far into the distance, seeing how busy this city is. The blue glow makes it appear full of life, even at night. The room itself seems very shiny and well kept, and it feels as if it’s an upper-class loft.

Looking back to the city, we see a lot of activity. We also see the use of the color blue really taking the focus of the image. There is also a very distinct visual style at play. An experienced photographer will immediately notice the use of HDR, High Dynamic Range, in this photo. But the inexperienced eye will simply notice the vivid color and detail, adding a rich layer of context to this image of Batman overlooking the city from his high tower.
But why do we presume this man is Batman? The first signifier is his helmet; his two pointy ears are iconic to any depiction of Batman. Moving down, the second signifier of his identity is his long, black cape – again, another traditional aspect of Batman. There is yet another signifier here: the color black. Batman has, in our culture, been a dark hero. He roams the city at night. This poster captures our cultural expectation of Batman.

Delving further into his persona, we’re able to uncover even more codes about who he is and what he does. First signifier that we can see is his left arm: there are three spikes protruding from it. This is a deadly melee weapon that is attached directly onto his person; in fact, the code here shows that his violent life is literally “a part of him.” His dedication to fighting crime truly is a part of his very body and soul, one of his defining traits.

The other side of his persona we see is not one of a hero, but of a loner. The color blue signifies his emotion state of coldness. It signifies that he is required to douse his emotional feelings in order to complete his task as a hero. His posture is also an important code – he’s standing completely still, stiff, and straightforward. He is looking into the distance, which signifies his reflective and deep nature. This also signifies that he’s a thinker, not just a mindless fighter.

Batman stands alone on his dark tower, yet again another signifier! By standing alone, it signifies two important things: first, that he stands alone to fight crime. Secondly, it shows that he is emotionally detached that he literally “stands alone.” The act of standing alone is an important theme that is explored quite deeply in the actual feature film. In the end, the colors, stance, and posture of Batman all point to one signified concept: that he is in solitude.

There is an eerie, hard to recognize visual effect that is a signifier within this image. Batman himself is surrounded by a barely visible blue glow, giving him this sort of otherworldly appeal. The signified is that Batman may not entirely be human, or at least that he does carry more power than your typical man. It may just be because he embodies more than his physical body. He’s a representation of something greater.
Taking a step back, you realize yet another signifier of Batman’s solitude is the very room he is in. He stands upon this high tower, in an empty room, with a series of windows in front of him. But what do these windows resemble? What does this empty room resemble? The tall, closely spaced windows at first appear to a typical office space. But on second glance, does it not look like a jail cell? In fact, the connation does signify that Batman is entrapped within a jail cell. This may be a cell of his own making, but it’s still his own entrapment.

But this dark, shadowy room is more than just a representation of Batman’s solitude. It actually has connation that shows off the high-tech approach that Batman takes. How does that work? Well, the signifiers are both the blue colors and the incredibly reflective flooring of the room.

First, this shade of blue is used very frequently in high-tech advertisements and in science fiction imagery. Take a look at these examples:

This shade of blue signifies futurism and science fiction.

But it’s more than just the floor reflecting the color blue. It’s the actual reflection. A reflective surface has begun to identify with us culturally as being new, shiny, but also it has begun associating with technology. Take, for example, this iPhone advertisement to the right. The concept of adding a reflective surface to new, high-tech products have become commonplace and the mainstream audience is able to identify this code, even if it’s subliminally.
There is even further connation within the room. It is a sharp contrast to the word outside. Inside the room it’s dark, shadowy, barren, straight, and very orderly. The tiles on the floor and roof are incredibly straight and sharp, and there is a sense of symmetry within the room. However, as soon as you eyes move outside (which the lines draw you towards), you see the city down below. Not only do you sense that you are above the city, but you see the contrasting elements. The city is bustling with life, color, and activity. It is a seemingly chaotic and uncontrolled environment compared to the peaceful sanctuary of this small, dark room that Batman is standing in. This is an example of the binary opposition that is present. It signifies the chaos on the outside, and the need for Batman to control and fit into that world.

Taking a look at the big picture requires you to step back. This movie poster shows the ideology of the new-age city, the modern era. This is apparent from the modern look of the city, from the shades of blue, to the reflective surface of the room, to the symmetry present, to even the visual style and use of HDR photography. However, to deduce that Batman is old fashioned and needs to play “catch up” would be incorrect.

It’s not showing how Batman is fighting the new; it’s showing how he’s embraced the new technology and leaped forward with it. The correct signification would be Batman is “reborn” and that he’s using the brand new, latest gadgets and technology to tackle his foes. This signification is apparent when you study his pose – he’s calm and still. Also, you can tell from his gear he is properly equipped and ready to tackle and take it on.
Second Poster

Why So Serious?

