Semiotic construction of superhero's Thor costume and colour use

Gunita Kurpniece

Abstract

What makes the superhero important and different from an ordinary man is the costume. The use of costume in most cases is the extension of the hero himself. The costume and foremost the use of color can become a representation of the hero's emotional status. This paper will assess the importance of color use in Thor's costume in the 1962 Marvel comic book *Journey into the Mystery* and Kenneth Branagh's 2011 film *Thor*. After reviewing semiotic, color symbolism and masculinity, this research established the association superhero costumes have with the portrayal of masculinity and the individual's psychological state. The author concludes that by examining the color use in superhero Thor's costume it can be seen as an effective way for colors and costumes to contribute to the perception of the superhero image.

Key Words Superhero, costume, color, semiotic, color symbolism, masculinity

Introduction

This paper will look at the construction of super-hero costume design by using colour semiotics. It will look over director's Kenneth Branagh super-hero film *Thor* (2011) and Marvel Comic character Mighty Thor that first appeared in 1962 comic *Journey into the Mystery*. It will use a semiotic approach to analyse the construction of Thor's image and assess the use of costume. It will undertake the

semiotic approach and explain why it is essential to analyse the construction of the costume and what masculine characteristics and emotional state it gives the character. It will briefly explain what is semiotics and what it applies in this paper. Also it will examine the meaning of colours that have been used in the film and comic Thor's costumes. These two demarcations will help to see how Thor's gender performativity and masculinity was performed through the super hero costume.

Semiotics

Semiotics, is a term made by Ferdinand de Saussure in 1916 that was used in the field of psychology and sociology. As Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress explains 'semiotics has been defined as the science of the life of signs in society' (Hodge, R.; Kress, G.; 988; p.1). It can be used to analyse posters, films, advertisements and much more. All of these texts can be seen as meanings, messages to communicate with viewers or other readers. As Barthes clarifies 'myth is a system of communication, that is a message' (Barthes, R.; 1993; p.117). It helps to depict the texts, myths in films and advertisements and as Barthes explains 'myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form' (Ibid). Every myth can be examined with the help of semiotics. As myth is a system of communication, 'semiology confronts the question of how images make meanings head on' (Rose, G.; 2001; p.69). Semiotics draws from specific subjects or texts and looks at the discourses that can be seen as the 'site where social forms of organization engage with systems of signs in the production of texts, thus reproducing or changing the sets of meanings and values that make up a culture' (Ibid; p.6). To explain it clearer 'semiology means the study of signs' (Rose, G.; 2001; 69). Every sign should consist of two parts – signified and signifier. As Rose explains 'the signified is a concept or an object' (Ibid; p.74). The second part, signifier 'is a sound or an image that is attached to a signified' (Ibid). This paper will use the semiotic symbolic mode to examine the subject - Thor's costume.

Daniel Chandler explains that, 'what in popular usage are called 'symbols' would be regarded by semioticians as 'signs' of some kind but many of them would not technically be classified as purely 'symbolic' (Chandler, D.; 2007; p. 38). If we think of super heroes, we think of men with super powers that save the lives of others. The symbolic signs for most super heroes are the capes, masks and costumes or the abilities to fly, super strength or other unnatural powers. The signs and symbols of the construction of super hero image in films have already been looked over from Superman to Batman, but thanks to that the symbolic perception of the super hero image is much clearer. Warren Buckland explains this perception as a 'corresponds to an intensional semantic theory of meaning, for it drove a wedge between mechanical duplication and cinematic representation and then defined the latter' (Buckland, W.; 2000; p. 26). Taking this in mind Thor can be acknowledged as a true super hero. His image has been constructed by looking over already known symbols of super heroes – capes, unnatural abilities, and costume.

Color Symbolism

This section will analyse Thor's costume by colours. Mabel Weaver explains that 'color symbolism is the use of a color to describe or represent something of meaning in a particular society or Culture' (Weaver M.; 2015; p. 4). In this case the colours can identify with emotions. The colour choice for Thor's costumes contains red, black, brown, yellow, and blue. The use of colour symbolism and meaning can help to understand the character's coherence and the emotional status of the male figure. Firstly color red. It is the colour that makes people react to adrenaline filled situations. Red is a demanding colour of aggression. Helen Varley examines the power of colour; she inclines 'this strong, sultry red is an imperious colour; it seems to challenge, to command attention' (Varley, H.; 1980; p.138). The transition of costumes in comic book and film may be important as the perception of male identity change. As Duncan and Smith explains 'most mainstream comic books have traditionally been ablaze with the bright primary colors (red, blue, and yellow) thought to appeal to adolescent males. Certainly the colourful costumes are part of the appeal of superheroes' (Duncan, R.; Smith, J.,

M.; 2009; p. 142). In Marvel comic book *Journey into Mystery* volume 83 the readers are introduced with the thunder god Thor.

Looking further at the costume, in the film Thor is covered in black leather, brown metal chest piece with a darker blue undergarment. Eiseman states 'brown is the color most identified with earth' (Eiseman, L.; 2006; p.26). The deep red together with the brown can be seen as the earthy colours that 'symbolize deep worth and elemental root qualities' (Varley; 1980; p. 138). It signifies the nature's elemental roots Thor bears as the god of thunder. In the comic book, the brown color is taken away. The original Thor's costume in the comic has yellow in it. Yellow is the colour of happiness, the sun. Richard Lewis explains that 'While calming and relaxing, the color dares suggest a desire for change; that things are never quite at rest' (Lewis, R.; 2014; p. 33). It is the change from an ordinary man to a god. Thor's alias Doctor Blake is crippled. Even though he doesn't express the want for change, to be a whole man, the change to Thor helps him get a healthy and strong male body and identity. There is a negative side of yellow as well. It associates with 'dishonesty, cowardice, legalism, betrayal, and caution' (Ibid; p.34). The downfall of the colour that symbolises happiness is weakness. The mixed qualities yellow represents are relevant to how Marvel has constructed the dual identity of Thor.