The second poster shows the villain of the film, instead of the hero. The audience can quickly identify the Joker by his trademarks – the bright red lipstick, his dark trench coat, his mysterious and disguised face, the worn hang gloves, and his seaweed green hair. The other big signifier that this is the Joker is that he is scrawling his slogan, “Why So Serious?” right onto the poster.

Looking at the image further, we get the feeling that he’s in or around the city. It’s a very gloomy day, with an enormous amount of fog that makes visibility difficult. The cityscape in the background is barely visible, and it feels very distant. The focus falls squarely onto the Joker himself. His body posture and the position of his fingers seem disjointed and odd. The smile that he’s painting with the red paint (or perhaps blood?) signifies that the Joker may not be an entirely sane individual.

The fog in the picture is a clear signifier. It blurs and distorts your vision, making it harder to identify anything – or anyone. The fog in the poster signify the Joker’s lack of identity. Though the fog does help bring the Joker into focus, it does help blur out his facial features, and a lot of his jacket. It makes the Joker feel as if he’s a part of the fog. And, thus, the signifier points at the fact that the Joker lacks identity.
Fog goes hand in hand with another aspect: gloom. The dark, moody colors and the fog surrounding the picture signify that it’s a gloomy setting. This is quite easy to pick up on. The gloom itself signifies the nature of the Joker. There is a darkness that surrounds him, a sense of evil. Just like when something doesn’t seem right on a gloomy day, something doesn’t seem right with the Joker. It could be deduced that the gloom itself is a symbol for the Joker.

The paler color of blue and foggy nature signifies an impending sense of doom. This is largely due to the cultural significance of the “shower scene” that has appeared in horror movies since the first Psycho. A movie poster of the “Psycho” remake displays this to the right. On some level, the scene of the Joker standing there signifies that he is actually waiting outside a window, or even in a shower, inside your very home. He looks like a psychopath who has been waiting for you.

It should be noted that this color of blue is far paler and more suspenseful than the blue featured in the first poster; this blue does not signify the Joker’s technological prowess, as the first poster did for Batman.

Another signifier present is the use of the Joker’s hands. His fingers are crooked and bent. This shows two things. First, he’s not entirely in control of his own actions. This is a symbol his mental instability. Secondly, it shows that’s he’s shifty and untrustworthy. It appears that his hands and fingers twist and twitch, which are signify his shifty personality. Two signified concepts, one signifier.

While still observing the hands, the worn gloves he wears are quickly apparent. His gloves are a signifier. Again, it has two signified concepts. First and foremost, it alludes to his criminal nature. What better way to keep your identity from the police than by using gloves to keep your identify hidden? And the Joker puts a big importance on keeping his identity a secret. We never really know who he is. The second signified concept is that he uses his hands, a lot. If you look closely, you realize that the gloves are well-worn, which shows he uses his hands a lot. The signified concept is that he’s a very “hands on” criminal. This is a binary opposition to the tech-friendly and gadget-loving Batman.

His “hands on” approach is further signified by the use of the other hand – he is painting the “glass window” in front of the audience’s eyes. His fingers are dabbing in the red paint (or blood) - creating a false (and creepy) smile in front of his face. This scene of him painting in blood signifies an incredibly
perverted type of “creativity” into his work. And, like the worn gloves, he shows he is “hands on”,
though in a way that intimidates and scares you, not impresses you.

Yet another signifier is his dirty, seaweed hair. It’s incredibly unkempt and greasy. His lack of personal
hygiene signifies that he simply doesn’t care. His attitude isn’t to try to impress anyone – the only
games he plays is his own. He’s an unassuming villain, not trying to earn friends or allies, but trying to
brutally create as much chaos as possible. His appearance is a reflection of this attitude. In many
respects, this is a binary opposition to the image that Batman is trying to keep (a clean, safe hero).

Within this movie, the Joker develops an
iconic saying: “Why So Serious?” This
moniker is displayed heavily in this poster,
the bright red text coming to light quickly.
In fact, it is the focus of the entire poster.
Again, this reflects his carefree attitude, but
not in a very negative fashion. As we know,
the Joker is an evil and confused character.
The question of “Why So Serious?” is a
signifier of the Joker’s insanity. He laughs at Batman’s attempts to keep justice and order in the city,
continually using his taunt to question why Batman takes his job so seriously.

In the end, the connation of this poster is simply that the Joker is insane, hands on, and feared all at
the same time. The gloom and fog around him make his identity hard to pinpoint, but also make him
seem as if he’s appearing out of the dusk, and is a very dark, gloomy figure. His posture and the saying
he has painted with his fingers give the signifiers that he’s insane. And it is the worn gloves, the
unkempt hair, and finger painting all display his ability to work “hands on,” by committing all his evils
deeds by own hands, instead of relying on minions.
The third poster is by far my favorite, and viewing it is a very surreal experience. It contains a scattered deck of cards – all Jokers. They cards seem very worn and dirty. There is blood smears around the edges. And on the face of Batman, there is a painted smile, signifying the Joker.

The symbolism of the Joker in this image is very apparent. From the scribbled text, to the palette knife, to the hands-on crafty approach to the art, to the dirtiness, to the painted face, it all signifies the Joker. But what does this all mean?

The very first thing you see is the image of Batman himself. But this isn’t truly the man; it’s a collage of joker cards. It seems poorly constructed, with dirty and small pieces of tape, but yet it seems very artful. It’s a very accurate representation, but it seems sinister. The desecration of this image, the dark coloring, and the bloody edges all signify that there is ill intent in the creation of this image.

The most noticeable visual element of this entire movie poster is the use of the joker cards. They’re scattered, seemingly random, but their position outlines the image of Batman perfectly. So despite their perceived chaotic nature, there is an underlying order to them. But what does the use of the joker card symbolize? I believe it signifies the lack of identity, or that there is no manner in which something is defined in simple terms. Everything is complex, and their true nature is often hidden and unknown.
The next element used in this artwork is the use of the tape. It’s torn up into a bunch of dirty, small pieces. They are taped onto the joker cards in random angles, keeping the entire image together, but just barely. They are the connecting pieces. But as what is keeping this entire image together, these small pieces of tape look weak, used, and dirty. They’re a not strong material to keep this image together. The use of this tape is a signifier, showing that the image of Batman could easily be broken. He’s taped together around the edges, barely being held together, it’s signifying that he’s fragile. This shows a bias from the artist of this image, who you are led to believe is the Joker himself.

Another piece of the puzzle is the palette knife that’s included in this poster. It definitely tells us that this was a work of art that was recently constructed. It also lets us know that it’s meant to be a work of art for the universe – its audience for the “artwork” is the people in Batman’s universe. But the real signification of the inclusion of this knife is a peak into the artist – the Joker’s – persona. The knife symbolizes the Joker’s handiness with a knife, and his preference to always use a knife. While he is creating art, it alludes to the fact that he’s violent, and maybe even enjoys the sight of blood. Either way, the Joker enjoys the satisfaction of using a knife whilst he commits crime. The addition of the text “Let’s put a smile on that face” near the knife adds to this creepy effect.

This image shows a very metaphorical concept. It shows the collision of two identities – Batman and the Joker. Though the image of Batman is more prominent and in your face, you immediately begin to notice traits of the Joker seeping through. The most prominent feature of the Joker is the bright red face paint, but it doesn’t let you know if it’s face paint, lip stick, or blood. This artful collision of these two people brings up the question: just what does it signify? I believe it signifies the mental battle between the two characters. While Batman struggles to find himself, the Joker plays tricks with his mind. As the Joker quotes (as seen on the poster itself), “It’s all part of the plan.”

There is an underlying assumption that the Joker constructed this piece of art. If it wasn’t apparent from the inclusion of the knife or the blood red smile, then this quote should suffice: “It’s simple: kill the Batman.” These small little one-liners are scrawled all over this poster, all sayings
that we’re familiar with the Joker spewing out. It helps flesh out his personality, but it’s also important to help him try to confused, disorient, and potentially even turn Batman to his side. The significance of all these quotes throughout the poster is that there is a mind game that the Joker is always playing. An example of this is when he tries to convince Batman of their similarities and that “To them you’re a freak… like me!”

The Joker is well known for his trickery and illusions. And this piece of art is a prime example of these traits. In fact, stepping back and viewing this artwork as a whole, its signified concept is essentially of the trickery and illusions that the Joker is able to construct. The signifier is the combination of the word games, the signified meaning of the tape, the palette knife, the abundant use of joker cards, and the use of the blood or red substance to create his creepy smile over Batman’s face. This is a classic example of mental warfare, where the Joker tries to defeat you by confusing and tricking you, not by brute strength.

The visual effects of this movie poster also have very significant meaning. This poster featured far less color and brightness than the other two posters had. This one is a lot less color, it feels more moody, and has a dark set of colors to it. The visual style shows that the Joker is far less worried about the technology or battle technique, and is far more interested in playing mind games and using his hands. This is a binary opposite to Batman’s style, who is far more invested into technology and hand-to-hand fighting technique. The Joker cares less about style, and more about being as ruthless, psychopathic, and cunning as possible.

The homemade, crafty look of this poster gives it this “mood.” It not only gives you a “psychopath” feeling to whoever constructed this art, but it also is slightly stalker-like. The collection of photos, taped together, on a wall, would give that signified meaning. However, this art feels even more sinister and evil than that. You begin to feel the beginning of the Joker’s crazed plans being set into motion by just observing this very small glimpse into the Dark Knight’s plot.