The dark blue layer under the brown chest piece is symbolic to authoritative, strong and loyal. As Eiseman describes, 'dark blues are far more serious and thought provoking as they retreat, drawing inward' (Eiseman; 2006; p.34). Belinda Recio also explains that 'blue also connotes the dignity, virtue, and trust' (Recio, B.; 1961; p.7). Additionally Varley adds that dark blue is also seen as 'the colour of melancholy and loneliness' (Varley; 1980; p.141). In the comic book the blue tones in Thor's costume are brighter than in the film. Mable Weaver explains that 'like all colors the meaning of blue changes as its hue changes and it becomes less welcoming and serene' (Weaver, M.; 2015; 11). As mentioned before, comics use brighter colors, especially in the 1960's when the super hero comic books became popular and every new character needed to stand out.

In the film black covers mostly of Thor's body. The colour black is 'connected to the fear of the unknown and ultimately death' (Eiseman; 2006; p.62). The understanding of black in most cultures relates to death, night and ominous presence. As Richard Lewis explains 'for many socio-economic groups and cultures black is before all else the color of mourning, grief, and death' (Lewis, R.; 2014; p. 11). But Eiseman also perceives black as 'all-powerful and empowering. It is the color of packaging that consumers see as 'worth more'. It is stylish, modern and yet classic' (Eiseman, L.; 2006; p.63). Black has been interpreted with both – good and evil- qualities. In the comic black appears only on Thor's boots. It blends together with yellow forming stripes on the boots that expresses the change to the unknown form.

Masculinity

What is similar to the film and comic is the portrayal of masculinity through the outfits. As this work looks over the body of Thor, it is necessary to examine the masculinity Thor demonstrates. In the Marvel Comic book, Thor is represented with a dual personality. His human form, Doctor Donald Blake is represented as a weak and injured man, but his super hero side is strong. These two personas of Thor can be identified as the phallus and non-phallus male identities Freud has introduced in psychoanalysis. Donald Blake represents male without the phallus, without any authority or masculinity in himself. The readers see the role Doctor Blake and Thor are positioned in, and feel sympathy to the human and super hero identities. The dual identity crisis works well for Thor as he shows the perfect super human and the injured male as one and lets the readers associate with them both. As Peter Middleton explains this concept, 'the stories are about being, not becoming a man. Superheroes may lead ordinary lives in disguise, but they can be transformed in a moment from boy to man, from failed man to real man' (Middleton, P.; 1992; p. 40). It is not just the body that makes Thor masculine, but the need to change to the super hero and overcome his disability as Donald Blake.

Following the example of comic books, Hollywood blockbuster super hero films construct the heroes' quite hyper masculine. The super hero films have become another extension of the comics. They show the heroes in different setting, but with similar problems. In the beginning of the film the viewers can see the main character Thor, portrayed by Chris Hemsworth. The actor has the necessary appearance the comic book has set for Thor and so has made the super hero aspect realistic for the audience. Even though Thor has no problem with his dual identity, he still has issues with his masculinity. The film shows Thor as an arrogant and spoiled god who is the crown prince of Asgard. After breaking a treaty with the snow giants, Thor's father, Odin banishes Thor to Earth and strips of his powers. Thor has to redeem himself and become a worthy man for his father and his powers. Middleton explains this as a way of initiation from boy to man, 'this masculinity of pure motor drives fuelled by anger is sustained by the longing felt by boys excluded from acceptance as proper males by their elders' (Middleton, P.; 1992; p.42). The film focuses more on the acknowledgment of masculinity and family ties. As most Hollywood films, *Thor* aims attention to heroism and hegemonic relationship between the feminine female character and the masculine male protagonist.

Conclusion

Semiotic and color approach to masculinity is important as it displays the form and structure that is appropriate for men in comics and films. The color semiotic represents the emotional status the character portrays and connects to masculinity. The colors in both Thor costumes are quite demanding and dark comparing to more feminine colors. As red can be seen as a color of passion, if taking in mind masculinity and the male body, the expression of the color is moved more on aggression and male dominance that can be signified by the phallus. The color representation in Thor's costume expresses masculine values that lets him execute his role as the super-hero.

Bibliography

Barthes, R., (1993), *A Barthes Reader*, Random House Press

Buckland, W., (2000), *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, Cambridge University Press

Chandler, D., (2007), *Semiotics: The Basics*, Routledge Press

Duncan R., Smith, J. M., (2009), *The Power of Comics: History, Form & Culture*, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.

Eiseman, L., (2006), *Color: messages and meanings*, Hand Book Press

Hodge, R., Kress, G., (1988), *Social Semiotics*, Cambridge, Polity Press

Lee. S. (ed.), (1962), 'Thor the Mighty and the Stone Men from Saturn', *Journey into Mystery*, 83 (1)

Lewis, R.; (2014), *Color Psychology*, Riana Publishing Group

Middleton, P., (1992), *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity & Subjectivity in Modern Culture*, Routledge, Londonledge, London

Rose, G., (2001), *Visual methodologies: an introduction to the interpretation of visual materials*, SAGE

Recio, B., (1961), *Blue*, Gibbs Smith Publisher

Varley, H., (1980), *Colour*, Marshal Edition

Weaver, M., (2015), *Color Symbolism: Detailed Study of Colors and their Meaning*, Amazon Media Press

Filmography

Thor (Kenneth Branagh; 2011)